

# STEPFORD, U.S.A.

*Accidental Spy  
Small Town Adventure*

LADARAY

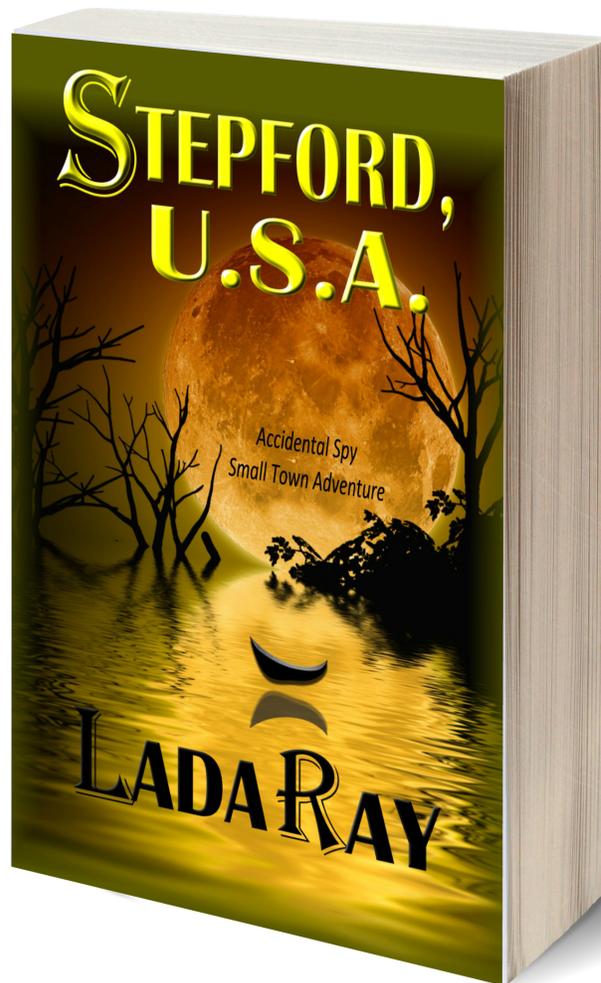


# STEPFORD, USA

*Accidental Spy "Small Town USA" Adventure*

2<sup>ND</sup> edition

**Lada Ray**



## *Reviews*

### ***FIVE STARS***

“This exciting page-turner will have you guessing from the very beginning. Lada skillfully weaves many surprises into this psychological thriller. Her exquisite scene setting together with compelling dialogue makes Stepford USA a fascinating, if at times nail-biting, read. I highly recommend Stepford USA. Jade Snow is intelligent, warm and witty. Join her as she puts the pieces together and helps release a town from its dark, hidden past.” ***Jason Sullivan, Author***

### ***FIVE STARS***

“Compelling until the very end. This is a very enjoyable book with terrific characters and a clever storyline that conjures truths from the imbedded lies and deceit of the higher echelons of Stepford. In a whirlwind of well crafted storytelling we experience Jade's paranormal psychic visions and even venture into a virtual reality laboratory to discover that all is not as it seems. This novel makes clever observations on morality, class and perception with wonderful twists and turns that will surprise and intrigue. A purposeful puzzle, compelling until the very end. Looking forward to reading Lada Ray's other novels.” ***Mardi Orlando, Author***

### ***FIVE STARS***

“Psychological thrillers don't get much better than this. Excitingly and yet chillingly gripping... plot line that surprises you at every turn and absolutely does not let you go.” ***J.J. Collins***

### ***FIVE STARS***

“I enjoyed reading this uplifting book by Ms. Ray, filled with intrigue and irresistible characters.” ***Review by a reader***

### ***FIVE STARS***

“Very well written and gripping tale that will leave you guessing to the very end! Excellent storytelling!” ***Madeline Walsh, New York***

### ***FIVE STARS***

“Sleepy, Uneventful, Small Town Paradise...NOT! I enjoyed solving this mystery, though we knew who the guilty ones were early on, it was the finding of the proof, uncovering the details and getting the story straight that was the heart of this book. I like this author; I'm now starting to read the next book in the series, I'll get back to you on that.” ***Brenda Jane***

## By Lada Ray

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#### Novels:

- The Earth Shifter
- Gold Train (Accidental Spy Russia Adventure 2)
- Stepford USA (Accidental Spy Small Town Adventure 1)

#### Shorts:

- Catharsis, Legend of the Lemurians (Earth Keepers 1)
- Green Desert (Accidental Spy prequel)

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2<sup>nd</sup> edition  
Ray House / EARTH SHIFT

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*Before she was spy extraordinaire...  
Experience Jade Snow's humble beginnings in Small Town, USA.*

## **STEPFORD, USA**



*Some conspiracies hide in small towns with perfect facades...*

*Ray House  
EARTH SHIFT*

*Lada Ray*





## Prologue

The full moon was surreally bright, but that didn't help. This part of the Hidden Lake shore was so secluded, so few ever ventured in this direction that not a single soul was likely to hear her scream.

Except one. If he cared to listen... If he cared about her... But now, she knew with absolute certainty he didn't. No one did. The world, her world, was ending.

How will her mother survive this? And dad? He's just started recovering from a stroke. Gathering what strength she still had left, she struggled on wet grass as her new summer dress turned to filthy rags. But there was no escaping from the cold fingers pinning her down, or from a rough hand that crushed her mouth.

The last thing she thought was: how could he? The last thing she smelled was the freshness of the night lake, overpowered by a foul stench of a drunken, sweaty male. The last thing she saw was a menacing shadow obscuring the light of the moon.

Then, she saw no more. She felt no more...

## Chapter 1

I never thought of myself as a stay-at-home little housewife. A mere eight weeks ago I'd been dodging stray bullets in Afghanistan together with Paul, my new husband. But then again, I'd never pictured myself as a marrying type either.

My name is Jade Snow, I am twenty eight, an investigative journalist and a freelance documentary filmmaker. I met Paul, a brilliant journalist for *Time* magazine, on one of our expeditions. My crew got word that the Taliban should be in one of the villages of southeastern Afghanistan, close to the Pakistani border. Our documentary about the Iraqi and Afghani insurgencies would've been enhanced dramatically if only we succeeded in getting that coveted footage of the bearded, dust-covered Taliban warriors.

We were in the very thick of things, when the shooting started. My crew was trapped, and Paul came out of nowhere and saved the day, just like (I'm embarrassed to say) that proverbial knight in shining armor. And as if that wasn't enough, as they'd say in romance novels, that's when our eyes met and we knew.... Basically, you get the drift.

When you are in the line of fire every day, you know very quickly *who's who* around you. You also don't waste your time on unnecessary doubts and deliberations. Paul and I didn't. A month later we were married and since our lives were very busy, me – shooting my documentary, him – writing his pieces for *Time* magazine, the honeymoon was brief and almost perfunctory: four days at a luxury hotel in Dubai, part of the nearby United Arab Emirates. Dubai is a Switzerland wannabe of the Middle East – so close to all the skirmishes, yet so prosperous, so clean, so quiet and so neutral. Well... sort of prosperous, apart from nearly going bankrupt recently, and sort of neutral, at least officially.

We spent our time making love, walking on the beach (in case you were wondering, just walking since public displays of intimacy are a huge no-no in these parts), making love (alas, strictly in our hotel room), enjoying peace and quiet, and making love (lots of it). It was loads of fun, restrictions aside, but we had to get back to the hell across the Gulf.

Trouble started when one morning I felt sick. At first, we thought it was just the food – you know, the inedible, indigestible kind Afghanistan is so famous for. But when the excruciating abdominal pain and the extreme nausea didn't subside after a full week, Paul talked me into flying back to Dubai to see a proper doctor.

Turned out, I wasn't sick at all, I was just pregnant. And that's when my life changed forever from the predictability of danger-ridden assignments at the hottest spots on the planet to the shock of the unpredictable existence as an expecting housewife.

The doctor shook his head reproachfully and pronounced that I had too much stress in my life and if I wanted to keep my baby, I should consider changing my lifestyle.

“Meaning?” I managed to squeak out indignantly.

“Meaning, young lady,” continued the doctor, sternly knitting his bushy eyebrows, “you should stop chasing the Taliban and start living a peaceful, restful life, with good and regular nutrition and in a safe environment.”

I hated that man!

But Paul agreed with him immediately and wholeheartedly. One week later, he persuaded me, forced me really, to move back to the US. He knew I didn't have much of an excuse. The

documentary was basically done and I could leave my crew behind to finish up some additional footage.

We returned to New York, to Paul's spacious apartment on Upper West Side, where he spent his days applying finishing touches to his work. Meanwhile, I was trying to look like I was busy, too. I went around, obsessively re-arranging furniture in compliance with the principles of my new hobby, feng shui, all the while feeling like a caged tiger. Before long, Paul's eyes started acquiring a certain alarmed look every time he'd turn around to find yet another furniture piece not in its familiar place. But at that point, his series of *Front Line Essays* was published to a chorus of favorable critique; my crew came back and our documentary went into production. Soon, I ran out of furniture to re-arrange, having already feng shue-ed the whole place to death. There was nothing left for me to do but to be bored, between debilitating attacks of nausea, of course.

From there on everything got worse... Paul got a new assignment, of all places, to Africa. I envied him since I was about to begin resembling a small barrel on long, thin legs and in my condition taking on any new assignments was out of the question.

Meanwhile, Paul didn't feel right leaving me by myself in New York. We need to talk, he said to me one day. Somehow, I didn't really like the sound of that... Then he started. Didn't the doctors say I needed a peaceful and restful atmosphere? So, he continued, that must mean the country. It turned out all my assurances that I was fine in New York, and that I had all the fresh air and peace I needed right where I was, fell on deaf ears. Paul was a man of action, coupled with an overactive imagination and a *white knight in shining armor* syndrome, to boot. I should know, this was the explosive combo I fell for. But now it was turning downright dangerous, as he insisted on treating me as his very own damsel in distress.

So, one fine day, Paul came home and happily announced that he rented me a wonderful cottage in the Berkshires, Massachusetts, a charming community about two and a half hours north of the City. Fresh air, mountain views, peace and quiet – what can be better for a pregnant woman? Paul's rhetorical question hung in the air next to his smiling face, which stared happily into my mortified one.

He continued his assault. Green grass, birds singing, besides, didn't I want to start working on my own book? Surely, those gorgeous mountains would provide plenty of inspiration! He was so convincing, I imagine that's how the infamous snake in the Garden of Eden seduced naïve Eve into trying the forbidden apple.

I certainly saw Paul's dilemma: what to do with me in my condition when he is so far away, risking his life in some godforsaken Somalia? From his point of view this was a perfect solution and a great way to appease his guilt – mission accomplished! And I... I was too exhausted to argue and somewhere deep down, skillfully implanted by my best friend and confidant, Rachel Weise, a doubt lingered. Who knows, maybe I should, after all, try a change of pace? Perhaps, the country would indeed be better for the baby? Perhaps, I could finally start working on the stories I always wanted to write, but never found the time? Perhaps...

And that's how I was seduced into moving to the quaint town of Stepford, located in idyllic Berkshire County, MA.

Paul left for Africa two weeks later, after settling me down in our new country home. He gave me a long and passionate kiss, his dark eyes gazing into mine.

“Ocean,” he murmured dreamily, as our lips finally detached. “Ocean,” he repeated, still gazing into me. It was our code word of sorts, that's what he'd always called my eyes. They were like two turquoise drops of a boundless ocean on a beautiful summer day, he said to me once,

and the image stayed with us. My eyes were indeed an unusual blue-green color and their shape was a bit like a drop of water, with corners slightly slanting upwards.

“The Orientals,” Paul had told me when we first met, “believe that people, whose eyes are slanted upwards, are born optimists.”

“Relax, enjoy, and remember how much I love you,” he finally managed to whisper, still a little dazed and tongue-tied, but sporting one of his sexy, boyish smiles. I stood in the front door as he pulled out of the driveway, waving like a proper little housewife I've suddenly become. My eyes followed the car carrying my husband away, as it flashed the left turn signal and disappeared behind the bend. A sigh parted my lips as I touched them, savoring the lingering sensation, the taste, the smell, the feel of his lips on mine, that last delicious kiss. I wanted to make sure it stayed with me forever.

For lack of anything better to do, I started writing a story that was on my mind since Iraq. The Stepford library was just a few steps away from the famous Blue Peacock Inn, right on Main Street and a nice fifteen minute walk from my house. The library was a delight for those who appreciated antiques, a sweet, peaceful place. During the day, I would spend a few hours writing in its deserted hall, at one of the old wooden tables with turned legs, surrounded by nineteenth century portraits decking its walls.

It started becoming my routine, unless I felt I'd do better writing in one of the area's little cafes. The weather was getting warmer and each morning I would awake to the merry chirping of the birds and to nature's intoxicating smells, as lilac in my garden burst with color and aroma. What a nice, sheltered paradise it was! What else could I want? How could I miss my old life, full of danger, uncertainty and death? That was a good question and I didn't have an answer to that. And yet, I was getting more restless by the day. The only thing that kept me pinned down was the fact that my belly was growing and I knew, it would only get bigger.

It looked like I had no choice – I had to stay right where I was, for the baby. I talked myself into taking it easy. But a slight aftertaste, bordering on rebellion, remained somewhere in the depths of my psyche.

Meanwhile, my life was outwardly settling down. The cottage Paul rented for me came tastefully, if lightly, furnished with some quality antiques. First things first, again I spent some time on feng shui, the so-called “oriental art of placement.”

I tirelessly moved furniture around to allow for a free flow of *chi*. A few days later, I stood in the middle of my living room, between a comfortable sofa and a mahogany coffee table sitting atop an oriental rug. A vase filled with daisies – my favorite flowers – adorned the table. That's for harmony. On the sideboard I put a large bowl of fresh fruit for abundance and on the *étagère* with my books, a pitcher with curly bamboo for growth and good health. Next to it, a statue of Laughing Buddha, for luck. After adding a framed photo of Paul and me, both smiling happily on our wedding day, I admired the fruits of my feng shui-ing labors.

The only taboo in the room were the hefty original beams running across the vaulted ceiling. That, according to the best feng shui practices, meant heavy obstacles. I laughed out loud. Ridiculous! Obstacles? What obstacles could I have in Stepford? Besides, I liked these beams. They gave the place a character. All in all, if my living room was any indication, a peaceful, restful and luck-filled life was predestined for me in the Stepford paradise.

I sighed, recalling the smoldering ruins of Iraq and the lung-searing dust of the Afghani desert. Nothing like that here; just peace, quiet, chirping birds. For all I knew, this town could as well be in another galaxy. And this – another sigh – was my new life.

And so it happened that one fine day I was working on my story at the library. It was almost six p.m. and I was getting tired and hungry, but my writing flowed so well that I didn't dare interrupt it. However my stomach, together with my nutrition starved brain, begged to differ.

About to give up and leave in order to find supper for the demanding beast inside, I noticed a group of women making themselves comfortable by the ancient fireplace adorning one of the walls of the usually deserted reading hall. They arranged their chairs around an antique coffee table and started pulling out their knitting projects.

Knitting – imagine that! All of a sudden, I felt transported to Victorian England, of all places. I could make out a sweater on one woman's lap, a cute little hat on another's, also, what looked like a baby blanket, a pair of slippers, a lacy shawl and even a knitted bunny! There were women of all ages and I noticed that two of the younger ones were pregnant.

For some reason, I felt drawn to this group. Trying to be inconspicuous, I attuned to their conversation.

“I don't know what's going on,” said one of them, an older woman in some comfortable, new-agey clothes. She glanced at the others over the top of her half-moon spectacles that didn't go at all with her round face. “I rang Adelaide's bell – no answer.”

“This isn't like her,” agreed another woman. This one had keen eyes hidden behind some practical, but sooooo old-fashioned glasses, complete with an oversized square frame. She shook her head, at the same time remembering to count her stitches. “The other day I couldn't reach her on the phone either.”

“This would be the third meeting she'd missed,” announced one of the young pregnant women with innocent blue eyes and rosy cheeks.

“I think you are right, Karen,” frowned the woman in new-agey clothes. “Adelaide and I started this club over ten years ago and I don't recall her ever missing a single meeting, let alone three in a row...” Her voice trailed off, a look of mild alarm on her face.

“D'you think we should all go and visit her sometime?” proposed another young woman brightly. “Perhaps she needs help?”

“Now, that's a great idea, Shawna,” nodded the older woman approvingly. “We'll make it a field trip. How about this Saturday?”

I hadn't the faintest idea who the mysterious Adelaide was, but all of a sudden I felt a strong urge to belong. Isn't it nice to be a part of a group where so many people care when you don't show up for a knitting club gathering? In my previous life I was always needed: my crew needed me, my editors, my friends, my husband. And now... Certainly, I still had friends who called me regularly. But they were all in New York, going on with their lives. They all promised to come and visit sometime, but I knew from experience: it could be a long wait.

And of course, Paul called every opportunity he got, but honestly, what kind of opportunity could he have in Somalia? His calls were far and in between, and his letters even more so. I knew he would be there for me close to my due date – my knight in shining armor – but for now... Oh, let's face it, I was on my own.

Well, I told myself, I'm a tough chick, so Paul isn't worried. In his mind, I should be happy and, most importantly, safe right where I am. After all, what's not to like in paradise?

Some unknown force lifted me from my chair and before I knew what I was doing, my feet carried me towards the group of knitting women.

“Excuse the interruption,” I started. All six women, as one, lifted their heads from their knitting and looked at me expectantly. I produced the friendliest smile I possessed. “My name is Jade Snow. I'm new in town and I saw you all here... So I thought, maybe I could...”

I felt uncharacteristically shy and once I realized that I did, my confusion and embarrassment made me blush.

The women stared at me. Then their eyes rested on my slightly showing stomach.

“Oh, please, please, join us,” said one of them, while another hastily pulled up an extra chair.

“Thank you,” I said gratefully.

“I’m Maria,” said the older new-agey woman. “And these are Shawna and Karen. They are expecting, too.” The two younger women, who were about my age and who, from all appearances, were further along than me, gave me a friendly wave.

“I’m Beth and this is my sister Cathy,” said another woman, who looked like she was in her early forties. Cathy, who might have been in her thirties and who was apparently a woman of few words, simply nodded.

“And I’m Anne,” said the woman in the old-fashioned glasses.

“So, Jade, do you like to knit?” inquired Beth.

“Now that you’ve mentioned it, I actually never tried it. But I’d really love to learn,” I said quickly and, incredibly, blushed again.

“See, I am a journalist and my husband, also a journalist, is now in Africa. He thought I’d like the peace and quiet of the Berkshires, while he’s away. I’m actually busy writing my first book, but sometimes it feels a little lonely and... and I start wishing I had company.” I uttered that almost apologetically.

“Now you have us. You are welcome to join the group any time,” said Anne encouragingly.

“He kicked,” suddenly whispered Shawna, her left hand on her bulging stomach. “He just kicked! Oh, my God, again! And again!”

Knitting abandoned, all the ladies gathered around her, buzzing excitedly and touching her stomach in the hopes of experiencing the miracle of new life inside her.

“Mine has been kicking like crazy lately,” announced Karen proudly.

“When did yours first kick?” asked Shawna.

“About two months ago. Yours?”

“One and a half.”

“What about you, Jade?” Karen turned to me.

“Oh, should it start kicking already? I haven’t felt anything. Maybe, I should see a doctor?” All of sudden, I felt alarmed.

“Wait, there is probably nothing to worry about yet,” said Maria reasonably. “Shawna is six and a half months pregnant and Karen is over seven. And you are what? Only four?”

“Four and a half already,” I responded meekly.

“Then yours will kick very soon, at around five months. If everything’s all right, that is,” concluded Shawna with a sunshine smile.

“If everything’s all right?” I asked, beginning to worry again.

“Oh, don’t listen to them,” said Anne. “Stepford is a virtual paradise, marvelous for raising a family. Everything will be fine.”

I exhaled, relieved.

The women went back to their knitting, all the while chatting away about this and that, the latest neighborhood news and the freshest bits of gossip. I sat there half-listening and nodding distractedly. Shawna was knitting a baby blanket in cornflower blue and Karen, a baby hat in bright pink. Their fingers moved swiftly, neat rows appearing like magic from under their

clicking needles. *I better learn to knit like that soon, I thought. The baby sure could use a soft blanket or a pretty little hat.*

And then another thought slithered into my mind. *Congrats Jade, it teased me, you've just landed yourself in pregnant housewives' paradise. But then again, the thought continued, at least I won't be alone any more. And who knows, perhaps, it'll even be fun.*

## Chapter 2

We gathered a bit early at the Bean Counter coffee house. It was Saturday and the plan was to visit Adelaide today. Everyone was in a good mood, giggles and jokes flying around the table. We all ordered coffee and waited for Maria, who was running late.

The coffee house was permeated with the otherworldly aroma of freshly ground dark roast. I inhaled the divine scent, like a junkie deprived of her drug of choice, while sipping my coffee slowly, deliberately. For a brief few minutes (too brief, unfortunately) I allowed myself to linger in heaven. Since finding out I was pregnant, I was on a strict chamomile-slash-peppermint-slash-green tea regime, to avoid making my future baby hyper. But today, with five women around me savoring the steamy brew, temptation was simply too much. Oh well, I was entitled to a treat once in a while, wasn't I?

The door opened to let Maria in. The strange expression on her face made everyone sit up.

"Any news?" immediately asked Beth.

"I know what's going on with Adelaide," said Maria in a hushed voice, looking around conspiratorially. "Jason, her son, is back."

"You mean – from jail?" gasped Shawna, a look of horror on her face.

"Yes," whispered Maria. "Can you believe it!"

"So, what does that mean," asked Karen, her eyes as big as saucers. "Is he going to live in Stepford?"

"That's what it looks like."

Apparently the news was rather bad, because the ladies at the table all lowered their heads and drank their coffee silently, pensively. There was a marked change in the atmosphere, as if the excitement and joy of only five minutes ago was suddenly zapped out of the air.

"Excuse me," I said. "But what happened with Adelaide's son? Did he commit a crime or something?"

"Yes, he did," said Maria, shaking her head sadly. "And what a crime!"

"See, Adelaide lost her husband when Jason was just a teenager," explained Anne. "After that, she became what she called *especially protective of her only child*. But in many people's opinion she simply spoiled him rotten."

"Jason was a handsome boy with lots of charm," chimed in Beth, "and girls simply adored him. Almost thirteen years ago, when this whole story started, he had just turned eighteen and Adelaide had given him a new silver Mercedes convertible for his birthday."

"She has money then?" I asked.

"Her husband left her a nice nest egg," said Anne. "But of course, with all the lawyers' fees – defending Jason and all – I bet it has diminished somewhat."

"She still has plenty," said Cathy wistfully. "She is quite wealthy, you know." The other women nodded in agreement.

"So," continued Anne, "Jason was very popular and he was often seen driving girls around in his new car. One evening right after graduation, a girl named Rebecca Gilman took a ride with him. That was the last time she was...she was..." Anne's voice wavered and she fell silent, apparently unable to find the right words.

"And then what happened?" asked Shawna, holding her breath.

Anne hesitated, throwing a doubtful glance at Shawna and Karen's bulging stomachs. Then, her keen eyes circled the table. Six pairs of our eyes peered back at her with rapt attention.

"Anne works at the police station," whispered Shawna to me by way of an explanation.

"That's right. I've been there for, let's see, almost eighteen years now," confirmed Anne.

"And I remember that day all too well. The whole department was looking for Rebbecca. They found her in the bushes by the lake. She was severely beaten and raped, had some broken bones and internal bleeding, but thankfully, she was still alive."

Karen's eyes went wide and Shawna's face drained of color. Even the more seasoned Beth and Cathy had horrified looks on their faces.

Anne noticed that. "Are you, girls, all right? You sure you want me to continue?"

"Yes, please do!" The response was as unanimous as the terrified expressions.

"It was a gruesome crime. Are you sure you are up to..."

"We are fine! Please go on," firmly said Beth, while Karen and Shawna nodded energetically.

"All right then," reluctantly agreed Anne. "If you're sure... Here goes. Jason was the only suspect, since he was the last person seen with Rebbecca. As I recall, bloodstains were found in his car. DNA match showed that the stains belonged to both him and the girl. It seemed clear, he was the one who did it to her. But he denied it emphatically. He said that when they parked at the lake and he tried to kiss her, they got into a terrible argument, she scratched him very painfully on a cheek, he got mad and slapped her hard in response. The blood from his cheek spilled in the car. Meanwhile, her nose started bleeding and so, that could have accounted for her blood. That was Jason's version of the events."

"Then what happened?" prompted Shawna.

"Jason also said that after realizing that Rebbecca was bleeding he came to his senses and withdrew. But she still ran out of the car and before he could stop her, disappeared. He tried to call after her and even looked around the bushes, but there was no sign of the girl. So, assuming that she ran back home, he drove away."

"Except, that's not where she ran, it seems," said Maria pensively.

"Right," nodded Anne. "They found her unconscious and bleeding not far from the spot Jason indicated as their place of argument. It was in the opposite direction from Rebbecca's house and in a very secluded area. So, based on evidence and in the absence of witnesses, no one believed Jason's story."

"But what about Rebbecca?" I blurted out. Everyone turned to me in surprise. I didn't know exactly what made me continue, but feeling a bit self-conscious, I pressed on nevertheless. "Didn't you say, Rebbecca was alive? If so, surely, she could've explained what really happened back there?"

"Unfortunately," said Anne with a sad smile, "she couldn't. She was alive, just barely. The doctors saved her life and she got better in time, physically anyway. But the trauma of the beating and rape had done something to her mind. All attempts by police to get a statement caused her to go into hysterics and try to commit suicide. Finally, doctors prohibited further questioning. Later, she withdrew completely into some kind of inner world and stopped talking altogether."

"What a tragedy," whispered Karen.

"It gets worse," said Maria. "Rebecca's mother got ill after the incident and died soon after. And her father, having essentially lost his daughter and his wife, had a stroke and had been confined to a wheelchair until his death five years ago."

“So, Jason was convicted, of course?” I nodded.

“Well, the trial was very emotionally charged. The whole town was in shock over that hideous crime. Chief Nordini, a very nice man with lots of experience, felt badly for Adelaide. He personally spent day and night searching for evidence, hoping for anything that would confirm Jason's story and point in another direction. But,” Anne shook her head, “everything seemed to be pointing at the boy.”

“What was the charge?” I asked.

“If I remember correctly...” Anne knitted her eyebrows, recalling. “It was rape with aggravated assault and attempted murder. Prosecution was able to show that not only was Rebecca cruelly raped and beaten, but she was also deliberately left for dead. Due to the seclusion of the spot, it was by pure chance that she was found when she was. Just half hour later and it might have been too late, hence, prosecution argued, it was an attempted murder. Once the “M” word was uttered, there was no turning back. Adelaide hired the best lawyers from New York that money could buy. She spared no expense. And even though the evidence was irrefutable and prosecutors wanted Jason's blood... well, at least twenty years of it, his hotshot lawyers managed to reduce the sentence by almost half and Jason got twelve years.”

“So now that his sentence's up, he's returned to his mother,” said Shawna, cringing.

“Is he planning to stay here?” whispered Karen, her saucer-like eyes full of fear.

“I sure hope not!” exclaimed Cathy indignantly.

“Well, there is only one way to find out.” Maria resolutely got up. “Time to go, ladies!”

## Chapter 3

Adelaide's house was a mere ten minutes walk past the old, overgrown cemetery. In this town oozing with history and antiques, the impressive white colonial looked very much in place. Peonies and roses came to life in its extensive and well tended front garden and a majestic oak on its right lent shade and protection to both the garden and the house. The front porch had an inviting set of wrought iron settees and a coffee table surrounded by potted geraniums. An impressive crystal chandelier illuminated the entrance hall and the furniture inside was, predictably, antiques.

The woman sitting in a comfortable, meticulously restored Queen Ann chair, knitting on her lap, still preserved some traces of beauty from the long bygone era. Her looks were probably quite exceptional some forty years ago. Her old charm still showed in a delicate ivory of her skin and those clear, porcelain-blue eyes. There was still a certain regal curve to her neck and a straight posture. But wrinkles around her eyes and sadness around her mouth betrayed her share of loss. She got up to greet her guests and I noticed that she was leaning on a cane.

I definitely liked this woman; there was some sad and quiet dignity about her. And despite her disability, she was a gracious hostess. Within ten minutes, tea was brewing in a teapot. Fruits, lemon slices and sugar biscuits appeared out of nowhere, while the cranberry cake brought by Maria, sat in the honorary central position on the dining table. It seemed, Adelaide was glad to see us.

Why did she disappear from the group? Oh, she was just sitting it out, since walking is so hard for her. Would she like someone to pick her up and bring her to the next meeting? Oh, how nice, but perhaps she could make it on her own. She was a sweet lady.

We were about to sit at the table when her calico cat, a brown, orange and white medley of pure fluff, leaped lightly into view and fixed her bottomless eyes, which were the incredible shade of green turquoise, on each of us in turn. She rounded up her inspection of our group by sniffing each guest and apparently satisfied, settled herself on the table.

After a brief introduction, Adelaide seated me on her right and I found myself positioned next to her cat, who purred at me invitingly. I gently stroked her silky fur and the cat responded with an even louder purr, sending some wonderful vibrational waves through my entire body. It felt surprisingly good.

“She's a magician, that one,” said Adelaide, watching me with approval. “Makes you forget all your worries and pains.”

She petted the cat lovingly. The purring intensified further. “Do you have a cat?”

“No, I don't. I used to work abroad and move from place to place a lot, so I couldn't...”

“Jade's a journalist from New York City,” announced Karen. “She recently returned from Iraq and Afghanistan.”

“Yeah, that's right. Thanks, Karen,” I said. “Now that I'm settled down, I might get a kitty.”

“So,” said Adelaide, “your husband's a journalist, too.” It wasn't a question.

“How did you know that I have a husband and that he's a journalist?”

“That's not a hard one to figure out, my dear,” said Adelaide with a shrug. “Although you are hardly showing yet, you're definitely pregnant and have a trace from a ring on your ring finger. Probably took it off because your hand is a little swollen. That's quite natural, of course. You're the city type – a New Yorker – and wouldn't have settled here unless a husband insisted

that you needed some peace and quiet for the baby. And I have a hunch that you're staying here while he's away, otherwise, you'd likely be spending a Saturday with him, not with us. Since you've been to Iraq and Afghanistan... and looks like for a while, judging by your tan, you must have married there. Now," she looked at me appraisingly, "military is definitely not your cup of tea, therefore, he must be a journalist."

"Everything's exactly as you said." I laughed. "You are good!"

Adelaide smiled at me. "I've been around the block quite a few times, my dear."

"Yeah, you are right," I said. "My husband's on an assignment to Africa. So, he insisted I move here during my pregnancy."

The moment I started my explanation, the cat perked up her ears. But as soon as I was finished, she jumped off the table as if now she knew everything there was to know about me and anything else would've been superfluous. She stretched luxuriously and made herself busy playing with the ball of yarn left by Adelaide on the floor. Watching her graceful moves and funny jumps, Shawna giggled and the rest of us applauded. As if to receive her due, the cat sat on the floor like a chiseled calico statue, her four snow-white paws forming a perfectly round pedestal, which caused another round of applause. The atmosphere in the house was so peaceful, so relaxing that it seemed impossible that anyone unpleasant or, worse, sinister could live in such environment.

"What's her name?" I asked.

"Ah, of course, how could I forget! Let me introduce my pride and joy. This is Lily, also known as Princess Lily." Upon hearing her name, the cat turned with a pleased *meow* and two shimmering pieces of green turquoise stared at me.

"She has gorgeous eyes," I said to Adelaide.

"She does. In fact," Adelaide looked intently into my eyes, then back into Lily's, "this is incredible, but her eyes are a lot like yours."

"You are a beauty," I said, smiling at the cat. "And it's very nice to meet you." The cat smiled back at me.

There was a sound of the opening door and a man came in. He was tall, lean and strong. His dark hair was shoulder-length, gathered in a ponytail. A tattoo with a skull and two crossed knives was peaking through on his muscular arm, where the short sleeve of this t-shirt ended. His right hand came into view as he lifted it in order to take a black messenger bag off his shoulder. It was a large, capable hand – a hand, used to manual labor. And it was all covered with rough darkened skin and what looked like a number of cuts and calluses inflicted by years of hard work, neglect and possibly, injuries.

He was probably in his early thirties, but somehow he made an impression of an older man, mercilessly beaten down by life. His forehead was cut with untimely zigzags and his mouth, which a long time ago was probably considered sensuous, drooped down in a kind of permanent fatalistic expression that said, *I have nothing to live for and won't be surprised by any shit that comes my way*. There was a definite family resemblance, but his face possessed no spark, no intelligent curiosity Adelaide's face shone with. The man certainly was her son, yet very much *unlike* her.

Seeing him come in, Karen and Shawna involuntarily shrunk in their chairs. Cathy, Beth and Anne watched him with different degrees of suspicion, and even Maria had a faint trace of disapproval in her eyes.

The man's downcast eyes quickly surveyed the landscape and immediately turned away from the group. Call it journalist's instinct, but I knew that however quick and general that glance was, it noticed everything there was to notice.

"Good day," he mumbled in our general direction, hardly bothering to open his mouth and not really looking at any of us. His frowning expression told us that in his opinion, the day was anything but... Without so much as a fleeting glance in our direction, he shuffled up the stairs.

"Good day," responded some of the women uncertainly to his retreating back, concluding in a chorus, "how are you, Jason?"

No answer. The shuffling had trailed away.

"Jason, dear," called Adelaide after her son coaxingly. "Would you like a nice cup of tea? Look, the ladies brought cranberry cake, your favorite!"

Silence... just a creak of a floorboard somewhere upstairs and a sound of a body sinking into bed behind the closed door.

"You must forgive him," said Adelaide apologetically, something suspiciously wet glinting in her eye. "He's trying to re-adjust. This is only his second week back."

"Of course, there is nothing to apologize for. We understand." The women wanted to smooth out the awkward situation.

"So, Adelaide, how are you feeling?" Maria hurried to change the subject.

"I'm fine, just fine. A little tired, is all," said Adelaide distractedly, her eyes still lingering on the top of the stairs where her son disappeared just a minute ago.

"How's that foot?"

"Oh, that's a bit painful. Has been difficult to get to my charities." Adelaide smiled weakly. "I don't feel right skipping yet another week, you know."

Then, realizing that I had no idea what she was talking about, she explained, "I volunteer at the battered women shelter. They are always in need of an extra pair of hands there. Besides, I do some work at the shelter for homeless animals. Lily and I are lucky," she glanced fondly at Princess Lily, who was now purring contentedly on my lap. "We both have a good home and security, but how many out there don't."

"She is just modest," said Anne. "She does *a lot* of work at both places. She's practically there full time."

"Yeah, and she's also their major financial supporter," said Karen.

"O-okay ladies, what else can I get you?" said Adelaide, looking embarrassed.

"Oh, we should be going." Everyone started gathering their things over the half-hearted protests of our hostess and although my journalistic antenna was up big time and I wouldn't have minded getting to know better this interesting woman and her unusual son, I knew it was time to go. Still, I felt with every fiber of my body that there was much more to their story than caught the eye.

"Now, don't you be a stranger," said Adelaide, giving me a goodbye hug.

"I wouldn't dream of it," I responded earnestly, "especially since my house is only several blocks from yours."

## Chapter 4

“Hey, how's the life of leisure,” rang in the phone Rachel's cheerful voice and my mood immediately went up a few notches.

Rachel and I were close for years, ever since freshman year at Columbia. She stayed at our *alma mater* for graduate school and now she was Rachel Weise, Ph.D., a young, but already fashionable psychoanalyst, her Manhattan office located not just anywhere, but at the highly coveted and awfully expensive Central Park West. All, thanks to generous contributions from her guilt-ridden, divorced mom and dad, as well as a battalion of Jewish relatives scattered all over the world, but firmly united in the pride and support of a high achiever from the Weise clan. Rachel, the practical, common sense soul that she was, made a very good use of all that windfall. And knowing her relatives, I am sure, they didn't expect any less of her.

Usually, whenever we happened to pick up our friendship after a period of either my travels or Rachel's super-busy schedule, it flowed naturally, as if a dry spell had never happened. At the sound of her enthusiastic voice in my phone I would readily spill all my news, big and small, and listen to hers, with equal interest.

Irrationally, I've been a bit peeved at Rachel lately. It so happened that when my husband had made that infamous unilateral decision to rent me a house in Stepford, he had tried to enlist Rachel's help in persuading me that it was, in fact, a swell idea. Rachel listened to our heated discussion silently – she was a pro and much too smart to take sides in my husband's presence. But when Paul, exasperated with my resistance, finally left for his office, Rachel wisely stayed back. As soon as the door closed behind him, she told me that in her professional opinion, he had a point.

“*E tu Brutus!*” I exclaimed indignantly, considering that to be a punch way, way below the belt.

She sighed in resignation and then, completely demolished me with her lecture that in my humble, non-professional opinion was worthy of appearing in some fancy-shmancy psychology textbook.

“Emotional and physical requirements of a pregnant woman are different. An expecting mother's desire to protect the unborn child may cause a subconscious system rebellion, unless it is placed in what it deems a safe and protected environment.” She fixed me with that professional psychologist's stare of hers, but seeing that I wasn't yet duly impressed, went on.

“Jade, given that your lifestyle prior to pregnancy had been that of danger and uncertainty, you are a high risk. Call it *an overactive baby protection system*, if you will. When your mind assumes that your lifestyle is dangerous for the seed of new life in you, just like an overactive immune system in some people, such a rebellious baby protection system may become unruly, causing major complications and even a loss of your child.” She had pronounced all that psychological mumbo-jumbo with a very serious air and although I felt that I was being pushed to make a decision I didn't want to make, it got me thinking.

That night I had agreed to move to the Berkshires to Paul's inexpressible relief, but I never mentioned to him Rachel's role in my unexpected turnaround.

“That I've got to see, you doing nothing!” meanwhile continued Rachel's voice in the phone and my irrational resentment evaporated as a wisp of smoke. I had to admit that she was right, and so was Paul. Within a week since my move to the blessed Stepford environment, my nausea

and morning sickness disappeared without a trace. Granted, my skeptical side objected, it could be that I was simply into the second trimester and my first trimester woes were naturally over. But hey, with my appetite coming back and my life finally settling down, I wasn't about to complain.

Rachel was very glad that I was doing well and promised to come visit me the following weekend. My mood dramatically improved, I decided that a little celebration was in order. Let's see, what could I have for lunch? Something nice, yet healthy. Hmm... I didn't feel like cooking, so eating out seemed like a good idea. But where? Obliging, into my consciousness drifted the inviting smells that usually emanated out of the Blue Peacock Inn, a multilevel colonial that sprawled its grand body across a whole block of Main Street, easily dwarfing my favorite library next door. It had a luxuriously deep veranda, as large as a dance floor, where guests and restaurant goers lounged and mingled, complete with two marble statues of peacocks majestically flanking its main entrance.

The inn was *the destination* of Stepford and so, forty-five minutes later, I found myself at the Blue Peacock restaurant. My table was in a somewhat secluded corner that, nevertheless, afforded a full view of the room, including the entrance. This was a habit of a die-hard investigative journalist. See everything, hear everything, yet stay as unnoticed as possible. Eating at a restaurant by myself wasn't my first choice, but it beat cooking and I had to admit that smells wafting out of the inn's kitchen were irresistible. Besides, I was making up for my torturous nausea days, so skipping meals was definitely a thing of the past. After all, I was now eating for two!

And as for eating alone, I took care of that, as well. How? By bringing with me a companion, namely, Nikolay Gogol's immortal satirical comedy *The Incognito From St. Petersburg*, which I was heroically attempting to read in Russian. Political intrigue in a small town, deception, hidden motives, mistaken identity and in the end... well, naturally - everyone got what they deserved. Delicious!

The restaurant was half empty. There was an elderly couple sitting at a table by the window and a few tourists scattered around the room. By the wall opposite the entrance, I noticed a mismatched group of three men: two in expensive business suits practically screaming "country club" and one in a faded blue shirt that was in desperate need of an iron. All three of them looked like they were in their thirties and appeared to be immersed in some important discussion conducted in hushed voices. One of the men in suits – the good-looking one – got up and headed towards the bathroom. The remaining two kept a hushed conversation going, while throwing periodic surreptitious glances in the direction of the entrance.

I ordered grilled salmon on a bed of basmati rice with baby tomatoes and basil, and sat there, sipping Evian and reading *The Incognito*. The door opened and a man wearing a policeman's uniform came in. He was big, broad-shouldered, the way bodybuilders are, with muscles bulging through the thin fabric of his summer uniform. In fact, everything about him was a bit too big for comfort and seemed out of place in this room, where flowery Victorian teapots and delicate china dominated the decor. The man quickly surveyed the place with his small eyes, tucked away behind the visor of the uniform hat, and resolutely headed straight for the table with the three men. The glass display cabinets with Victorian teapots in them trembled slightly, as the oversized policeman passed.

"Nick, glad you could join us," said one of the men, shaking the new arrival's hand.

The chair creaked pitifully, as the policeman sat down. He took off his uniform hat and placed it on an empty chair next to him. The trio at the table put their heads together and

resumed their whispered discussion. A few moments later, the policeman lifted his head and scanned the surroundings, while I observed him from my corner, unnoticed. Apart from the small sharp eyes, his face was in total discord with the rest of him. It was simply too young and ruddy cheeked. It didn't go very well with the imposing air the man exuded and with the eyes that were way too cold, way too cutting for such a young man.

My curiosity went on high alert. *The Incognito* forgotten, from that moment on I became all eyes and ears. Of course, there was nothing wrong with a policeman having lunch with a few local business people. Except that the four of them – two in expensive business suits, one in a wrinkled shirt, and one in neatly pressed police uniform – made up an odd group.

Meanwhile, the good-looking suit was on his way back to the table and as he noticed the newcomer, a quick shadow seemed to pass through his face. But a mere second later, he was again all smiles and shaking the burly policeman's hand.

At that moment, a stocky man in his sixties, accompanied by a suntanned woman, her dieted and exercised body in a well-cut beige dress, entered the room and headed to a table, not far from where the odd group of four ate their lunch. The new arrival noticed the oversized policeman and greeted him jovially, “Good to see you Chief Nordini! How’s everything going?”

“Everything's under control, Your Honor,” responded Chief Nordini, rising slightly in his chair.

“Splendid, splendid,” said the man, gallantly pulling the chair out for the woman.

Chief Nordini? Must be the same one Anne mentioned the other day. What was it she said? Oh yes, Chief Nordini – a nice man with a lot of experience. He felt sorry for Adelaide and personally spent days and nights looking for evidence that would point in another direction, but alas, it was all pointing squarely at Jason.

Except it couldn't have been him, age didn't match. It happened good thirteen years ago and the police chief, if he was as experienced as Anne said, at the time should have been at least forty or older. This man was much too young for that. Even though his uniform and his size made him look imposing, the face betrayed his real age. He definitely looked to be in his thirties. As a matter of fact, he looked young enough to be the same age as Jason. That meant that he would have been twenty or less, when Rebecca's tragedy took place.

Meanwhile, the other three greeted the stocky man, as well: “Good day, Your Honor!” “How are you, Judge Bowman?” “Good to see you, Your Honor!”

Judge nodded to all of them genially. “Marc, I trust practice is doing well? Jack, how's your dad's health? So you are running the company now – good man! Peter, I'll need to talk to you about some investments. When? Tomorrow at lunch? That should work – splendid, splendid.”

The waiter started taking the judge's lunch order and I got busy with my steaming fish. For a few minutes I enjoyed the meal, but after first hunger was satisfied, thoughts returned. Did I just witness a gathering of *who's who* of Stepford? Something about this whole scene seemed strange, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

Half an hour later, I was done with my lunch and deciding against coffee (I must be good for the baby) was ready to ask for the check, when the policeman abruptly got up and quickly left. A minute later, the other three headed out in a group. On the way to the exit, they unexpectedly paused by my table.

“Excuse me,” said one of the suits, the bigger and taller one. “Are you Jade Snow, by any chance?”

“Yes,” I said, surprised. “I don't believe we've met. How did you know?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he said, smoothly conjuring his card out of thin air. “Allow me to introduce myself. Marc Catcham, Law offices of Catcham and Catcham, at your service.”

“Thank you,” I said, taking the card reluctantly. “I’ll keep that in mind. But I still don’t understand, how do you know me?”

“Oh, yes,” he flashed me a smile, his face with protruding chin and hawkish nose failing to show even the slightest sign of embarrassment. “One of your knitting friends works as my paralegal, Beth Miller. I understand you are a journalist and your husband is on an assignment to Africa.” He shrugged his shoulders disarmingly. “In a small town news travels fast. And,” he added as an afterthought, “the knitting club is dubbed *The Gossip Central of Stepford* not for nothing.”

“So I see,” I said slowly, processing this new bit of information, while at the same time examining his card. “Catcham, Catcham. Rings a bell. Where could I’ve seen this name?”

The two men in suits looked down at me with what felt like a condescending smile and started to open their mouths to enlighten me. That annoyed me. Look at these little, arrogant country clubbers, I thought. They think they are so smart and important, don’t they? We shall see. My dormant competitive drive was all of a sudden aroused.

“No, don’t tell me,” I said aloud. “I have good memory. Yes, I know. I saw your name on posters. That’s it. *Marc Catcham for Senate*, correct?”

“Correct!” The hawkish-nosed suit was pleased, a trained politician’s smile on his lips, but the smile still failing to register in his narrow eyes. “I am running for State Senate and your vote will be highly appreciated.”

He wanted to go into his campaign pitch no doubt, disregarding my raised eyebrows, when...

“Peter Burns,” quickly cut in the second suit. Somewhat shorter than Marc Catcham, he had a good looking, clean-cut face – the kind women like – and suave manners. And apparently, *he* noticed my raised eyebrows. It looked like little escaped this particular man’s attention, as he simultaneously managed to sweep a covert glance over my breasts that got bigger as my pregnancy progressed, and therefore, were peeking in the low cut of my princess top. He produced his own business card with a flourish. “President of the Burns Berkshire Bank: banking and wealth management.”

“Thank you,” I said, mentally hoping this torture by men in suits would end soon.

“Hi,” said the third man in a wrinkled shirt, clasping my hand in a surprisingly clenchy grip. His fingers were thin and long and his hand nervous and clammy, like a spider’s extremity. “Jack Maloof. I work with my father,” he mumbled, avoiding my eyes and I was relieved he didn’t attempt to push on me his own business card or agenda.

“Jade,” continued Marc Catcham, “we wanted to invite you to join us at the next Rotary Club meeting.” He was obviously unperturbed by either awkwardness or interruptions. Clearly, he would make an excellent politician, I thought.

“We all belong to the club.” He made a sweeping gesture to include his companions and God knows who else. “And we gather for lunch right here, at the Blue Peacock, every Tuesday between noon and two. There are other business men and women, as well as prominent people of our community and perhaps, as a journalist, you would like to be a part of it.”

“Thank you,” I said noncommittally, shuddering at the thought of having to endure two hours at a table with these specimens. “Um... I’ll consider it.”

The trio finally headed for the exit, and I made a mental note to stay away from the Blue Peacock on Tuesdays at all cost.

## Chapter 5

The story I was writing kept stalling and absolutely refused to move forward, much like a stubborn donkey, that quintessential animal of Afghanistan. And no wonder, since my eyes kept drifting in the direction of the tiny white hat I started to knit for the baby, while Adelaide's image, along with those of Princess Lily and Jason, kept invading my mind. Adelaide had missed yet another knitting club meeting and somehow, curiously, I missed her. Setting aside my computer with a sigh of resignation, I put the baby hat into my bag, handling it with trepidation of a true novice.

I should go visit Adelaide, I decided. It's as good an excuse as any: a proud beginner showing off her first ever knitting project. She'd be happy to see me, or so I hoped.

Adelaide's front garden was, as usual, sunny and serene. The majestic oak hugged the house, as well as the garden, in its protective embrace, complete with multicolor blooms, butterflies and chirping birds. Not a sound, not a move anywhere, besides the gentle ebb and flow of nature. For a hard core New Yorker like myself it seemed a bit too serene. I almost rang the bell, but it occurred to me that the lady of the house might be resting. Not wanting to wake her up, I peered instead into a half open window of what I knew was her sitting room. As I suspected, she was asleep in the familiar Queen Ann chair and her knitting slipped off her lap to the floor.

There was a curious scene in progress on that floor. Princess Lily, her back towards me, was bent over Adelaide's project and the impression was that she was busy knitting it. But it couldn't be, could it? Cats didn't knit and I couldn't really see what she was doing there, where the shadows deepened. Perhaps, like most cats, she just wanted to play with a ball of yarn and was in the process of contemplating how to best unravel it. After all, however smart Lily was, she was just a cat, complete with all of the feline instincts and pranks.

I better wake up Adelaide, I thought, or she would have no project to get back to. I cleared my throat loudly and the cat immediately turned around, saw me and gave a melodic *meow*. There was not a trace of guilt in her demeanor, only friendliness. You are just being silly, Jade, I told myself, my heart melting. Your imagination is running away from you. This is an angel of a cat! She would never do anything mischievous.

Meanwhile, the cat smartly brushed her silky body across Adelaide's legs, which woke her up instantly. I waved to her from the window. Getting up with difficulty, she went to open the front door.

"Isn't she precious," cooed Adelaide, glancing fondly at her cat. "That's a good girl, waking me up so I could let Jade in." She stroked the fluff in front of her and Lily responded with a satisfied purr.

Adelaide pulled out a tin of her pearl jasmine green tea, which she saved for special occasions. I helped her set up the table and started cutting blueberry cheesecake I picked up at the bakery. We sipped tea and talked about knitting, when Adelaide asked me about my parents.

"My parents are both gone," I said quietly, my heart skipping a beat, but quickly resuming its usual rhythm.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Adelaide. "I didn't know."

"That's okay," I said. "It's been a long time, thirteen years ago. They died when I was fifteen. My Grandma Anastasia took care of me after that. But she was getting on with age and died during my sophomore year in college."

“What happened to your parents?”

“Well, they were both investigative journalists on an assignment to South America. There was a small, unknown war, the kind of war that hardly ever makes news in the US. It was between some local drug lords and my parents got in the middle. They were shot. I only found out a month later.”

“I'm so very sorry,” she said, and put her wrinkled, warm hand on top of mine.

“Thank you,” I said, feeling grateful and tingly with that forgotten homey warmth that I vaguely remembered from my childhood.

“I see you decided to follow in your parents' footsteps and become a journalist too?”

“I always wanted to be one. It was really a very natural choice for me. I love traveling, talking to people, getting to the bottom of things.”

“Good thing you tan so well. That's highly unusual with your coloring. Reddish hair and blue-green eyes usually are not favorable for tanning.”

“True,” I nodded. “But I do have some southern blood. My father was British and from him I inherited my reddish hair. My mother was half Russian, and my Grandma Anastasia is responsible for the color of my eyes. And my Spanish side has given me a great tan.”

We continued chatting while enjoying our tea when Jason came into the room. Seeing that Adelaide had a guest, he tensed defensively, his immediate reaction to head for the stairs, to escape.

“Hello, Jason,” I greeted him amicably, hoping he might change his mind.

“Hello,” he responded reluctantly and looked in my direction for the first time. His face underwent a transformation when he knew it was me. It was unbelievable, but there was no mistake: the expression on it was that of relief. “I remember you. You came with the rest of the knitting ladies the other day.”

“That's right,” I said.

“You are not like the others,” he continued, his body starting to relax. My eyes met his and I noticed a deep shadow of sadness in them.

“Would you like to have a cup of tea with us, dear?” quickly asked Adelaide, seizing the moment. He nodded and sat down. I poured him tea.

“I couldn't find any cranberry cake, it's your favorite, isn't it?” I said to him, “so I brought some blueberry cheesecake instead. I hope it's okay.” And I handed him a slice.

“Thanks, it's fine,” he said. And amazingly, there was a semblance of a smile on that never-smiling face. Adelaide looked happy.

We all drank the fragrant green liquid. Jason finished his slice of cheesecake and asked for seconds. There was a sound of *mrrreow* and Princess Lily nimbly leaped on Jason's lap. He petted her gently with those callused, prematurely aged hands and fed her cheesecake from his spoon. The cat's tongue touched the smooth substance delicately and an inspired purr, like a song, emanated in waves from her little body. She licked the spoon clean and stretched luxuriously on Jason's lap. Then, she placed her snow-white paws on his shoulder, reached for his face and licked his cheek with great affection. He stroked the cat's fur in response, his face changing beyond recognition. There was absolutely no pessimism or pain left on it. It was peaceful, much like Adelaide's. This time, it was clear beyond any doubt: Jason indeed *was* her son.

I walked back home, meditating on what I just witnessed. I had been to Afghanistan and Iraq; I've seen death and suffering. I met those who committed crimes and those against whom the crimes had been perpetrated. For the life of me I couldn't imagine the man I just had tea with

raping and nearly killing another human being, a young woman, just for the fun of it. He didn't feel like the villain of the piece... to me he rather resembled another victim.

Something was fundamentally wrong with the official story of Rebecca's rape. But what? And that's when I knew, I simply had to get to the bottom of this cold case. I had to uncover the truth!

## Chapter 6

The next day, I woke up deep in thought. It appeared that the best place to start my secret investigation into Rebecca's case would be where the original inquiry was conducted, at the local police department. Hadn't Anne mentioned that she worked there? That was very convenient. I decided to surprise her for lunch.

The Stepford Police Department was also located on Main Street, but several blocks down from the Blue Peacock Inn and in the most unlikely building imaginable. It was a restored nineteenth century colonial, white, with smooth round columns and real black shutters. Those shutters that in the times past did the actual job of protecting windows from storms, unlike the new style plastic imitations permanently fastened to the walls, as is the pathetic fashion among contemporary builders. This white stately colonial, a reminder of the times past, would have been more likely to house a local history museum or an antique shop, trademark of the Berkshires.

A police station in such a place was, put it mildly, a surprise.

But if the outside was a surprise, the inside was a shock. It looked the utter opposite of its outward shell. The interior was completely gutted out to accommodate the necessary police wiring and computer equipment. The thick black wiring in question spidered ominously along the walls painted in some indescribable shade of institutional gray. The picture was complete with a row of cold-looking metal chairs chained together next to a bare wall, and a huge bulletproof divider, screening off the dispatch area. The combination of the old, genteel exterior and the harsh contemporary interior looked forced, worse, tortured, as if someone tried unsuccessfully to fit a proverbial round peg into a square hole.

Even more than in the incongruent architecture of the building, I was interested in the people working in its walls, particularly, Chief Nordini. I confess: taking my good friend Anne out to lunch was just a cover – so sue me! My real goal was to keep my eyes and ears open. In other words, today I hung my writing hat and donned that of an investigative journalist, the hat I'd missed so much, the one that always fitted me best.

Anne, whose title was Police Department's Senior Dispatcher, was happy to see me and pleasantly surprised that I wanted to take her out. She left her workstation in the care of an eager new girl whom she was training. The innocent-looking blond, who couldn't have been more than twenty or so, smiled at me from behind the giant bulletproof glass of the dispatch.

In the short time it took Anne to get her things, a couple of officers went in and out of the building, throwing me sharp glances that were no doubt meant to make any potential criminal tremble and recoil. Otherwise, the station was dead quiet and there was no sign of Chief Nordini, apparently due to lunch hour. Too bad.

No matter, I decided, I'd do more snooping around when we get back from lunch. And in any event, it was good that they saw me in Anne's company. If I needed to come back for more investigating, they'd be used to me, they'd see me as a non-threatening insider – as Anne's friend. Good plan.

I let Anne decide where we'd go for lunch and she suggested Pepperino's, a nice, if a bit noisy cafe on Main, which, according to my companion, served a wicked good sandwich. Sandwich it is, I agreed, longingly recalling my favorite grilled salmon from the Blue Peacock.

Anne was right, the sandwiches were good. I ordered a grilled turkey with pesto on freshly baked rye bread and a side of veggies in lieu of French fries. And to quench my thirst, a cup of peppermint tea. Anne was having a sensible tuna fish sandwich on whole wheat. I sipped my tea, while throwing wistful glances at Anne's cup of steaming coffee. Ah well, whoever said that it was easy being an expecting mom?

We chatted about knitting and I learned all about mysterious abbreviations like *yo* (yarn over), *k2tog* (knit two together), and *sl1* (slip one). Then, we proceeded to talk about Anne's two little nieces - *oh, they are so adorable* - and to review in great detail photos of her two blue-eyed and curly-haired angels in pink dresses, which she proudly produced out of her ample felted bag.

As we got up to leave, Anne mentioned that she was concerned about Adelaide. "She isn't herself lately," she said. "You should have seen her just a couple of months ago, when she was all energy and optimism."

"So, leaning on a cane is a new thing?" I asked casually.

"I've never seen her use a cane before, and I've known her for almost fifteen years," Anne said fervently. "I tell you, this son of hers is bad news. Having him around is killing her."

"Hmm..." I said, "so, you think he was the one who did it to Rebecca?"

"Yes, of course, everyone knows that," she responded immediately... but then, did a double take. Keen eyes behind her oversized glasses looked searchingly into mine. "But...I take it you don't think so?"

"I am not sure what to think," I admitted. "I know one thing, in my journalistic career I've seen my share of killers and criminals and there is something about Jason that doesn't fit the profile. Does that surprise you?" Somehow, I felt I could share my doubts with her, because underneath all her small town idiosyncrasies she did seem like a woman of common sense.

She considered this new thought. "No... no, I don't believe it actually surprises me. I guess... you must have some experience with that sort of thing since you've been to Afghanistan and all. Also, I'd think, you should have a good instinct about human psychology, being a journalist. So," she concluded more confidently, "if you feel this way, there must be something to it."

I nodded, smiling to myself. I wasn't mistaken about Anne.

A pensive expression rested on her face all the way to the parking lot of the police station. There was more activity there now with cars pulling in and out and officers coming and going. It seemed the lunch hour was over. I promptly pretended I was passionate about mastering a new lace stitch Anne had been raving about earlier at lunch. My kindhearted companion volunteered to lend me a book that made it a "breeze to learn," which - oh luck - was in her desk. I enthusiastically agreed as it gave me an excellent excuse to come in and stealthily look around the station.

As we approached, we heard screams and crushing noises coming from the lobby. I gave Anne a bemused look, while her face registered an alarm. She wasn't the only one; right on cue officers, who just a minute ago were busily going about their business, turned like one and rushed towards the building, some hastily feeling for their guns. Anne and I quickened our step.

The fantastic scene that presented itself to our eyes, made my jaw drop.

Chief Nordini stood in the middle of the lobby, looking like a bull who was seeing red, his large feet planted firmly on the ground, oversized fists clenched. His nose was bleeding and it was clear that it cost him a superhuman effort not to lunge at the man facing him. And facing him was none other than the topic of our and the whole town's gossip, Jason, in all his glory.

Like Chief Nordini, Jason was also muscular, but not quite as tall and noticeably slimmer. Despite the difference in weight category and rank, he apparently punched the Chief on the nose

and was at the time of our arrival being restrained by several officers, with difficulty. But that didn't stop him from yelling at his foe, "You, gutless maggot! Chicken shit! Still hiding behind your daddy's skirt! Be a man for once in your life!"

Jason was finally subdued and dragged out of the room, while Chief Nordini stood silently, beetroot-red all over, fists clenching and unclenching. His small, sharp eyes surveyed the room, taking in all the witnesses of the scandal: the support staff ogling him with their mouths open, several confused policemen, and Anne. Then, his eyes froze on me. After that, without a word, Nick Nordini turned on his heel and stormed out of the building, like a big, angry tornado.

"What was that all about?" I exhaled, finally reacquiring the gift of intelligent speech.

"I don't know," responded Anne, frowning. It was clear that she was not in a mood for any further discussion. She brought out the book she promised and said hurriedly, "I think we'd better talk another day. Looks like I might be busy for a while. Bye..."

I walked home, the knitting book absentmindedly clutched in my hand, replaying the scene I've just witnessed. It unraveled in slow motion, and as it was, the scene made no sense. Whatever Jason might've been, he wasn't crazy, and neither was he stupid. He must've realized that attacking the police chief in broad day light in front of a dozen witnesses, most of them cops, could put him away again for a long, long time.

I tried to place myself in his shoes. What on earth made you do this, Jason? What caused you to forsake reason and self-preservation? The only answer that came to mind was this: it was something very, very serious.

## Chapter 7

Paul hasn't called in a week and the next morning, sick with worry, I was about to contact *Time* magazine's editor-in-chief to demand that they send him back to me. Because... well, because, I wanted my husband... I needed my husband! Now!!!

All of a sudden I realized that I was in a mood to break something. I looked around – a vase? Neah. There will be nothing left to keep my favorite daisies in. A carriage clock on the mantelpiece? It was ticking very annoyingly, but it belonged to the owner of the house and I didn't think the sweet lady who rented us her cottage would appreciate it if I broke her heirloom timepiece. What else, what else... Dishes? Too much cleaning. Besides, all that broken stuff on the floor would make for terrible feng shui! Finally, common sense won over, but it took me a lot of self-control to restrain the burgeoning impulse.

To compensate for the loss of such tempting destructive opportunity, I started pacing around my living room. Round, and round, and round... I paced, while muttering under my breath, “I deserve better than that... Oh, they are gonna get it... they'll see...” and other such nonsense. But after ten minutes of painfully biting my lip and wringing my arms – something I've never done before in my life – I finally paused in front of a mirror, attracted by the fantastic image of my upper limbs suspended in a highly creative twist of desperation. I looked ridiculous. What's worse, my mind it seemed, was mimicking the movements of my arms and resembled an emotional roller coaster gone berserk.

I sat down and looked at my hands in disbelief. What was going on with me? I've never been this emotional, almost hysterical, before. Did pregnancy cause this? Hormones on overdrive? Or was I influenced by the drama that was unfolding before my eyes? In any event, I told myself, I won't get anywhere this way, that's for sure.

I put a pillow on the carpet for additional support and turned on a CD, entitled *Beethoven for Meditation*. Then, I sat on the pillow and took some deep breaths, trying to stay as close to the lotus pose as possible, but failing miserably due to my growing tummy. I struggled with my body that didn't want to obey me any more, wondering, what would my yoga instructor say when he saw his star pupil not even being able to maintain a lotus pose? And then, it occurred to me that he would probably say, *go with the flow*. I smiled as I knew, that was exactly what I needed.

Relax and go with the flow, the rest will take care of itself. How do I do that? Let's see... By themselves, my legs unfolded and stretched full length in front of me. I uttered a moan of relief and closed my eyes, absorbing the soothing sounds of the Moonlight Sonata. *Calm your mind, calm your mind*, I intoned, picturing myself floating in a river with water so crystal clear that the whitewashed pebbles lining its bottom were visible in the moonlight. The banks of the river were lush with greenery, the overhanging bushes creating a cozy, sheltered environment. Ah, peace...

I enjoyed it for a while and when the CD ended, I opened my eyes slowly, my lips stretching in a serene smile. Mental note, tell Rachel to bring me some more meditation CDs when she comes to visit. The happy smile lingered, as worry subsided and my usual positive attitude gradually returned. I knew now, Paul was fine, he just couldn't reach the phone, that's all. I was sure he would be calling me as soon as possible. Happy with myself and the wonderful world around me, I looked at the clock. It turned out, my meditation lasted longer than I thought and I was running late for my knitting club meetup.

“So I’ll be a little late,” I said to myself with the same sunshine smile. “Remember, go with the flow, go with the flow.”

Humming my new little tune and dancing to its accompaniment, I changed into what has become my uniform of late. First, an oversized cotton tunic – purple today, some delicate green leaves sprinkled lightly over it – very Zen. Next, a pair of stretchy pants with an elastic waist. The tunic hid my growing tummy very well and the pants’ cut was presentable enough. Designer clothes were out of my wardrobe and spandex was in, lots and lots of it!

If you believe it’s easy to find well-fitting clothes when your figure stops resembling a long, thin stick, like mine used to, I can assure you, it’s not. There was a time in my life when I was just as blissfully unaware of the challenges most women faced as their bodies started growing curves in all the right and, well, wrong places. Gone were the good days when I could do a ten-mile trek through the dusty, sunburned Afghani mountains and not even flinch. My new status of an expecting mom had changed all that.

Looking doubtfully at my favorite Italian leather flats, I opted for infinitely more sensible Merrell walkers, not a high fashion statement, mind you, but just what the doctor ordered. A pleasant fifteen-minute walk later, I reached the library.

It was clear right away that Adelaide was still absent. What’s more, Anne was missing, too. The library hall was deserted as was usual at this hour, and we had the whole large space to ourselves. The knitting progressed half-heartedly, while the conversation was unusually animated. All everyone could talk about was yesterday’s argument between Jason and Chief Nordini.

The moment I stepped through the door, Karen enthusiastically dashed out, “Jade, did you hear that Jason got into a fist fight with the new chief?” Her expression was the one usually reserved for the choicest bits of gossip.

“Yes,” I said, nodding. I was glad she started this conversation.

“Oh,” said Karen and fell silent. Poor thing, she looked so disappointed that she wasn’t the one to break the news to me.

“How did you know?” immediately inquired Shawna.

“I actually was there when it happened,” I said. “And I saw it... well, not the whole thing. Anne and I walked in on the argument towards the end.”

I gazed at my knitting companions, trying to decipher their expressions. I was curious about their reaction to the newest of scandals and was hoping to perhaps learn some background on both men. I knew from experience that a casual conversation could sometimes reveal infinitely more valuable information than a direct, in your face, interview ever would. Such was the mysterious quality of the delicate human psyche.

Everyone looked impressed that I was an actual witness to such unusual and exciting event, but I couldn’t discern anything special beyond that.

“So, Anne was there, too?” asked Shawna, a shade of envy in her eyes (oh, why wasn’t it she who happened to be there at the time!)

“Yes, she was. Is she here?” I glanced around innocently, as if expecting Anne to jump out of some dark corner.

“No,” said Maria. “She called me earlier to say she’d be busy today.”

“I see,” I said pensively.

“So, is it true that Jason punched Chief Nordini on the nose?” Shawna was quick to redirect the conversation back to where the juiciest stuff was. What could I say, I loved that girl! You could always count on her to make sure all the most interesting gossip was thoroughly discussed

backwards and forwards. And if, god forbid, anyone ever tried to stray off the prescribed path, she would make absolutely sure the group stayed on course. With a watchdog like that I could be certain the conversation would flow in the direction I wanted, while I could stay inconspicuous, observing, learning and drawing my conclusions.

“It looked like it,” I shrugged my shoulders noncommittally. “When we came in, his nose was already bleeding.”

“But why on earth would he do that?” said Beth in an exasperated sort of voice. She even abandoned her knitting for a moment to scratch her chin in obvious confusion. “One has to be absolutely crazy to punch the chief in front of so many witnesses and expect to get away with it.” Her sister Cathy, a woman of few words as always, nodded energetically, indicating her complete agreement.

“Perhaps,” I suggested slowly, pondering the idea, “he was beyond caring about that. He also called the chief a coward. Does anyone know why?” I gazed at my knitting buddies intently, hoping to see a spark of recognition, a dawning comprehension or anything else that would help me solve this mystery. But... all of them just shook their heads, puzzlement the only expression on their faces.

“No one knows why he did it,” responded Karen for everyone, “and Jason isn't talking. You know how he is.”

With the topic seemingly exhausted, silence fell as my knitting friends contemplated the news, while getting back to their projects. For a time, the only sound one could hear was the clicking of needles and I alone, it appeared, secretly wished we continued our interesting discussion. I just finished asking God to make someone pleeeeeease get back on topic, when...

“Didn't Jason,” all of sudden said Shawna, “go to high school together with the new chief?”

*Thank you, God,* I murmured to myself, mentally lifting my grateful eyes to the ceiling.

“Yes, he did,” confirmed Maria. “They were in the same class. But the two of them couldn't have been any more different.”

“How do you mean?” I asked.

“Well,” Maria stopped clicking her needles, as she started down the memory lane. “You may not know this but I'd been our high school librarian for over twenty years.” *She had? Now, that was interesting. Bull's eye!*

“Generations of kids grew up in front of my eyes,” continued Maria. “I remember when Karen and Shawna were in high school,” a kindly nod towards the girls, who in turn smiled demurely at her, “and I certainly remember Jason and Nick, as well as their entire class.”

“What were they like?” inquired Shawna.

“Well,” said Maria. She was silent for a moment, considering her response carefully. “Although it might seem incredible looking at him now, Jason was a playboy back then. He wasn't a bad boy, though, you can take my word for it. I always thought he had a curious mind and a tender heart underneath all that exterior. There were times he'd come to the library when no one was there and would sit and read quietly in a corner. We'd talked about literature. He dreamed about a career as a writer and I was absolutely sure in those days that he would make a good one. Sometimes, he would help me carry heavy books, but only when no one was looking. It almost seemed as if he was keen on maintaining his playboy image for other people's eyes. Back then,” Maria shook her head, as if not believing the words coming out of her mouth, “I thought that he was a good and gentle soul and that his future was bound to be bright.”

“Does that mean,” I said, “now you don't think so any more?”

“No,” the expression on Maria's face was that of utter regret. “I can't. What he did to that poor girl...” her voice trailed away sadly.

“What about Chief Nordini, how was he different?” prompted Shawna, noticing Maria's dwindling enthusiasm for telling the story.

“I guess, Nick... he was always determined. Yes, determined, that's what I'd call him. I think, he was always serious about his future, and even as a teenager already considered his career. So, he behaved accordingly, always choosing his friends very carefully.” Maria put down her knitting again and looked up, recalling... Everyone held their breath. Something fascinating was about to be revealed.

“What always surprised me,” she continued after a while, “was that he was only friends with the “rich and famous” of Stepford, so to speak. His father was a simple cop, you know, not yet chief. The Nordini family came from thoroughly blue-collar roots. Nick's grandfather and great grandfather toiled at the local mill, back when Massachusetts towns like Great Barrington, where still called Mill Towns. Then, having saved some money and with the help of a bank loan, his grandfather opened an auto yard just across the Massachusetts border, in Canaan, Connecticut. They had four children, three boys and a girl and Nick's father, Frank, was the youngest. When Nick's grandfather grew too old to work, the yard was divided between the two older sons, while Frank was encouraged to go to the military or to become a cop.

“He chose police and shortly thereafter, married a local girl here in Stepford. She was the daughter of a local lumber yard owner. It was a rather struggling lumber yard and the girl... can't recall her name at the moment, needed to stay in the area to help out at the shop. So, Frank got a transfer to our police department and the young couple settled in town.”

“Her name's Trish,” unexpectedly chimed in the usually quiet Cathy.

“What, dear?” asked Maria.

“Nick wife's name is Trish,” repeated Cathy with a strange expression on her face, which, if I didn't know better I'd interpret as jealousy. Anne and Beth exchanged knowing glances.

“That's right – Trish. Thank you, dear,” nodded Maria. “Wait a minute, did I drop a stitch?” She frowned in puzzlement at the beautiful shawl she was knitting. “Let me see here, two knit, yarn over, two purl, two knit, two purl, two knit... No, looks like I am all right.”

“So, what happened next?” asked Shawna.

“Let's see, where was I?” Maria paused pensively.

“You were telling us about Nick,” obligingly supplied Shawna.

“Ah, that's right, Nick. Yes... His was not the most glamorous background, you might say, ladies. But if you looked at his friends, you would've thought differently. He was tight with Marc Catcham, son of the most prominent attorney in the area, friends with Peter Burns, son of the owner of the Burns Berkshire Bank and some say, the wealthiest man in our parts.”

“Why did that surprise you?” I asked, recalling the scene I observed at the Blue Peacock.

“Well,” Maria hesitated. “They didn't seem... to have much in common, if you know what I mean. I guess, I thought... um... that he only wanted to be friends with them because of their social standing and... you know... money. He always seemed so... so calculating.”

Maria paused, a little out of breath. It was clear that she was trying very hard to be fair. “But then,” she finally went on, “Nick's father became chief and he, little by little, acquired certain... um... dignity, I guess, certain confidence about him. He changed, changed a lot.”

“And then what happened?” said Shawna, who listened so intently that she forgot all about the baby blanket she was knitting.

“Well,” Maria's face saddened. “Then, tragedy happened and Jason went to jail. Nick went on to study at the police academy and when he returned, he became a cop. And now he is our new chief, proudly following in his father's footsteps. A good, responsible man, pillar of the community. While, Jason is...”

She smiled sheepishly. “Just goes to show, doesn't it...” Maria's soft eyes gazed at us, surprise and regret mingled on her kindly face. “Just goes to show how mistaken one can be about people. It appears, the boys turned out the opposite of what they had promised to become as children.”

## Chapter 8

“Nick's father was Stepford's police chief, too...” I murmured under my breath in response to some obscure beginning of a thought that I couldn't quite identify. An illusive light turned on in the murky depths of my mind and slowly grew brighter, brighter. The scene I witnessed yesterday appeared of its own accord in front of my eyes: Nick, beetroot-red and furious and Jason, being restrained by cops and yelling, “You, gutless maggot! Chicken shit! Still hiding behind your daddy's skirt! Be a man for once in your life!”

Okay. So, it seems clear what that mysterious phrase, “hiding behind your daddy's skirt” meant. But why did they get into a fight in the first place? What kind of unresolved issue was there between them?

“That's right,” said Beth, as if she could hear my thoughts. “Nick's father, the late Chief Nordini was the one investigating what happened to Rebecca back then. He'd been a policeman here since forever, decorated by the Massachusetts Governor more than once... Probably had seen everything you can imagine in his job. Yet, the poor Rebecca's story had really gotten to him. He was simply obsessed with getting to the bottom if it, combed the whole shore of the lake, looking for possible clues, and personally supervised every step of the investigation. And after Jason was convicted, he had a heart attack, poor man. He took that whole thing so close to heart,” Beth shook her head, managing at the same time not to skip a beat with her knitting. “He had another heart attack less than two months ago and shortly thereafter, he died. It seemed to coincide with the news of Jason coming back from jail. Police chief was bound to know ahead of everyone else, wasn't he?”

My own knitting project lay abandoned on my lap. Meanwhile, my journalistic instinct went positively on overdrive and my mind, trained to spot anything out of the ordinary, started flashing alarms. Hmm... Previous chief is this chief's father and he had been a very “hands on” investigator of Rebecca's tragedy. The father had a heart attack when Jason was convicted and then died, just prior to Jason's return from jail. Interesting coincidences...

“How old is Jason, anyway?” I asked aloud, trying to sound as casual as possible.

“Let's see,” responded Maria. “What year was their graduation? Right, same as poor Rebecca's. Yes, that's right, it was... 1997.”

“No, no,” chimed in Shawna. “I remember both Nick and Jason from high school. They were two years ahead of me. Class of 1998. So, Jason's actually thirty two.”

*Jason's thirty two – one year younger than my husband*, was the immediate thought. *And the same age as Nick*, the revelation struck. Wait a minute, wait a minute!

“1998,” I said aloud. “Thirty two... Then Nick's thirty two as well, right?”

“Correct,” nodded Maria.

“But doesn't that make him awfully young to be chief of police?” I said doubtfully. “Don't they usually look for someone older, with more experience?”

“True, and he'd encountered lots of opposition from citizens,” readily agreed Beth. “And how much jealousy he's seen from his fellow cops...” Her eyes widened dramatically to demonstrate just how much jealousy poor Nick was subjected to. “Some even sent letters with complaints. At one point, we had a police commission from Boston investigating whether he was worthy and all that. But,” she continued cheerfully, “everything's turned out okay. Nick's very

bright and it was also taken into account that his father was chief here for years. And you know how they say, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.”

*Curious choice of words.* The thought came out of nowhere and struck me like a bolt of lightning.

As she spoke, Beth staunchly continued working on her new knitting project, a blue mohair cardigan, all the while counting stitches under her breath and not wavering even for a minute. I simply admired her concentration.

“Besides, he has powerful friends,” reminded Cathy, who was by now finished with her knitted bunny and had already started a new piece, a pair of warm red mittens.

“Yes, very powerful friends!” Beth raised her eyebrows to underscore just how powerful. “Nick plays golf every Saturday with basically the *who's who* of Stepford. Judge Bowman, Mike Shultz - big in real estate - he owns practically a third of the Berkshires, Cole Paisano and his father, a very wealthy family, Steve Foley, that's old money. Also, there is Jerry Pivkin, the head of the Berkshire County Council. And of course, his high school buddies, Marc Catcham and Peter Burns.”

“The good old boys' club,” I murmured under my breath. Why was I not surprised?

“And Jack Maloof, don't forget him,” added Cathy, failing to notice my remark.

“Oh yes, of course, Jack. Although, Jack doesn't play much. He just hangs out with the boys. He is really a nerd, the shy, awkward kind, he's always been.”

“Yeah, I've noticed,” agreed Karen, rolling her eyes. “He's the biggest nerd I've ever seen. Can't understand how come he is friends with these other guys, I mean, Nick, and Marc, and Peter? They seem so different.”

“Maybe,” suggested Maria, “they just took pity on him.”

“Have they been friends since high school?” I asked.

“They've always been tight,” said Maria. “For as long as I can remember. They were all in poor Rebecca's class. Half of her class had a crush on her. Peter, if you ask me, definitely had a thing for her. But she was a class princess and no amount of his daddy's money could convince her to go out with him. Besides, Peter had always been a womanizer. So I guess, she didn't really trust him. The truth was, she had the pick of the litter and anyone would've been proud to call himself her boyfriend.”

“And she... she chose Jason,” Karen snorted indignantly, shaking her blond, curly head in disbelief.

“Talk about the irony,” agreed Beth.

“Everyone in her former class was so shaken when, you know... it happened,” said Maria quietly. “These boys, Nick, Marc, Peter and Jack especially took it to heart. One or the other of them was always ready to visit Rebecca's parents, run errands or go to the hospital to check up on her. I think they still do.”

“Yes,” nodded Shawna, “that's true. My mom says at least one of them comes to visit every week or two. I mean, Marc or Jack usually, but sometimes Nick. Not so much Peter though.”

Beth whispered into my ear, “Shawna's mom works at the Berkshire Hope Clinic, where Rebecca has been a patient ever since the tragedy.”

“Isn't that nice,” cooed Cathy, “after all these years still having friends who'd visit you every week. So lucky for poor Rebecca to have friends like these. I never realized they were that close.”

“I didn't think so either,” shrugged Maria. “At school, Rebecca hung out with a different crowd. And she definitely preferred Jason as far as dating was concerned.”

“But maybe,” offered Cathy, uncharacteristically talkative today, “they are just kind and compassionate souls, is all.”

“They must be,” agreed Shawna. “Because mom said that other than these four, hardly anyone comes to visit Rebecca any more. At first, her old school friends came. But gradually, they all got married or moved out of the area. So mom says she is actually very glad these four still come, otherwise poor Rebecca would be all alone.”

“Such good people they are!” Cathy was back with her praises. “If Marc Catcham has such a good heart, I am definitely voting for him! And all these ill wishers of Nick's – where did their jealousy and complaints have gotten them? Nowhere! Nick is simply a good man, and thank God we have him as our chief! I personally wouldn't have it any other way!” She finished her proclamation ardently and fell silent again, exhausted from what was such an unusually long and emotional speech for her.

“Just like the old Chief Nordini,” said Beth approvingly. “I remember, he was so kind to both Rebecca and Adelaide after... after it happened. He used to visit Adelaide to show support when Jason went to jail. He was such a nice man, and a great chief, too. What a shame he's gone.”

Everyone nodded energetically, clearly in complete agreement with this statement.

I sat, listening intently, when the world around me suddenly dissolved into a gray mist and I saw it for the first time. It was a mere flash: a young woman's body on damp night grass and a glint of moonlit lake visible through the dark bushes. The struggling woman attempted to scream, but a man's hand – big and rough – covered her mouth. Another man, his fingers long and cold, pinned her down in a steely grip. Then, he was on top of her, savagely ripping her summer dress, while the third figure, the large-framed one, stood in the ghostly light of the moon and silently watched the terrible spectacle.

It disappeared just as quickly. The next thing I knew, I swayed in my chair, coughing and gasping for air.

“Jade, your knitting's unraveling,” Shawna leaned towards me with surprising agility, considering her bulging stomach, and managed to save my knitting project, a baby blanket perched precariously on my lap, which suddenly decided to acquire the life of its own.

“Oh, thanks,” I said, still trying to shake off the disturbing vision. Of course, I knew of psychics and clairvoyants who could see things that happened in the past or would happen in the future. My guess was, I've just seen Rebecca's rape. But how could that be? I never had visions before in my life. Why did I get one now? Was somebody trying to tell me something? Nothing in this vision of mine, if indeed it was a vision, was very clear. Just rough hands, night, lake, a struggling woman and multiple, looked like three, attackers. I didn't even see their faces. What could I do with this kind of vague information?

I closed my eyes and sat like that, centering myself. A few moments later, I had a plan of action. When my eyes opened, five alarmed faces stared at me.

“I think... um... I'm tired,” I announced, quickly gathering up my knitting into my new craft bag. “Looks like I've had enough for today. I'm going to be heading home.”

“Perhaps, you should lie down?” said Maria, her gentle eyes clouded with worry.

“Are you sure you're all right? Do you want me to drive you?” volunteered Beth.

“Thanks. It's awfully sweet, but I am fine, really,” I responded. “It's just the heat. I'll see you all next week.”

## Chapter 9

On my way home, I worked out a plan of action. Too late today, but tomorrow bright and early, I hit the library. Some serious research effort was called for and that meant going through local archives, old paper clippings, and through any other records I could uncover. What else, what else... I started feeling the fever, the rush of a chase, that altered state of being, which happens only when a bomb of a story is about to materialize. Because I knew there was a story here. And that – real – story was much different from the official version of events that everyone in this town wanted to believe.

The next morning, I hurriedly gulped up my morning cup of tea and some yogurt. After that, I did a few quick stretches on the veranda. Lilac blooms in the garden gave out a delicate, exquisitely intoxicating smell and the lilies showed off with reckless abandon in flowerbeds. The understated daisies nodded their heads, dragonflies and butterflies fluttering their wings excitedly amongst them. I admired my garden for a few minutes, then picked up my bag containing a notebook, a pen, a small photo camera, a bottle of Evian and a few healthy energy bars. Bag on my shoulder, I locked the front door. Research day.

I decided against the Stepford library as I didn't want to bump into any of my knitting buddies. For now, my investigation was to be a secret.

The Berkshires had a fabulous library system. Each library was housed in a charming old building, usually a former mansion, with antique furniture and period pieces, to boot. Each library had an ancient fireplace, its mantelpiece adorned with either exquisite old china or some local history mementos. The area had a fabulous atmosphere for writing, some intangible quality of mystery and otherworldliness that is priceless when you are in the business of creating stories, larger than life.

I considered my choices, deciding on the Great Barrington library in the end. What was I looking for? I wasn't exactly sure. Something - anything that would help me understand better what really happened in this sheltered, paradise-like community some thirteen years past. What happened to poor Rebecca? What was the role of Nick and his father, then police chief and chief investigator in the matter? And was there any involvement by Nick's unlikely friends, Peter, Marc and Jack?

First, I stumbled upon a yearbook: the Stepford High School, Class of 1998. Jason gazed from his picture with a touch of enigmatic melancholy. He was rather thin, not nearly as muscular as now, and there was still something very innocent about him. But I could certainly see why girls would have been fighting over him – he was awfully attractive in a Bohemian, *a la* Lord Byron, aka, misunderstood poet, sort of way.

Then I found Rebecca's photo. She was very pretty and her face shone with a kind of bright and sexy smile that boys adore. Her wide-open eyes with those long, curving eyelashes looked from the picture directly into the big wide world with anticipation. They conveyed a serene, but unshakable belief that the unknown life she was about to step out to would be exciting, and kind, and very, very happy.

Peter's photo showed a smiley teenager with effortless good looks and confidence of someone, whose destiny is clear and whose road in life has been strewn with roses.

Jack on the picture looked almost exactly as he looked today. In a word, as a nerd.

Marc's photo stood out. Even then, he liked being in front of a camera and posed with pleasure, looking athletic and confident, as if he held the whole world in the palm of his hand. This was a shot of a future politician. Everything in his appearance was rather congenial, except his eyes. They were narrowed and the look in them was cold. No, not quite. Calculating? Cruel? Although, I wondered how accurately could a picture convey an expression in anyone's eyes?

And then, there was Nick. His was a photo of a burly, unsmiling young man, who had a cautious, almost suspicious look on his face, which seemed to say, "Why are you wasting my time on these silly pictures? I've got more important things to do."

In short, these old graduation photos of several very different teenagers told quite a story.

Ready to close the yearbook, I stumbled upon an oversized panoramic group shot of the Class of 1998. It was rather informal: boys and girls commingling, chatting or simply gazing at each other for the last time, before saying goodbye and flying the coop. And that's where I hit the motherload.

Nick and Marc were captured talking to each other, unquestionably two of the most athletic, big-shouldered guys in class. Jack was lurking right next to them, trying to show that he was included, yet the picture clearly revealed the pitiful truth - he firmly remained on the fringes of that conversation. Peter stood next to the other three, but his head was turned in the opposite direction. I followed the direction of his glance. It was fixed on Rebecca.

She stood to the side of the picture, deep in conversation with Jason. Well, the fact that Peter was looking – no, I corrected myself, staring – at Rebecca so intently was nothing surprising. A lot of guys in the photo stared at her. And a lot of girls, at Jason. But the intensity of that gaze was so remarkable that I felt it even through the picture.

So, Peter was infatuated with Rebecca, but his was an unrequited passion. Was he jealous of Jason? And was he jealous and spiteful enough to have done the unthinkable: rape the woman he worshiped and then pin the crime on his lucky rival? And did his high school buddies help him? But how could they get away with it? The answer was simple. They needed the assistance of someone who had unencumbered access to the crime investigation, who could tamper with evidence and who could influence public opinion. In other words, Chief Nordini, Senior, Nick's father.

Everything fitted very smoothly, in fact... a bit too smoothly for my liking. I took a deep breath, trying to make sense of doubts that now flooded my mind. Perhaps, I was influenced by my likes and dislikes? Was I pre-judging before having real facts at my disposal? Shouldn't I hold my horses and give all potential actors in this drama the same benefit of the doubt I unequivocally afforded Jason? And then again, wasn't my imagination running away with me? Perhaps, the mystic air of the Berkshires was playing a joke on me, after all? Perhaps, in this tragic, thirteen-year-old story, everything did happen as everyone believed? Perhaps, being bored and unable to pursue my beloved investigative journalist's calling, I invented the whole thing?

Perhaps...

But, despite a wisp of doubt lingering on the fringes of my mind, another part of me stubbornly refused to give up. My intuition was telling me that I was on the right path and I was used to trusting it one hundred percent. After all, it had never let me down. And so, I went on with my research.

I found some old newspaper clippings archived on microfiche. An article in the Stepford Post, entitled *The Stepford Tragedy*, described how the night after graduation, a "suspected rapist," Jason Paphos, took the unsuspecting Rebecca Gilman to the so called Lovers' Clearing

in the remote section of Hidden Lake and how he had raped and brutally beaten her, leaving her there for dead. The article went on to describe how Rebecca was found and brought back to life, how she lost any ability to speak and retreated into the world of silence.

Included was an oversized picture of Rebecca, taken after the incident. The haggard, severely bruised face stared at me, totally unrecognizable. Blank expression, dark circles around her eyes, a shapeless mouth with a cruel, bloody gash across, the black and blue neck and matted, disheveled hair. Nothing about this picture reminded me of the smiling, healthy girl from the high school yearbook.

I gazed at the picture for a moment or two and then, without warning, the world around me dissolved into the familiar gray mist and I saw it again. Night... grass... lake... young struggling woman on the ground... steely fingers pinning her down... rough hands covering her mouth, not letting her breathe... and looming ahead, a faceless man, his huge body blocking the moonlight.

I desperately gasped for breath. As the vision began to dissipate and the world started coming back into focus, I distinctly heard a strange whisper: *DNA samples... DNA samples...*

“Are you okay, miss?” I opened my eyes to find a young man hovering over me. I blinked, trying to get my bearings. I was seated at a library table, clutching it so tightly that my fingers turned white. I gulped, as senses slowly returned.

“Are you all right?” repeated the young man. “Do you need help?”

“Thank you so much,” I responded, hastily gathering my stuff. “I’m perfectly fine.”

“Are you sure?” inquired the librarian, joining our little group. “Do you need me to call anyone to pick you up? Or perhaps, you need a ride home?”

“Thank you, you’re very kind. But I just need some air, that’s all,” I said, beating a hasty retreat.

It really did feel good to take a nice walk along the river and I breathed in the fresh air with abandon. Several minutes later, my thoughts were right back where they started, on Rebecca’s newspaper photo.

Nothing, absolutely nothing was left of that beautiful girl who had so much to look forward to in life. This was cruel, unfair, incomprehensible. And yet, it happened. And if my hunch was correct, it was cruel and unfair not only to this poor girl. But now that so much time had passed, it was up to me, and me alone, to get to the bottom of what really happened that night.

## Chapter 10

I was concerned about Adelaide. How was she taking Jason's arrest? How was her health? I decided to visit her. She greeted me at the door, still leaning on her cane, and I was alarmed to see how frail she looked. Princess Lily kept snuggling up against Adelaide's feet and it was clear, she was worried too. And the atmosphere in this wonderful old house I came to love was unrecognizable. It has changed from that of quiet and positive dignity to the one of grief.

Adelaide silently poured her famous jasmine green into my cup and offered me some lemon biscuits. Other than that, she said very little. I talked about the knitting club and about my writing, while she nodded distractedly. Then, we chatted about the animal shelter and I promised to come and help her out with animals some day. Adelaide was trying to avoid the painful subject. Not a word so far has been uttered about Jason.

"By the way," said Adelaide, "you should come and visit our cat adoption booth at the upcoming town fair. You can meet Amy, the shelter director, and some of the kitties. It's called the Stepford Day Fair and it will be on from ten to six this coming Sunday. As a matter of fact," Adelaide got up with great difficulty and, holding on to the table for support, slowly made her way to the mantelpiece. "Here is an invitation."

"Thanks," I said, accepting the card and trying not to betray how concerned I was about her health. "I really appreciate it. I have a friend coming to visit from New York, but maybe we can both stop by."

After another sip of Adelaide's fragrant tea I finally gathered enough courage to start the painful subject.

"Adelaide," I said. "I am very sorry about Jason and I'd like to help. What can I do?" I fell silent, not sure how she'd take my offer of help, since she'd always been so fiercely independent.

"Thank you very much, Jade," Adelaide responded with a feeling. "I think I'll take you up on your offer. I actually need a favor."

"Sure, anything!" I said, relieved. "What do you need?"

"Well, you may not be as agreeable when I tell you. I need to visit Jason. He's in Pittsfield jail, awaiting his bail hearing." Her eyes filled with tears. "But it's not until next Monday and till then, he'll be locked up. After I post bail, hopefully, they'll let him stay home until his court date." She reached for a tissue and gently dabbed her eyes.

"Yes, of course I'll come with you. I'll be happy to drive you," I agreed immediately.

"Thank you, dear, I'm so glad." Adelaide put her hand on top of mine and again I was struck by how frail it felt.

The next morning, I drove to Adelaide's house to pick her up. The Pittsfield jail was a huge, square building, located just off Main Street in the capital of the Berkshire County. There were only three above ground floors, but seven more levels were underground and that's where most of the inmates lived. We were shown into an impersonal-looking meeting room, where paint was peeling off the walls. As we sat on cold metal chairs and stared at the long Plexiglas screen dividing the room, I shivered, despite warm weather. The cold, it seemed, emanated not just out of chairs; here, it seeped through the walls. A minute later, Jason was brought in.

"Oh, Jason," cried Adelaide and reached for a tissue in her purse.

"Hi Jason," I smiled, in the vain hope of warming up the impossibly cold room.

“Thanks for keeping Mom company,” he responded, returning my smile. “She needs all the support she can get right now.”

“No problem. You both can count on me!”

“Oh, Jason,” repeated Adelaide, exasperated. “Why, oh, why did you do it?” She dabbed her eyes, which were turning redder by the minute.

“Mom, don't cry, please,” cringed Jason. “You know why. I had to let him know that I know...”

“But why didn't you talk to me first? Why haven't you at least watched your back? And now, look at this!” Adelaide swept her eyes across the dreary space. “You could go to jail again for God knows how long and I... I am now too old to...” she couldn't continue, as tears started staining her light linen dress.

“Mom, don't,” said Jason in a worried voice. “Please!” He looked at her pleadingly. “Understand, I had to.” He reached for her thin, almost transparent, hand. His capable, dark hand hit the hard screen and froze there, as if trying to send love to his mother through this indifferent obstacle. I hugged Adelaide's trembling shoulders. We sat like that for a few moments. Then Jason whispered, “Everything will be alright, you'll see.”

“Oh, but how can it be alright? How?” she said bitterly, about to start crying again. “You are in jail once more and let's hope they at least keep you here, in Pittsfield, close enough to home, so I can come and visit you. And not at that terrible place... where you'd suffered so much. And he... he's just like his father and I'm afraid he'll do anything in his power to keep you locked up.”

“Mom,” said Jason quietly, throwing a surreptitious glance at the guard by the door to make sure he wasn't listening. “Let's not talk about this here. Let's talk about it at home, after they let me out on bail.”

“The bail hearing's only on Monday. They couldn't find the judge on such short notice, or so they say. Likely story.” Adelaide sniffed. “So, you'll have to stay here...”

“That's okay,” responded Jason hastily. “It's just three more days. I've been here longer.” He attempted a pale smile, which only caused his mother's lips to tremble again. I hugged her tighter. That seemed to calm her down.

I had a flurry of questions on my mind about some mysterious phrases that have been said, but held my tongue, knowing that Jason didn't want the guards to overhear. We chatted a bit more and then, I drove Adelaide home. By the time we reached the house, she was feeling better and started bustling around the kitchen, preparing some snacks.

I gladly accepted her invitation to stay for tea and, meanwhile, made myself busy playing with Princess Lily. I held a piece of yarn, evidently, one of her toys and let her pursue it around the floor. She jumped on it, capturing its end, then letting it go.

Lily obviously enjoyed the game. “See how easy this is,” she seemed to be saying, gazing at me with her two shimmering turquoise eyes. “C'mon, don't you have a more difficult trick up your sleeve?”

“Okay, Lily.” I rose to the challenge. “Let's see whether you can catch this curve ball, I mean, this curve thread. Are you ready?”

“Mrrreow!” she responded, and I could've sworn she has just said, *you betcha!* in a mocking sort of tone. Hmm... have I just discovered another talent of mine? Am I starting to communicate with animals now?

Princess Lily sat on the floor in her famous snow-white pedestal statue pose. Her eyes followed my movements carefully, while her tail twitched, readying for a strike. I played with

the piece of thread for a moment or two in front of her nose, but she staunchly refused to be distracted by my diversion tactics. The next moment, I brushed the thread by her paws (another pitiful attempt at diversion). Then, I unexpectedly made it jump as high as possible. In a flash, Lily lowered her supple body to the ground. Next, she jumped almost as high as my shoulder and snatching the thread out of my hand, did a spectacular somersault, landing nimbly on her feet. A moment later she was gone, carrying her trophy with her.

“Wow,” I said, mesmerized. “Lily, you are such an acrobat. You win!” I yelled after her. “Just don't eat the thread, darling!”

“Tea is ready,” said Adelaide, who's been standing in the back of the room, watching us play.

“Did you see her jump?” I asked. “Absolutely amazing!”

“Yes, she is very talented,” Adelaide said proudly and with relief, I noticed that a smile was back on her face.

We sat down to have tea and biscuits and I decided it was time for a talk.

“Adelaide,” I started. “I want to ask you something.”

“Sure, dear, anything.”

“Well,” I said, “I couldn't help but overhear your mentioning that Chief Nordini would want to keep Jason in jail, just like his father.” I noticed her protesting hand and hurried to finish.

“Before you say anything, I want to tell you that I have my suspicions about Chief Nordini's role in Rebecca's tragedy. I also am not so sure the official story of what had happened back then holds water. But I have no proof. If you and I put our heads together, we may be able to get to the truth and prove Jason's innocence.”

“Please,” I added in response to her shaking head, “I want to help!”

“You can't help,” she said sadly. “Believe me when I say this: whatever you do, stay away from this whole thing. Your baby must be your absolute priority. This is too dangerous.”

“But if you have any proof, any at all...” I started again.

“I have no proof. They'd been very careful getting rid of the evidence,” she said bitterly.

“They? Who do you mean? At least tell me who you suspect!”

“Jade,” she said, frowning resolutely. “I love you and I feel that I should be the mother figure in this case. Please, promise me you'll stay away from all this. Promise!”

“But I could help you!” I almost cried out in frustration. Boy, but this woman was just as stubborn as her son! “We could get to the bottom of this much faster if we worked together, don't you see?”

“I am tired,” she said dismissively, ignoring my last outburst. “It was a trying day and I am going to bed.” Then she looked at me imploringly. “I beg you, please stay away. You can't help, trust me.”

Well, what could I say? Of course, I humored the old lady, seeing how agitated and ill she looked. I let her believe I'd stay away from Rebecca's case. But as a result, my burning desire to dig out the truth got only stronger.

## Chapter 11

“Hello,” I mumbled into the phone, still not fully awake. Blinking, I tried to focus my sleepy eyes on the clock. Eight in the morning. Who would be calling at such hour?

“Hello,” I repeated automatically.

“Jade, this is Karen,” said the voice in the phone. “I hope I’m not waking you up.” A pause – waiting for reassurance, no doubt.

“No, of course not, I was already getting up,” I chimed in obligingly, stifling a yawn. “So, what’s up?”

“Haven’t you heard? Jason’s being released from jail today. Chief Nordini refused to press charges and they are letting him go!” Karen fired all this information out in one breath.

“Wait,” I said, finally waking up. “What? They are letting him go? No bail or anything? Is that really true? Are you sure?”

I certainly didn’t expect that.

“Of course, I’m sure,” said Karen impatiently. “My husband works at the County Court.”

“I see.” No surprise there. As usual, the Gossip Central was well connected. “This is great news, Karen! We need to tell Adelaide. She’ll be so happy!” Now I was definitely fully awake.

“That’s why I’m calling,” responded Karen. “Several of us are going to stop by Adelaide’s to let her know and to offer our support. D’you want to come?”

“Of course,” I said enthusiastically. “Count me in!”

“All right then,” said Karen. “How about we stop by your place while you are getting dressed and then we can all go together, since you are only a few blocks away from her house.”

By eight thirty, my knitting club buddies were knocking at the door: Karen, Shawna, Maria, Beth and Cathy.

“We called our bosses and told them we’d be late for work today.” As usual, Beth provided an explanation for both her sister and herself.

Full house - well, almost - I thought, while passing tea to everyone. Except Anne, who’s been M.I.A. since the Jason and Nick fight.

Karen seemed to have read my mind. “Unfortunately, I couldn’t reach Anne. She seems to have disappeared. Too bad. Wouldn’t it be nice if all of us together came to support Adelaide at such trying time.”

“I just can’t get over how noble our Chief Nordini is,” all of a sudden pronounced the usually silent Cathy, sipping her peppermint tea.

“I know,” agreed Shawna. “I was so shocked when Karen called me this morning. Letting Jason go and refusing to press charges after how Jason punched him and insulted him in public. That’s just unbelievable!”

“He’s a very good man,” nodded Beth sagely. “We are so lucky to have him.”

“And poor Adelaide, having to deal with Jason and all of his problems,” meanwhile went on Cathy. “She is such a nice lady and it’s just so unfair that she has to suffer like this because of this good for nothing son of hers.”

“That’s true,” said Beth. “I’m sure, after everything he’s done, not a single soul would support him, not even those who used to give him the benefit of the doubt. I bet he has no friends left whatsoever. Certainly not amongst us!” She circled the room with her beady eyes, fishing for

confirmation, as Cathy, Karen and Shawna nodded in agreement, while Maria just sighed regretfully.

It occurred to me that Beth was right and it indeed would be very hard for Jason to find a real friend in these parts. Public opinion was firmly against him. I guess it was my turn to shake things up a bit.

“That's not true,” I said. “He has at least one friend.”

“He does?” said Beth, knocked off her high horse for a brief moment. “Who?”

“Me!”

The next thirty seconds resembled the famous closing scene from Gogol's *Incognito from St. Petersburg*. Utter shock, lots of open mouths and popped eyes, all that accompanied by deadly silence. I enjoyed the scene for a moment or two and then decided on my further course of action.

“Excuse me, ladies,” I said. “But I'll have to take a rain check on visiting Adelaide. Please give her my best and congrats on Jason's release. And tell her I'll stop by later today. Right now, I have to attend to another urgent business.”

The knitting club filed out of my house, still in shock, while I headed to the police station to visit Anne. I had two goals. First, I wanted to see what I could snoop out about the miraculous turnaround of Jason's situation and second, I needed to ask her about the mysterious DNA samples the surreal voice in the library whispered to me about.

I waved to Anne, who was seated inside the police station's dispatch area, behind the familiar giant bulletproof divider.

“Hello,” I greeted her cheerfully. “You are working too hard lately. Everyone at the knitting club seems to think you are missing in action. So, I thought I'd surprise you today. Buy you a cup of coffee?”

“Thanks.” She smiled despite herself. Although she hesitated, I could tell, her heart was melting from a bit of attention and kindness, things she probably scarcely saw in her line of work. “I don't know if I can leave now...”

“Well, don't you take coffee breaks? Besides, your assistant could cover for you, right?” I winked to the blond girl I met last time. “Oh c'mon, Anne, just for a few minutes!”

“Um... if only just for a few minutes...” She still wasn't sure.

“It's okay, Anne,” the blond girl came to the rescue. “You need a break, you haven't taken one in ages. I'll cover for you.”

“All right then,” reluctantly agreed Anne. “I'll be back in fifteen minutes.”

“Take your time,” said the girl magnanimously. “No rush.”

“So, how's life?” I said, as we walked to the coffee shop two blocks away. “We've missed you at the knitting club, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” said Anne. “It's been crazy lately, ever since...”

“Ever since the fight,” I finished for her. “Speaking of which, do you know that Chief Nordini is not pressing charges and they are letting Jason go?”

“I've heard,” nodded Anne, as we picked up our coffee and sat down in the coffee shop's private garden.

“Why d'you think that is?”

“Why? Oh, I don't know,” she started evasively. Then paused, took a deep breath and looked me straight in the eye. “Look, Jade, I like you. And I think I can trust you, so let's not play games. I know why you are here today and why you are asking all these questions.”

She's right, time to drop the games.

I produced a smile. "I'm glad that you want to be straight, Anne. I appreciate that and I know I can trust you, too. You are right, I'm here because I want to find out more about this whole story with Rebecca. And I feel that Jason and Nick's fight is connected to it. I believe a grave miscarriage of justice happened here twelve years ago and an innocent man was sent to jail. Can you help me prove it?"

I fell silent, my heart beating hard amidst total silence.

"I appreciate your candor," finally said Anne. "Look, I want to help, but I don't know if I can."

"If you are concerned about your job, in case they found out..." I started.

"No, it's not that," she shook her head. "Although I think we are dealing with some smart, and probably ruthless, people here."

"Then what is it?"

Anne threw a sharp glance around the deserted courtyard. "Can we walk?" she said. "I should be getting back and I'd also feel more comfortable if we were moving when we talk."

"Sure," I said.

"See," she continued, as we took the round-about route back to the police station, "after our last talk and after the fight, I started thinking. I'd told you that I was working at the department at the time of Rebecca's case. I guess, some kind of doubt about the official story always remained in my mind because of some things that happened and some things I'd observed. They didn't add up. But it was a very vague feeling and since everyone in town was pretty much convinced about Jason's guilt, I just brushed my suspicions aside and forgot about them. But his return and also, something Adelaide had said, reawakened it. Adelaide is very smart and I've known her for many years. I know, she would never say anything idly."

"What *did* she say?"

"Well, I don't know if I should tell... it was said in private." She paused, deliberating. "But, since you are a friend and trying to help... I guess it's all right. See, a couple of months before Jason's return, the old Chief Nordini had a heart attack, his second. He was just released from the hospital and was supposed to stay in bed, based on strict doctor's orders. Instead, he unexpectedly showed up on Adelaide's doorstep. She told me the whole story later. Walking and breathing with great difficulty, he said that he came to her because he may not live to see the next dawn, but before he died, he wanted to apologize. She asked him what for and he said that he begged her forgiveness for himself and others who'd done her and her son wrong. She stood there, stunned, and before she could say another word, he turned around and was gone. He died that night, while purportedly sitting at his desk and writing a letter. A fresh ink stain was found on his index finger and it matched the ink in the pen found next to him. However, there was no letter. The official conclusion was that he died of another heart attack, because he had failed to stay in bed, despite doctor's orders. Adelaide never told this story to anyone, but me. She added that she always suspected the truth and that the chief's conscience didn't let him live to look Jason in the eye."

"When did you have this conversation?"

"When? A couple of days before Jason's fight with Nick."

"It makes sense," I murmured.

"So you see, when you told me that you doubted the official version of events and later, when we witnessed the fight, I made up my mind to help uncover the truth. I volunteered to improve our archive storage system and started working to re-organize police archives going

back fifteen years. It proved to be a hell of a job and in order to move at a decent speed, I had to work literally day and night.”

“That explains why you stopped coming to the knitting club meetings.”

“Right. I was rushing to see if I could help free Jason. I'm really glad he is out, so I can pace myself a bit more leisurely.”

“But what is it that you're looking for?”

“I'd rather not say right now. What if I'm wrong? I need to organize my thoughts first. I'll tell you as soon as I can, if you don't mind.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “But you know, it would be easier to work together if we both knew the whole thing. I could stumble on something that helps you in your search and vice versa. For example, I actually came here, among other things, to ask you a question, which might help clarify a lot.”

“Sure, what is it?”

“Well, the other day I was thinking about the story you told us at the coffee shop, the first time we were all going to visit Adelaide. Remember?”

Anne nodded, as I went on. “So, I recalled your saying that DNA samples were taken from Jason's car and they proved that both his and Rebecca's blood was present there. But then, I remembered something else. I'm no expert, but in cases of rape, wouldn't they also take semen samples from the assaulted woman and then compare the DNA with that of the alleged rapist?”

“That's correct,” confirmed Anne.

“So, I *am* right!” I exclaimed. “Yet, no one had ever mentioned that. Do you know whether those samples had been taken and tested. And if yes, what happened to the results?”

“You are amazing,” murmured Anne, stopping dead in the middle of the street.

“I am?”

“Believe it or not, that's exactly what I've been searching archives for: those missing DNA samples!”

“So, what happened to them?” I said in anticipation of an important revelation... Warmer, much warmer.

“Well, since you've spotted the problem all by yourself,” said Anne, “I'd better tell you. See, the semen samples were indeed taken and supposedly sent to the lab for DNA analysis. However, the next day they allegedly disappeared. Initially, the lab tried to cover up their disappearance and it only came out two weeks later. Obviously, by then nothing could be done.”

“In other words,” I uttered excitedly, “if Jason was telling the truth, then someone eliminated the only real proof that he didn't rape Rebecca!”

“Exactly,” said Anne. “And it also means that someone else's DNA would've been found in those samples. That's why they had to be destroyed.”

“Which in turn means that someone, connected to the crime or to the criminals, had unencumbered access to evidence and knew the inner workings of the investigation. And who would have known it better than...”

“Chief Nordini, Senior!” Finished Anne triumphantly.

## Chapter 12

A shiny red Prius whirred to a stop in the driveway. Rachel's sunshine face smiled at me, as I opened the front door and the next few minutes were spent with hugs, followed by squeals of unadulterated joy, accompanied by a fair amount of juvenile hopping like bunny rabbits while holding each other's hands. Ah, innocence! It was like freshman year all over again.

I couldn't wipe the happy grin off my face as I got busy making tea and breakfast, which we would enjoy on the veranda. Rachel was such a sport, she had said she'd come today and didn't waste any time fulfilling her promise. It was still bright and early, eight thirty to be exact, and she was already here. Efficient as ever, she must've been on the road before six to get here at this hour. Now, that's what I called a real friend!

Rachel's glance swept appreciatively over the plush Oriental rug and the mahogany furniture of the living room, at the same time duly noting my feng shui improvements to the space.

"Does the place meet with your approval?" I asked her, smiling.

She nodded. "Not bad, not bad at all. Our Feng Shui Master would be proud of you."

"Thanks."

"There's just one thing."

"What?"

She pointed at the heavy beams running across the ceiling of the living room. "Beams. You know what that means – problems, obstacles."

"I know, I know. But what can I do? They were here when I moved in. Can't remove them, can I? Besides, I actually like them."

"What, problems and obstacles?"

"The beams, silly! They add character to the room, as they'd say in real estate brochures."

"Ah," she said with a twinkle in her eye. "I see."

I took Rachel to her room, where she changed into a pair of shorts and a tee. Soon we were sitting in the veranda's comfortable wicker chairs.

"Spill it," said Rachel, sipping her green tea.

"Spill what?" I asked innocently.

"Come on, Jade," Rachel smiled at me shrewdly. "I know you - you've found a story, haven't you?"

"A story?" I raised my eyebrows, unable to resist the temptation to tease her a bit before, naturally, telling her absolutely everything. "What story?"

"Yes, a story. And please don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about. I recognize the gleam in your eye. It happens every time you've found something interesting to investigate."

"Yep," I nodded, unable to hold off any longer the bursting dam of my doubts and theories, and relieved she made it easy for me. "You're right, of course. There is something - yes. Something very sad, in fact."

"So, what is it?"

"You really want to know?"

"Why do you think I asked? If the gleam in your eye is any indication, it's got to be a good one."

“I think so,” I nodded. “But I am not sure it's actually a story, you see. There is certainly a mystery and a tragedy, too. In fact, we are talking about a crime committed some thirteen years ago.”

“Thirteen years?” Rachel said, raising her eyebrows. “Kinda a long time, not your style, really. What got *you* interested in such ancient history?”

“Well, this ancient history has a direct and very real connection to today.”

And I told Rachel all about my knitting club, about Adelaide, about Rebbecca, about Jason and about a very strange fight Jason had with the chief. I explained to her about my belief that a miscarriage of justice had been committed here. And in the end, I told her about my mysterious and persistent visions of a struggling girl being beaten and raped by not one, but three rapists.

Rachel listened attentively, nodding occasionally. After that, we sipped tea in silence.

“So, what d'you think?” I blinked first.

“About what?” Rachel batted her eyelashes innocently. Apparently, she couldn't resist the temptation either.

“Oh, c'mon, Rache,” I burst out, getting really impatient. “All right, you win. Sorry, I teased you. But honestly, what d'you think?”

“Well,” she said, with a twinkle in her eye. “If anyone else told me this story, I would've suggested a couple of years of intense therapy.” Then she noticed my look and finished in a completely different tone. “But since it's coming from you, I would take everything very seriously.”

What can I say, I was relieved. “So, you don't think I'm imagining things and that my visions are a sign of a pregnancy-induced madness?”

“No, I don't.” Rachel's expression was now serious. “I think you are as sane as I've ever known you to be.”

“But why visions? Why me? Granted, I've always had pretty good intuition, but ever since I moved here, it's like I'm some goddamn psychic. It's weird, I'll tell you... and physically draining, too. What do you think it means?”

“I can't tell you for sure right off the bat,” said Rachel, frowning. “But I could propose a theory that might explain it. See, it's possible that your famous intuition has always been borderline psychic. You might've been born with natural psychic ability. But because it was never nurtured in you, it expressed itself as a well-honed intuition. That's why you were always able to get out of tight spots and escape any problems during your dangerous assignments.”

“But why did it “come out of a closet” all of a sudden now? Why here?”

“Well, for the first time in your life you were able to slow down enough to smell the roses and listen to the singing of the birds, so to speak. The change of pace in your life is dramatic, you now have time for reflection. And that's when our inner talents manifest, when we stop drowning them out with everyday noise and give them an opportunity to flourish. When we stop to listen to our inner voice.”

Not for the first time, I was impressed with Rachel's ability to explain everything clearly and succinctly. “Wow, Rache, I can tell you, you've got to have a column. Something like “Ask Rachel.” And count me as one of your most devoted readers. Now it finally starts making sense!”

“And of course,” added Rachel as an afterthought, “you're pregnant. So, your emotional body has become much more in tune, much more sensitive than usual, as the New Age people would say. And that, I'm sure, was an important trigger that helped awaken your psychic ability.”

“It makes sense,” I nodded, feeling relieved. “I only hope I’ll be able to prove my suspicions. I really need to help Jason and Rebecca. Just imagine, he’d been wrongfully convicted and lost twelve best years of his life in jail. And she’s been as good as a prisoner in a psychiatric clinic ever since the rape.”

Rachel was silent for a minute or two. Then she asked: “Is Rebecca now at some local clinic, by any chance?”

Yes,” I nodded. “She is. It’s called The Berkshire Hope Clinic and it specializes in long term care of mental patients with no history of violence. My knitting buddies told me the story. According to them, Rebecca withdrew into some kind of inner world, as they put it, and stopped talking altogether. I guess, her relatives thought the familiar surroundings and, perhaps, her old friends’ visits might help trigger something that would restore her. The clinic, I understand, has a lot of patients, who, like Rebecca, had lost their memory.”

“But I thought that you said hers wasn’t a memory loss, but a withdrawal into “some inner world?”

“That’s right, but...” I started saying. Then stopped, realizing that Rachel was trying to tell me something. “Is there a significant difference between the two?”

“Significant difference? Could be all the difference in the world!” Rachel has mounted her favorite horse and I prepared to hear a lecture on psychology.

But thankfully, she was brief. “In layman’s words, memory loss may occur when one’s subconscious blocks a tragic event and in order to access it, you must break through that block. And a withdrawal into the inner world most likely means that a person lives with the memory of a tragedy or a secret but doesn’t trust the outside world enough to reveal it. Subconsciously, she erects a wall between herself and the rest of the world. In other words, memory loss means that the wall exists between the trigger event and the person, while a withdrawal into the inner world means that the wall exists between the person and the outside world. Do you see the difference?”

“Ye-es,” I said slowly, trying to wrap my mind around the difference in question, and then - I got it!

“You see, Rebecca may actually remember what happened thirteen years ago, but for some reason doesn’t trust the outside world enough to talk about it. That’s why she blocked out the outer world, but not the event itself.”

“Rache, you are brilliant, you know that?” I exclaimed. “This means that if Rebecca started trusting someone, she might start talking!”

“The only question remains,” Rachel continued gravely, “why *didn’t* she trust anyone enough to open up till now?”

The question hung in the air, like a bomb about to explode. We looked at each other in silence, considering possible answers and their implications. As it were, none of the answers seemed to promise a happy ending.

Rachel was the first one to shake off the spell. “Jade,” she said, looking at me intently. “I know you don’t like hearing this, but maybe you should drop this investigation. I don’t like the sound of it. Something is very fishy here, sinister, in fact. And you are pregnant.”

“I have to keep investigating this, Rache!” I said passionately. “I must. I feel so sorry for that poor girl, and Adelaide, and Jason. I can’t tell you how sorry! You should have seen Rebecca’s picture before the tragedy. She was so beautiful, so – so light and optimistic, she had such a bright future ahead of her. And then, there was her picture after the rape. What a change! She was all haggard and bruised and it was like the light in her had been extinguished. And Jason, you know, he was dreaming of a career as a writer. Maria, the former librarian, thought he

had promise. All of a sudden, it all goes puff! I can't... I simply can't stop! I have to find out whose cruel hand had destroyed these two lives!"

I held my breath and looked at her imploringly, willing her to understand my position. For some reason, I desperately needed her to agree with me, needed her to say it was all right to proceed with my secret inquiry.

She contemplated me for a while, then said, "I see how important this is for you and apparently nothing I say would change your mind. So, why don't I help you with whatever I can?"

"Rache, you are the best!" I exhaled and threw my arms around her neck.

"But you have to promise me," she said somberly, distancing herself a bit and locking her hypnotic black eyes into mine. "Promise, you'll be very, very careful, both for you and the baby."

"Scout's honor!" I said solemnly, raising my hand palm up and grinning ear-to-ear. "Okay?"

"Ok-kay," echoed Rachel with slight hesitation, failing to mirror my grin. There was still a concerned frown on her face and it took her another five minutes to reshape her features back into their usual sunshine continence.

I shrugged that observation off easily. *Rache is such a worrywart*, I told myself. *I guess it comes with the territory and that's exactly what makes her such an excellent psychoanalyst.*

Rachel was pensive, as if weighing her options. Then she said, "Tell you what. How about we go visit Rebbecca today?"

"Great idea," I said readily, "but don't we need some kind of permission to do that?"

"More or less. Of course, I could go by my own credentials, but it would be better if we used some really big name. Because, as we well know, big names open doors much easier."

She paused, thinking. "Here is what we are gonna do. I'll call my old professor Strauss, the one I told you about, my teacher from Columbia."

I remembered professor Strauss very well. He was very high-profile, having written three best-selling books. Rachel was his favorite student and she still kept in touch with him. I've even heard that he encouraged her to write a book of her own.

"What are you gonna tell him?"

"See, I've recently taken his advice and started writing a book," responded Rachel with a crafty look on her face. "I'll tell him that I am in Stepford for one weekend only and that here I've heard about a case that fits into my book's case study magnificently. So, I need him to call the clinic and ask for me to be allowed to see Rebbecca... what's her last name?" she prompted.

"Gilman."

"Right, to see Rebbecca Gilman today, because her extremely interesting case fits so well into the theme of my book."

"Rache," I exclaimed in admiration, "that's inspired!"

"Glad you like it." She bowed with an air of exaggerated importance.

"Just one thing," I said. "How d'you know where to find him? It's Saturday."

"No problem. I know exactly where he is at the moment."

"You do?" I said, raising my eyebrows playfully.

"Yep. He's in his office at Columbia; he always is on Saturday mornings, catching up on his paperwork."

"And the number is?"

"And the number is..." she opened her cell phone with a flourish. "Here it is, on my speed dial."

Wow! On speed dial? I knew Rachel was Strauss's protégé, but even I didn't realize they were that close. Hey, no complaints on my part, especially, if this closeness helps me solve my mystery!

## Chapter 13

Professor Strauss turned out to be a real trooper. He listened to Rachel's story without interrupting and immediately agreed to call the clinic. Ten minutes later, he called back and announced that he spoke with the head nurse of the long-term ward, where Rebecca had been a resident for the past thirteen years. The head nurse's name was Mrs. Blake and she was awaiting Rachel's call to schedule a visit. A short call later, we were on our way to the clinic.

In Stepford, every edifice of any significance seemed to be located on Main Street. So, not very surprisingly, the Berkshire Hope Clinic was just a few short blocks down the road from the Blue Peacock Inn. The towering red brick mansion, complete with a grand, white-columned entrance, was thoroughly in line with the town's old colonial mystique.

Nurse Blake met us at the front desk with a perfunctory smile.

"Hi," she said. "I am the head nurse and I understand you are..." She paused, looking inquiringly at Rachel.

"Rachel Weise," Rachel extended her hand. "Thanks for allowing me a visit on such short notice.

"No problem, Dr. Weise," said Nurse Blake. "Although our chief physician is on vacation till next Monday, we are very familiar with Professor Strauss's work and any of his associates are welcome here."

She turned to me. "And you would be?"

"This is my friend, Jade Snow," introduced me Rachel, "who is hosting me here, in Stepford. She has graciously agreed to drive me to the clinic and I'd feel uncomfortable leaving her in the lobby after everything she's done. I hope you don't mind if she joins me?"

"Jade Snow?" asked nurse Blake. "Aren't you a part of the Stepford Knitting Club?"

"Guilty as charged," I said.

"My daughter, Shawna, attends it, too. She spoke very highly of you. It's very nice to meet you. I am Janet Blake." I shook nurse's hand as she ushered us into the long-term ward.

"I'm actually very glad to see *anyone* visit Rebecca," confessed Nurse Blake, as she led us down the long corridor. "She's been here so long, almost thirteen years... And very few people come to visit her any more. Just our local guys, Marc Catcham and Jack Maloof. Chief Nordini comes sometimes and I saw Peter Burns a few times, but not too often. Very nice people they all are, God bless them." She opened the door at the end of the corridor, inviting us in.

The narrow room we entered had a simple bed by the window, a bunch of flowers in a small vase atop a bed stand, a side table with photographs and a chair in the corner. Another chair was brought in for us. Through a slightly open window, the upbeat chirping of birds could be heard from the garden, as the gentle breeze delicately fluttered the white curtain.

The room itself didn't stand out in any way, but our eyes immediately drifted to, and fixed on, the still figure draped in a long hospital gown. The figure sat on the edge of the bed, looking straight ahead with unseeing eyes.

Mrs. Blake's demeanor changed dramatically once she entered the room. She was now a caring nurse, no longer an efficient administrator we had met in the lobby. She checked the pulse on the limp, painfully thin arm and spoke kindly to the still figure on the bed, "We like it when someone comes to visit us, don't we Becca?"

She pointed at us, “These two nice young ladies wanted to talk to you for a bit. You don't mind, do you, Becca?”

The gaunt figure on the bed didn't move, nor produced a sound to indicate she heard or noticed us. She just lowered her eyelids with long, curved eyelashes and continued sitting still, now with her eyes closed.

I recognized those eyelashes right away. I saw them on the picture from the old yearbook, a picture of a happy, healthy and beautiful eighteen-year-old girl. Those eyelashes seemed to be the only thing that still remained of the old Rebbecca, a sad reminder of what could have been.

As we sat in our chairs, Nurse Blake tiptoed out of the room and quietly closed the door behind her.

“Hello, Rebbecca,” said Rachel cheerfully. “Do you mind if we talk with you for a while?”

The figure on the bed didn't move, sitting as still as before, her eyelashes lowered.

Rachel and I looked at each other, trying to decide how to proceed. I cleared my throat.

“Hi Rebbecca,” I started quietly. “My name is Jade Snow. And this is Rachel Weise. We live in New York City, but I am staying here, in Stepford, to write my book. And Rachel is visiting me for the weekend.”

It seemed, nothing has changed, but did I detect a slight flutter of the eyelashes? I almost dismissed the thought as wishful thinking, when I noticed Rachel's intense gaze fixed on Rebbecca. Did she notice it, too?

I continued, while observing Rebbecca closely. “I am a journalist and I've worked in Iraq and Afghanistan for the past two years. But then I got married. My husband, who is traveling in Africa, suggested I move to Stepford while he's away.”

It was unmistakable this time, the flutter of the eyelashes, the slight opening of the eyes.

Rachel and I stared at each other.

“Keep talking,” mouthed Rachel.

“Rebbecca, my husband thought that it would be good for me to be here, while he is traveling. This being such a paradise and all. Because I am pregnant, you see.”

The figure continued sitting still on the bed, but something in her has changed. The eyes were now open. Then, they shifted slightly to the right, towards the open window. Rachel and I exchanged glances.

“The window,” mouthed Rachel. “She wants it closed.”

I got up and maneuvered past the still figure on the bed. I closed the window, conscious of Rebbecca's eyes on my back. Then, I smoothed out the curtain and started back to my chair. As I passed the bed, someone grabbed my left forearm so forcefully that I jumped. I looked down, perplexed. Rebbecca was holding on to me with such strength that I would have never suspected from those limp fingers.

Her eyes were now looking up straight into mine. Her lips were moving, but no sound came out.

“Can I help you, Rebbecca?” I said, alarmed.

The lips moved once more and as I leaned closer to her mouth, trying to listen, it hit me again. A quick flash, but this time much clearer. Night grass was damp and the moon in the sky was bright. The young woman in a summer dress turned to rags fought with every last bit of strength left in her. But what could she do, sprawled helplessly on damp ground, against two strong men? One of them slapped her hard, and kept slapping, till she bled. Another kicked her. And then, right before the lights went out and her tortured body, mercifully, felt no more, another, large and menacing form appeared, blocking the stars and the moonlight...

I gasped and jerked my hand out of Rebecca's grip. Swaying dangerously, I tried to steady myself. The next thing I knew, Rachel's arm was around me, keeping me from falling. A sudden fit of excruciating coughing made me bend forward, toward Rebecca, while holding on to the bed frame for extra balance. As I did, I glanced at the woman sitting on the bed. Her pose was now more relaxed, eyes fully open, gaze fixed on my face. It occurred to me that we were making progress and that, if I continued talking, we would soon get somewhere. But first, I needed to get back to my chair and rest a minute or two, because I felt exhausted and sick after yet another shocking encounter with Rebecca's rape.

Rachel, her arm still around me, and I, still bent over next to the bed, were about to start moving back to our chairs, when the door suddenly opened and Nurse Blake hurriedly entered the room. Rebecca immediately shrunk back, fear registering on her gaunt face. The nurse frowned, throwing a quick glance around the room. It was hard not to notice the changes and it was clear, she didn't like what she saw. The window closed; both visitors out of their chairs and in very strange poses; me, holding on to the bed frame and both of us leaning toward the woman, who appeared to shrink away in fear. God only knows what passed through the nurse's mind when she caught us like this, but one look at her face told me that ours was a lost cause. Her words confirmed it.

"I am afraid, Becca had enough excitement for the day," said Nurse Blake coldly. She avoided looking in our direction, while forcefully opening the door to let us out. "She needs her rest now."

It was clear that nothing we could say or do would change the fact that we were no longer welcome in this establishment. Nurse Blake accompanied us in silence to the front door and stood in the open doorway, like a sentinel, while we walked to the car. As we drove out of the clinic, we noticed a security vehicle following us to the exit, making sure we left for good.

Rachel drove, as I recovered from my vision, the most intense so far.

"So, what d'you think?" I asked her, as soon as I could breathe again. We sat on my back porch, me – clutching a delicate porcelain cup with peppermint tea in it, Rachel – completely ignoring hers with a concerned expression on her face.

"Rache, it was very intense this time," I tried again. "My vision, I mean. But I keep seeing the same thing: grass, lake, young woman and three faceless rapists. If only I could see what they looked like!"

Rachel didn't respond.

"And did you see how Rebecca reacted?" I continued excitedly. "I know she was trying to tell me something, I know that! She was on the verge of awakening. Maybe she was ready to disclose what really happened back then? If only the nurse didn't come in at that moment!"

I felt extremely frustrated.

But Rachel still failed to answer.

"What's bothering you?" I finally said.

"Many things," she responded slowly. "First of all, I am concerned about your visions. It seemed too intense for my liking and you would've fallen, if it wasn't for me catching you on time."

"Ah, that's nothing. I was perfectly fine," I waived her concerns away.

"No, it's not nothing and you weren't fine at all! You are still a little pale and this could cause too much strain in your condition. I am concerned that next time I may not be there to catch you."

“You're right,” I conceded, mostly to get her off my back. “I have to think about the baby. I promise to be more careful. But,” I added with a sly grin, “you have to agree, the sooner we catch those bastards, the sooner my visions will be over.”

“That's the thing,” she responded. “I know how you feel about it, but I'm not sure you should be involved in this investigation at all in your condition.”

“Oh, Rache, not again!” I felt really frustrated with her. “What do you think can happen to me here, in this sheltered Stepford paradise, where people don't lock their doors and where the biggest thrill is the knitting club gathering at the local library?”

“I don't know,” she responded in a measured voice of a therapist trying to talk some sense into a completely unreasonable patient. “But I didn't like what I saw at the clinic.”

“What d'you mean?” I asked, my antenna up, because deep down I definitely agreed with her. There was something I didn't like there either, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. “It's your neck of the woods, all this psychiatry business. What was off, in your view?”

“Nothing definitive, because it was too brief, but it's as if Rebecca was afraid of something at that clinic. Also, I didn't quite like how we were dismissed either.”

“Well, the nurse appears to have thought we were doing something to Rebecca and she was being protective of her. Maybe overly protective, no?”

“On the surface, yes. But something's not right...” Rachel frowned, deep in thought.

“You think there is something shady going on over there?”

“I don't know. It's possible.”

“Hmm... So, Rebecca's afraid of something you think?”

“Something... or someone?”

“You mean, like Nurse Blake?” I gasped.

“N-no, I don't think so,” Rachel looked hesitant. “It's very hard for me to think that a member of my profession – any member – would be involved in something...um.. like...”

“You mean, like intimidation or something?”

“I don't know what's going on over there, but something's definitely off.”

“I agree,” I said. “There were some strange vibes, but I was busy with the window and Rebecca, while you were a removed observer. Tell me what you saw.”

“Well,” she said. “For one, Rebecca was extremely still and indifferent most of the time, but when you started telling your story, she changed. So, we have to assume that something in your story caused her to react. What was it?”

“Yes, I agree. I clearly saw her eyelashes flutter at least twice. And then she opened her eyes, indicating that she wanted her window closed. After that, she grabbed my hand and definitely wanted to say something. But my vision got in the way. Was that the sequence of events, as you remember?”

“More or less. When was the first time she'd fluttered her eyelashes? I think it was when you mentioned that we live in New York.”

“I thought so, too,” I said. “But how could that be relevant? She's tired of staying at the clinic and wants to travel? Is that what got her excited?”

“Perhaps,” said Rachel pensively. “She did flutter her eyelashes again when you mentioned Iraq, Afghanistan and Africa. So, it would seem logical. But how would you explain that she wanted us to close her window? She is longing to travel, yet she is afraid of a light breeze in the clinic's private garden?”

“True. That doesn't seem to make sense.”

“No, it doesn't.”

“Besides,” I continued, “she grabbed me pretty hard – startled me awfully, and you know I am not easily startled. I was surprised she had such strength. Her hand seemed so lifeless. So, where did the strength come from?”

“That's just it,” said Rachel. “It doesn't make any sense, unless...”

“Unless?”

“Why did she want us to close the window? The only plausible answer that comes to mind is that she was afraid of someone overhearing our conversation. Was she preparing to tell us something? Something that got interrupted by Nurse Blake's appearance?”

“Rache,” I started again, “d'you think Nurse Blake is...”

“N-no,” she shook her head reluctantly. “No... I don't know... I hope not... To think that a member of medical profession, a colleague of mine could be, you know... doing something...”

“I feel the same way. I sincerely hope she's not implicated. After all, she is Shawna's mother as well.”

Silence was almost complete as we drank our teasane, munching on giant roasted cashews and New Zealand honey, Rachel's gifts from abundant New York.

Then I said, “I still can't understand why she would be reacting to my talking about travel?”

“I don't know.” Rachel shook her head. “Unless.... unless we are misreading it and she was reacting to something completely different.”

“That's likely,” I nodded. “But the question is – to what?”

## Chapter 14

“What's this?” said Rachel, picking up a card from the mantelpiece. She read aloud:

You are invited to  
The Stepford Day Fair  
Sunday, June 6th  
10 a.m. – 6 p.m.

“Ah, almost forgot,” I said. “It's tomorrow and I think we should go. Half the town will be there and it'll be a terrific chance for some additional sleuthing.”

“Bake sale,” read Rachel. “Artisan breads, homemade pies and scrumptious deserts. Local artists' exhibit. Silent charity auction. Local organic farm produce. Historic car show. Berkshire Humane Society's cat adoption. And last but not least, local chefs showcase their culinary talents. Hmm... Sounds pretty good, actually. It might be fun. Why not.”

After sleeping in late on Sunday, I put on my usual stretchy Capris and a turquoise tunic with a matching turquoise necklace that highlighted my eyes. Rachel opted for a red summer dress that went fabulously with her dark eyes and hair. Having approved of each other's outfits, we were off to the Stepford Day Fair at the local fairgrounds. A sea of colorful balloons and white tents, accompanied by an extravaganza of smells and cacophony of sounds, met us at the gate.

“Ah, Ms. Snow,” said a familiar voice, which belonged to Peter Burns. “Glad you could make it to our celebration.” He met us by the entrance like a gracious host, a big smile on his good-looking face, his eyes (no time wasted there!) proficiently scanning down my neckline, towards my breasts and skimming the rest of me.

“Hello, Mr. Burns,” I shook his hand, which was surprisingly warm and smooth to the touch.

“Please, meet my wife,” he continued, nodding at a slim woman in a designer silk blouse and straight blue skirt, which fit her perfectly. She held a leather portfolio in one hand and a Parker pen in another. A regular country-club-going, charity-inclined, bored-out-of-her-mind, and boring, suburban millionaire's wife.

“Pleased to meet you,” I shook the woman's hand. “Jade Snow.”

“Sheila Burns,” she responded politely, but her thin lips remained unsmiling and I was struck by a tone of resignation in her voice.

“Please meet my friend, Rachel Weise,” I said. “She's visiting from New York.”

Peter Burns shook Rachel's hand with the same broad smile he afforded me, and the ritual of checking out a new skirt in town repeated to the minute detail. An almost imperceptible sigh parted Sheila's lips, and I started understanding why she had a resigned, almost martyred, look on her face.

“My wife and I are co-presidents of the organizational committee for the Stepford Day celebrations,” went on Peter, who didn't seem to notice his wife's discomfort. Or maybe he did, but didn't care? “I hope you are coming to the car show later on. It's the highlight of the day. I have two cars of my own on display!”

“Terrific, we'll be there!” I said distractedly, eyeing a stand with appetizing-looking Greek food. After all, it was almost lunch time. Well, brunch time to be exact, and I was feeling ravenously hungry.

“So, that's the infamous banker, Peter Burns,” remarked Rachel, as we sat at a small picnic table we were lucky to find in the shade of a sprawling maple, munching on our Greek salad and pita wraps. The table's position was up on a small hill, near the very end of the fair and although it was somewhat remote, it afforded an excellent view of most of the grounds.

“Yes, that's him. He feels like a very likely person to have committed that rape.”

“Why?” Rachel laughed. “Because he is a banker, because he is good-looking, or because he doesn't miss a single skirt?”

“Well, all of the above, I guess.” I said. “Oh, stop laughing, will you! I can't quite quantify it. Not yet. There is something about him I can't exactly put into words. Besides, did you know that he had a major crush on Rebbecca back in high school, but she never reciprocated? Motive enough to rape her and pin the crime on the lucky rival, don't you think?”

“Possibly, but...” Rachel didn't seem convinced. “Womanizer, yes, roving eye, yes, but he doesn't strike me as the type...” she started, but attracted by the delicious piece of baklava on her plate, interrupted her speech and dug in with gusto. “You know, this baklava practically melts in your mouth. I think I'll pick up some to bring back to New York. Actually, let's see what other baked goodies they've got. I like what I see, so far.”

“Sure,” I said, resigning to the fact that the world around us was on lunch mode and Rachel's attention was fixed on smells and views from the food court. I nodded in the direction of a series of tables with what looked like mountains of artisan breads and hills of pies on them. “We should definitely check out that bake sale, I was told they have pretty good st...”

I paused, as I noticed Peter Burns quietly making his way around the bake sale tables to the last row of tents on the right... alone. Rachel and I exchanged a look. Meanwhile, Peter stopped and surreptitiously surveyed the grounds. We followed his glance and saw Sheila Burns talking to someone at the silent auction site, on the opposite side of the venue. He nodded, apparently satisfied, and made a resolute beeline for a tent in the last row, which was backing to the shrubbery surrounding the fairgrounds. He opened the curtain and with the last discreet glance of the surrounding area, disappeared into the tent.

“Wow,” said Rachel, her eyebrows shooting to the sky. “This one's not wasting his time.”

We finished our lunch and took a stroll amongst the sprawling tables and tents.

“Hi, ladies,” a voice called to us from the nearby booth. “Would you like a flier?”

I spun around to find myself nose to nose with Marc Catcham, of the Law Offices of Catcham and Catcham, Esqs.

“Hi,” he repeated with the same trained politician's smile on his face I remembered so well from the Blue Peacock. “Welcome to the Stepford Day and to the Catcham for Senate booth! Allow me to offer you some souvenirs.”

And before we could say anything, he pushed on us some plastic shopping bags in white, red and blue with a huge “Catcham for Senate” printed across. The bags turned out to be filled with brochures and fliers, as well as stickers with “Vote for Marc Catcham” in red and blue, a pen and a mug with (you guessed it!) the same dizzying “Catcham for Senate!” written on it.

“Th-thank you,” I said, forcing a smile. Rachel said nothing.

“Ah, Marc, aren't you going to introduce me?” A woman, who wore a business suit, despite Sunday and the warm sun, joined our group.

“Of course,” said Marc Catcham, flushing his customary smile, “Linda Morrow, editor-in-chief of the Stepford Post, our premier publication. Jade Snow, a journalist. And...”

“My friend from New York, Rachel Weise,” I said.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Rachel, Jade,” Linda shook our hands. “I’ve heard a great deal about you, Jade, and I read something of yours.”

“Really?” I said, pleasantly surprised. “What did you read?”

“Your articles from Iraq, for example,” said Linda. “I enjoyed them very much.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“Say,” she continued, “something just occurred to me. We are always on the lookout for high-quality contributors to our publication. If you at some point decide that you want to write for a newspaper again, I would welcome your articles.”

“What topics are you interested in?”

“Any topic of your choice,” she said quickly. “I would be honored to publish any articles you write for us. If you decide this is for you, please contact me.” And she produced her business card.

“Jesus,” I said when we were safely out of Linda and Marc’s earshot. “I am starting to feel one can’t make a step in this town without being forced on a brochure or a business card.”

“You are not seriously considering writing for the Stepford Post, are you?” said Rachel.

“Anything’s possible,” I said sagely. “Life will show.”

“Can we somehow dispose of these things?” said Rachel. I already forgot I was carrying the “Catcham for Senate” bag.

“You’re right, I wouldn’t want to carry a bag that serves as a free walking advertisement for that sleazebag, no pun intended.”

“A bag from a sleazebag,” snorted Rachel. “Not bad.”

“Let’s go over there,” I pointed in the direction of the classic car show, which was in full swing to our left, beside a small building. “It’s far enough and he won’t see us throwing out his stuff if we can find a dumpster behind that structure.”

We made straight for the car show, but no dumpster was in sight. We walked among the antique Roadsters, classic Fords, Mustangs and Corvettes in an eye-popping range of colors, from yellow and magenta, to sky-blue and bubble-gum pink, all the while being on the lookout for a suitable dumpster.

“There,” finally exclaimed Rachel. We headed to the large trash can, placed in the back of the car show venue, next to a classic silver Mercedes convertible with red leather interior. A tall man stood in front of the car, his arms crossed, apparently admiring it. Rachel and I threw out the bags together with their contents.

“Upph,” she breathed a sigh of relief. “Good riddance.”

We were about to leave, when...

“Hi Jade,” said a soft voice behind us. Jason Paphos stood beside the silver Mercedes, smiling at me. It was a tender smile, which I’ve never seen on his face before.

“Jason!” Almost against my will, my voice acquired an excited quality and my face stretched into a happy grin. “What a pleasant surprise! How great to see you here!”

“It’s great to see *you!*” The size of Jason’s grin rivaled mine.

“This is my best friend, Rachel Weise. She is visiting from New York.” This time the introduction came very naturally.

“Nice to meet you, Rachel!” Jason smiled at her warmly and shook her hand. “Any friend of Jade’s...”

“Thank you. The pleasure is all mine,” Rachel returned the smile. “So, is this your car, Jason? She's a beauty.”

“Yes, she is a beauty but I can only wish she was mine,” said Jason. “I used to have a car a bit like this one, but she is... she is... long gone.” His voice faltered.

Sensing that we were on dangerous ground, I changed gears quickly. “So, Rachel and I've been strolling around the fair. We thought we'd visit the bake sale and the silent auction next. What about you, Jason?”

“I just came for the car show. I love classic cars, you know. After that, I'll stop by Mom's.”

“Right, Adelaide's here,” I said excitedly. “Where can I find her?”

“She's with the cat charity booth, didn't she tell you?”

“She did, actually. But we kinda got sidetracked by some people.”

“Yes,” nodded Rachel, and before I could stop her, blurted out, “we just met Peter Burns and Marc Catcham. Do you know them?”

“Yes,” said Jason very quietly, and a dark shadow passed through his face. The smile that delighted me just a minute ago disappeared without a trace.

I stealthily tugged on Rachel's sleeve, hoping she catches my message: “Shut up, will you!” Rachel fell silent. It appeared she did catch it.

Again, I expertly changed gears. “So, Adelaide is with the cat adoption booth, right?”

“Yeah.” His smile slowly returned. I was glad, even if it was just a pale ghost of the last one. “She'll be there all day. Just head straight and make a right at the food court.”

“Thanks, Jason.” I flashed him another big smile. “Let's go, Rache, I really want you to meet Adelaide. You are gonna love her!”

“What about you, Jason,” said Rachel. “Are you joining us?”

“Thanks. But I'd rather stay here, with the cars. I'll stop by Mom's before the end, when there are fewer people around. She'll need help loading up cats and driving them back to the shelter. Besides,” he added quietly, “you don't want to be seen with me – bad for your reputation.”

Disregarding our assurances that our reputation would be absolutely fine, Jason remained by the cars and we headed for the cat adoption booth. Midway, I realized that we could cut a corner by circumventing a row of tents that stood in our way and by skirting the grounds on the right.

“You have to find adventure wherever you go, don't you?” said Rachel with a laugh. “A straight and clear road isn't good enough for you. But,” she lowered her voice conspiratorially, “why not, let's see what kind of evidence we can uncover in the nearby shrubs and tall grasses.”

“Go ahead, mock me,” I said defiantly. “But you never know when and where an important piece of a puzzle might show up!”

We proceeded along the back of the last row of tents, on the narrow strip of cut grass, hugged by a tall shrubbery on the right. The shrubbery delineated the fairgrounds' border and separated it from the neighboring field.

We walked past the backs of various tents, peaking curiously into each. One sold art supplies, another - some paintings of local landscapes. Then, there was a pottery tent, a tent full of handmade toys for children, and a few other tents with assorted arts and crafts. When we approached a tent with photography equipment stored in the back I noticed two people in its shadow – a man and a woman – in a tight embrace. That particular tent's front was closed off with a curtain. A light went on in my head and, before Rachel could say a word, I put a silencing finger to her lips and dragged her behind the bushes.

“Peter Burns,” I mouthed to her, as we peaked from our hideout. The woman was concealed in the shadow of the tent, but she seemed to be tall, with a luxurious mane of blond hair. Her face was hidden, as Peter smooched her full on the lips, while his hands groped her shapely behind in a rather graphic fashion. Rachel tugged me on the hem of my tunic and, giggling discreetly, we retraced our steps via the narrow grassy passage. In a couple of minutes, we were back to the venue's main thoroughfare, from whence we continued our journey through the fair in a normal, boring way.

We picked up some baklava Rachel has fallen in love with; then stopped at a bake tent, where I found what I was looking for: the freshly baked artisan bread, a loaf of olive and a loaf of raisin walnut. Rachel and I also picked up a couple of scrumptious-looking blueberry and pecan pies each. We were about to leave, when I noticed a poster advertising the Famous Old World Cranberry Cake.

So that's where Maria got that amazing cake! I simply had to get a treat or two for Jason! Better stock up on them, I thought. I paid for my breads and pies and ordered three large cranberry cakes to be delivered to my home tomorrow.

“What do you need so many cakes for?” asked Rachel in a shocked voice.

“Oh, it's just that Jason loves those and I've been looking and looking...” I stopped, noticing *that* expression on her face.

“What?” I said, squirming under her knowing gaze.

“Jade,” she said, “are you falling for him?”

“Don't be ridiculous.” I blushed, getting angry at myself and at her. “He's just a friend, is all.” Rachel said nothing and we walked the rest of the way to the Berkshire Humane Society's cat adoption booth in complete silence. By the time we reached it, I calmed down and was back to my normal self.

Adelaide stood in front of the booth, deep in conversation with a nice-looking family, complete with two excited children, who wanted to adopt a fluffy tabby. The mother was urging the kids to pet the cat gently, while filling out some adoption papers. We waited until Adelaide kissed the tabby a final goodbye, safely deposited him in a carrier and the happy group left, carrying the new addition to their family. I noticed that Adelaide looked rather tired.

“Hello,” I said cheerfully. “We just saw Jason and he told us that you'd be here. I am so glad I found you!”

“Jade,” said Adelaide. “How wonderful to see you! ”

“Please, meet my best friend, Rachel Weise, from New York.”

“Oh, how nice. It is such a pleasure to meet you!” Adelaide hugged us both, looking so happy that it seemed even her tiredness subsided.

“Just placed two cats with some very nice families,” she announced.

“So, this is part of your charity work, isn't it?” I glanced around at cages containing kitties of all colors and sizes. They were clustered underneath a large rectangular umbrella for protection against the sun. The sides of the corner cages have been carefully wrapped with newspapers, to limit exposure to the sudden gusts of wind. A white adult cat slept in the cage next to me, covering his head with his paw. The next cage was occupied by a pair of gray kittens curled together in a tight, protective ball. In another cage, a small ginger kitty complained loudly.

“Poor thing,” said Adelaide. “He is a cutie, but still very young and all this noise and activity scare him. We shouldn't have brought him here, I told Amy and George. But they really wanted this one adopted, because he longs for a good home. So, they insisted on bringing him.

Amy is the shelter director and George is a volunteer, a local vet. Such good people, both of them. They are at lunch now.” Adelaide leaned towards us and added confidentially, “They’ll be married before the end of this year, if you ask me... Ah, and here they are!”

The two young people were heading in our direction, talking, lighthearted laughter following them in the wind.

As they approached, the ginger kitty got all the way up on his hind paws and complained even louder. The young woman unlocked the cage and held the cat, petting him and sheltering him from the wind.

“Poor baby,” she said, as the kitty settled himself in her arms and stopped complaining.

“She is so wonderful with animals,” said the man, gazing at her with admiration.

“Hi, I am Amy,” introduced herself the woman. “And this is George.”

I basked in the loving energy of this couple and in the aura of kindness that surrounded this place. How different it felt in this little spot! No other booth in the whole fair felt anything like it. I watched Amy cradling the ginger kitty; George busily straightening out the newspaper screens on cats' cages; Adelaide, who was already conversing with another prospective adoption family. And in that moment, I knew that I wanted to adopt a kitty right on the spot! The ginger cutie! Yeah, that's right, he needs a home so badly, poor thing. No, I'd rather get the pair of gray kittens! They are so young and defenseless, and so adorable, too. Or maybe, that big white cat? He's such a beautiful fluff ball! Or, maybe, somehow, I'd manage to adopt all four of them? Then, when the baby's born, we all can be one big, happy family!

*Full stop!* I said to myself. *This is madness. I'm losing touch with reality.* Do I want to become a cat woman at the ripe age of twenty-eight, with a baby on the way, to boot? And what about my journalistic career? How will I ever travel with four cats?

*But what about adopting at least one kitty,* a small voice inside me pleaded. *But which one?* Another voice objected, *they are all so adorable. It's awfully hard to choose.*

In the end, my sensible nature, as usual, won over. I need to get my bearings first, I decided. Understand what is involved in taking care of a cat, what I can do and what is beyond me. That would be the right course of action. I'll volunteer at the shelter first and that will give me a better idea how to proceed.

I sighed longingly. Wasn't I being a bit too sensible? Shouldn't I just go for it? But something still held me back; that famous instinct, which never let me down before. Ah well, I thought. I guess, that's the way it is. But for now, why not help out financially?

“So, how do I donate?” I asked.

“Here is the donation box,” pointed Amy.

I took out my wallet and deposited sixty eight dollars into the box, everything I had left on me. Rachel, who, as I suspected, went through the same inner struggle I just experienced (and honestly, who wouldn't) contributed another sixty five, leaving just a few bills for her return trip to New York.

“Thank you! This is very generous,” said Adelaide.

“It's nothing,” I said. “I'd love to help out at the shelter, too, if I could be of any use. I don't have any experience with that sort of thing.”

“That would be wonderful.” Adelaide was positively glowing. “You don't need any experience. Would you like to visit the shelter tomorrow? I can show you around and explain everything.”

“Great. I'll see you tomorrow.”

We sat on my shady veranda, sampling the goodies we picked up at the fair. Together with the pies, Rachel bought a bag of freshly ground French roast and made some in my Turkish coffee maker. I broke down and had a cup. Well, someone had to help Rachel finish all that coffee, right? She couldn't possibly finish it all by herself, could she? I leaned back in the comfortable wicker armchair, closing my eyes like a happy cat after a good meal: a large slice of my favorite pecan pie with a cup of French roast. It was positively heaven.

“A very eventful couple of days, I'd say,” commented Rachel, cradling her coffee cup.

“Oh my, if you say they were eventful...” I shook my head in mock disbelief.

“So much for sleepy paradise.” Rachel and I looked at each other and started laughing.

“So, what do you think about the participants of this drama?”

“Lots of food for thought,” nodded Rachel solemnly. “Of course, I haven't yet met two of them, the police chief and the rich nerd. But the ones I did meet... Very interesting, very interesting, Holmes.”

I snorted. “Let's sum up, Watson.”

“Let's. One – Rebecca: has not spoken since the incident and is apparently scared to death of something or someone. Two – Jason, the convicted rapist, but seems like a very nice, open and kind man, although a very beaten down one. Prefers cars to people, understandably under the circumstances. He used to have a Mercedes convertible. When was that?”

“I think he may be referring to the Mercedes Adelaide had given him for his eighteenth, the one that was implicated in Rebecca's rape.”

“Hmm... A Mercedes at eighteen,” said Rebecca. “In other words, she'd spoiled him rotten. No wonder he got in trouble. Any psychoanalyst will tell you, it's the surest recipe for disaster.”

“They both paid a disproportionately high price for that, don't you think?”

“Seems that way,” readily agreed Rachel. “I can see why you want to get to the bottom of this.”

“Thank you, glad you understand.”

“Okay, let's continue. Adelaide: a good person, no question. Marc Catcham: one word...”

“Sleazebag!” we blurted out together.

“And don't forget, also a politician,” I added, laughing.

“Right. I have to say, your instinct about him was right on. Finally, Peter Burns: roving eyes and naughty fingers. I don't know about the other two, police chief and the nerd, but as the ancient Greeks used to say: tell me who your friends are, and I'll tell you who *you* are...” She shook her head, letting her words trail off.

“So true.”

“And did you notice Jason's reaction,” went on Rachel, “when I mentioned that we just met Peter Burns and Marc Catcham? Did you see that shadow on his face?”

“It was clearly an intense dislike,” I mused. “But what if it's more than that? What if he also knows or suspects they were implicated in that rape?”

“It did seem more,” agreed Rachel. “His face looked positively stormy. But here is another question: did he react to one of the names, or to both?”

“In short,” I nodded, “any one of them could have done it, but this is all pure speculation. I need proof, but that's exactly what I don't have.”

Rachel left for New York late on Sunday night, but before leaving, she made me solemnly promise that I'd be careful and keep her apprised of the developments.

As I lay sleepless in my bed, I was haunted by Rebecca's gaunt figure and her frail hand grabbing my arm with an unexpected force. Then, Rebecca's image was replaced by Adelaide's gentle face and Jason's smile.

I knew now with absolute certainty that a miscarriage of justice was committed here. But how do I prove it? And who were the real perpetrators? Was I on the right track with my investigation or was I barking up the wrong tree? With these disturbed thoughts, I finally fell asleep.

## Chapter 15

I rang Adelaide's bell at nine on Monday morning. After a pause, the door opened. Jason stood in the doorway just in his jeans, a red bandanna tied over his hair, several beads of sweat glistening on his naked torso. He wielded a hammer in his hand. I swallowed hard. What a body - lean, muscular, tanned, delicious! In a word, Adonis.

"Oh, sorry," I murmured, trying not to betray my feelings. "I wanted to see if Adelaide wanted a ride to the animal shelter. I was going to meet her there, but thought I'd stop by and see if she..." I paused, feeling that I was turning bright pink. What is it with you, Jade? I asked myself. Hormones playing tricks? Stop blushing, it's lame!

"Hi Jade," he said. If that huge grin on his face was any indication, he was happy to see me and didn't mind my blushing at all.

"Mom left early. She did mention she'd be meeting you at the shelter today."

I said, "Oh," and started turning to leave, feeling a little self-conscious.

"But," he continued, "you could give *me* a ride instead. I am going to the shelter myself and this way, I won't need to bring my wreck of a truck. It's on its last legs, you know."

"Yeah, sure!" I looked at his attire critically. "When do you think you'll be ready?"

"In a jiffy. I am about finished. Just give me a sec to put a t-shirt on and we can be off."

A couple of minutes later, Jason came out in a worn navy tee and clean jeans, red bandanna now tied around his neck. As we rode to the shelter, I felt the sexy heat of his body next to me. Taking a deep breath, I gripped the wheel of my Land Rover – Paul's wedding gift - and concentrated on the road. This was getting dangerous.

The Berkshire Humane Society was located at the end of a long service road, past various businesses and warehouses.

"I'm so glad you could make it," said Adelaide. "And you brought Jason – how wonderful! Jason, dear, we need those cages cleaned."

He nodded and got busy cleaning litter boxes inside the nearby row of cages. Occasionally, he would stop to pet a kitty, whispering something softly. Cats in cages all sat up, waiting for their turn of a daily dose of caress. It looked like Jason was very popular here. He proceeded to the end and then started the next row on the other side of the elongated room, while Adelaide left to take care of a phone call in the front lobby.

Meanwhile Amy, the shelter director, came in. "He's so great with cats, they just adore him," she said, as her approving gaze followed Jason's progress. "Besides, he's so much help with fixing stuff and even with cleaning. What will we do without him when he leaves, I have no idea."

"What do you mean – leaves?" I asked. "Is he going somewhere?"

"Oh yes, didn't you know? He's planning on moving away from here as soon as he can." Amy wrinkled her clear forehead. "He is not comfortable here and I don't blame him. All that suspicion and gossip follows him wherever he goes. He would be much better off elsewhere."

"I know, it's hard on him." I found my eyes following Jason's moves. "So, in your opinion, this suspicion is unjustified?"

"I don't know what happened thirteen years ago, I wasn't here," Amy said quietly. "But what I do know is that Jason is a kind, gentle soul. All you have to do is watch him with the cats. People like that don't commit rapes or attempted murders."

“My feeling exactly,” I whispered. We exchanged a glance and at that moment some kind of deep understanding passed between us.

“Here you are, Jade,” said Adelaide, entering the room. “Let me show you around and then, you can decide if you are interested in helping us out. We are always in need of an extra pair of hands around here.”

We walked past rows and rows of cages containing cats of all sizes and colors. Some longhaired, others with very short fur, tabbies, white, black, orange and all shades in between.

“Oh, my God,” I said, astonished. “How many kitties need a home!”

“They are all up for adoption,” said Amy. “Perhaps, you'd like one?”

“I've actually been thinking about it lately,” I said. “But this is all so new to me. At first, I'll come and help out, if you don't mind. When I get my bearings, I'll decide who I want to adopt.”

As we continued our tour, the kitties peeped curiously at us.

“Oh, they are all so cute,” I cooed, petting a tiny gray kitten with fur as soft as the lightest down. The kitten licked my finger and purred happily. “How can I possibly choose? This is going to be the most difficult decision ever!”

Adelaide smiled, a crinkle in her wise eyes. “When the time comes, my dear, you'll know.”

“Easy for you to say,” I countered. “Lily is so special, one of a kind, really. I bet it was the easiest choice ever.”

“That's true,” Adelaide agreed. “I knew we belonged together the moment I saw her.”

“See!”

“And you, my dear, will know too.”

I did my share of cleaning and petting and agreed to come back next Monday. On the way back, I followed Jason and Adelaide in my Land Rover. When we arrived at Adelaide's, Jason said goodbye and left with his truck.

“He works at a local organic farm,” explained Adelaide. “He prefers to work with his hands and it's good for him, he gains experience. He's developed an interest in farming. Plus... Plus, it helps that he doesn't have to deal with the locals.”

“I know,” I gave her an understanding look.

We stood, chatting by the low stone wall leading into the Adelaide's front garden, when Princess Lily stealthily appeared out of nowhere and perched herself on top of the wall in her usual white pedestal statue pose. I petted her silky fur, as we discussed when and where we'd meet next Monday to go to the animal shelter.

“I would prefer next Monday at noon,” said Adelaide. “In the morning I have to visit my lawyer, make some changes to my will.”

“Noon's fine,” I agreed.

“Great,” said Adelaide, when she noticed someone on the other side of the street.

“Hi Dan,” she waived to an athletic-looking man walking a huge German Shepherd on a leash. “Walking James?”

“How's everything, Adelaide?” replied the man sociably, crossing over to our side of the street.

Adelaide opened her mouth to answer the question, when James all of sudden jerked on his leash and charged in our direction.

“James, no! No!” yelled Dan, trying to hold off his dog.

But it was too late.

I became conscious of a loud hissing noise. Lily was still perched on the stone wall next to me, her fur standing on end, which made her look like a cat-porcupine. Her tail expanded to four times its usual size, mouth opened wide in an angry hiss. She was obviously gearing for battle.

I've never seen Lily like that before and having no experience with this kind of a situation, amid earsplitting barking, angry hissing and loud, but vain attempts by Dan to restrain his powerful dog, I clutched instinctively at my stomach and just stood there, mouth hanging open in astonishment.

"I better take Lily inside," reacted Adelaide calmly. It appeared, to her the scene wasn't a surprise at all. She swiftly picked up the warrior princess and carried her into the house, disregarding her sonorous protests. And just like that, a major international incident was averted.

"James, sit!" said Dan, obviously relieved. The dog immediately obeyed, as if the previous episode never happened.

He sat, his long pink tongue hanging out, and followed me with his moist eyes. His glance clearly said, "See, I am a good doggie. Please, pet me." I wanted to, I really did, but the memory of what has just happened kept me at a safe distance.

"Don't be afraid to pet him," said Dan, noticing my hesitation. "He usually is a very friendly dog."

I petted James tentatively, as he looked at me adoringly with his puppy-dog eyes. "See, I am very tame," James transmitted to me telepathically.

I did a double take. Wh... what? Now I can read a dog's mind, too? I resumed petting James to see if I could hear more. Yes, I could! "I just wanted to show you that I am a strong and dependable dog, that I can bark really well and protect you from danger," James seemed to be saying in his telepathic doggie language.

I got down on my knees in front of him and, petting his big furry head, looked straight into his eyes. "I appreciate it very much," I sent him my thought, hoping he would catch it. "I know I can fully rely on you, if necessary. But could you please promise me not to fight with Lily any more?"

James looked at me hesitantly, then grudgingly agreed, "It's a deal. But that cat is really asking for it!" He licked my right hand. "If you need anything, anything at all, just let me know, I'll protect you."

I caught his transmission again, still a little shocked, but willingly suspending my disbelief.

"It's a deal," I transmitted back to him and got up from my knees. I dedusted my pants and looked at James's owner to see if he'd noticed anything.

"See, he is harmless," Dan said with a broad smile. Apparently not.

"I am Dan, by the way," he continued, extending his hand. "I live a few blocks from here, by Hidden Lake."

"I'm Jade. It's nice to meet you."

"And this is James. He is usually well-behaved, but he and Lily have never been on good terms, just like the proverbial cat and dog. Come on, James, show Jade that you are a good dog. Give her your paw."

And James obligingly extended his right paw, his puppy-dog eyes gazing at me with devotion, his tongue hanging out. I solemnly shook it. "It's nice to meet you, James. I hope we meet again soon under more fortunate circumstances."

"I think James would welcome the idea," said Dan with a wink. "He always had a soft spot for pretty girls."

James gave a short, confirmational bark.

## Chapter 16

Tuesday, Tuesday... What was I supposed to do on Tuesday? I stared at my calendar. Animal shelter? That was yesterday and next Monday. Knitting club? No, that's tomorrow, Wednesday and also, Saturday. What else was I forgetting?

Ah, yes! Marc Catcham invited me to the Rotary Club meeting, which I promised myself to avoid at all cost. But what a terrific sleuthing chance! *Crème de la crème* of Stepford will be there. Certainly, Peter Burns and Marc Catcham, and possibly, a few other interesting specimens I needed to check out.

Dilemma, big dilemma. I suppose... Well, I suppose, I have to scratch that promise, after all.

Another eternal dilemma: what to wear? After some soul searching, I chose a dressier silk tunic with swirls of blue and silver on it, pairing it with white pants that still, thankfully, fit me. After a critical examination of my current favorites, Merrell walkers, I opted for my past favorites and infinitely more presentable, Italian flats.

Not bad, considering. One experimental twirl in front of the mirror and I was off to the Blue Peacock.

The sign in the entrance hall read:

Stepford Rotary Club Luncheon Meeting  
West Banquet Hall  
Tuesday, 1 p.m.

“Ah, you made it!” Marc Catcham met me by the entrance, habitual politician's smile stamped onto his face.

I stumbled on the edge of an oversized door rug, but quickly recovered and shook his hand. Marc Catcham looked sharp, as always, in his navy suit made of light Italian wool and a perfectly snow-white shirt. He also wore an expensive dark-red tie, held in place by an exquisite gold tie pin adorned with a large faceted black onyx in the center. My eyes rested on the tie pin. A beautiful little thing. I wouldn't mind getting something like this for Paul... if I could ever persuade him to wear a tie, that is.

“Marc,” I nodded to him.

“Allow me to introduce Dr. Gray, chief physician at our renowned Berkshire Hope Clinic.”

“Dr. Gray,” he turned to the imposing man standing next to him, “please meet Jade Snow, a journalist from New York.”

Dr. Gray shook my hand with a smile, but his narrow eyes were alert and their probing look made me feel unsettled. I passed into the banquet hall, where two long sideboards were already set up with the usual corporate spread: various cold cuts, sliced bread and cut veggies, large bowls of what looked like a glorified potato salad, bagged black tea, coffee in large dispensers that probably sat there for at least an hour, orange juice and bottled water in large ice bowls, as well as platters of suspiciously sugary looking cookies and a conventional, white flower cake for desert. Not what I'd call a great lunch.

I scanned the spread with a skeptical eye and after some hesitation, took a couple of slices of turkey breast, a piece of cheese, a slice of bread, a few veggies and grabbed a bottle of iced water. The banquet hall was set up with several large round tables covered with white

tablecloths. I decided to sit at a table nearest the exit, thinking that in case I wanted to leave early, I could slip out unnoticed. As I was about to sit down, I threw a glance back towards the entrance. Marc Catcham and Dr. Gray were still there, involved in a quiet conversation. There was a frown on Marc's face. What's more, both of their eyes were fixed on me. A chill I couldn't quite explain ran through my body.

"Jade," said a voice next to me. "We meet again!"

"Good to see you, Linda," I responded, grateful for the distraction.

"As a matter of fact," continued Linda in a hushed voice, leaning close to me, "I wanted to have a chat with you."

"Sure," I said, a tad surprised. "Shoot."

"Let's walk out together at the end and I'll tell you then," she said enigmatically.

I nodded and prepared to start on my turkey breast, when a tall young woman in stiletto heels with a luxurious mane of meticulously styled blond hair and a big smile on her red lips, sat next to me. She looked vaguely familiar.

"Hi, I am Marina Pelsidski," she introduced herself in a throaty, accented voice. "I own Larger Than Life photo studio, down on Spring Street." She tossed her hair with an exaggerated move of her head and settled regally into the seat next to me. I noticed that a couple of older men in the room stared at her. Larger than life, indeed.

"Jade Snow," I said, shaking her hand.

"What do you do, Jade?" Marina asked.

"I am a journalist."

"I see." She nodded. I didn't know exactly what she saw, but smiled at her amicably and made a second attempt to get back to my turkey breast.

The tables were now almost full. I noticed Linda sitting a few tables from mine in the center of the room. She was talking to Marc Catcham on her right. Another person I recognized was Jack Maloof, who sat at the table nearest the podium.

What a contrast he was compared to Marc! In honor of the occasion he wore a properly ironed blue shirt with an unbecoming tie. As usual, he didn't participate in the conversation at the table and was devouring with surprising appetite a mountain of cold cuts on his plate. At the table next to him was Judge Bowman, whom I saw at the Blue Peacock restaurant a couple of weeks prior, the same day I met Marc, Jack and Peter.

Speaking of which, where was Peter? I would've thought he'd definitely be here. With that thought, I turned towards the entrance and as I did, I noticed Marina next to me throwing impatient glances in the same direction. A moment later, her face illuminated, as the door opened and Peter Burns appeared. He scanned the room briefly, noticed an empty seat on the other side of Marina and resolutely directed his steps towards us.

"Sorry I'm late," he nodded to everyone at the table.

"Marina," he said to her offhandedly, but there was something in his glance and in her knowing smile that made me take notice. He saw me and added quickly, "Good to see you, Jade."

Nothing more was said, but I became cognizant of a certain excitement in the air. It wasn't something you usually felt at this kind of impersonal, cold affair. No, it was something entirely different, something... something... akin to passion? Lust? Hmm... Could it be? And where was it coming from? I turned right. Sitting there was a shriveled up man with shrewd eyes, who at that very moment took out his handkerchief and, probably thinking no one was looking, was in

the process of wiping his long, hooked nose. He seemed to be in his sixties and was dressed in a non-descript gray suit.

“Solomon Schwartz, accountant,” he said in a nasal voice, shaking my hand with his dry and bony one.

“Nice to meet you. Jade Snow, journalist,” I said. No, the energy I felt clearly didn't originate from here.

I turned left and dropped my fork, which hit the floor with a clutter. Marina and Peter Burns were in the process of exchanging such a glance that there was no mistaking it. It was a glance only lovers could possibly share. That's why they wanted to sit in the corner, away from prying eyes.

Suddenly, I remembered the dropped fork. Neither waiters nor spare forks were in sight. Once more, I turned right. Solomon Schwartz was already engaged in a discussion with another man. I turned left. Marina and Peter were absorbed in a conversation of their own. In fact, everyone seemed busily conversing with their neighbors.

Damn! That meant that I'd have to bend and reach under the table to retrieve that fork all by myself. That was awkward, considering my best bending days were in the past... I looked under the table. Damn, damn and triple damn! The fork was on the floor to my left and just out of my reach. I leaned as far forward as I could and tried to grasp it. No luck. About to withdraw, I noticed a movement to my left. A slim woman's foot with red toenails slid out of a stiletto-hilled shoe and made its way toward the leg of the man next to her. The agile foot seductively traced its way up the man's trouser, and kept moving higher, higher, higher.

All right, I decided. I've seen enough. I emerged from under the table without my fork and absentmindedly nibbled on a piece of carrot on my plate. Now I remembered where I saw Marina. It was at the Stepford Day Fair, in the back of the photography tent where she was very busy, smooching Peter Burns.

Meanwhile, everyone's attention turned to the podium occupied by Linda Morrow.

“Ladies and gentlemen, as you know, we have a tradition of sorts. Every month, one of our own members gets a chance to talk to us all about his or her business. I am very pleased to introduce today's speaker, whose presentation I think will be a special treat. Please give a warm welcome to Jack Maloof, CEO of Virtual Reality Research and Development.”

“Oh, this should be very interesting,” Mr. Schwartz murmured excitedly to no one in particular, making himself comfortable in his chair.

I observed Jack slouch towards the podium, all hunched up as usual, his gangly arms swinging in an uncoordinated fashion along his body. The banquet hall, to my great surprise, exploded with applause.

I had to admit, I had serious doubts about Jack's ability to deliver a remotely interesting, let alone exciting, presentation. Perhaps, the Rotary Club members were just an especially supportive bunch? Maybe they just wanted Jack to feel at home and welcome here? Which, of course, was very nice of them, but where did that leave me?

Having lost my fork, I couldn't even eat the food on my plate. And as I was getting restless from sitting motionless in my chair, I realized that I wasn't too keen on enduring Jack's boring speech while starving. It occurred to me that this was a good time to slip out unnoticed and go find something edible for lunch. But then, I remembered my promise to get together with Linda.

Hmm... I really needed to befriend her. As editor-in-chief of the Stepford Post she was bound to be in the thick of things! She knew people, heard things and she could be a source of useful info about what happened here thirteen years ago. I sat, trying to decide whether it would

be okay to call Linda later and explain to her why I was unable to stay till the end, when suddenly the large screen behind the podium lit up, lights went out and Jack started talking.

“Thank you,” he mumbled into the microphone in his usual colorless voice. Then he pressed a button on a slick remote control and an image appeared on the screen. “I am here today to talk about the future of virtual reality. Mankind has always dreamed about shaping up reality based on our specifications and today, we can boast of certain achievements in this exciting sphere of knowledge. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you our FUTURE!”

The screen came alive with beautiful scenery, changing dynamically every several seconds: a butterfly landing on a flower and changing into an eagle soaring to the sky, then in turn, changing into a rabbit running through a meadow and turning into a dinosaur. And so on and so on. It was very cool!

“Virtual reality is a computer program, which simulates real life in an imaginary environment.” As I listened, Jack's voice began to change. There was passion and power in it I would've never suspected he possessed.

“Imagine,” he went on, “that you are in the future. You enter a special chamber and as the door behind you closes, you start experiencing new and very exciting sensations. Suppose, your dream has always been to be someone totally different than what you are today. You are a superman or a superwoman able to fly like the wind. It's exhilarating, intoxicating. You soar up to the sun and circle around the planet with the speed of sound. Have you always wanted to explore the depths of the Pacific Ocean? No problem! Just give a command to your very own virtual reality chamber and *viola!* You are there. Perhaps, you wanted to go to a beautiful tropical island and relax on a beach, where local beauties would give you a relaxing massage, catering to your every whim?” (Wistful chuckles from the audience, primarily male.)

Jack continued talking, as I forgot about my hunger. It was fascinating and I wanted to learn more about this futuristic stuff that seemed straight out of Star Trek and yet, based on Jack's presentation, appeared to be accessible to us, mere mortals. I was still deeply immersed in the fantasy Jack managed to create on stage, when the presentation ended.

“Jade,” said Linda, “ready to go? I'll wait for you by the exit.” I got up and we walked out together.

“So, what did you want to talk about?” I asked.

“Ah, yes,” she nodded. “How did you like Jack's talk?”

“Very impressive,” I said. “I never realized that underneath Jack's exterior there was such passion.”

“Well put,” said Linda. “He really does have a lot of passion, which is only obvious to those who take the time to get to know him. Actually, that's what I wanted to discuss with you.”

“I'm listening.”

“Well, our paper is planning a series of articles on the new generation of movers and shakers in our community, the bright future of Stepford, so to speak. Jack Maloof is one of them. See, Jack has recently taken over the management of his company, Virtual Reality Research and Development, from his father, who's seriously ill. I don't know if you know this, but Jack is a bona fide genius and has been the brains behind his company for some time now. But now he is also the front man. Jack graduated from Harvard summa cum laude and registered over a dozen patents already. Rumor has it that the company has recently landed a large contract with the U.S. military and it would be interesting to have his success story in the paper. The other candidate is Marc Catcham, our most prominent young attorney, who is also running for State Senate. Plus, Nick Nordini, our new chief. Also, Peter Burns and, possibly, one or two other people. Of

course, your suggestions are always welcome. So, what do you think?" Linda looked at me inquiringly.

"Sounds like a good plan," I agreed. "But what does it have to do with me?"

"I want you to write the stories."

"Me?!" I was surprised, mostly, by the strange coincidence. She wanted me to write stories about the exact same people who were on my suspect list. Was someone, yet again, trying to tell me something?

"Yes, you," nodded Linda. "I think it would be perfect. "A prominent journalist, who is currently making our town her residence, writing about the prominent members of our community."

"Thanks, but I don't think I am that prominent." I said.

"I disagree, I think you are too modest. You are quite prominent," she said seriously, and then added, "well, especially by our standards."

"Gee, thanks," I said, chuckling. But I understood her and didn't really mind.

She realized that what she probably meant as a sincere compliment came out wrong and quickly corrected herself. "What I mean is that our readers would be thrilled to read your stories. Besides, there is one other, selfish consideration on my part."

"Oh? What's that?"

"See, you are new in town. You know how someone who'd lived in the same place for a long time stops noticing the interesting, the unusual and starts seeing things that aren't even there."

"I know exactly what you mean," I said. "I sometimes refer to it as a *soaped up eye*. In other words, a tired eye."

"Exactly. When yours is fresh, you are more likely to see what needs to be seen and notice what needs to be noticed. This project is very important and I really want your fresh eye." Linda looked at me searchingly. "What do you think?"

I was struck by her reference to the fresh eye, because that's exactly how I felt about Jason and Rebecca. It seemed, people here all looked at that old crime with a tired eye and as a result, they couldn't see the obvious.

"Do we have a deal?" insisted Linda.

It appeared destiny was sending me an opportunity to talk to my "suspects" eye to eye under a very legitimate pretext. The decision wasn't a very hard one.

"It sounds like a good idea," I said. "I'll do it."

"Great!" Linda looked happy.

"On one condition. I will only write the truth."

"That goes without saying."

"And I'll need complete freedom. If I do interview them, they have to be ready to answer my questions. Please inform them to avoid surprises."

"Consider it done."

"But so you know, sometimes I prefer to observe my subjects unobserved. So, if I end up not scheduling an interview with either of them, don't be surprised. It simply means I'm taking that route."

"Sort of undercover," smiled Linda understandingly. "Smart! You can often learn more that way."

## Chapter 17

I needed to do some thinking, so I set out towards the town's place of respite and reflection, Hidden Lake, which, as I was explained, was a mere twenty minute walk from my house. On the way, I passed by Adelaide's house and a thought of dropping by to say hello crossed my mind. But in the end, I decided not to disrupt my meditation.

After the road ended, I proceeded to the meandering dirt path, which snaked in the direction of the water amongst a mixture of oaks, birches and pines. The path took me close to the shore, past a scenic landing surrounded by rocks and shrubbery and then, to a more secluded portion of the lake, where a large community of ducks splashed in the water and luxuriated in the sun. The ducks resting on warm stones raised their heads as I approached, but quickly went back to sleep, while the others swam excitedly in my direction, hoping for a treat. Unfortunately, I had no food with me, so they turned away, disappointed.

All of a sudden, ducks on the shore got to their feet, quacking in alarm, and the ones in the water swam away as fast as they could. I peered back along the partially hidden path, trying to figure out the nature of the disturbance, when I noticed a familiar German Shepherd in hot pursuit of poor ducks. He came to the shore, panting excitedly, but realized that his prize outsmarted him and began barking, venting his frustration.

"James, no!" His owner's voice followed suit. I watched with a chuckle as Dan ran out of the tall grasses, trying to catch the illusive leash that got away from him, when the dog bolted. James was preparing to dive into the lake to continue his pursuit, as Dan, breathing heavily, sweat dripping down his face, managed to catch on and reacquire possession of the treacherous leash. The ducks spread their wings and flew off with indignant quacking. After admonishing James, Dan sighed with relief. Then, he turned around and finally noticed me.

"Jade?" he said, smiling sheepishly.

"Hi Dan," I chuckled back at him. "Looks like James is disappointed."

"I am afraid," he said, addressing the dog, "for the second time in a row we are not making a very good impression on Jade. What do you think, James?"

James was silent.

"He is a very good dog," he addressed me. "But has two weaknesses."

"Let me guess what those are," I said, laughing. "Cats and ducks, right?"

"What gave it away?" grinned Dan.

"Woof?" echoed James.

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "A thing or two..."

James already forgot about the duck fiasco and approached me to receive his share of petting.

"This is such a nice park," I said, stroking James's fur.

"Yes, it's always been my favorite. James and I take walks here practically every day. Sometimes we come late at night, so James can swim and run around to his heart's desire. There is plenty of space and it's quite private in this portion of the park even during the day."

"Really? I should visit it more often, especially when I need privacy. This place is so peaceful."

"Yes," nodded Dan. "Now it is, once more."

"What do you mean, once more?"

“Didn't you know? It's so private because few people venture in this direction any more... after what happened here thirteen years ago. Haven't you heard the story?”

“You mean Rebecca? It happened here?”

“Well, not quite. That would be a couple of hundred feet from here, if you follow this path along the lake. There is a small, secluded area, called the Lovers' Clearing, which in those days was used by the young people as a romantic spot. I myself,” Dan gave an embarrassed cough, “used it... um... you know, during high school. Of course, now hardly anyone comes there any more... because, well... because it's considered bad luck. And if you continue on for another hundred feet or so, that would be where it happened. James and I usually don't go that far.”

“That way?” I pointed straight ahead.

“Yes,” said Dan. “But you are not planning on going there alone, are you?”

“Why not,” I said, shrugging easily. “After all, the odds of a lightning striking twice in the same spot are very low. I'm sure it's completely safe.”

“Well, that may be.” He hesitated. “Still, it would be better if James and I accompanied you. Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” I said. “The more the merrier.”

The overgrown path meandered on until we reached a clearing surrounded by blooming lilac bushes, which gave out the most exquisitely intoxicating scent imaginable, and a weeping willow hanging over the water. I noticed a small and rather dilapidated-looking boat tied to a post, which probably hadn't been in use since the old romantic days. Overall, the atmosphere was quite idyllic. No wonder it used to be the preferred make out spot for local kids. But I also felt some residual melancholy permeating the air – unfortunately, not so conducive to kissing. Pity.

We walked a little further. The atmosphere there was quite different. Something oppressive, sinister hung in the air.

“We usually don't go this far...” started Dan, and his voice sounded strangely hollow.

I interrupted him. “Do you feel it?”

“Feel what?”

“The oppression in the air?”

“I...um...” He blinked, unsure how to respond.

But James's reaction was unmistakable. All of a sudden the huge and powerful dog started making pitiful, mournful sounds, his tail between his legs. He looked at Dan and me imploringly and his expressive dark eyes were saying, “Let's get out of here guys, I don't like it.” James sniffed the ground restlessly, all the while whining and trying to entice us to leave this unpleasant spot.

“James, what is it?” said Dan.

“He feels it,” I said quietly. “I think this is the spot.”

I closed my eyes and stood still for a moment, hoping to see what happened here thirteen years ago. Nothing came. Probably James's restlessness was a distracting factor. Should I come back by myself some other day? Although the place was giving me the creeps and it was good to have company. I was already opening my eyes, when I saw a glimmer of something.

I firmly closed my eyes again and there it was, in a flash. Night. Lake. The young woman in a desperate struggle for her life. She is on her back on damp ground, the lake glistening in the moonlight, the dark, silent bushes surrounding her. A heavy hand slaps her hard – once, then again and again. Her attacker is in a rage, but there is someone else, helping him to subdue her. They look and sound like young men and they are very, very drunk. There is a third man

standing in front of them. He doesn't participate in the beating and rape... he just stands there. But why, oh, why can't I see their faces?

I opened my eyes with a sharp intake of breath and would have fallen, if Dan didn't come to my rescue.

“Are you okay?” His voice sounded alarmed. His strong arm hugged my waist for support.

“F-fine.” I gulped, trying to recover from what I just saw. The visions were getting more and more powerful – and draining.

“You are not fine! Just look how pale you are,” he objected. “This place is draining you and James is restless for a reason. I think this might be the place where Rebecca, you know...”

Well, it looked like Dan finally caught on.

“I think you might be right.” I attempted a weak smile. The man was a bit slow on the uptake, but at least he was there.

“We better get out of here,” said Dan resolutely.

No argument from me. I threw one last glance around and noticed a stretch of dense woods with orange “No trespassing” signs plastered to trees.

“Whose property is that?” I asked.

“That must be the beginning of the Maloof property. The elder Maloof owns a mansion on the opposite shore. Something like forty acres and the whole western part of the lake.”

“So, does Jack live with his father?” I asked casually, as we started walking back.

“No, he built himself a modern house on his father's estate by the water. If you look closely, you can see part of his roof showing through vegetation.” Dan pointed past the “No trespassing” signs, where the meandering path all but disappeared, nearly swallowed by the tall grass. “See?”

I focused on the spot Dan was pointing at and saw a vague outline of a modern-looking, angular roof that peaked through the lush green.

“He has his own small beach and a few boats in a little bay, hidden behind the lake’s bend,” explained Dan.

As we walked back to civilization, it progressively felt brighter and easier to breath. James's tail was back up, wagging with its usual enthusiasm, and I felt as if a heavy load had gradually melted off my shoulders.

We finally emerged onto a street and Dan insisted on accompanying me all the way to my house. We stood in front of it and I said gratefully, “Thank you, Dan and James for coming with me to that place. You were right, there is something there. I felt much more secure with the two of you around.”

“Any time,” said Dan, and James seconded that, his long pink tongue hanging all the way out.

“Well, I should go,” I said, shaking Dan's hand, followed by James's paw. “Thanks again.”

“Jade, wait,” started Dan. “Um... what would you say if I invited you out to dinner tonight?”

“I am flattered,” I responded, taken aback. “But it's probably not such a good idea. Even though my husband is half across the globe on a business trip, I'm still married, you see.”

“If I was your husband,” he said wistfully, “I would've never left you alone, business trip or not.”

## Chapter 18

Virtual Reality Research and Development, VRRD, Inc., was located on the very outskirts of Stepford. It was a large, gray concrete building. The contemporary angular architectural details were in abundance. The architect's idea was evidently to showcase the futuristic element in Jack's enterprise, but the resulting effect was surreal and chaotic at best. I walked past the hedges, trimmed neatly, but so severely that they conveyed an impression of a topiary crew cut. The glass revolving door led into a spacious, empty lobby from where the secretary led me into Jack's office on the upper floor.

"Yes, Linda told me you might be stopping by," he said, a resounding echo accompanying his words.

I glanced around. An enormous glass desk was plunked in the middle of a cavernous space with vaulted ceiling that disappeared somewhere far up. The style was minimalist to the extreme, the whole oversized space sorely lacking a woman's touch.

At first, I had trouble recognizing the man who stood up to greet me. He was serious and proud. The CEO of VRRD was a completely different Jack Maloof than the one the knitting club thought of condescendingly as a nerdy misfit. It was his domain, he was king and god here, and it showed.

"So, what would you like to talk about?" He addressed me without preambles, clearing a nondescript notebook off his desk and turning off his computer. I gazed into the face of this man I've obviously misjudged.

"I was very impressed with your presentation at the Rotary Club the other day," I said truthfully.

"Thank you," he inclined his head lightly, acknowledging my compliment in a brief, dignified movement.

"I would love to learn more about your work," I started enthusiastically, and I wasn't faking it. "Your projects are extremely cutting-edge, as far as I can see. I'd love to write about you and I'm sure our readers would love to learn about the fascinating, futuristic stuff taking place right here, in our own backyard."

"Sounds good," he nodded, an indulgent smile curving his lips. "How do you want to begin?"

"I was thinking, first I'd like to see your lab, the place where the magic happens, so to speak. It would be great if you showed me your latest accomplishments so I could experience what you do first-hand. Then, we could sit down and talk."

"I see." He frowned.

"Is there a problem?"

"Not a problem per se, but a complication."

"Oh?"

"See, Linda mentioned an interview only, but it appears we are looking at a demonstration here."

"Well, certainly! I thought, because of the nature of your business – very visual – it would be better to show rather than tell."

"The only problem is, our current work is for the military, highly classified, and I can't take you to the lab. That would be a breach of contract."

“I see,” I said, disappointment in my voice so pronounced that even the usually aloof Jack heard it.

“Well,” he said, smiling enigmatically. “There is another possibility.”

“Yes?” I leaned forward hopefully.

“We can look at a private project I've been working on for some time now. I can't show you everything, but you'll get the idea.”

“Of course,” I said. “I'd be very interested.”

“It's the prototype.” He handed me a slick, hand-held device with a number of buttons on it and a heavy helmet with panoramic view goggles, joined together by wires.

“Now,” he explained with a glimmer of pride in his eye. “You are looking at the VRP1, or Virtual Reality Pet 1, the first of its kind and the prototype of my personal Pet.”

He stroked the device tenderly. “This little baby will revolutionize the computer gaming industry. With it, you won't just be watching a game on a screen, you'll be in it – literally. No tricks, no gimmicks. Smack in the middle of action. You'll experience the tastes, the smells, the sensations, as if you were actually there. Possibilities are endless. You could be a man or a woman, an animal or an insect. You could be whoever or whatever you desire. This is well beyond game. It is a complete virtual reality experience.”

“Fascinating,” I said truthfully. “But how does it work?”

“In order to have an experience, all you have to do is put this helmet on and press one of the buttons. This control panel, as you can see, has a number of buttons color-coded to represent different experiences.”

I examined the device closely. There were two rows of buttons in different colors: green, red, lavender, blue, white and pink.

“Do you want to try it?”

I responded with enthusiastic nodding.

“Well then, let's put on the helmet. Once you do, I'll tell you which button to push. When you do, you'll be able to have one of the experiences programmed into this device.” Jack Maloof paused, frowning. “Umm... just don't... touch the lavender button.”

“Why?” I asked with a playful grin. “Is there another military experiment behind it?”

“Something like that,” he responded evasively, averting his eyes. And with surprise, I saw a glimpse of the old, familiar Jack Maloof.

All right,” he went on briskly, and just like that, the new, assertive Jack was back. “Ready to begin?”

I nodded, as he helped me adjust the helmet. With it on, I could still see the buttons through the goggles, but now they were shimmering multicolored circles suspended in dark nothingness. I couldn't see Jack or anything else, just the buttons.

*How cool*, was the immediate thought.

“Now push the button on the right, the green one,” I heard Jack's voice from a distance. It wasn't more than a whisper, although as I knew, he was standing right next to me.

I obediently touched the green shimmering circle floating before my eyes. I didn't see my hand, but the circle was for a moment dimmed, and I knew I did indeed push it. The very next moment, I forgot everything.

I was flying, my mighty wings outstretched, and there was nothing but sheer exhilaration of flight. I headed for a lush, sun-filled valley, scouting the ground. Then I saw it, a gray rabbit. I felt a terrible urge to strike and then, carry it in my talons to a hidden spot where I'd devour it. Wait a minute... What? My talons? Devour? Am I an eagle? Holy...

A momentary shock changed to the excitement of a hunter, as I positioned myself high up. Almost reaching the light fluffy clouds, I was prepared to dive for my prey. But something was wrong, I felt it with all my heart.

Oh, no, I didn't want to do it! I squirmed, trying to change my position in the sky. I really didn't want to kill that poor rabbit! As I resisted, a sharp electric pulse hit my brain. The more resistance I put up, the more intense the pulse became, until it turned into a persistent and excruciating headache. My breathing heavy, I would've fallen from the sky, when I heard a far away, hardly audible voice, "Jade, Jade, take off the helmet."

I obeyed and stared into Jack's frowning face. "Didn't you hear me?" he said with great irritation. "I've been yelling for you to take it off!"

I blinked, trying to get my bearings. "You've been yelling?" I was genuinely surprised. All I heard was a muffled, far away whisper.

"What happened, why did you resist?"

"I... I," I was trying to find the right words. "D... didn't want to hurt that rabbit."

"Ah..." a glimmer of comprehension entered his eyes. "The program may seem like a toy, but it really isn't," he explained. "It's designed to fit my particular fantasies and tastes, so if yours are different and you resist, it may have adverse effects."

He was still frowning, eying me carefully. But then he noticed a pensive expression on my face and immediately re-arranged his own expression into that suitable for a gracious host. After all, he wouldn't want any negative publicity, would he?

"Jade," he said, "I don't want you to leave with this kind of... impression. Let me show you another program, which I think you'll enjoy much better." I wasn't so sure any more and was eying the device with apprehension, unable to forget the sharp electric pulse piercing my brain.

"Trust me, you'll like this one." His smile was inviting, and I was too curious to leave without making at least one more attempt at a glimpse into the world's virtual future.

"Now, when you put it on, press this button. You'll like it, trust me," he nodded with an encouraging smile.

I decided, why not? Helmet back on, I reached for the shimmering white circle and the very next moment I was running through a beautiful green meadow with unbelievable speed, wind whistling in my ears, my white mane flying. The sensation was out of this world – joy, exhilaration, freedom. I was a horse, a beautiful white horse, and what could be better than that! After a long, refreshing run, I stopped to graze, picking wild blooms and tender blades of fresh grass with my gentle horse lips and chewing them thoroughly with my strong horse teeth. I could taste the sweetness of green grass, the pungency of purple clover and the delicate, honey-like taste of the small white flowers I couldn't quite identify. It was so amazing that I giggled with delight, but instead of a giggle I heard a horse's nicker in my ear. Unbelievable!

"Very good," came a far away whisper. "Now press the pink button."

Nickering softly, I obediently pressed the shimmering pink circle and felt myself shrinking rapidly. I wasn't a horse any more, I was... I was... crawling. My body was a slithering, furry pipe. Raising my head from the ground, I examined myself and the surroundings curiously. Wow! I was a caterpillar and I knew that I was on some kind of a mission. Ah, that's right, I needed to find a warm, well-protected spot. I located one in a quiet corner of a garden and curled up in a ball. Then I felt myself becoming a cocoon. My life essence pulsed inside, in the moist darkness, as if in a mother's womb. Except this womb was of my own creation. I felt myself change while inside the cocoon, then it became too small and I desperately wanted out. I started trying to break through the shell and finally succeed. I felt the wings behind me. Oh joy, I could

fly again! But this time, it was different. I was tiny and flew from flower to flower in a beautiful garden near a gently flowing river. I collected nectar and fluttered, fluttered...

I was a gorgeous black, white and orange butterfly, so carefree and happy that I couldn't wait to try the next button. And there it was, the most beautiful button I've ever seen. It was a shimmering lavender color, with a wonderful, delicate smell, like a flower. I was a curious butterfly, and I needed to check out that button, because my feeling was that Jack has hidden the best nectar behind it – the forbidden nectar and therefore, the sweetest. I resolutely reached for the shimmering lavender circle.

“NOOOOOOO!” Who's that yelling so loudly? I wondered. The reverberating sound was still in my ears, but I was a playful, carefree butterfly, so naturally, I disregarded that strange sound. I desperately wanted to check out that sweet smelling, beautiful lavender flower.

“NOOOOOOO! Take that ooooff!!!!” the noise was so terrible that it yanked me out of my butterfly bliss for a moment. But it was too late... I already pressed the button.

Butterfly no more and human again, I was kissing someone passionately, hungrily, full on the mouth. On the moist, pink, delicate lips. Then, I touched the woman's breasts, young, full of life and moaned with insatiable desire and yearning. I felt a stirring near my groin and knew that my hard, hot, throbbing organ was ready for her.

Wh.... whaaaaat??!! My organ??!!

In shock, I pulled my face away from the woman I was kissing and stared in disbelief at the smiling, languorous form of Rebbecca. Not the gaunt, lifeless Rebbecca I met at the hospital, but the young, full of life Rebbecca from long ago, the one, whose picture I found in the high school yearbook.

If this was Rebbecca, then who was I? I thought in a panic. My eyes feverishly circled the room. We were in a sumptuously erotic bedroom, full of red candles, red drapes and golden mirrors. The mirrors reflected the bed whose headboard was fashioned with carved cupids. I stared into a mirror and blinked. Gazing back at me was Jack's face... Jack's present day face.

“Jack, darling,” moaned the young Rebbecca, stretching sensuously on the bed. “Aren't you going to kiss me?” She made a move to pull me towards herself, but I jumped off the bed, as if burned.

The very next second I felt an electric shock to my brain, a shock so excruciating that I immediately yanked the helmet off and staggered, struggling to catch my breath. I stared into the livid, purple with suppressed rage face. I squeezed my eyes shut and shook my head, hoping to shake off the vision. I couldn't still be Jack, could I?

“I told you not to press that button, didn't I?” he said in a low, hissing voice that held a threat.

Still disoriented, I took a step away from him, shivering under his searing gaze and clutching protectively at my stomach.

“S... sorry,” I managed with some difficulty. “It's just... I couldn't control the urge when I was butterfly. That button was so inviting and it smelled so good, I... I just had to see...” I gulped hard and then added hastily, “I really haven't seen anything, Jack. It... it was just a blur and then... um... when I felt the electric shock, even stronger than with the eagle, I took the helmet off right away.”

I could almost hear the cogs whirring inside his head, trying to assess the damage. It took only a second – oh my, but his mind worked fast – and then he nodded, visibly relaxed. The heavy steel shutters lowered over his eyes as the look in them turned politely indifferent. Next,

his face quickly re-arranged itself into a gracious host's mask. The shutters to his soul snapped shut and there was no way to discern what was going on behind them.

I understand.” He gave me a perfunctory smile. “It can get very realistic at times, but as I said before, it's a toy, nothing more.”

I did recall him saying the opposite, in fact warning me that it *wasn't* really a toy, but then again, I wasn't about to argue with him just then. I produced an appeasing smile and nodded politely.

He accompanied me to the front door and as I walked back to the car, I felt the eyes boring into my back – probing, distrustful, dangerous eyes.

## Chapter 19

That night I dreamed that I was a butterfly. I fluttered my colorful wings among the blooms, enjoying the bright summer sun. All of a sudden, a giant, who wore a wrinkled shirt and a menacing smile, appeared out of nowhere. A huge sack rose, like a black, relentless cloud and dropped over me. I didn't notice the danger until it was too late. I tried to break through the barrier of the net, fluttering my wings as hard as I could. In despair, I fought and fought for my freedom, but nothing, absolutely nothing happened. I was trapped. The vicious giant with a gleeful smile bent over me and started morphing into someone else, equally dangerous, but different looking. This one wore an expensive suit and a tie with gold tie pin set with a large black onyx.

I was absolutely powerless as he picked me up with his long, cold fingers... No, I corrected myself, his fingers weren't cold at all, they were big and forceful and they held me very painfully by my wings. My days were numbered and I resigned to the fact that he was going to pierce me with a needle, frame me and put me up on the wall. I knew...

Abruptly, my eyes flew open and I sat up in bed, soaked with cold sweat. I still trembled. What a disgusting nightmare! Brrrr... I got up and shuffled to the kitchen. Three in the morning. Perfect, just perfect. I put the kettle on the stove. Perhaps, if I had a nice cup of tea with Rachel's fabulous Tasmanian honey, I'd be able to sleep.

I poured boiling water over a bag of chamomile tea, stirring into it a generous dollop of honey. Then, I sat at the kitchen table and drank it slowly. Three twenty five, I noted, stifling a yawn. Okay. Now, back to bed.

I lied down and closed my eyes, breathing deeply and counting from one hundred in a descending order. Usually, however agitated I was, I'd fall asleep before reaching sixty. This time, I had to count down all the way to twenty one. Then, the numbers finally started floating in and out of my mind. Twenty... eighteen... seventeen... nineteen... seventeen...sixt... And I was asleep.

What was that ringing in my ear? I woke up with a start. Seven thirty. Hey, my "chamomile tea plus counting down from one hundred" recipe seemed to have worked! I slept without any nightmares the rest of the night. But now that I was fully awake, why did the ringing persist? Ah, that's because it actually wasn't in my ear. And there I thought I was developing some kind of internal alarm clock in addition to all my other newly found psychic talents.

Could it be the cell phone? And where did I put it? As the phone continued ringing next to my ear, I groped around the nightstand, trying to locate it and finally digging it out from underneath a napkin, a magazine and an open book. Aha, that's where the good, old *Incognito from St. Petersburg* was, my latest valiant attempt to master Russian!

"Hello," I said groggily, wondering who could be calling at such hour.

"Jade, darling!" The reception wasn't great, but the voice on the phone was unmistakable. The one and only voice. The voice I loved. I did a sharp intake of breath and jumped out of bed.

"Paul, Paul, it's you!" I yelled into the phone, while doing a wild African dance of ultimate jubilation around the bedroom. "Oh my God, it's you!"

I was so ecstatic, I couldn't contain myself.

"Yes, my sweetheart."

“Where have you been?! I missed you so much!” At that, my voice cracked and I was ready to start crying. I blinked, trying to stop the welling up of tears that made everything swim in front of my eyes.

“I am sorry, darling, I couldn't get to the phone. I had an opportunity to interview some tribal leaders, who may be connected to the piracy in the Gulf of Eden. I couldn't pass it up and there was no reception whatsoever. But you'd be happy to know that *Front Line Essays* are progressing very well. I am scheduled to visit two refugee camps tomorrow and the day after. And then, a few more interviews and I should be done. I'm running ahead of schedule and I might be back home sooner than I thought. Isn't that great?!”

“But I was so worried that you didn't call! I thought... I thought you forgot about me or... that you were in danger!” I exclaimed, feeling rather emotional.

“I'm so sorry, sweetie, I miss you so much and I would have never forgotten to call you, you know that! I think about you all the time.” Paul's voice was apologetic.

“Really?” I said and sniffed. I couldn't recall being this sappy ever before in my whole life. Boy, but this pregnancy was turning me into a basket case! I took a deep breath, trying to calm down. Paul doesn't need this. He has enough danger and problems to deal with without my whining.

“Darling, are you okay?” said Paul, his voice starting to sound worried. “What's going on? Is something wrong?”

I couldn't tell him. I simply couldn't. It would do no good to try to explain that the paradise he convinced me to move into was hardly paradise at all. I couldn't explain to him what I was going through emotionally, as my pregnancy progressed. I couldn't explain about Rebecca's rape, about Jason, about my secret investigation, about Adelaide and Princess Lily, and about me becoming a member of a knitting club. Actually, I was quite sure he'd never believe that last bit and that he'd probably think I was pulling his leg.

I took a deep breath. “Everything's fine, darling,” I said in a sunshine voice. “It's really nice here, I met some wonderful people and Rachel has come this last weekend for a visit. My writing is progressing and everything's well.”

“Jade, sweetie?” The voice on the phone was drifting in and out amidst constant cracking and clicking. “The recept... really ...ad,” I could discern Paul saying. “I am ...raid to lose y... any ...oment.”

“I can hear you,” I responded hastily. “Let's keep talking for as long as we can.”

“Okay. I am so ...lad ev...thing is going ...ell,” he yelled into the phone. “... was concer... you would ...ate it ...ere.”

“Oh, no,” I assured him. “I don't hate it at all. It's very...um... interesting here.”

“What a r...ief. I so miss ...u,” he went on. “I so ...ant to ...ug and ...iss you.”

“Me too,” I sighed longingly. My eyes closed and a picture of myself in Paul's arms, being gently caressed by his lips, drifted into my mind.

“I wan... ..o ...iss you... belly ...o ...uch, I ...ant ...o ....iss you ...ll over.” The reception was getting worse.

“I love you,” I whispered, sending him a kiss all the way to Somalia through that uncooperative phone, through the airwaves, the continents and the oceans, willing for him to receive it, to feel its heat on his lips.

“Oh, ...y ...ove,” I felt, rather than heard, Paul's moan in response and I knew he did receive it. Then there was a click and we were disconnected.

I sat by the phone, hoping he'd call back. But he didn't. As I made myself some toast, poured tea and set the table for breakfast, I smiled. Even though the reception was bad, even though we were disconnected, still, I did get a chance to talk to him, to hear his voice. And what's more, I now knew with certainty he was alright. I felt relieved and happy.

Smile still on my face, I reviewed my schedule for the day. The interview with Peter Burns, ten a.m., his residence – number twelve, Dudley Court.

I quickly dressed in a dark blue, business-like tunic with mandarin collar and straight linen pants, picked up my notepad, pen and a small recorder, and locked up the house. It was only nine thirty and the drive to Peter's house couldn't be more than ten minutes. But being early for my interviews was my professional habit. I preferred to wait for my subjects, rather than have them wait for me. Besides, being early had another important advantage: there was time to take a good look around and get a better feel for the place or, with luck, even a better feel for the character of a person to be interviewed.

I drove past mansions recessed in extensive gardens behind closed gates and tall walls. Finally, I made a sharp turn into a long, winding driveway of the number twelve. A large, Tudor style mansion appeared without warning from around the bend. My Land Rover moved silently along the fine gravel of the driveway. I parked on the side of the main house, in the area apparently designated as a service or guest parking. It was only nine forty.

Twenty minutes to the appointment. There was time to take a leisurely stroll around the property. I walked past well-tended flowerbeds surrounding the house, admired the neat rows of roses and marveled at the amount of work the gardener had to put in to keep this garden in such terrific shape. I glanced around, hoping to see who made this beautiful garden a reality and to compliment them on their hard work, but not a single soul was around.

Maybe, I thought, the gardener wasn't here every day. Actually, everything seemed awfully quiet. In a place this big I'd have expected to see some kind of staff. In fact, I've been half expecting a traditional English butler to spring up on me, bending at the waist as if there was a stick stuffed inside his suit and ready to take my coat and gloves... if I had any. But no, there was no one at all. The house appeared empty.

I already started having doubts that Peter Burns was home. I couldn't have mixed up the time or date of the interview. I did have it written down. Perhaps, Peter himself has forgotten our appointment? As I continued strolling to the front entrance, I bent down to smell a particularly beautiful looking tea rose, when I heard voices coming out of an open window. Good, someone was home!

As I got closer, the voices got louder.

"This is not the first time, Peter," a woman's voice was saying irritably. "You always have an excuse. It's always some kind of accident, or I am confused, or I am unfair to you. But I know what I saw. The simple truth is that your fly is permanently open, figuratively speaking, of course."

"Please keep your voice down, will you," hissed an annoyed man's voice. "Someone may hear you."

"Who'll hear me? Who? All servants have a day off," said the woman dismissively.

"Still, you never know. Someone might," the man said. "I do have an interview soon with this journalist, what's her name. She'll be here soon."

"You are lying to me again, I know it! Just like you lied to me about *her*. As usual, this is just one of your many flings!" The woman was now almost yelling.

"Please, control yourself," said the man in a disgusted kind of voice. "And keep it down!"

“I am so sick and tired of your games,” continued the woman, but now, apparently in an attempt to heed the man's advice, in a loud whisper that I could still hear through the open window. “If only you knew how tired I am!”

“This is not a game,” mumbled the man with a sigh of resignation.

There was a momentary silence, during which the woman seemed to recover her composure. “Here is my last word to you,” she started again in a frozen tone, containing dangerous notes. “It's either her or me. You stop that adulterous affair right this moment, or I will take you to court and make your life extremely miserable for the next three years. I will make all your dirty affairs public, I am warning you!”

“Sheila,” said the man. “We have to talk about it some other time. I told you, I have an appointment. This journalist, Jade Snow, may be here any moment.”

“You are lying!” the woman snapped. “I just feel it. Is this another one of your affairs?”

“No, it's not,” said the man in a tired voice. “This is an official interview. They'll be doing a piece on me in the Stepford Post.”

“Stepford Post?” said Sheila suspiciously. “How come? What have *you* done to be interviewed? Why didn't I know anything about it?”

“They are interviewing prominent people in our community. And you would have known, if you were the least bit interested in me and my work.”

“Oh, so now I'm to blame!” Sheila started heating up again. “I simply like that! You are a saint and I'm to blame for everything! How interesting. How very interesting!” She paused, then went on in a menacing voice. “You seem to be forgetting that it's my money that's responsible for your so-called prominence. But you can't avoid the day of reckoning forever. And when it comes, you'll pay for everything.”

“I will take that under advisement. And now, could you please clear out? I have things to do.” The man's voice acquired steely notes as he started losing his patience. I didn't hear what the woman's response was, because at that moment I was already ringing the bell.

As Peter Burns opened the door, I put on my official smile and started saying, “Hello, I am Jade Sn...,” when I heard the noise of an accelerating car behind me. He frowned, and I spun around, managing to catch a glimpse of a slick black Mercedes drive out of the garage at lightning speed and disappear around the bend with an angry noise. Behind the wheel was Sheila, Peter's wife, whom I met at the Stepford Day Fair.

Peter Burns's face said it all as he watched his wife drive away. There was a look of intense distaste on it, yes, but there was also something more, as if he was seeing a poisonous snake that he was longing to squash. When he noticed me observing him, he quickly composed himself and invited me in with a glued-on smile.

He answered my questions politely and succinctly, his eyes absent, posture straight and official. A regular, no frills interview, indifferent and boring. Not a spark of human emotion, not a thing to sink my teeth into. Nothing like the conversation I've overheard earlier between him and Sheila. I was disappointed and ready to leave.

“Jade, can I ask you something?” he said all of a sudden. “Do you ever regret your life's choices? Did you ever wish you'd made different ones?” His voice was bitter, with a tinge of melancholy. He seemed human now, even pitiful somehow, and unexpectedly, I caught myself feeling sorry for him.

“I don't think so,” I responded slowly. “I believe our choices, like our mistakes, are our own to make. Mistakes teach us valuable lessons and make us who we are today, stronger, better. They are a normal part of a complete human experience.”

He listened very carefully, nodding. “How's your husband? Is he still in Africa?” He caught me off guard with this question. And did I detect a genuine interest in it? That I didn't expect either. I was wondering now, who was interviewing whom?

“Yes, he's still there, but hopefully he'll be back soon.” My lips stretched all by themselves into a blissful grin, as I recalled this morning's call from Paul. Peter Burns observed me closely with a subdued smile.

“I envy you,” he said quietly. “I envy your choices. And...” He paused, reflecting. “I can't help but wish that in my own life, I'd made different ones.”

## Chapter 20

“Our knitting club members are dropping, like flies,” said Maria standing in my doorway, a large bag of fresh bagels clutched in her hand. The bagels smelled appetizing.

“Please come in,” I said. “It's good to see you.”

“Thank you, dear. I thought I'd surprise you for breakfast. Bagels and cream cheese?”

I set the table for two, placing a variety of bagels, still warm, and two different kinds of cream cheese, Maria's compliments, on the table. To add an exotic element, I dug up the Tasmanian honey and the remaining stash of giant roasted cashews Rachel brought from New York. Then, I brewed some dragon pearl green tea to go with the spread.

“So, what brings you here?” I said, cutting my multigrain-nut bagel in half and smearing some raisin and cinnamon cream cheese over it.

“Well, I thought, if Mohammad doesn't come to the mountain, then the mountain should come to Mohammad.” Maria bit with gusto into a crunchy pumpernickel topped with generous amounts of scallion and roasted pepper cream cheese.

“I see.”

“In truth, I wanted to find out what's going on,” she confessed. “It seems like some sort of an odd epidemic. First Adelaide stopped coming, then Anne, now you. If it keeps up, at this rate I'll be the last man, or rather woman, standing quite soon.”

“It got a little crazy in the past few days. Sorry I missed the last meeting.”

“You already missed two,” said Maria. “But who's counting.”

“Oh, right,” I nodded distractedly. “Two.”

Maria gave me a long, probing look. “What's going on with everyone?”

“Well, as far as I know, Anne's involved in some research at work and Adelaide's not feeling well. And me, just a busy spell, that's it.” I paused. Hmm... some explanation. Although, I wasn't really lying – not technically.

“But I'm planning on attending next week,” I added brightly.

“If you say so.” Maria wasn't convinced. “If I didn't know any better, I would've thought... um...” She fell silent and took another generous bite of her bagel.

“What?” I said.

“Never mind, just a thought I had.”

“What was it?” I insisted. “What were you going to say?”

“All right,” she conceded. “I thought that it almost looked as if it was all related to Jason. At first it seemed kind of improbable. I thought, you hardly knew him and Anne wasn't the type to be easily swayed. But then I remembered what you said when Nick Nordini let him go. Something about him having at least one friend, you. Then it occurred to me that Anne happened to disappear right after the Jason and Nick fight. At that point I started thinking that there's got to be some connection.”

She fell silent. I didn't interrupt.

“See,” she said quietly, “I used to count myself among Jason's friends. Then, the rape happened. I couldn't believe he would do such a thing, but the evidence seemed irrefutable. So, I changed my opinion of him, even though it pained me to do that. But now, I don't know what to think. I have these terrible doubts. What if Jason really didn't do it? What if he was framed?”

I sat quietly, letting the truth come out on its own.

“It occurred to me that you must know something that I don't. You must! Do you?” Maria gazed at me pleadingly.

I decided it was time to reveal certain things to her, because like Anne, she was someone I knew I could trust.

“Yes,” I nodded. “There are still many questions needing answers, but I can say confidently, Jason didn't rape Rebecca.”

Maria breathed a huge sigh of relief.

“I am so glad,” she said, a happy smile spreading over her face. “I wasn't mistaken about that boy, after all. Oh, this is wonderful!”

We continued our breakfast in silence. Then, she stopped abruptly, hit by a new thought. “But if he didn't, then who did?”

“That,” I said, “is a much more complicated question. For now we can assume that there were multiple attackers, possibly three or four. But I can say with a reasonable amount of confidence that the identity of one of them is pretty much known.”

“One of them?” said Maria, curiosity all over her face.

“Yes.”

“But who is it? Can you tell me?”

“I don't think it's such a good idea. It's too early, and what if I'm wrong?”

“But... you said you knew!”

“I don't...” I started – then stopped. If I didn't know any better, I'd say that she was trying to pressure me into doing something I wasn't ready to do. The gentle, kind, always agreeable Maria? Just what was going on?

I looked her straight in the eye. “What's going on, Maria? Why do you need to know so badly?”

She returned my glance, then blinked once, twice, and... started crying. I stared at her in astonishment. Was it something I said?

“Are you alright?” I asked her. “What is it?”

“I... I don't know what came upon me,” she said, wiping her eyes with her breakfast napkin. “It's just... that I thought of all these ruined lives: Jason's, Rebecca's, Adelaide's. All the slander and gossip, all the grief they had to endure.” She took a deep breath and continued in a totally different tone, “Oh, it makes me so mad that some sons of bitches have been getting away with it all these years! I want them brought to justice. I want to help!”

Now it was my time to blink. I didn't expect such forcefulness from this normally meek woman.

“So, can I help?” she continued insistently.

“I'd love to tell you, but I don't think I can, not yet.” I watched as profound disappointment spread over my breakfast partner's face. But what was I supposed to do? If we were dealing with dangerous and desperate people, as Adelaide believed, anything could set them off. It was enough that Anne and I were involved. I didn't want Maria, with her open and apparently passionate personality, confronting one of them in search for justice and paying for it. Of course, there was also another kind of danger, that of her deciding to spill the beans to our knitting club buddies. And that could ruin everything.

“I know why you are not telling me,” she guessed right away. “You want to protect me, but you needn't be concerned. I can take care of myself. And I could be of use to you. I hear and see things, I might remember something. And don't worry, I'll be discreet. I won't say a word to the knitting club.”

I was impressed. Not a word to the Gossip Central! Coming from Maria, it was a serious promise.

“Okay,” I made my decision. “I’ll let you in on it. But you have to solemnly promise that you won’t tell anyone.”

“I promise,” she responded eagerly.

“I don’t know everything, but based on what I’ve learned, one of the people involved in the crime was Nick Nordini.”

“I knew it!” Gasp Maria, positively excited.

“Just remember,” I raised my hand warningly. “You promised. Not a word.”

“My lips are sealed,” she nodded energetically. “But what a scoundrel! Pretending all this time to be an upstanding citizen. To think that he wormed his way into the office of chief of police! And we all naively trusted him! What a scandal!” She shook her head, then, suddenly sat up, as if struck by a new idea. “But what about the others? Didn’t you say there were three of them?”

“Well...” I started.

“They must be his buddies,” she went on in a convinced manner, disregarding my hesitation. “That would be logical, wouldn’t it?”

Y... yes,” I said, starting to get amused at her habit of asking and answering her own questions.

“But you said three, right? Yet, there are four of them in total. So, which three or rather, which two in addition to Nick?” She was talking feverishly, as if on a verge of a major discovery and I thought with a smile that she too has caught the sleuthing bug, the one that little by little was infecting our knitting club. I wondered if the club might lose yet another member who was about to fall victim to the bug’s relentless advance.

“Take, for example, Marc Catcham,” meanwhile went on Maria with great vigor. “What do we know about him? Very ambitious, has always been full of himself. His father always pushed him to go into politics.”

“Yes,” I said, letting myself be drawn into Maria’s game in accord with my golden rule: the best information often emerges in a casual conversation. “Unscrupulousness plus ambition has been known to be an ugly combination.”

“That’s Marc all right,” she agreed. “What about Jack? A nerd, generally pretty bad with women, quiet, keeps to himself. In my opinion, he is the least likely of the four to have participated in the rape.”

“Except, I was interviewing him the other day for the paper,” I said. “And guess what I’ve discovered.”

“What?” asked Maria, holding her breath.

“Well, Jack was showing me his private virtual reality project and by mistake, he showed me a program intended for no one’s eyes, but his. Do you know that he is working on some very futuristic virtual reality stuff in his lab?”

“No,” she shook her head. “What’s virtual reality anyway?”

“It’s a dreamed up world, a holographic simulation, like the holodeck in Star Trek. His project involves putting on a helmet with special goggles and when you do, you are transported into a virtual world. You see, hear and feel images that the program artificially projects into your mind. But of course, you can program it in any way you want. Ultimately, it’s your fantasy. Perhaps, something you’ll never be able to achieve in reality.”

“I see now,” nodded Maria.

“So, guess what! Jack's fantasy turned out to be Rebecca. And in that fantasy, he was making love to her.”

“No!” she gasped.

“Yep! Of course, this in itself means nothing. So, he was secretly in love with her. Big deal! Half of her class was. This kind of thing happens all the time. But I was able to observe his behavior at various times. And you know, he is quite a passionate man, but is good at hiding it. Hardly anyone knows what he's really like, unless they are close to him. And he's careful about letting people near him. Also, he's been very successful at hiding his feelings for Rebecca and yet, he still fantasizes about her. That aloof exterior he presents to the world is not his real nature. So, considering the circumstances we are discussing, he conceivably could have been a party to the rape.”

“True,” nodded Maria. “Who else? Oh, yes, Peter Burns. That one, as I told you before, had a major crush on Rebecca in high school and he wasn't hiding it either.”

“Right,” I agreed. “Did you know, that he also has a mistress and that his wife has found out about it? I overheard their argument the other day.”

“Yeah,” Maria didn't seem surprised at all. “I thought that much. He's been a womanizer all his life. I always thought he married this woman, Sheila, for her money. The bank at one point was on the verge of insolvency and he and his daddy were desperate for a cash infusion. And then, Sheila comes along and she's loaded. So naturally, Peter turned on his usual charm, which he possesses in abundance, if he wants to and a few months later they're married, the bank's saved and everyone's happy.”

“All, except poor Sheila.” I said.

“She's not the nicest woman I've met, but you could say, she's got the short end of the stick. I always thought he cheated on her.”

“So conceivably, he also could be a part of the rape.”

“Right,” said Maria. “So, where does that leave us? Nowhere! They all could be in it together. Are you sure there were only three of them?”

“I am ninety nine percent sure.”

“But how do you know?”

“Well...” I hesitated, not sure how Maria would react to my secret. Then, decided to reveal it. “It may sound incredible and I still don't completely believe it myself, but ever since I learned about Rebecca, I've been having psychic visions of her rape. The first time it actually happened during one of the knitting club meetings, the one in which we were talking about her.”

“I remember,” she said. “It was when you gasped and almost dropped your knitting.”

“Correct,” I said, impressed with her powers of observation. “After that, I went to the library and as I was reading an article about Rebecca, it happened again. Then again, when I was at Hidden Lake, at the exact spot where the rape took place. And every single time, I saw three rapists. I never saw a fourth, no matter how hard I tried to. You are not surprised, I see.”

“Surprised – no,” laughed Maria lightly. “Why should I be? Honey, New Age is my middle name. You name it, I studied it all: Wicca, shamanism, feng shui, paranormal phenomena. I don't really have any such talents myself, but admire them in others.”

“That's a relief,” I said. “So, there are four possible suspects, yet, it appears, only three of them participated in the rape. Where does that leave us?”

“Of the four,” mused Maria, “the least likely person to be involved would be Marc, I think. And here is why: one - he didn't seem to be taken by Rebecca, right?”

“Right.”

“Two – he is very ambitious and always wanted to be a politician. He wouldn't jeopardize all that for a skirt.”

“I agree. He rather strikes me as a guy who would step over anyone, including a helpless woman, if he needed to in order to protect himself, but he wouldn't do something as stupid as rape a girl and potentially throw his entire future away.”

“Well, in this respect, I think Nick is also quite unlikely to have been there. He is awfully ambitious as well and he didn't seem smitten by Rebecca either.”

“That's true,” I agreed. “Except, of the four, I can place him at the scene with high confidence. He was there, Maria.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Think about it. He has a fight with Jason, during which the latter accuses him of being a coward and hiding behind his father's back. We know that his father was chief investigator of Rebecca's case. There is also someone else's testimony of his involvement, but I can't tell you more, because I'd be breaking confidence. You can just trust me – it's incriminating. However, what I can tell you is this: Nick didn't press charges and let Jason go because his conscience didn't allow him. He had wronged the poor guy previously and he just didn't have it in him to hammer the last nail into his coffin. It probably means that he isn't a completely lost cause, but it also shows that he feels guilty.”

Maria fell silent, trying to wrap her mind around this illusive argument.

“Okay,” she finally said, “I more or less understand where you are coming from, although I must admit my head is starting to spin. But I trust your judgment.”

“Thank you.”

“So, let's sum up. Peter and Jack had motive. And Nick and Marc didn't seem to have any motive or need, for that matter. Despite that, Nick was most likely there. And by process of elimination, Marc wasn't. But I still don't get it, why would Nick get involved?”

“Peer pressure?” I shrugged. “He was celebrating graduation with friends, after all. Maria, I went to the spot where it happened, the place called the Lovers' Clearing. The Maloof estate starts less than two hundred yards from there, just down the overgrown path. The boys could have slipped out from under Maloof Senior's watchful eyes. To get some privacy, they might have decided to go to celebrate on the public side of the lake. They were drunk when Rebecca had the misfortune to run into them, in her haste trying to get away from Jason whom she perceived as danger, not realizing that something much more sinister awaited her ahead.”

“Yeah, I see where you are going with this. I like your reasoning. However, if the boys were celebrating, why wasn't Marc with them? He was, after all, their ring leader.”

“That's a mystery,” I agreed. “Perhaps, he wasn't available that particular evening or left early?”

“Pity,” said Maria. “Of the four, he is the least savory character. Did you know that he's married and has a five-year-old son?”

“No, actually, I didn't. He acts like an unmarried man.”

“That's because this marriage is just a front. He married a Mexican-American model, who has money. But lately, she's been spending most of her time back in Mexico, together with their son and as far away from Marc as possible. She's Catholic and for her a divorce is almost impossible. Anyone else would've felt awkward, but Marc is fine with that, because being married looks better on a senator's resume and because he has the use of her money, while not having to live with her.”

“Interesting bit of info, Maria. Quite useful before my interview with him. But what a character!” I shook my head. “Tomorrow I’ll know more about him. My interview is at eight a.m. I feel, I am getting close to cracking this case.”

“Jade,” Maria said in a worried motherly voice. “Whatever you do, please, be careful!”

## Chapter 21

The early morning air was pleasantly cool and I decided on a refreshing stroll before my interview with Marc Catcham. When I first contacted him a couple of days back, he was pleased to get his name in the paper, as any additional publicity would be good for his senate race. However, he told me, he was quite busy most of the week and the only time he had to spare was Friday, at eight in the morning, before his staff got in and the phones started ringing.

I breathed in the fresh air, savoring my invigorating walk to Marc's office, located – you've guessed it – on Main Street. It took me only twenty five minutes to get there and, when I looked at my watch, I discovered that it was only quarter to eight. As usual, I was early. Trying to decide whether to take another stroll or to wait for Marc on the spot, I tried the front door and to my surprise, it turned out to be unlocked. I went inside, into the semi-dark, well-furnished lobby. Most lights were still off, as the receptionist would be arriving only at nine, the official opening time. I looked around. The door into Marc's study was slightly open.

“Hello,” I said quietly, peering inside. “Marc, are you there?”

No answer. I walked into the room. It was empty. But he must be here already, otherwise the door wouldn't be open! I decided to explore and started walking along the long and winding corridor, full of little secondary corridors and hidden nooks – deep into the very belly of the beast. There was no sign of Marc or anyone else, but as I progressed, I heard muffled voices somewhere ahead. I kept walking, trying to decide which room they were coming from. When, in my estimate, I was close to the very back of the building, I heard them distinctly. One belonged to Marc and another, I was pretty sure, was Nick Nordini's.

The door into one of the back rooms stood ajar as I approached it lightly.

“... the height of foolishness,” Marc Catcham chided, “to let him go after he happened to conveniently fall straight into your hands. I don't know what possessed you.”

“Nothing possessed me.” Nick's voice was angry. “I refuse to do this any more, period!”

“Refuse? I don't think so!” Marc's voice was getting elevated, as well.

“He suffered enough. He spent twelve years in jail. I can't send him back. He deserves a break. So yes, you heard me correctly, I refuse! And you can't make me!”

“I think I can,” hissed Marc malevolently. “If this comes out, not only your career is finished, you'll go to jail! Your reputation and your father's legacy, family honor, position in society, all will be gone like a wisp of smoke! Everything you worked for! Your children will grow up paupers and ashamed of what their father and grandfather have done! Besides, do you know what happens to those who betray their friends?”

Nick was silent.

Then, Marc's voice underwent a remarkable transformation. Now, it was soft and persuasive. “Think what's best for your family. Is it better for them to live in poverty and dishonor, when the man, who was supposed to be their rock, is behind bars? No!” He answered his own question emphatically. “It is much better that their father is a great example to them, a reliable pillar of our community and the proud chief of police!”

Marc fell silent, but still, no response came. I stood in the shadow of the dark corridor, all ears and trying very hard not to breathe.

Finally – dejectedly - Nick Nordini uttered, “You are right, I have to continue pretending. For my family. I just know, one day you and I will burn in hell and there is nothing on this planet that can save us!”

“Marvelous, absolutely marvelous,” said Marc Catcham in a voice of smug satisfaction, as if he was just promised paradise on earth. “I see that you are still a reasonable man and can be talked sense to.” It appeared he failed to catch a reference to hell, or perhaps, he simply didn't care. Perhaps, all he did care about was to get Nick back into the fold.

“And now,” continued Marc sharply, “leave, and quickly. Any minute, that meddling witch will be here to interview me for the paper. I don't like that probing look in her eye. It's best if she doesn't see you.” Realizing he was talking about me, I shrunk into a corner, mercifully, containing a broom closet, the door of which was a crack open.

I heard the heavy footsteps of Nick Nordini and managed to squeeze myself into god-send closet just in time. It was too late to try closing the door fully, so I just left it ajar, as Nick Nordini stormed past, a dark frown on his face. He turned right, into a side corridor. A moment later, I heard a door open and close behind him. Apparently, he left via the back exit.

I waited patiently, until Marc emerged out of the room and whistling merrily, walked past, turning in the opposite direction, toward the front of the building. I heard him open the front door, no doubt checking for me. Then, he went into his study and I was pretty sure, left the door open, evidently, to watch the entrance. I quietly slipped out of the closet.

I heard and saw enough for today and didn't think Marc would very much appreciate it if all of a sudden “that meddling witch” emerged out of the back of his office. I looked left, then right. And made my decision. Stealthily moving in the direction of the back exit Nick had used, I quietly opened the door just wide enough to slip out. Then, as I tried to close it just as quietly, it creaked, then louder, and louder, almost giving me a heart attack. I took a chance and let it close completely. It snapped in place with a thud. Damn springs!

But the good news was that I found myself in the back yard. I started breathing again. At least, I was out of this viper's nest. I couldn't go back to the front since he was bound to see me. So, I went over to the old-fashioned iron fence separating this building from the next. The fence wasn't too high, only up to my chest. Recalling my old athletic days, I put one foot on the lower perpendicular bar and pulled myself up; then put another foot on the upper bar and swung over to the opposite side.

I dusted off my pants and breathed a sigh of relief. I was in someone else's backyard. Making my way through the grass, I emerged onto Main Street and headed away from Marc's office. I simply couldn't bring myself to interview Marc Catcham after what I've just overheard. Besides, the thought of being alone with that man in an empty space was giving me the creeps. I'll call and explain that I couldn't make it, I decided.

If I was able to drink in my condition, I could use one right now. Or two, or three. But since I couldn't, I went home and made myself some tea. The green, steamy liquid made me feel better. I sat in the kitchen and tried to reconcile the results of my investigation. So, Marc Catcham was there. He all but admitted that much. And he was blackmailing Nick. I often wondered about the power Marc seemed to exude over his friends. Had the goods on each of them? And boy, was he persuasive! Of course, a lawyer and a politician. Need I say more...

Alas, I had to scratch Maria's and my calculations. And today, the solution to the Stepford puzzle still eluded me. If Marc was there, then which one of them wasn't? That was the million dollar question.

## Chapter 22

My eyes flew open. It was only dawn, but I knew I couldn't sleep a wink. Well, Maria's wish came true. Marc Catcham was there and that meant that either Jack or Peter wasn't. But at that point I hit a wall and, concluding that a call to an expert would be in order, jumped out of bed. I found my cell and dialed the familiar number.

"Hi, Rache," I said cheerfully into the phone. "Glad I caught you. We need to talk."

"J... Jade? Is th...that you?" Rachel's voice was sleepy. "Do you know what time it is?"

"Oh yes, sorry about that." I squinted at the alarm clock that sat on a small side table near the wall. Five thirty. Wow, I was becoming a real early bird!

"I was afraid I wouldn't catch you later." Well, that was a white lie. "Besides, I have some really interesting developments to tell you about."

I dangled the carrot in front of Rachel and waited for her to react.

"F... fine," she said, stifling a yawn. "Let me get some coffee and we'll talk."

"Good idea! I'll also go and make some tea." As we bustled around out respective kitchens, I told her about my recent encounters with the four "suspects." She listened silently as I described the virtual reality tour with Jack, the scene at Peter's mansion and the overheard conversation between Marc and Nick.

When I finished, she said: "It's amazing how you manage to find adventure even in a sleepy, sheltered paradise like Stepford. Oh, and Jade..."

"Yes?"

"In the future, please remind me to never again call Stepford sleepy, sheltered or paradise, will you?"

"No problem," I said, laughing.

"Good!" Rachel's voice was now perky. Apparently, the coffee was doing its magic. "All right. If I understand your problem correctly, you just acquired a new suspect, but lost another, although it's unclear at this point which one. Correct?"

"Right! It's between Jack and Peter now. What's your scientific opinion?"

"Well, I haven't met Jack, so all I have to go by is what you told me."

"Well, if it helps, Maria seems to think Peter is the more likely of the two, and she has known them most of their lives. By the way, she also said that character-wise Marc was the most likely suspect, although in the end we decided he didn't have anything to gain. "What's in it for me?" happens to be his life's primary motivator. But in Rebecca's case, there seems to be nothing he could've gained, therefore, he was booted out of the suspect list by the process of basic elimination."

"So presumably, Maria has good instincts, therefore, her opinion may be valuable. Is that what you are saying?"

"Yes, we should take it into account."

"I see," said Rachel. "In that case, I don't know what to say. My inclination would be to think that Jack was more likely of the two."

"Why?"

"Some things you said. The intangible stuff really. But because I haven't met him, I can't be entirely sure. And there is this. See, Peter is womanizer and "his fly is open," as Sheila so astutely pointed out, but it doesn't necessarily lead to him being a rapist. As far as we know, he

just likes pretty women and the ones that are squarely different from his wife. He made a mistake when he was young, choosing money over love and now he is trying to compensate for that mistake.”

“By cheating on his wife?” I asked sarcastically.

“It's disgusting, I agree. But you've got to admit, it's a far cry from brutal rape and attempted murder.”

“That's true,” I conceded.

“Besides,” Rachel continued, “Jack's awfully quiet on the outside, but you said it yourself, he has real fire in him. And that kind of suppressed fire is dangerous. It can turn into rage under certain circumstances. When I was little, my Russian great grandmother used to say, “There are devils hiding in a quiet pond.”

“Is that an old Russian proverb?”

“Apparently.”

“It's a good one,” I said enthusiastically. “I've got to add that to my list. D'you know what it sounds like in Russian?”

“No, because I don't speak Russian, remember? Not everyone is a polyglot like you, my dear. But I could try to find out from my Grandma. She might know.”

“Thanks, Rache, I appreciate it. Every bit helps with my Russian studies.”

“Not at all. But let's get back on the topic.” Rachel was all business.

“Let's.”

“My opinion, Jack's character traits seem to make him a more likely suspect.”

“That may be true,” I countered, “but let me be the devil's advocate. It didn't happen yesterday, but years ago. They were both teenagers back then. And I know for a fact, Peter had a major one-way crush on Rebbecca at the time. Could that have sent him over the edge?”

“It's possible.”

“Just imagine,” I went on. “It's the night after graduation. The three of them are drunk, perhaps more drunk than they've ever been in their lives. And then... surprise! Rebbecca stumbles upon them. In her confusion and having probably been intoxicated too, she seeks their protection. They offer her a drink and she accepts. Her nose is bleeding and they ask what happened. Sobbing, she reveals how Jason tried to take advantage of her, how he slapped her and how she ran away. And that's when Peter, who happens to be madly in love with her, becomes resentfully jealous. Drunk people can see things differently, their logic and common sense are impaired. He decides that this is the time to press his advantage and tries to kiss Rebbecca. But she isn't in the mood. She resists and slaps him. He's furious and grabs her arms. Then, Catcham and Nordini start helping him. They hit her. The more she resists, the more they beat her. Then, having had their way with her, they leave her in the bushes and scamper off, terrified of what they've done.”

“A very probable scenario,” said Rachel. “But remember, the same exact scenario would work for Jack.”

“True. If only I could know for certain which of them wasn't there,” I said, “then the case would be solved. Or better yet, if any one of them confessed.”

“If only...” retorted Rachel. “Too bad you can't come up to Jack and Peter and ask them: excuse me, but did you participate in Rebbecca's rape thirteen years ago and forgot to mention it? Would you like to confess and, while you are at it, implicate your buddies, so I could wrap up this case and move on with my life?”

“That would be wonderful,” I said dreamily, to the accompaniment of Rachel's giggles. “But since that's not going to happen, I might as well resign to the fact that I need to figure it all out by myself.”

“Right,” agreed Rachel. “Oh, and by the way, aren't you forgetting one tintsy-wintsy little thing?”

“What's that?”

“Finding proof, my friend! A rather difficult, if not impossible task after all these years.”

“It's all in a day's work,” I waived her doubts away carelessly. “Somehow I'll find it. I know, I will. I have to!”

“I admire your confidence,” she said with a laugh. “And you know what? If anyone else said that, I'd think them unrealistic braggarts. But you, darling... I know, you can!”

With these encouraging words we said goodbye and I set out to my new “day's work,” which included trying to figure out just how to prove the unprovable.

I knocked on Adelaide's door, a bag, containing one of the “Famous Old World Cranberry Cakes” from the Stepford Fair, clutched in my hand. A nice surprise for Jason. I also brought a small can of fresh cream, a treat for Princess Lily, and a bunch of daisies from my garden for Adelaide.

A couple of minutes later I sat in the inviting living room of this old house, already my favorite, surrounded by people whom I already regarded as family, with Princess Lily purring contentedly on my lap. Adelaide and I have just re-confirmed our meeting at the cat shelter at noon the next day.

Jason finished his slice of cranberry cake and asked for seconds, which gave me indescribable pleasure. Adelaide looked happy seeing how alive and joyful Jason was. But I could tell, her health was still fragile. She nibbled at her tiny slice and went to her bedroom to take an afternoon nap. She did that lately every chance she got, trying to accumulate strength for those days when she had to do a lot of physical activity. Jason volunteered to help her get to her room, but she declined, saying that we should just enjoy ourselves.

“By the way, Mom,” he said. “Tomorrow, I'll be at the farm all day. Tom asked me to stay late and I might need to remain there for a few days. Lots to do this time of year. So, if you need anything, just call on my cell, okay?”

“Sure, dear. This work does you good.” She kissed him on a cheek. Then hugged me. “I'll say goodbye now, Jade. I'll see you tomorrow at the shelter.”

I watched with a feeling of gentle warmth, as this old lady climbed the stairs. I've only known her for three weeks. But that old woman possessed powerful magic: she was the quintessential mother. When Jason was behind bars, not being able to bestow her boundless love on him, she adopted the cats at the animal shelter, and the battered women, and the knitting club. So all-encompassing her love was that even after Jason returned, while enveloping him in the ultimate warmth of her heart, she still had enough for cats, and the unfortunate women... and for me.

She gave me a final wave at the top of the stairs and disappeared into her bedroom. As I waved back, a strange feeling of an impending loss came upon me. I frowned, puzzled, then shrugged it off, sure that my pregnancy was, yet again, playing a trick.

I turned to Jason, who was gazing at me with an adoring smile. “So, how's your work?”

“Fine,” he said. “I am gaining experience. I want to work in agriculture going forward. So, it's good practice.”

He stared at his darkened hands and suddenly said in a deep, hoarse voice, "It was in jail when I first got interested in farm work. First several years were hell." He fell silent, his face a mask of pain, eyes unseeing. I didn't interrupt.

"I still don't know how I survived," he continued. "I was the youngest and the weakest. Didn't know anyone or anything. It's a jungle out there. Much worse than a jungle. They picked on me, tortured me. I had to do things, disgusting things. I suffered, suffered terribly, especially because I didn't understand how a thing like that could happen, when I wasn't... when I didn't..."

I put my calming hand on top of his dark, callused one. He squeezed it lightly and gratefully.

"These cuts," my finger traced one of the deep trenches on his right hand, "are they from jail?"

"Yes," he whispered, hardly breathing, keeping still and expectant, his eyes closed.

"So, what happened then?"

He exhaled, getting back to reality. "I started training, and as I became physically stronger, fewer and fewer tried to force me to do things I didn't want to do. But I wasn't at peace. I was so tortured that I started initiating fights and picking on others whenever I could. That didn't sit very well with authorities. I was in trouble so often that I lost any eligibility for parole. But in all honesty, even if I didn't lose it, I knew I'd be denied. There were plenty of people who were against it, anyway. It was better that way, less disappointment. It got so bad that at some point I was seriously thinking about ending my life. The only thing that stopped me was that it would kill Mom.

"In my seventh year in jail, I became friends with a man who used to be a farmer. He taught me about working with the earth and plants, we talked about seasons, merits of various crops, weather conditions, you name it. The jail had a small garden and we both volunteered to work there. We convinced the warden to expand the garden plot. He didn't mind. It kept us out of trouble and provided fresh vegetables for the table. Before long, the two of us managed a small farm with some help from other inmates. I was alive again. That farm gave me purpose and for the first time, I wasn't dreading getting out of bed. I was almost anticipating it."

We sat quietly for a while, then I said to him, "You know, Jason, I have a feeling that bad times are almost over. Life will be much better soon."

He smiled at me mysteriously. "You're right. Much better."

"Jason," I said. "I have to ask you this."

"Sure, anything," he said with a kind of hopeful readiness.

"I think you suspect who might've been the real rapists. Why don't you do something about it?"

"Oh, that," he said, wincing. His face looked disappointed, as if he expected a different question. "I know what you're thinking, Jade. After everything I've been through, don't I want justice served? Well, I do, and you're right, I do suspect. Hell, more than suspect, I know who committed the rape! But what's the use. It's been too long. Too late for justice."

"It's never too late," I disagreed ardently. "You can't give up, Jason! Let me help. What do you know? Who do you suspect? Tell me! I can help. If we put our heads together..."

He took my hands into his and held them gently. "My darling, wonderful Jade," he said with a dreamy smile that made my heart skip. "You have no idea how much your belief in me means. Thank you for that from the very bottom of my soul. But don't ask me to share my suspicions with you."

"But why? Why?"

“Because I'm not sure I want anyone else to go to jail. I committed a terrible sin when I tried to take advantage of Rebecca, and paid for it. It's done, finished, over. What's the point in sending someone else to jail? These people have families, kids. What purpose would that serve? I learned my lesson, and they probably learned theirs. I'm sure they'd never do anything like that again.”

“Oh, Jason.” I shook my head in awed disbelief. “God bless you for your kindness, but boy, how mistaken you are about those people! As much as I'd love for that to be true, I wouldn't hold my breath that they've learned *any* lessons at all.”

“Maybe you are right, but I'd feel wrong inflicting pain on others. Their lives will be ruined if they go to jail. And of all people, I understand about jail and ruined lives.”

“Darling,” I said, exasperated. “What are you talking about? Those people didn't have any qualms about inflicting pain on you or Rebecca...” I stopped, because it was clear that I wasn't getting anywhere with him. He, after all, was Adelaide's son and she was the most stubborn woman I've ever met.

“Besides,” quietly said Jason, “there's another reason I don't want to talk to you about this subject.”

“Oh? What's that?”

“I don't want you to get hurt. If you are right and those people haven't learned their lesson, the less you know, the better.” I looked at him, surprised. So, he wasn't naïve, after all. Turned out, he understood the situation much better than it seemed.

Meanwhile, he continued. “I know, you won't rest until you get to the very bottom of this. But it is a very dangerous bottom, Jade! I want you to stay as far as possible from all this ugliness. Because you are... you are very... special. You are one of a kind, like the rarest jewel. I need you to be safe, and healthy, and happy. Because... I love you.”

And with these words Jason took me in his arms and kissed me full on the mouth.

The very first second I was stunned, the next, really curious. Turned out, he was a great kisser! I pressed my lips closer to his and gave myself fully to his sensuous touch. He kissed me hungrily, yet tenderly, then gently opened my lips with his tongue and felt inside. I let my tongue meet his and we explored each other for a long, delicious, suspended eternity. I allowed my body to melt into his arms and swoon, swoon... for just one more otherworldly moment, before waking up from this delicious dream.

As I walked back home, the taste of his kiss was still on my lips, my head was spinning and confusion reigned supreme in my head. He said, “I love you...” These words again and again replayed in my head. I savored his taste in my mouth, a little bitter, but also so sweet, so manly, and so vulnerable, too. I was going crazy.

Wake up, Jade, I said to myself. You love Paul, remember? And Paul loves you! “Oh, Jason, Jason...” I moaned in response. What do I do now? This was getting awfully complicated.

I unlocked my door and went inside, trying to find refuge in my warm, inviting kitchen, still breathing hard, but hoping that the throbbing heartache would go away. But it didn't. I curled up on the couch and closed my eyes, willing myself to sleep.

I woke up when it was already dark. I got up from the couch, surprised at how long I've slept. I must've been exhausted. I stretched with gusto and smiled at my reflection in the mirror. Life was great and I was in a terrific mood. I smacked my lips, savoring their wonderfully sexy, bittersweet taste. Ummm, delicious.

I giggled. But then, I recalled Jason's kiss and within seconds, my good mood was gone and the confusion was back.

At that moment, the phone rang.

“Hello, it's me,” said Rachel.

“Hi, Rache,” I said, relieved. She was the only person I didn't mind talking to right now.

“I have some news,” she said. “I've been thinking about Rebbecca. I also talked to Professor Strauss about our visit to the clinic and Rebbecca's strange behavior. We came to a conclusion that she is, possibly, being intimidated.”

“Professor Strauss agrees with you?”

“Yes, he does. Of course this is pure speculation at this point. Hypothetically, what if your spirit is broken after an extremely traumatic experience and what if someone, who you fear most, comes to visit all the time to remind you again and again of the horror you had experienced? What if that someone is ruthless enough to also give you certain drugs under the guise of a treatment?”

“What kind of drugs are we talking about?”

“Could be any number of things, or a combination thereof. Hard to say without examination and testing. Unfortunately, we didn't get a chance to observe her long enough. But it would be something that under certain circumstances would further inhibit her already broken will and multiply her fears. There are some seemingly innocuous drugs out there that in combination with others will cause hallucinations and delusions, may induce a sense of extreme isolation, paranoia and suicidal tendencies. And even inhibit the ability to speak.”

“Right,” I said.

“Here's what may have happened. After the rape, Rebbecca was naturally in shock and afraid to speak up for fear of retribution, seeing that the chief investigator was the father of one of the rapists. But eventually, given proper care and environment, she may have recovered. However, the rapists couldn't take such a chance. They had to continue reinforcing her fears. That's why they kept visiting her. Who knows what they did when they were alone with her. It just takes a few seconds, provided no one's looking, to whisper something threatening in one's ear. Add to that a sense of absolute isolation and entrapment the poor girl probably felt. Plus, her already damaged psyche and a belief that she hadn't a single friend left, and there you have it. They didn't need much: just a tiny nudge in the right direction, and the girl's naturally frail and disoriented state would do the rest.”

“Rache, I agree completely,” I said. “But you do realize what that means, don't you? Someone at the clinic had to be in on it!”

“Yes,” admitted Rachel reluctantly. “However hard it is for me to think that someone in the healing profession would stoop... I must say, that's the most plausible scenario.”

“Nurse Blake?”

“I don't know. She does fit the bill in some respects. Full access to Rebbecca as a head nurse in charge of the long-term ward, possibly enough experience to know her drugs and dosages. But, no, I still think they needed a doctor to accomplish that. Someone with not only good knowledge of drugs and their combinations, but also someone with authority. Someone, who'd been at the clinic long enough and had a chance to observe Rebbecca. Who knew how she'd respond to certain drugs and circumstances.”

“Someone,” I continued, “who's a member of the good old boys' club. Someone, like Doctor Gray, the chief psychiatrist of the Berkshire Hope Clinic.”

“R-right,” said Rachel slowly, and I could almost see her wrinkling her forehead, processing... “Tell you what. I'm going to pass this idea on to Professor Strauss. He's on the Board of the American Psychiatric Association. Maybe there's something he can do.”

“Oh, that would be brilliant, Rache!” I said excitedly. “May be the APA could send a commission to investigate. Because if we show our faces again we'd probably be thrown out on our ear.”

“Yeah.” She seemed hesitant. “I'll see what I can do. I do have to manage your expectations though. The professor is very uncomfortable with this whole situation. If he raises false alarm and maligns his colleague unjustly, he'll risk damaging his own reputation in the field, perhaps, irreversibly. And reputation for a psychiatrist is everything – more than everything. He trusts me and he knows I wouldn't say these things lightly, but...”

“I understand,” I said in a voice that failed to hide my disappointment.

Rachel heard it. “If only you could find proof – any proof of foul play – it would make my job of convincing him to start making waves infinitely easier.”

“Then proof I shall find,” I said resolutely. “At whatever the cost!”

## Chapter 23

Adelaide didn't show up at the animal shelter. Amy and I cleaned cages, petted and fed the cats, expecting Adelaide to walk through the door any minute... But in vain. When it finally struck two p.m. and I distinctly heard Amy's stomach growling with hunger, I suggested she'd go and get herself proper lunch. She hesitated. Since the shelter was so dependent on donations and good will of volunteers, it was always either feast or famine situation, both literally and metaphorically. Clearly, this was one of the famine days, when no one but me showed up. Even Adelaide, who could always be trusted to be there, bailed. It was completely unlike her, especially because we agreed that she'd show me the ropes, and that concerned me. What if something happened? What if she wasn't feeling well? With all that recent worry about Jason...

I decided that I'd call her later, or stop by her house in the evening. For the time being, I put these thoughts out of my mind because I had to help Amy. But there was one complication. I was new and inexperienced, and Amy didn't feel comfortable leaving me alone. I had to reassure her.

"Look, I may be new, but I wasn't born yesterday. I'll watch the kitties, answer phones and feed them, if you like. Just show me what to do and go. You deserve your lunch break."

"Actually," she said, hesitantly, "I'm really hungry and I haven't brought lunch today. We already fed the cats earlier. So hopefully, they'll be sleeping and won't bother you. I am going to get lunch and come straight back, okay?"

"Everything will be fine," I assured her. "Don't rush. Have a normal sit down meal at a cafe. Just leave your cell phone number and I'll call you if I need anything."

"It's a deal." Amy was visibly relieved.

When she left, I walked along the isles with kitty cages, some of whom lifted their heads and watched me. I petted a few of them, said some soothing words to the others and went to the front to call Adelaide. Her cell gave me a canned response that this customer wasn't available right now and to please try later. That didn't sound like Adelaide at all. She was very responsible and would've at least called me if she couldn't make it. And to keep her phone off was also not her style, as far as I knew. Perhaps, I should try her at home? But after a brief search, I realized that I didn't bring her home number.

I didn't like it, but I couldn't leave Amy without help. There was nothing to it other than to wait patiently until evening.

I found myself busy helping Amy, till I finally looked at the clock in disbelief. It was past six p.m. My stomach was reminding me of my new, three full meals a day regime quite insistently. I said goodbye to all my new kitty friends and deciding that a dinner would do me a world of good, stopped by Athens, the Greek cafe I passed on the way to the shelter. After a satisfying dinner, I called Adelaide again. Still, no answer. I decided to do some shopping at the nearby deli. I was running low on supplies and, if Adelaide wasn't at her best, she'd want some supplies, too.

Having picked up half a dozen yogurts, some eggs, a couple of loaves of freshly baked multi-grain bread, a few muffins, some freshly grilled vegetables, as well as chicken-Provençal and artichoke salad, the deli's specialty, I was on my way to Adelaide's place. It suddenly occurred to me that after a day of cleaning litter boxes and petting kitties, which left plenty of fur on my clothes, I should first go home and change. I'll take a quick shower and throw on something fresh. And then, I'll go straight to her, I've decided.

Thirty minutes later, having taken a brief shower and changed, I was ready to leave, when I remembered to try her home number. Nothing. I thought that was odd, but decided that I'd be there in a few minutes, anyway. By the time I loaded up the goodies I bought for Adelaide into my Land Rover and drove to her house, the car clock showed five past nine.

Her house was quiet. Perhaps, a bit too quiet. No lights anywhere. I rang the bell – no answer. I knocked – same result. I went to the familiar window and peered into the gloom of the sitting room where she usually sat knitting or taking a nap. The time wasn't right for that nap, but it was worth a try. I couldn't see anything through the closed window. The room was dark.

I tapped on glass and called Adelaide's name. No answer. I was starting to get seriously worried. There seemed to be no one in the house, but where could she be? I could hardly believe she would go traveling, since she wasn't in her best health lately. Besides, she was supposed to be at the shelter at noon and she was known to be as good as her word. All this seemed very strange.

At that moment, I heard scratching. I stood frozen, listening. Then, I heard it distinctly: scratch... scratch... meooow...., scratch... scratch... and again, meooow. Lily! She was inside. And her meows seemed awfully mournful. I didn't like the sound of it at all! I knew, I had to get in. But how? I remembered that Adelaide kept one of her back doors unlocked at all times. In Stepford's sheltered environment she didn't feel the need to keep all her doors locked and it made it more convenient to get in, if she forgot her keys or in case of an emergency. I walked around the perimeter of the house, trying to remember which door it was.

The house was large and had at least five doors. The main door and the door into the veranda were the ones I knew very well. There was also the door that led to the basement, the one that went directly to the kitchen, and the one that led to the service room that also was used as a laundry room. It was between the kitchen and the service room door. I walked around the house, feeling my way in the dark and hoping I could find the right door soon. The one leading to the kitchen turned out to be locked.

Next, I stumbled upon a hidden clothes line, which Adelaide used when she wanted her clothes to smell fresh. Behind it, was a door. It had to be the one! I pushed it and it opened easily. I found the light switch and blinked in the sudden brightness of the service room. I followed the corridor into the main house, turning on the lights as I went.

“Adelaide?” I called. No answer.

“Lily, where are you?” I tried again. “It's me, Jade.”

Lily came out from under a table, where she seemed to be hiding and started rubbing herself against my leg, meowing pitifully.

“Poor thing,” I said, picking her up. She felt very thin, and she was trembling.

“Lily, has anyone fed you?” I said.

“Mrrreow,” responded Lily plaintively. Obviously, not.

“And where is Adelaide?” I continued, frowning.

“Mreooow,” said Lily, this time mournfully. Part of me understood the impossible thing Lily was trying to communicate, but another part refused to believe it.

Feeling that I was starting to tremble myself, I quickly proceeded to the sitting room. Adelaide seemed to be asleep in her usual Queen Ann chair. I gently touched her on the shoulder.

“Adelaide, are you all right?” I called, my teeth chattering. No answer. Just Lily's mournful meowing. I shook Adelaide lightly, then a little harder. Suddenly, her body shifted and she

would have fallen over, if I didn't catch her, propping her back up in her chair. My last hope fading fast, I tried her pulse... and couldn't deny the horrible truth any more.

Adelaide was dead.

The rest of that evening was a blur. With shaking hands, I called an ambulance and the doctor pronounced that Adelaide died of strangulation. Police took my statement, and soon it became clear that they had a suspect, the only suspect: Jason. He seemed to be the last person to see his mother alive and a neighbor had heard them arguing late last night. I picked up Princess Lily and went home in a dull state of shock. I fed her some chicken and yogurt, which she barely touched, and made her a makeshift bed out of one of my pillows, placing it in a chair next to my bed.

For hours I lay awake, trying to make sense of what just happened, of how the whole world, the world that I now belonged to, came crushing down just like that, in one single day. And all night long, I heard tiny, pitiful sobs emanating from Lily's pillow.

Adelaide was dead. Jason was on the run and a prime suspect in a killing of his own mother. It was inconceivable and absolutely surreal, and for the first time in my life I didn't know what to do next.

## Chapter 24

Apparently, some time during my sleepless night vigil I did fall asleep, because when I woke up with a start, it was already past noon. I felt disoriented and decided that a nice cup of tea would help me wake up completely. So, I went to the kitchen to make it. I was pouring water into a pot over my favorite, lemon green tea, thinking that I should invite Adelaide some time and see how she would like it, when it hit me with a force of a building crushing on my head. Adelaide won't be coming. She is dead.

I gasped, and the pot with hot liquid fell with a loud thud to the floor. Thank god for my reflexes. I avoided being burned by a split second, jumping away just in time. Another moment and I would've landed in a hospital. I mopped up the floor with trembling hands and threw away the broken pieces of the pot. So much for tea. But what do I do about my thirst? What else do I have to drink, something that's safer? I gave my kitchen a sweeping glance and that's when I noticed two dishes I left on the floor last night. One with chicken, another with yogurt, both barely touched.

Lily! I totally forgot about Lily! She was awfully quiet and suddenly, a chill of fear touched my heart. Forgetting my thirst, I dashed to the bedroom and sighed with relief. Lily was asleep on her pillow. I got closer and started worrying again. She was awfully still. I touched her, but she didn't move.

"Lily," I said to her softly, feeling my eyes welling up with tears. "Darling, please wake up." I petted and kissed her little body, as grief overwhelmed me anew.

"Meow," said Lily almost inaudibly and lifted her head slightly from the pillow. Her fur and the pillow were both wet, as tears of sorrow made two deep tracks down her little furry face. I took her up in my arms and held her closely. She was very thin and weak, and as I hugged her, I felt the dam of her grief bursting inside of me.

Oh, my God! How this poor little kitty was suffering! If I felt that my world came crushing down, just imagine how she must've felt! Adelaide, who was her everything, was brutally murdered right before her very eyes and Jason, whom she also loved with her whole little kitty heart, was nowhere to be found. Her pain felt almost unbearable and I knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that Lily wouldn't be able to survive it.

NO! I said to myself. NO! I won't let that happen! I couldn't let Lily, my beautiful, precious Lily, die of grief. Enough! Enough deaths, enough broken lives, enough sorrow! Now I knew what I had to do.

I took Lily to the kitchen, all the while whispering to her gently how much I loved her, how wonderful our life would be together and how everything would be better very, very soon. Then I fed her fresh cream from a teaspoon, all the while petting her tenderly and telling her how much I needed her in my life. At first, she refused to eat, averting her head from the spoon.

"Please, Lily, please," I begged her, feeling tears again starting to well up in my eyes. "You must! Please don't die. I need you. I don't know what would happen to me if you died, too!"

Lily's turquoise eyes, normally so bright and shiny, but now, dulled with grief, looked at me seriously. She gave a little meow and started eating from the spoon. I laughed and cried, all at the same time, but now they were tears of relief. I continued petting and feeding Lily from the spoon, then gave her some fresh water to drink. After that, when she finally made herself comfortable on the living room couch, full and content, I made myself a fresh pot of tea.

I took a tray of tea and biscuits into the living room and placed it on the coffee table next to the sofa. As I drank and ate, I kept petting Lily, who was now looking almost like her normal self.

After tea, I felt better, too. Well enough to start thinking again. I went over the events of yesterday, trying to make sense of a persistent feeling that I overlooked something. For the life of me, I didn't know what it was, but the nagging feeling didn't subside.

“What d'you think, Lily?” I said. “I feel like I've missed something. I've no idea why, but I have this feeling that I need to go back to Adelaide's house and that's where I'll find it. What's your opinion?”

“Meow, meow, meow!” said Lily emphatically, and her whole body tensed. That meant, “I totally agree, need to go back, and I'm coming with you!”

“All right,” I said. “I'm glad you agree, but you are not coming with me. You are too weak. You must stay here and get better.”

“Meow, meow,” disagreed Lily. Which meant, “I must come and help you.”

“Thanks, darling, but I think I can manage by myself,” I said with a smile. “Besides, I'll have to go late at night and sneak into the house carefully, when no one can see me.”

“Meow, meow, meow,” said Lily. Translation: “You are being illogical. I am much better than you at sneaking in and I am also better at seeing at night. See, you do need me!”

“All right,” I said, deciding to stop this pointless argument. “We'll see. Meanwhile, why don't you try resting and a little later, I'll make something special for you.”

“Mrreow – good idea,” said Lily, making herself comfortable on the sofa.

I waited till it got dark and all signs of traffic died down. Then, I put on some black stretchy pants, black t-shirt and my comfortable Merrell walkers. I dug out a flashlight and prepared for my expedition.

My house was dark and I was pretty sure that Lily, her tummy full of tuna and cream, was peacefully asleep on the sofa. I decided not to turn on the lights to avoid waking her up. I got my equipment, took out the keys and unlocked the door. It took me a moment or two to find the lock in the dark and when I was fiddling with it, I had a feeling that something brushed past my leg.

“Lily,” I whispered, in case I was mistaken and she indeed was asleep, “is that you?”

There was no answer, so thinking that I just imagined it, I locked the door and started walking in the direction of Adelaide's house. The town seemed deserted. There was a light rustle of leaves next to me and I directed my flashlight at the spot. A quick movement, something furry, then nothing. Probably a squirrel or a raccoon, I thought, resuming my walk.

Adelaide's house was deathly quiet and the crime tape enveloped its front door. I hoped the service room door was still unlocked and headed straight for it. I opened the door very quietly and tiptoed into the still house. As I was closing the door, I, again felt a delicate brush against my leg. Either I was imagining it, or there was a ghost in this house. Or else... I turned on my flashlight and proceeded into the living room, where the mystery of rustling leaves and light brushes against my leg was explained immediately. Lily sat in her trademark white-pedestal statue pose in the middle of the room and her whole look was saying, “Will you hurry up? How long do you expect me to sit here and wait?”

“Lily, you little rascal,” I said, shaking my head in disbelief.

“Mrreow, mrreow,” said Lily. Translation: “I beg to differ, I certainly am anything but a rascal. You need my help, trust me!”

“We'll see about that,” I murmured, getting down on my knees and examining the floor.

“I have no idea what we are looking for,” I said to Lily. “Do you?”

As if she was waiting for these words, Lily meowed and ran to a corner where a sideboard stood against the wall. She started clawing by the left front leg, periodically turning to me as if to say, "That's where you need to look!"

I approached the spot and shone the light into the shadow. Something in that little hidden space, where the carpet indented toward the sideboard's leg, sparkled like a diamond. I blinked at the blindingly sharp ray of light and reached into the small crevice with my hand. What could it be? I wondered. After some groping, I emerged with a dark stone in my hand. When I shone my flashlight on it again, I gasped. It was a large piece of brilliantly polished, faceted onyx... the same onyx I saw in Marc Catcham's tie pin during the Rotary Club meeting. I jumped back to my feet triumphantly.

"Do you know what this means, Lily?" I said. "We got him, we really got him!"

"I don't think so," said a mocking voice behind me. I spun around. The menacing figure of Marc Catcham blocked the doorway into the living room.

"Hand it to me," he said in a dangerous voice. Then, he made a step in my direction and extended his large, meaty hand.

## Chapter 25

I desperately turned left, then right, trying to decide which way to run.

“I don't think so, sweetheart,” said Marc Catcham, advancing on me slowly. I made a step back, then another and hit the sideboard. Beyond that, there was the wall... I was trapped.

He advanced resolutely with a crooked scowl disfiguring his face, the face that was a mask, with hardly anything human in it. A terrible sense of foreboding washed over me. I was panicked, more than just for the outcome of my long and treacherous investigation, more than just for my well-being. I was suddenly terrified for that precious someone who grew inside of me.

“Please, please,” I pleaded with him, somewhat irrationally hugging my stomach, as tears ran down my face. “Please, don't hurt my baby.”

His scowl deepened. “No, my dear,” he said in a sweet voice, which was in total discord with the murderous look on his face. “This isn't going to work. You should've thought of that earlier. It's too late. Now, you are going to tell me everything I need to know.”

I slowly edged away along the sideboard, until I hit the corner. There was nowhere else to go.

“How did you know...” His large frame towered over me, his breathing heavy. “How did you know to come here looking for it?”

“I suspected you for a while,” I said slowly, deciding that a conversation was better than the alternative. The longer we talked, the more of a chance I had to distract him and escape. “But I only became sure yesterday.”

“And what gave me away?” he said, and there was something hiding behind the obvious offhandedness of his question. Threat? Fear?

“I...I just knew,” I said, my mind frantically searching for a way out. Front door? Locked and sealed, I'll never be able to break through that seal in time. Service room door? Too far. Cell phone? Damn, I forgot it at home! Window? Won't work – he's blocking the way. What do I do? What do I do? If only I could distract him long enough to reach the kitchen door...

“You just knew,” his voice was dripping with sarcasm. “How very psychic of you. Enough playing games, you little meddling witch! Hand it over. NOW!”

The dangerous voice rose to a growl, as the meaty hand extended towards me, in order to take away my only proof.

I was torn. Should I hand it to him? But in that case, it will be my word against his. And then, another thought hit. You are not thinking clearly, Jade! If you don't hand it to him, there will be no story to tell, because you'll follow Adelaide to the grave, both you and your baby. Is that what you want?

Slowly, I extended my hand and handed him my hard-won proof. My plan B was to try and make my escape while he was busy examining the faceted stone. He stretched his hand to receive it and at that very moment I heard a distinct *meow* next to me.

Lily's voice reverberated in my brain, “I'll distract him - you ruuuuuun!!!!!!”

I gasped, more surprised than anything else, because I forgot all about her. The very next moment, Marc Catcham gave a howl of pain. His flashlight revealed Lily hanging on his trouser, her claws embedded deeply into his leg.

“You witch, you menace,” he howled like a banshee. “You'll pay for this!”

With the wall behind me, I couldn't get enough swing to kick him in the balls, so I just pushed him away from me as hard as I could, yelled, "Run, Lily, run!" at the top of my lungs and dashed to the kitchen door. If only I could reach and unlock it before he recovered his wits. In a split second, I was there. Frantically, I fumbled in the dark for the lock. Where... where is it... Found it! With a huge sigh of relief, I turned it and almost succeed in opening the door. My last thought was that, hopefully, Lily was safe and sound. Then, without any warning, everything went black.

## Chapter 26

I woke up from excruciating pain. My head felt like it was about to split into a million pieces, and there was something sharp digging into my hip. I tried to move, but couldn't, I tried to scream, but no scream came out. And what was that dizzying, nauseating rocking? Rocking? What rocking? Where was I? What happened to me? Why can't I move? And then I remembered – the baby! My baby! With difficulty, I raised my head a little and looked down – I was on my back and my stomach was bulging like a tiny mountain. The baby seemed okay. But where was I? Outside, for sure. I could see the huge, full moon and stars above.

I tried to wiggle my toes. They moved, but my feet seemed to be tied. I attempted to move my hands. They were tied, too. Now, that sensations started returning to my body, I felt all bruised, my whole body aching. At least the baby was all right, but for how long? I better not waste any time and scream for help. I inhaled deeply and almost choked on some dusty cloth filling my mouth, instead of the fresh air I expected. I was gagged.

What has happened to me? I recalled my desperate dash for freedom, followed by the blackness. Marc Catcham must've hit me on the head. That explains the headache. But what is digging into my hip? I tried to shift my body away from whatever was causing me such discomfort, but couldn't. The space I was in wasn't big enough for me to move. And the more I moved, the more it rocked. And a new sound was added to it. It was some kind of splashing. Splashing? That means water. And then, the realization dawned. That's why I could see nothing but the moon and stars. And that's why I couldn't shift my body. I was in a boat – a very small boat – and I was floating in the middle of the lake.

But why? What did Catcham have to gain from putting me in this boat? The very next morning, someone was bound to find me and everything he'd done would come out. All he'd achieve was to add yet another crime to his long list of evil deeds.

Wait, the next morning? I was supposed to spend the whole night in this boat? That could be very bad for the baby. Now I was concerned. But no, it was still illogical. Yes, I may be cold and utterly uncomfortable, but it's a summer night. I'll be okay, and so will the baby. What he did wasn't smart and that stumped me, because whatever else Marc Catcham was, he definitely wasn't stupid.

Come on, Catcham, where's the catch? I tried to think through the haze caused by splitting headache and utter discomfort. By the way, why was my hair wet? I raised my head as much as I could and shook it. I felt my face being splashed with water and licked greedily the drops that landed near my parched lips. I felt a splash as I lowered my head back down, and right away I knew the horrible truth. The boat leaked. They must have been small leaks at first, and in my dazed state I didn't notice that the water was rising as the leaks expanded. But now, there was no mistaking it. It was getting wetter by the minute. In a panic, I thrashed wildly, as the little boat rocked dangerously. The leaks seemed to intensify, as well. When I ran out of breath and stopped thrashing, there was more water in the boat. I was only making it worse.

What do I do? I thought desperately. I wouldn't survive till morning if the boat leaked. It would go under pretty soon and take me with it.

And then, the cold came. The gentle night breeze was hardly noticeable on a warm summer night if you sat in the garden or took a stroll. But if you were wet, tied up and immobile, pregnant and exhausted on top of that, it could prove to be deadly.

It seemed to be getting more windy, as the boat rocked harder. I felt dizzy and nauseated. And on top of it, now I was starting to freeze. I was sprawled at the bottom of the boat trembling, feeling the life force draining out of me minute by minute. My hands and feet were going numb and I could hardly breathe anymore. But the worst thing was that my stomach weighed on me, like a giant weight. It was heavy, but not with the heaviness that I was used to. That old, familiar heaviness was the heaviness of life. The one I felt now was cold and clammy, like a rock... like death. Gathering my last strength, I sent a prayer, "God, please save my baby, dear god, please save my baby!"

Then, I could feel neither my feet, nor my hands, nor the rock that became my stomach. Next, apathy came. But when I was about to fall into the black abyss, I heard a sound from the shore.

It was the divine sound of *meow*. At first, barely audible. Then, the wind blew in my direction and I heard it distinctly. The hope was back, the new strength filled my numb body and I tried to shift it as much as I could to show Lily that I was here.

*Please, darling, please, sweet Lily, you are my last hope! Find someone, rescue my baby and me!* I kept sending a psychic SOS over and over again, hoping Lily would hear it and produce a miracle. There was one last *meow* and then, it stopped. Lily disappeared. I strained my hearing for a long time, but no sound came. My last hope was fading fast, as yet again, I started slipping into oblivion.

But then, I heard it! There was that *meow*, a desperate, desperate *meow*. I also heard barking, followed by a man's voice. The man on the shore was trying to calm down his dog. It went like this for several rounds. A desperate meow, followed by urgent, agitated barking, then a man's voice trying to convince his dog to calm down.

Realization struck. Lily didn't let me down! She did bring someone and now, it was up to me. Come on Jade, you can do it! I gathered whatever little strength was left in my tortured body to keep myself from falling into eternal darkness that was about to claim me. I thrashed, and thrashed, and thrashed, sending splashes left and right and rocking the boat as hard as I could. I could hear the dog barking his head off. And the moment before I felt myself slipping into the abyss again, the man on the shore finally got it!

"Oh, my God," he yelled. "There is someone in that boat! There is someone in that boat!" I heard more barking, mixed with a sound of the man screaming at someone on his cell phone. After that, the moon and stars turned off.

## Chapter 27

I woke up to the rhythmical rocking. Oh, God, not again! Hastily examining myself and my surroundings, I discovered that I wasn't tied up, thank goodness, and that I wasn't in a leaking boat. That in fact, I was in a bed, with some tubes attached to me, covered with warm blankets and inside of what looked like an ambulance. My eyes searched for the nurse.

"My baby," I whispered to her.

"Your baby will be fine, and so will you," she said with a comforting smile, while her fingers deftly checked my pulse.

"Thank you," I said, lowering my eyelids in exhaustion.

"Not at all. It's your rescuers you should be thanking, not me." She gestured toward the opposite side of the ambulance van.

Beyond the hazy mist swirling in my eyes, I noticed vague contours of my co-passengers: a wet man and a wet German Shepherd, both wrapped in blankets. I smiled at them through the foggy tears of gratitude.

Next to me was another small, wet bundle, wrapped in a towel. A furry cat ear and a tri-color tail stuck out of it. I touched the ear. It twitched, and so did the tail.

"Lily," I whispered.

"Mrreow," said Princess Lily. She freed herself from her improvised cover and immediately snuggled up to me with her wet fur.

"Why are you all wet, Lily?" I asked, alarmed.

"That's quite a cat you've got there," said the man wrapped in a blanket.

"Dan?!" I blinked at the hardly recognizable, disheveled form. "Is that you I have to thank for my rescue?"

"I think the real rescuer is this little kitty. James and I just helped."

James, as always a dog of few words, gave a brief, confirmational bark.

"It was lucky," said Dan, "James and I decided to take a midnight stroll by the lake. Lily ran to us and started meowing. What surprised me, she wasn't afraid of James, like she usually is. And James didn't bark at her either. But she kept meowing, trying to lead us somewhere. Abruptly, James pulled on his leash so hard that I had no choice but to follow him. We arrived at that secluded area on the Hidden Lake shore the three of us had been exploring the other day, and Lily started to meow even harder. She would run to the water and come back to us, run to the water, come back to us. James barked and pulled me in the same direction. And he wouldn't stop, no matter how hard I tried to calm him down. Lily kept doing her routine of running back and forth and since it wasn't working, she was getting more and more desperate. She ran in deeper and deeper, until she was completely wet. And there, I thought cats were afraid of water. My James kept running back and forth also, barking frantically at some object on the water.

"I realized that the animals were trying to draw my attention to something, but the only thing I could see was a small empty boat bobbing in the middle of the lake. And that's when I noticed the boat rocking. It's like a light went on in my head, as I understood what Lily and James were trying to tell me. As you see, it was them," Dan pointed at the two furry heroes, "who get the credit. I was just there, that's all."

“He's being modest,” said the nurse. “Dan called us on his cell, but he didn't want to risk waiting until we arrived. There were no other boats around, so he swam together with James to you and the two of them pulled you all the way to safety.”

I stroked Princess Lily's wonderfully warm, wet body, as she purred excitedly next to me.

“Thank you so very much,” I said. “Thank you Dan, thank you James, thank you Lily. Many thanks to all of you for saving us! We,” I gently hugged my stomach, “wouldn't be alive, if it weren't for you.”

## Chapter 28

I opened my eyes and promptly recalled the events of the night: Marc Catcham, near drowning, local hospital's private room... But there was someone else besides me in my room, I could feel it. I quickly turned on the light and recoiled. Above my bed hovered the giant shape of Nick Nordini, resplendent in his police uniform.

“What do you want?” I said in the coldest voice I could muster, considering the butterflies of fear in my stomach.

“I responded to a call,” he said, as his frowning face hung over me like a big, dark cloud.

I tried to edge away into the furthest corner of my hospital bed, which wasn't very far, since the bed was pretty narrow.

“If you try anything,” I said, more confidently than I felt, “I'll scream and wake up the entire hospital!”

He was silent. I felt fear taking over, paralyzing me in its frosty embrace. Where is the nurse? I thought frantically. How could they leave me alone with this monster? How could they let him into the hospital? And then it occurred to me that they didn't know he was a monster. They only knew him as local chief of police and they probably called him to report a crime, an attempted murder by drowning of one Jade Snow.

“Please relax, Ms. Snow.” He pulled up a chair and sat next to the bed. “You don't have to be afraid.”

“Oh, I don't have to be afraid?!” I sat up as tall as I could, with some difficulty. My fear has completely evaporated. Now, I was angry as hell, I was simply livid. “Is that what you said to Rebecca when the poor thing wandered into your midst, looking for protection? You and your cronies raped and almost killed her! And your best buddy, Marc Catcham, is that what he told Adelaide while strangling her? Don't have to be afraid my ass!”

I must have looked pitifully small and defenseless, sitting on the hospital bed in my nightgown and pregnant to boot, compared to this mountain of a man who could snap my neck with ease, if he so wished. But I didn't care. I was past fear, past niceties, past any sort of pretense, past waltzing around the issue. Out with the truth!

“That bastard tried to kill my baby and me!” I yelled at him, clutching protectively at my stomach, as the memory of the night's horror struck anew. “And you – you have a nerve to barge in here and tell me that I needn't be afraid?!” I felt an irresistible desire to strike him, better yet, to beat him into a pulp, for me and my baby, for Rebecca and Adelaide.

“I am so sorry,” he whispered, and for the first time I noticed that his eyes were red. Then, he buried his head in his huge hands and started sobbing. I stared at him. The rock-like Chief Nordini is crying helplessly in front of me? Did I do that? Or maybe it was his conscience?

He finally lifted his head and wiped his eyes with a sleeve of the impeccably pressed uniform.

“Please understand, I was called in to investigate, because a crime took place,” he said meekly. “But I know how you feel and won't bother you for long. I already called in an investigator from Boston, citing a conflict of interest. He should be arriving shortly, to take over. I just wanted to check up on you to make sure you were all right.”

I said nothing, trying to adjust to this unexpected turn of events.

“Before I go, I just want to explain something.”

I eyed him, my eyes narrowed, expectantly.

He glanced at me and gulped, as if it pained him to talk. "I was planning to confess, because I couldn't live with this any more, but hesitated for too long."

He hung his head again.

"I know," I said. "I overheard your and Catcham's conversation in his office."

"So it *was* you. I thought I saw a shadow move in the direction of that closet, but it was dark and I discounted it as figment of my imagination."

"If you didn't hesitate," I said accusingly, "Adelaide would've been alive! If your daddy didn't lie and falsify the evidence, Jason wouldn't have to throw away the best years of his life in jail! Better yet, if you and your gang didn't rape Rebecca, none of this would've happened!"

"I know," he mumbled. "All I can say, I am sorry."

"YOU ARE SORRY? IS THAT ALL?" I gazed in astonishment at this spineless wreck of a man, posing as chief of police.

"I know, I know." He nodded. "It's too late for that." His whole body sunk into a small chair limply, like a misshapen, oversized sack. He was no longer that confident man whom I first saw just a few weeks ago at the Blue Peacock.

"Unfortunately, it is." I responded coldly.

"Right," he got up slowly, as if it cost him supreme effort. "The new investigator will be arriving in a few hours time to take your statement. I am so sorry, Ms. Snow."

As he walked to the door, I wondered again where the forceful walk of the old Nick Nordini had gone. His shoulders slouched, head hung and he, somehow, looked diminished.

He paused by the door. "For what it's worth, I didn't participate in the rape. I was just a spectator. I went to the bushes for a nature break and when I returned, they were already at it. Rebecca was fighting and they were holding her down and covering her mouth. I was too stunned or too drunk, to react."

"Or maybe," I interrupted, "you were afraid to lose your rich and powerful friends, your future meal ticket."

"Maybe," he whispered.

At that moment, I realized that he might be telling the truth. "So," I said, "were you the one who stood right in front of Rebecca, as the other two raped and beat her? Just stood there and watched?"

"Yes," he responded. "That is correct. How did you know?"

"I have my sources," I said, as it occurred to me to probe some more. "And the other two were Marc Catcham and Jack Maloof?"

"That's right."

"So," I went on, "Marc had started teasing Jack, questioning his manhood, which got Jack all fired up. He always had a secret crush on Rebecca, but that night, between alcohol and Marc's provocations, he forced himself on her, while she attempted in vain to fight him off. She said something humiliating, which only set him off. At first, Marc just nudged and teased Jack, but later, he was helping him to hold Rebecca down. After that, they took turns on her. Is that how it happened?"

"Yes," he nodded. "But how did you know?"

I disregarded his question and feeling a little more secure now, that he was some distance from my bed, pressed on. "One thing I don't understand though. How could you just stand there and watch? How could you do nothing? You, the chief's son, a future policeman! Whatever happened to the good, old "serve and protect"?"

“I... I told you, I don't know. I was young and stupid, and awfully drunk. It was... it was such a long time ago.”

“You weren't drunk later,” I pointed out, “when you went to your father and told him that he needed to figure out how to protect you and the other two. You weren't drunk when you and your father sent an innocent man to jail.”

Nick didn't respond. He simply stood by the door, frozen.

After a pause he said. “I just don't understand how you know all this.”

“I told you, I have my sources. But I do have one question for you.”

“Yes?” He tensed up again.

“Well, considering how tight the four of you were, it's surprising only three were at Hidden Lake that night. Where was Peter?”

“Ah, that,” he said, relaxing. “After graduation, we had a farewell football game. And Peter was unfortunate enough to break his leg. He was, understandably, angry at himself and disappointed at being unable to participate in our little party.” Nick gave a bitter laugh. “Come think of it, his breaking a leg was the best thing that could've happened to him.”

“Ironic, isn't it?”

“Goodbye, Ms. Snow.” He gave me a final, tortured look, before disappearing behind the closed door. And it was only then that I realized that I've been holding my breath for most of this conversation.

I sat in bed, digesting the new developments. After a minute or two, I arrived at my decision and started yelling at the top of my lungs, “Nurse! Nurse!”

There was a stampede of someone's feet in the corridor and a harassed-looking nurse ran into the room.

“What happened?” Her breathing was heavy. “Are you all right, Ms. Snow?”

“I need to go home right now!” I announced to her firmly.

She checked my pulse and said in her trained, soothing voice. “Now, how about we get some nice sleep, ha? You went through a lot last night and you need some rest.” She fluffed up my pillow invitingly and tried to coerce me back onto it. “Let's lie down and everything will be much better soon, you'll see.”

“No,” I said, refusing to budge. “I am not staying here for another day, not even for another hour. I must go home right now!”

“Doctor Sorensen says you need to stay for observation till tomorrow.”

I dispensed with niceties and responded sharply, “I don't care what Doctor Sorensen says or what you say, for that matter. You've just let a very dangerous man in and allowed him to be alone with me in the room. Only god knows what could've happened!”

“Please calm down, Ms. Snow...” started the nurse again.

“Don't tell me to calm down!” I was feeling really annoyed at this stupid woman. “Did you hear what I just said? Do you understand the words that are coming out of my mouth?!” I repeated slowly: “You – let – a – dangerous – man – into – my – room – when – I – was – asleep!”

“But I had to let him in, didn't I? He is chief of police, isn't he?” The nurse looked utterly bewildered.

“You let in an accomplice to rape and murder,” I said to her very quietly and very distinctly. “He could've strangled me in my sleep with his bare hands, because I was getting too close to the truth, do you understand? And then, the whole town would've looked the other way, because your precious Chief Nordini can do no wrong.”

“But...” The woman seemed completely baffled.

“If I stay here,” I went on slowly, as if explaining the obvious to a child, “the next thing you will do is let in another criminal who had tried to drown me, all because he is a prominent lawyer and is running for State Senate!”

In response to this new revelation, the nurse's mouth fell open and her eyes blinked.

I sighed. Boy, but she was slow! I continued with my tedious lecture: “I need to go home, where I know I can be safe, because I have proper locks on my doors. Do you understand?”

“But this is a hospital. You are perfectly safe here!” My four-year-old nurse finally reacquired her ability to speak.

“Look,” I said, resigning to the fact that it was impossible to get through that wall, “I don't know what world you live in, but in my world, I protect myself when there is danger. Someone just tried to kill me and he, or one of his cronies, may try it again. Do – you – get – it?”

“But... but,” the nurse was babbling, “that's why you should stay here, where it's safe and where you can get some rest. I do understand that you had a terrible scare and so I... I guess, I can see how you may be... um... paranoid at this point, but I can assure you, Chief Nordini is an upstanding citizen.”

She pronounced all that with a comforting smile on her face.

“Look,” I said, feeling awfully tired. “I must talk to the doctor right now.”

“Unfortunately, Doctor Sorensen is not available. He'll be in at half past nine and I'll make sure he sees you as soon as possible after his morning appointments.”

“And when would that be?”

“About half past eleven,” she said with the same nonchalant smile. The triumphant look on her face announced that she knew, she was winning this battle.

“That's too late,” I tried again. “I need to go home now! If you can't arrange that, I need to see a doctor right away.”

“That's not possible.”

I gazed at her in silence, assessing this new complication. Clearly, there was no one here to reason with. “All right,” I conceded. “In that case, I need to make a call. Please give me the phone and the local phone book.”

“This can be arranged,” she said, nodding regally. Then, she hastily left the room, apparently relieved that I finally got off her back. She brought in the phone and the phone book and promptly disappeared, before I could start pestering her again.

First I dialed Rachel and explained the situation. She told me to be ready with my stuff in forty-five minutes. If Rachel says to be ready, I could trust her. She had tremendous connections in the medical world and all she needed was one or two strategically placed calls.

Then I dialed Maria, whose phone was, thankfully, in the phone book and asked her to pick me up from the hospital.

Right on cue, the nurse and a doctor came into my room, my clothes on hand, astonished looks on their faces. I dressed as quickly as I could, signed release forms and rushed to get out of that place. Hospitals were never on my favorites list.

I was relieved to see Maria waiting for me in the lobby. On the way home, we stopped at Dan and James's house to pick up Princess Lily, who, according to Dan, had been waiting for my return next to the front door, refusing to leave her vigil even for a minute. James, to keep her company, spent most of his time next to her. I hugged Lily, scratched James behind the ears to his heart's content and gave Dan a long, grateful kiss, which brought a smile to his face.

When we got home, Maria made me some soothing tea with lemon and honey and volunteered to stay for the day. She made my bed and tucked me in with care one normally affords a fragile piece of crystal. I accepted her ministering, but made her promise she'll wake me up the moment the investigator from Boston shows up.

Then, cracking the bedroom door – in case I called for her – she settled down on my living room sofa and pulled out her knitting, which she sensibly remembered to bring along. Lily stealthily appeared on my bed and immediately curled into a cozy ball of fluff next to my stomach. I listened to the comforting clicking of Maria's knitting needles and to Lily's soothing purr, my eyelids getting heavy. Then, they closed of their own accord and I fell sleep.

“Jade, Jade, the investigator is here,” I heard a soft voice. Maria stood next to my bed, gently shaking my shoulder. “Senior Inspector Delgado from Boston wants to talk to you.”

“What time is it?” I said sleepily, getting out of bed and pulling on a robe.

“Half past two.”

“In the morning?” I asked stupidly.

“No, in the afternoon,” said Maria and smiled, noticing my worried glance at the clock. “Relax, you haven't overslept anything, the world is still intact and it's still the same day.”

“How long have I slept?”

“Something like six or seven hours. I wouldn't let him wake you up earlier. Told him, you would be no good to him if he didn't let you recover a little.”

“Thank you,” I said gratefully, accepting a cup of jasmine green from her and making myself comfortable on the sofa.

Inspector Delgado turned out to be a serious, olive skinned, bespectacled man in his forties, who took some lined paper out of his bag and immediately got down to business. I liked his detached professionalism. It certainly made a welcome change from the cronyism I've observed in these parts.

I told him about my secret investigation, my suspicions and findings and about what happened to me last night. As I talked, the investigator kept writing, tight, straight lines appearing quickly from under his pen. When I finished my story, he asked me to read and sign the paper. I liked that, too. No games here, everything's straight and above board. He seemed okay, but in case he wasn't, I thought, still unable to shake off my suspicions of anyone who could conceivably belong to the “good old boys club,” Maria would be my witness that I told him the whole story. And if necessary, I could always call on Rachel and the others to confirm my findings. But my hunch was that in this particular case that wouldn't be necessary.

“Thank you, Ms. Snow,” said Senior Inspector Delgado, shaking my hand. He stood up to leave. “You have been most helpful to our investigation.”

“Just a minute, Inspector,” I said. “I have a couple of questions of my own.”

“Sure.”

“I need to know if you've arrested the criminals.”

“And by criminals you mean?”

“Obviously, I mean those who raped Rebbecca, who killed Adelaide and who tried to kill me,” I said impatiently.

“At this time, we asked Mr. Jack Maloof not to leave town, pending our investigation.”

“What! Only Jack? That's it?” I said, jumping to my feet. “What about the others? Catcham! Nordini! The Ring Leader and the Chief Liar! What about those two? What, you are just going to let them go? Just like that? Are you telling me that you are a part of the same gang? Are you planning on protecting these killers?” I was almost yelling now.

Inspector Delgado winced and tried to say something, but I wouldn't let him. Maria hugged me around the shoulders, stroking my hand soothingly. My breathing was heavy as I tried to calm down.

The Inspector spoke softly, avoiding my blazing gaze. "Ms. Snow, you have every right to be angry. I perfectly understand, after what you've been through. But please, understand my position. I just arrived here. I don't know anything, nor anyone in these parts. I need time to..."

"To adjust," I finished for him sarcastically, my temper flaring up again. "And till then, you need to tread softly, right?"

"Not exactly, but generally speaking..."

"And while you are treading softly, these criminals may kill someone else!"

"As to that, I can assure you, it won't happen," he said dryly.

"Oh yeah, and how do you know? Are you psychic or something?"

"No," his mouth curved into a thin smile, as he looked at me with interest. "I'm not. But... I didn't want to tell you this. However, under the circumstances, I guess I'll have to."

"You better," I countered in a combative voice.

"Yes, I better," he nodded. "Otherwise, I'm afraid, you'll tie me up and hold me prisoner until I confess." His mouth again curved into a smile, apparently intended to diffuse tension in the room. But for once in my life, I wasn't in a mood for any jokes.

"This isn't funny." I looked at him reproachfully. "I don't tie up people! It's your friends Catcham and Nordini who are famous for that."

"They are not my friends," he said, frowning. Then he continued, this time entirely seriously.

"The reason I didn't want to say anything is because I wanted to spare you another shock. But if you insist. The thing is that Nick Nordini shot himself early this morning. He had reportedly kissed his wife and two children goodbye and gone to work. Then, he locked himself up in his office, telling the dispatcher on duty that he should not be disturbed and wrote a full confession, implicating himself, Jack Maloof and Marc Catcham. After that, he pulled the trigger."

"Oh, my God. I can't believe it," I murmured. I felt dizzy and sat back down on the sofa. Maria rushed to the kitchen and returned with a glass of water.

I gulped down the entire contents of the glass and handed it back to her. A couple of minutes later, I recovered enough to continue my interrogation.

"What about Catcham?"

Inspector Delgado hesitated. "Marc Catcham is still at large."

"You mean, YOU LOST HIM?!"

"I haven't lost anybody," said Inspector Delgado defensively. "Remember, I just arrived two and a half hours ago. He might've skipped town well before I got here. It could've happened right after he tried to kill you."

"Or, more likely," I offered, "Nordini tipped him off."

"Yes," he murmured pensively. "That did occur to me. Anyway, a warrant for his arrest has been issued and a nationwide manhunt is underway. We think, we can catch him pretty soon."

"Catcham is the killer. You must catch him!" I said, cognizant of how ridiculous that sounded. Despite myself, I grinned. "Catcham – catch him. Couldn't invent such last name if I tried!"

Inspector Delgado grinned back. "Yeah, I noticed."

“Jade,” gasped Maria. “Looks like your sense of humor is returning. The old Jade's back! Thank god! I was starting to get really concerned.” And she enclosed me in a warm, protective embrace.

I spent the rest of the day by the phone, hoping for news that they caught Marc Catcham. But Inspector Delgado was silent.

Then, right before I was ready to curl up in bed again, Rachel called. After what happened to me, she was able to convince professor Strauss to get involved in Rebbeca's fate. He was now talking to his connections, pulling strings and it was possible that the American Psychiatric Association's Investigative Commission would be arriving shortly to look into irregularities at the clinic. Rebbeca's transfer to Professor Strauss's Westchester Clinic was also in the cards. It was truly good news and my mood substantially improved. At least, this part of my investigation was moving in the right direction.

## Chapter 29

It seemed, the entire town came to say a final goodbye to Adelaide. I noticed Linda Morrow, editor-in-chief of the Stepford Post, surrounded by her staff. Further on in the crowd I saw Mr. Schwartz, the accountant I met at the Rotary Club meeting. Next to him was Peter Burns, openly holding hands with Marina Pelsidski; two librarians I knew from the Stepford library; Amy, the animal shelter director; George, the vet and a bunch of shelter volunteers. Our entire knitting club was there, all wiping their eyes with a tissue. I noticed a few people I recognized from the hospital, as well as several from Rebecca's clinic, including Nurse Blake.

I saw Dan, together with very well-behaved James, and gave them a friendly nod. There were also many people I've never met. Some had an expression of sorrow and loss on their faces and others looked incredulous, as if they couldn't believe Adelaide was indeed dead.

Even the wind seemed to die down and the birds stopped their relentless chirping. The silence was so profound that every sob and every sigh was magnified. I gazed at the mourning sea of faces and realized for the first time that Adelaide, this quiet, frail woman, wasn't just the soul of the knitting club, she was the soul of this entire town.

Jason stood by her coffin for a long time, all by himself. He was dressed in a somber black suit with white shirt and black tie, his hair tied back in a neat ponytail. Then, people formed a line. One after another, they approached him to say something respectful and supportive. The difference in how he was treated now was staggering. He was no longer a criminal, a despised rapist; he was an honorable member of the community. And it struck me as cruel irony that his mother had to pay with her life in order for people to change their minds about him.

He shook people's hands, said a few quiet words to each and generally behaved with so much dignity that I was impressed and proud for him. But when it was my turn to approach, his unspoken sorrow struck me so profoundly that I caught my breath. I could feel his soul crying and his heart bleeding.

I didn't shake his hand. That seemed too shallow for the overwhelming grief that enveloped us both. Instead, I hugged him and held close for as long as I could.

"Thank you, Jade," he whispered softly in my ear.

I watched with tears in my eyes as four men in black approached the coffin and carried it to the funeral carriage. Jason held the right front corner, George – the left. I knew that the man holding the rear corner behind Jason was Tom, the farmer he worked for. They carried the coffin to the car and when they turned, I saw with surprise that the rear left corner was carried by Peter Burns.

A long and winding procession of cars followed the funeral carriage to the cemetery. When the coffin was lowered into the fresh grave, Jason, pale but composed, threw the first handful of earth into it. I did the same and my lips trembled, as I was overrun with a fresh wave of grief. Jason, supporting me with an arm around my shoulders, led me aside. There, by an old, sprawling maple, we stood on the green grass of the old cemetery, trying to come to terms with our sorrow.

"I feel so lost at times," he finally said, "that I want to die."

I held his hand in mine. "I know."

“It's only you, Jade,” he went on, “who gives my life any meaning now. You are my beacon, Jade, my one and only beacon. When I look at you, I see the light, that light in the end of the tunnel you promised me. Remember?”

I nodded.

“Too bad,” he said with a sad smile, “that in order to get to that light I have to do the worst thing I've ever done in my life... say final goodbye to Mom.”

We stood in silence, drawing strength and at the same time, giving support to each other.

“Jason,” I said. “I wanted to ask you something.”

“Anything, Jade, you know that.”

“Listen, this is a big one. I know how much you love Lily, but you'll have a lot on your plate going forward, so would you consider... would you ever consider... um...” I stopped, not knowing how to continue. How could I ever ask him to part with someone as precious as Lily, especially, after he already lost his mother? Did I have any right to ask for such a thing?

But he interrupted me. “Jade, I want you to keep Lily,” he said simply.

“Really?” I couldn't believe it.

“Yes, really,” he smiled at my almost child-like incredulity and delight.

“I love her very much, but you have a special bond with her and I know, that's what Mom would've wanted.”

“Jason, thank you so much!” I was overwhelmed.

When I walked back to my car, I noticed Linda Morrow heading in my direction.

“Hi, Jade,” she said, shaking my hand. “I just wanted to tell you that you've done one heck of a job.”

“Hi, Linda,” I said. “And thank you. Sorry about not being able to complete my assignment. All my subjects are either dead, on the run, or under investigation. I guess, my assignment is moot now.”

“Don't worry about that,” said Linda. “You did something much more important. I wanted you to write about the movers and shakers of tomorrow, instead, you single-handedly shook up and awakened this sleepy town. And if you ask me, it needed a bit of shaking up. It was getting stagnant here. We need to reassess our priorities. Now, thanks to you, it's inevitable. As to the assignments, there are plenty of things to write about. I hope I can count on you in the future?”

“Time will tell,” I responded. “Soon.”

I turned to leave when I saw the approaching Peter Burns, with larger than life Marina Pelsidski on his arm.

“I am very grateful to you, Jade,” he said.

“What for?” I asked, genuinely surprised.

“For helping me see the light, to understand that life is short and that I shouldn't waste it. Thank you for that.”

“You're welcome,” I said. “But I still don't get it.”

“I didn't want to end up like my father,” he explained. “He slaved like a pack horse all his life and what did he have to show for it in the end? All he could remember were the long hours he spent working. He never took a vacation, never paid any attention to his wife, who finally ran off with a painter. He neglected me. And on his death bed, all he could think of was the humiliation he – it was always about him – had to endure. See, at one point, our bank was on the verge of bankruptcy and we desperately needed a money infusion. A decision was made and I promptly proposed and married Sheila, because her family could provide said infusion, not because I loved her. We recovered, but my father died not too long after, unable to bear that

someone else, who now owned a chunk of our bank, was telling him how to run it. He lived and died an angry, narrow-minded, prideful man. He never got it. And I was stuck with the results of a bad decision. All my life I felt angry at him, angry and bitter. I thought I was confined in this pretty prison because of him. I blamed him, not myself, although marrying Sheila was my decision, as much as his. Thanks to you, I was finally able to release all that suppressed energy. Now I'm free."

"You know," I said. "I want to confess something, too."

"You – confess? What could you possibly have to confess?" Peter sounded astonished.

"See," I said, "when I first met you and your former buddies at the Blue Peacock, the four of you were busy talking in hushed tones. Later, when I connected the dots, I thought you were discussing Jason's return from jail."

"You are right, we were talking about Jason. I just happened to stumble upon the guys and we all went to lunch. Then, Nick joined us. I did think at the time it was rather odd the way they lowered their voices and had worried looks on their faces. But I just dismissed that thought. I had too much on my mind: Sheila, business, how to get out of the rut..."

"I see," I said. "But I should probably tell you that for a while you were my number one suspect."

"Me?" said Peter incredulously. "But why?"

"Well, I learned early on that you had a crush on Rebecca back in high school. Then I discovered that you continued visiting her, along with your buddies. I didn't know at the time that you broke your leg and weren't present when the rape occurred."

"I did have a crush on her," said Peter. "In fact, she was the first love of my life. Unrequited whatsoever, unfortunately. That's why I came to visit her at least once every month, brought her flowers and sweets. I felt awfully sorry for her and for my unfulfilled love. Then, I married Sheila, but still went to see Rebecca, although not as often. When I met Marina, the old feeling for Rebecca had gone away, but I still felt terrible for her and so, still kept visiting her once in a while. But I had no idea Marc and Jack went, too."

"Now I know," I nodded. "Sorry I ever suspected you."

"That's okay." He waived away my apology. "I can see why you would. But you have to know something. Yes, I broke my leg back then. But broken leg or not, I could've never hurt Rebecca or anyone else, for that matter. I may be guilty of being stuck in a rut, but that's all I'm guilty of!"

Marina looked at her lover with pride and slipped her hand into his. "But now, baby," she said, kissing him on the cheek, "we will correct that situation, right?"

"So, are you two..."

"Yes, we are getting married as soon as the divorce is finalized," said Peter brightly.

"Congratulations," I said sincerely. "From the bottom of my heart. It's nice to see some happiness around here."

"Yes, I am selling the bank and most of the proceeds will go to repay my debt to Sheila, but Marina and I don't care, do we, darling?" He looked at her tenderly, and she nodded, smiling.

"Of course, I am also selling the house."

"Yes," said Marina enthusiastically. "And I am selling my photo studio. That should give us enough money. Right, baby?"

"Right."

"So, you'll be moving out of here then?" I asked.

“Yes, we've decided to travel. Marina and I,” he hugged her around the shoulders, “we want to see the world and feel free.”

“Good for you!” I said.

“First, we're planning on visiting Marina's relatives in Poland. And after that, where do you suggest we should go? I was told you are an expert on travel.”

“Well, what do you want to see?”

“Everything!” said Peter with a passion I never knew he possessed.

I laughed. “I admire your enthusiasm. If you want to see everything, I suggest you start in the Mediterranean, often referred to as the cradle of Western civilization. Italy, Greece, Spain, Cyprus, and perhaps, Turkey. Ancient ruins, turquoise sea, warm sun, wonderful cuisine. Just make sure you stay away from riots in Greece, unless you want some extra excitement, of course. Then you can continue on to Asia. Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and of course, China. If you feel so inclined, you could also travel to Tibet. There is so much to see in this big, wide world! Wherever you decide to go, I am wishing you an unforgettably delightful adventure.”

“Oh, this sounds wonderful!” Marina's eyes shone.

“Yes, this will be unforgettable, all right,” said Peter dreamily. “Just what the doctor ordered.”

“Good luck,” I said, shaking their hands.

And they walked away, his arm wrapped around her shoulders. My eyes followed them, until they disappeared around the corner. A happy ending for these two, anyway.

I approved of happy endings!

## Chapter 30

“Do you have champagne glasses?” asked Maria, standing at my front door. The entire knitting club, a bunch of smiley faces, bags of goodies and bottles in their hands, was with her.

“We decided to surprise you,” announced Shawna, stepping into the foyer and handing me a large bouquet of roses.

“Thanks,” I said. “They are beautiful. But what's the occasion?”

“Your farewell party, of course,” said Anne.

They all filed in: Maria, Beth, Shawna, Karen and Anne. No, not all... Adelaide wasn't with us any more. My heart clenched, but a brief moment later, it went on beating, just like it always did. I couldn't be sad now, not when all these wonderful women came to celebrate with me. I put on a smile.

But wait, we were still one person short. Cathy was missing.

“Hey, where's Cathy?”

“The women looked away uncomfortably. “Um...,” said Beth. “Unfortunately, Cathy wasn't able... um... to make it. She sends her regrets.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” I said. “I hope she's all right.”

“She's fine, just in one of her moods,” said Karen, cringing dismissively.

“Did something happen?” I was still concerned.

“No, everything's fine, let's just celebrate!” Maria attempted to change the topic.

I looked at Beth inquiringly.

“Oh, you know how she is,” she snapped impatiently, shrugging her shoulders. “She's mad at you.”

“Why, what have *I* done?”

“Oh, the usual,” said Shawna. “Outed her precious Chief Nordini. And now she blames you for his suicide.”

“I see,” I said, frowning.

“Don't take it to heart.” Beth shook her head. “She isn't rational right now. She's had a crush on him since forever. She'll get over it eventually.”

I looked at my guests. “I hope no one else feels this way?”

“Of course not,” answered Maria for everyone. “Don't be silly. Why do you think we are all here?”

“And why are we all standing in the entry hall?” said Anne. “Forget all that silliness. Let's go inside and celebrate!”

We all filed into the dining room. Within fifteen minutes there was champagne and orange juice (for those who can't drink) on the table, homemade salmon and chicken salads, a variety of cheeses and vegetables, orange almond cookies, as well as peaches and grapes. Maria brought her specialty, crème brule, and I pulled out of the fridge the last of my cranberry cakes.

“Have you heard the latest?” asked Karen, well informed, as always.

“What is it?” Shawna stopped eating her crème brule and sat up, all ears.

“Well,” said Karen, smacking her lips deliciously, terribly pleased she was the one with the scoop. “First, they are re-opening a full investigation into Rebecca's case. And Jason, of course, has been fully exonerated. And secondly...” Pause for dramatic effect. “Marc Catcham was caught in Texas yesterday, trying to cross Mexican border!”

“No way!” exclaimed Shawna.

“Really?” said Maria.

“Really!” said Karen triumphantly. “My husband just learned today. The whole courthouse has been buzzing since this morning. They are bringing him back here for trial.”

“Good,” said Beth with conviction. “He deserves it!”

“But what about your job?” I asked. “Sorry you had to lose your employer in such a way.”

“Don't be,” Beth waved away my concerns. “I'll be fine. The most important thing is that justice prevails. I personally always suspected he was a crook.”

“Did you now?” asked Anne, raising her eyebrows.

“Absolutely,” nodded Beth briskly. “And Jack, and Chief Nordini. I always thought there was something fishy about them! And you know something else? I'm so happy for Jason. He'll be able to start a new life now. I always liked him!”

Anne gave me an apologetic look and shrugged her shoulders, as if to say: “What are you gonna do with them?”

I smiled back at her and shook my head. “Don't worry,” was my silent message, “I'm not going to point out the obvious. Let them be.”

“I am so with you,” said Shawna passionately. “I personally never liked Chief Nordini. I always knew there was something suspicious about how quickly he got promoted. And Catcham, I would've never voted for him! He always gave me the willies.”

“So true,” Karen hurried to add her own two cents. “I've been telling my husband for a while now that I didn't trust Nordini a bit. And you know what they say: a woman's intuition. I always knew he'd end badly. Don't even get me started on Catcham. What a jerk! I always suspected he and Jack were the rapists.”

Maria silently hugged me around the shoulders and squeezed my left hand, as if apologizing for her buddies. I didn't mind their flip-flopping and I knew I'd always think of these ladies with warmth. It was so nice to just sit like this one last time: the six of us together, chatting quietly, almost like the original knitting club, almost like the good old days... Funny, the good old days I was referring to were only a few weeks ago, but to me it seemed like an eternity had elapsed since.

I gave Maria's fingers a return squeeze. Not to worry, my gesture said, I wasn't going to ruin my last knitting club memory by pointing out that a mere couple of weeks ago our dear friends Shawna, Karen and Beth were totally against Jason and firmly in the Catcham/Nordini fan club. Why spoil the party? They were essentially good people and fun in their own way. Maria, Anne and I exchanged a glance. We understood each other perfectly.

“I heard from my mom that Rebecca would now be at a clinic in Westchester. Is that true?” Shawna gave me an inquiring look.

“Yes,” I said. “My friend Rachel specializes in cases like Rebecca's. She's been lucky to secure a bed for her at her mentor's clinic. It's extremely difficult to get a spot there, but Professor Strauss is interested in this case, so Rachel will be here in a few days with the transfer paperwork. They've had great success with her type of cases and they expect improvement within a few months or even weeks.”

“A few weeks! This is incredible!” said Maria. “She's been here for thirteen years and has never spoken a word. No offense to your mother, Shawna.”

“None taken,” said Shawna magnanimously.

“Well,” I said. “I do want to get the record straight. It is suspected that Rebecca was afraid of Maloof, Catcham and Nordini's visits, which contributed to her condition. So, when the

constant “irritant” of their visits is eliminated, she is expected to improve quickly and dramatically.”

“Oh, I see,” nodded Shawna. “She kept to herself because she was afraid of them. Perhaps, they even went there on purpose to reinforce that fear, because remember what I told you all a couple of weeks ago? They kept coming to see her even when no one else did.”

“Right,” I nodded. Smart girl, Shawna. “That's exactly what happened.”

I gave her a smile of approval. She glowed.

What I didn't tell her was that a high-profile commission from the American Psychiatric Association was on its way to the Berkshire Hope Clinic to investigate whether Catcham, Nordini and Maloof had any inside help. It could have been any of the nurses, and I hoped with all my heart that Shawna's mom was innocent. My money was actually on chief psychiatrist, Dr. Gray, the one I met at the Rotary Club in Marc's company. He either looked the other way, or worse, helped the conspirators by advice, or even drugs. Their combined efforts kept the poor girl petrified and paralyzed for years. Now, it was in the hands of pros to find out what had happened at the clinic.

But I didn't tell them any of this. The Gossip Central was bound to find out soon enough, anyway. Until then, why spoil the party?

“Jade,” said Maria quietly. “Can you tell us what really happened at Hidden Lake thirteen years ago?”

I peered at my knitting buddies intently. For the first time since we've met, I found myself in the role of a storyteller, while they were respectful listeners. Five pairs of eyes gazed back at me with great anticipation. The room was so quiet that one could hear a pin drop.

“All right,” I agreed. “I reconstructed the picture of the crime based on my visions, on what I felt from Rebbecca and what Chief Nordini told me. The rest is based on logic and intuition.”

I closed my eyes. This time, the vision came willingly, with no pain or shortness of breath and with full clarity. My eyes still shut, I started the story.

“Jason and Rebbecca drove into the Lovers' Clearing. They were a little drunk, just enough to act silly, but not excessively. After all, it was the night after their graduation. They started kissing, then Jason got carried away and tried to have his way with Rebbecca. She told him to stop, but he wouldn't listen. After asking him nicely a few times, she started to struggle and scratched him on the cheek. It was painful, with lots of blood, and he slapped her in the face. But when he saw that she was bleeding, he withdrew and apologized. However, it was late for a mere apology. She was furious at him for betraying her trust, hurt that he slapped her and too drunk to think clearly. She ran out of the car. By the time he scrambled out, she disappeared into the darkness.

“Jason was drunk enough to feel a little disoriented in the dark, so he didn't notice which way Rebbecca ran. He called after her, then searched around briefly, to make sure. If he simply stood still, instead of making all that noise, and listened, he might have heard the sound of her running in the direction of the Maloof estate. He might've even heard voices coming from that direction, those of Jack, Nick and Marc. Instead, he blundered around, called Rebbecca's name and then, assuming she ran back home, drove away and went to bed, planning to apologize to her properly in the morning.

“Meanwhile, Rebbecca, also disoriented because of drink and darkness, ran towards the group of her classmates. She was glad to see them and decided she'd be safe with them. After all, one of them was the chief's son. She told them that she needed protection from Jason, who was trying to take advantage of her and they invited her to join the group. She accepted and they

offered her a drink, then another, and another. Shaken by her experience, she drank with them and soon, everyone was pretty drunk. At that point, Nick went some distance away for a nature break. The rest of them stayed. Something triggered an argument between Marc and Jack. Marc's favorite pastime was teasing Jack that he was too timid with girls. Marc pointed out that here was Rebbecca, who Jack was secretly enamored with, yet he was too afraid to kiss her. Jack got more and more agitated and Marc dared him to kiss Rebbecca, saying that Jason wasn't afraid, that's why the girls liked him.

"So, Jack grabbed Rebbecca, who attempted to fight him off. Then, Marc held her down, so that Jack could kiss her. When he did, Rebbecca, who was now scared out of her mind, bit him and kicked him between his legs. Jack got so furious that he started beating her up, while Marc continued to hold her down. Then Marc said that now Jack had to go all the way and have sex with her. Otherwise, everyone would be laughing at him. Jack started raping Rebbecca and that's when Nick returned.

"I believe, Nick tried to protest, but was told to shut up and stay out of it, or else. Marc probably threatened him that if he interfered, his father, who was just promoted to chief, would lose his position. Marc and Jack's fathers, the big shots, were behind Frank Nordini's promotion. Nick, who was as prideful and ambitious as his father, didn't dare interfere and just stood there in shock, as the poor girl was repeatedly raped by both Jack and Marc. And every time she tried to resist, they beat her mercilessly, until she was unconscious.

"When they had enough, Jack and Marc dragged Rebbecca's lifeless body and hid it behind the bushes. Nick, who was scared to death, cleaned up as best he could all traces of the crime and ran to his father. He woke up Chief Nordini and told him the whole story. When the dawn came, Frank Nordini went back to the shore and together with his son, cleaned up the remaining traces of the crime. They returned home and as if nothing happened, Chief Nordini went to work.

"When Rebbecca's parents reported her disappearance early in the morning, Frank immediately started investigation. He didn't wait, as is customary, for twenty four hours, because he thought it would be safer to control the investigation from the very beginning. They started the search right away, because he wanted to be the one to find the body. By then, he was sure, the girl would be dead.

"Rebecca's story about Jason trying to take advantage of her was very convenient, as it pointed a finger in his direction. Witnesses confirmed that Rebbecca was last seen in Jason's company and blood was found in his car. Meanwhile, the search party was organized and dogs were called in. Rebbecca, unbelievably, was found still breathing and rushed to the hospital. Whenever Chief Nordini questioned her, she got extremely scared and eventually, just stopped talking altogether. And for a very good reason. She felt she was in danger, that it was like father, like son. She's been through so much that her fragile psyche assumed that she was surrounded by enemies. She didn't want to suffer any more. Out of self-preservation, she retreated behind the veil of apathy and silence. Nordini's position allowed him to comb the shore to make sure no evidence against his son and his buddies was left behind, while pretending to look for evidence that would exonerate Jason.

"When semen samples, taken from Rebbecca after the rape, were sent to the lab, Nordini let them go. He knew full well what the results of the lab analysis would be: Jason isn't the rapist and Rebbecca was raped by more than one person. He needed to prevent that from coming out. He secretly visited the lab, after which samples mysteriously disappeared. The lab's sloppiness in reporting the disappearance only confused things further. As a result, Jason went to jail,

Rebecca languished in her inner and outer prison, while the criminals – Chief Nordini, his son Nick, Marc Catcham and Jack Maloof – went free. Until now.”

“What I don't understand is why Catcham needed to kill Adelaide,” asked Beth. “It just seems so unnecessarily cruel.”

“Well,” I responded. “Adelaide was asking some very uncomfortable questions. Catcham felt she was getting too close to the truth. And he couldn't afford any problems during his election campaign. Stakes were too high. So, he arranged to come to Adelaide's home with her new will, instead of her visiting him in his office. He motivated it by concern over her health. His idea was that it was much easier to kill her quietly in her own home. He reasoned that when the body was found, it would be blamed on Jason. He chose the day he knew Jason would be out of town.

“No one, but Catcham and Jason, knew at the time that Adelaide was in the process of changing her will to leave the bulk of her money to charity. Jason, as a result, would lose a substantial inheritance. On the surface, only Jason stood to benefit from Adelaide's death. As soon as that came out he naturally became the prime suspect. And since Nick had refused to press charges against Jason after the fight, which Marc was hoping he'd do, this also presented a fabulous opportunity to get rid of Jason for years, possibly, forever. No Adelaide, no Jason, no one to sniff around. He could be elected and live his senator's life happily ever after.

“It was actually a crazy plan, conceived by a desperate man. So many things could've gone wrong. Jason could've come back home or might've had a rock solid alibi, someone could've seen Marc entering Adelaide's house. But everything seemed to go smoothly, except for one thing that went wrong in the very end. And that one thing made all the difference in the world. Marc Catcham was careless enough to lose the onyx from his tie pin. As if that wasn't bad enough, I, with Lily's help, happened to find it. And the rest is history.”

## Chapter 31

Seven in the morning, three days later.

I took a sweeping glance around my living room. Princess Lily slept peacefully on her pillow. A soft purr was coming out of her furry little body, which was rising and falling in rhythm. I gave a happy, childlike giggle – this was the effect she'd always had on me.

The room looked uncharacteristically tidy, almost empty, boxes and suitcases crowding the corner nearest the door. Pretty much everything has been packed, except for a bunch of daisies in a vase, several books on the table and various Lily's items in the kitchen. I did a once over for the whole house and satisfied, sat down, waiting. I closed my eyes and rested my hands on my growing stomach. For the first time in so many days, I felt peace. I lingered in that precious state of equilibrium, listening to the familiar bird songs drifting in from the garden, to Lily's little sounds, to the comforting ticking of the old carriage clock... and at that very moment there was a kick. That little, precious someone, whose arrival into the world I've been patiently awaiting, finally kicked! My smile became wider, wider, wider. I froze, eyes closed, grinning to myself, listening to the sounds of new life calling out from inside of me. I didn't know how long I sat like this, oblivious to the external world.

I only awoke from my trance when a dilapidated truck pulled into the driveway and Jason jumped out of it. Ah, time to go. I put three books I selected in advance into a canvas tote. After a moment's thought, I added the one I was reading, *The Book of Zen* by Osho, kissed Lily and told her I'd be back soon, picked up a bunch of fresh daisies from the vase and locked the door. Jason helped me into the truck's high seat and we were off to pay respects to Adelaide one last time.

He produced an enormous bouquet of roses and peonies and placed it on the grave.

"From Mom's garden," he explained. "She always loved her flowers..." his voice wavered, "...so much. I brought as many as I could."

"I know." I placed my bunch of daisies next to his huge, overwhelmingly luxurious bouquet. The daisies looked small and delicate, as if they belonged in another, different world.

"Thank you," said Jason softly. "Mom would've liked these."

He took my hand in his and held it gently. I felt the secure warmth of his rough palm. I didn't know how long we stood in silence in front of Adelaide's last resting place. Then, a large, hot tear fell on my hand and I woke up with a start. Jason went down on his knees and pretended to straighten out the bouquets. The world in front of my eyes was blurry as I looked away, while he discretely wiped his eyes. Then we turned and headed back to the truck.

"I need to talk to you," said Jason, as we drove back. "Can you stop by the house?"

"Of course."

I haven't been to Adelaide's place since that night. There was a large "For Sale" sign upfront. The house looked sad, orphaned. The two souls that were its life and its *raison d'etre*, deserted it. Adelaide was gone, and Lily, well, Lily found a new life, with me. I loved this house and I felt sorry for it. But perhaps, I told myself, it too will find a new life breathed into it by new owners. Perhaps some day, the house will again see a happy family and hear children's laughter within its century-old walls. Perhaps...

We entered the living room and my eyes drifted to the spot where the familiar Queen Ann chair used to stand. The rug was shabby and indented where the chair's legs used to be, but the spot was empty. I looked at Jason inquiringly.

"I... I just couldn't look at that empty chair any more," he said. "Just couldn't. Antique dealers always wanted her furniture, so..."

The room indeed looked practically devoid of furniture, but full of boxes. There were boxes marked "charity" and some others, with books, marked "library," and yet others, marked "sale." Jason's own possessions were already packed and sat neatly in the corner: a box with books, his carpentry tools and a backpack with a jacket thrown on top.

"So..." I said, "the house is for sale."

"Yes. We already have an offer. Better than expected. I want this done as soon as possible." He said it apologetically.

"Of course," I agreed. "You are right."

"Someone will be able to enjoy all this," he looked around vaguely, a hint of nostalgia in his eyes. He shook it off quickly.

"Actually," he said, "I have something for you."

"For me?" I asked, curious and pleasantly surprised at the same time.

He took out a large golden box with an artistically tied silver bow on top. A small, also silver, card attached to one of its sides had one word "*Jade*" written in Adelaide's old-fashioned handwriting.

I opened the box. Inside it was an exquisite baby blanket in pale lavender, hand-knitted in a beautiful daisy lace pattern.

"Oh, my God!" I gasped, burying my hands in the plush softness of the delicate, but, oh so cozy, cashmere.

"She was working on this for you for a while," said Jason, and a rare happy smile parted his lips as he observed my reaction.

"Oh, this is so beautiful, Jason." I felt my eyes filling with tears. "I can't believe it. Thank you so much." I blinked several times, trying not to break down right here and now. I'll come home and cry there, for Adelaide, for Rebecca, for Jason and for me, for all that was and could have been, and for all that is still to come. But now, I had to be strong – for him.

"I am sorry," I said. "It's just that it's so gorgeous."

"I know," he said simply, his eyes as soft as the cashmere in my hands.

"I have something for you, too," I said, handing him the tote. The books I picked for him in addition to *The Book of Zen* included *The Idiot* by Dostoyevsky, a book of poetry by Rumi, and another one by Thich Nhat Hanh. "This is not much, but these are some of my favorites. I thought they might help you on your..." I searched for the right word "... on your journey."

"I love them," he responded with feeling. "Thank you!"

I reached into the familiar tea cabinet and pulled out a jar of Adelaide's jasmine green. I made tea for both of us and we went outside to sit in the veranda, under her oak.

"Jade," he said, taking a sip from his cup, "I need to talk to you about something."

"Sure," I said, taking a sip from mine.

"It's about my inheritance. I wanted your advice."

"Ah, yes," I smiled keenly. "Well, I guess, since your mom didn't change her will after all, it's all yours, and the world is your oyster, right?" I gave him a wink.

"No." He shook his head vigorously.

"No?"

“No,” he repeated resolutely. “I have no right to it. When she told me she wanted to leave most of it to her charities, I agreed right away. As a matter of fact, I... I encouraged her to do it.” Seeing my inquiring look, he explained, “See, I haven't felt that money belonged to me for a while now – actually, ever since...”

He took a deep breath and continued, “I am a capable man with good health and two strong hands. I can make money for myself. Meanwhile, there are plenty of those for whom that money would make all the difference in the world and perhaps even be a matter of life and death.” He looked at me with his dark eyes, which at that particular moment burned with a fire I've never seen before.

“That night,” he said, “we talked for a long time. I told Mom I was planning to leave and find a new life somewhere else. In the end, she convinced me to take fifty thousand, which was supposed to help me get back on my feet. She was also going to leave me another hundred thousand in her will. The rest, all five and a half million of it, plus the proceeds for the house, another million and a half in today's price, she was planning to leave to various animal shelters she supported and to the shelter for battered women.” His hand reached for mine. It was hot. “I want to follow through on her last wish.”

“Jason,” I said earnestly, “this is very honorable of you.” I felt very proud of him, but also there was another feeling, the one I'd been trying hard to ignore. Yet, I couldn't ignore it any longer, as suddenly, a sensation of gentle warmth enveloped my entire body.

“So, you see,” he went on, “yet again, I need your help.” A shy smile that made my heart beat faster, touched his lips. “I don't seem to be able to manage without you.”

“Sure, anything!” I said.

“As you know,” he started, “Marc Catcham was Mom's attorney.”

“Ah, of course. And he is presently indisposed.”

“That's right, and even if he were...”

“You wouldn't go to him,” I finished for him.

“Correct.”

“Now, the question is,” I said, “who do you want?”

“Good question. That's where you come in. In order to handle the estate properly and to distribute the money among the charities correctly I want an attorney who is honest, smart and who has an experience with charities.”

“I know just the person!” I said.

“I was hoping you'd say that.”

“Lena Miles. Can't find anyone better! She is an attorney in New York, specializing in Charity Law and she is a pro, as well as honest. Just what you need!”

“How do you know her?”

“I've known her since Columbia. She's always been the one for social justice and she had always done lots of volunteering and charity work. Then, she went to law school and opened a practice specializing in Charity Law. Trust me, that's who you want.”

“Excellent,” said Jason. “How do I get in touch?”

“Just a moment. I have her card on me, I think.” After a brief search I found Lena's card in my purse and handed it to him. “I am going to call her today and ask to do everything she can for you. I think you'll really like her. She is very good and her heart is in the right place.”

Jason looked at the card for a moment and satisfied, tucked it into his pocket.

“Thank you,” he whispered, standing very close and gazing at me. “What would I do without you?”

“Oh, that's nothing,” I told him, as the scent of his body tickled my nostrils. He smelled delicious, like warm, freshly baked bread. I swallowed hard, just managing to hide my embarrassment behind a perky smile.

“Jade...um,” he started awkwardly. “I wanted to tell you how much... um... I... what you did... means so much...” He fell silent, deep color spreading slowly to his cheeks, then rising to his forehead, to the very roots of his dark hair.

“I know...” I squeezed his hand and gazed into his eyes. Puppy-dog eyes, such long-suffering puppy-dog eyes...

“Jason...”

“Yes, Jade, darling?” His eyes peered back at me with hope and longing, his sensuous lips just a few inches from mine. I felt my knees weaken.

And at that very moment it occurred to me how much our lives depended on our choices. We were simply doomed to make them, period! Thirteen years ago it was Adelaide's choice to give Jason that ill-fated Mercedes convertible, and it was Jason's choice to take Rebecca in it to the lake. It was Rebecca's unfortunate choice to turn left instead of right, when she ran out of Jason's car, and it was Jack's choice to give in to peer pressure and commit rape. It was Nick's choice to stand by and let the crime happen, and it was his father's choice to frame an innocent man. And yes, it was Marc Catcham's choice to live a life of crime and deception...

Then, there were other choices. It was Peter's choice to finally leave his stifling life behind and start a new, inspiring one. It was Jason's choice to give most of his substantial inheritance to charity.

But what about my own choices? Well, I did choose to come to Stepford, and one fine day, when I was bored and lonely, I did choose to approach the knitting club. If not for those choices, Rebecca would remain imprisoned in her terrified silence and Jason would still be a convicted rapist, Marc Catcham would probably be a senator, and I wouldn't have had this incredible adventure in this very unlikely town.

Choices, choices, choices... And now, it was time for me to make *my* choice... again.

“My dear Jason,” I touched his burning cheek and heard a deep intake of breath. He lowered his eyelids, framed with those incredibly long, almost girlish eyelashes, resting his face in my hand. A very handsome face, perhaps the most handsome I've ever seen...

“Dear, dear Jason.” I continued. “Some day, somewhere, there will be love in your life, love and happiness, many, many years of it.”

He opened his eyes and exhaled. Then, he made a step back as if coming back to his senses. After a pause, he nodded.

“Thank you,” said Jason, his face set. “Thank you for everything.”

And just like that, the enchantment was gone and we were simply friends.

“Where to?” To break the pause, I pointed at his things sitting in the corner.

“Anywhere,” he said, chuckling. “The world is my oyster, right?”

“Right,” I echoed.

“You?”

“Me? Well... Paul is coming tonight.” I grinned at him. “I guess all this proved to be too much paradise for me.”

I made a vague, yet sweeping gesture, meant to encompass everything from Adelaide's garden to my recent adventures, from the charming town of Stepford to, well...

“So,” I went on, “we'll be heading back to New York first. I want the baby to be born with lots of old friends around. I want her to take her first steps in Central Park. I miss all that...”

“Understandably.”

“And then,” an enigmatic smile touched my lips, “who knows? It's a big world...”

Jason spoke again dreamily, as if in response to his own private thoughts.

“I think I'll be heading east. First, I'll travel some – China... India... Vietnam... Indonesia... Thailand. Somewhere along my travels, I'll settle down and start an agricultural co-op. One hundred fifty thousand Mom left me should be enough to start, I think. I am good with my hands.” He looked at his large, capable hands, dark like the Mother Earth herself. “I want to work with the land, dig into the warm, fertile soil, plant things and see them grow.”

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Around the bend, somewhere out in the big world, a new business day has officially begun. The sound of voices and the noise of traffic could be heard from Stepford's Main Street. The shining disk above moved higher and higher, just barely caressing the treetops. We watched, mesmerized, as the golden streaks peeked through the lush green of the majestic oak in Adelaide's garden, provider of shade, protection and shelter for so many plants and creatures, large and small. Rustling oak leaves, teased by the light breeze, sparkled like precious stones in the warm summer sun. The golden rays filtered into the enchanted garden below, where flowers nodded gently their heads and butterflies fussed around them, where birds sang praise to life and swift squirrels busily stocked up for colder months. It was yet again, the way it had always been in this sheltered little paradise. It was all back to normal.

“Yeah,” he nodded resolutely, “I'll be heading all the way East. Where the sun rises and the new day begins.”

“You know what, Jason,” I said. “Good choice!”

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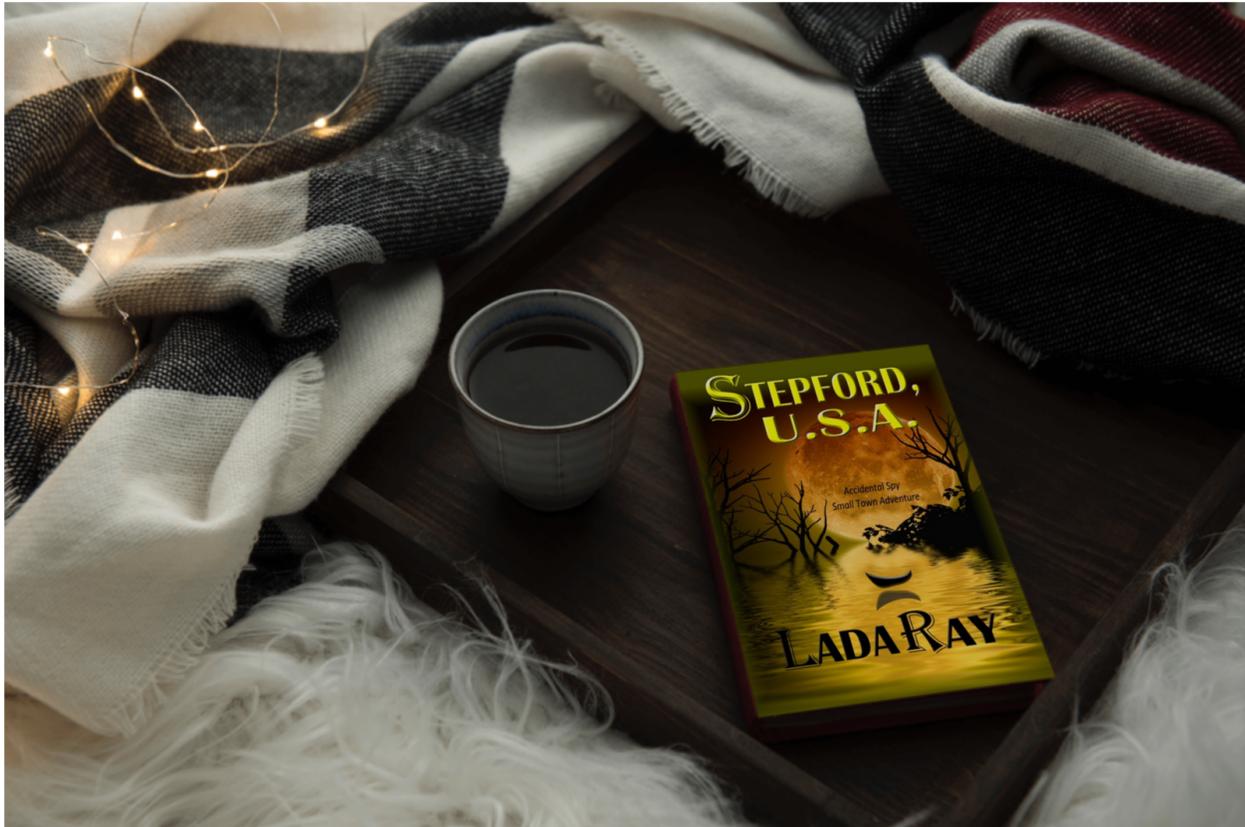


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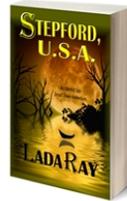
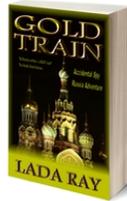
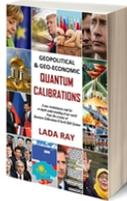
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