

LUCK OF THE DRAW

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an original work of fiction by Larissa Dahroug

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dedicated to those with the wisdom to keep ancient knowledge and traditions

CHAPTER 1

More Than She Could Offer

Doug guided Stewart, his giant marmalade colored cat, into the carrying crate and closed the front latch. Stewart exhaled a half hearted meow and purred rubbing his head against the grate of the door as Doug pulled his hand away.

“What a good boy. When we get to work you can have some kitty-crack and fishy-flakes.” Doug checked his bag to be sure the new jar of catnip was in there. It was. With some *actual* effort he picked up the crate with the ample cat, slung his bag over his other shoulder and swiped his keys from the kitchen table. Saturdays were usually his day to hike Shoreline or have lunch with Galina, his late Mother’s best friend. But Galina had called earlier in the week to say she was taking a weekend trip with a “gentleman friend” and Doug hadn’t asked any questions. He was more than happy to be off the hook. His Mother had been one of twelve children, but his actual Aunt and Uncles had never left Ukraine. He had only met them once or twice in his entire life, and that was before he had even shaved for the first time. Galina and his Mother immigrated around the same time and met while doing temp work for a small agency before Anya had met Doug’s father, Dennis. Anya and Galina were fast friends and had even been roommates until Dennis bought a ring. Doug now had that ring in a box in the back of his kitchen junk drawer. Eberly, his boyfriend of the past six years, thought the ring was ugly, but Doug had no intentions of ever asking Eberly to marry him no matter what the law now said he could do.

“It’s just gonna be you and me at the office today Stew-pie. Daddy has some paperwork to catch up on.” Doug explained to the cat as he secured the crate to the front passenger seat of his second hand Escape. Stewart just meowed apathetically.

“Well, don’t sound so excited. It’s not like I enjoy this part either. It’s just, well, Daddy’s a sucker, Stew-poo. Crazy people don’t know how to fill out paperwork.”

Doug never brought his files home. He had a strict personal policy about separation of work and home. The two were to never meet! He was seriously concerned that “the crazy” might rub off on him if he let anything of his clients touch anything of his life outside his office. One time a couple years ago he unexpectedly ran into a client at el Rio in The City. It was Cinco de Mayo.

He and Eberly had been drinking and were dancing suggestively to a cross-dressing mariachi band when he was shaken from their sloppy sweaty bubble to the sound of someone yelling: “Dr. Spears! Dr. Spears!” A young trans girl was flagging him with a lipstick stained hanky from across the back courtyard. Doug had grabbed Eberly by the shoulder and pulled him out through the neighboring punk club without explanation. Once on the street he ran, almost dragging poor Eberly on the pavement, until they were three blocks away and around the corner looking for a cab. It wasn’t that Doug was trying to hide that he was gay...he just thought the majority of the LGBTQ community was crazy and wanted nothing to do with them unless they were sucking his dick or paying him to fix their broken minds. He had made Eberly submit to a barrage of psychological evaluations before he would invite him to come in for a drink. Eberly had only humored him because the blow job in the truck stop restroom where they met had been that good. Neither man had been with another man since that first fateful meeting and neither had been back to any Bay Area clubs since the el Rio incident. They kept their social activities limited mostly to each other, Stewart, Micah (Eberly’s cat), Galina, or Stephanie and Jack, Eberly’s favorite Niece and her husband. Eberly did free lance copy editing for a couple technical magazines and rarely had to meet with *co-workers* face to face. Three times a year the two men took trips together to go antiquing in British Columbia, New England, or along the Mendocino Coast. Once a year Doug took a week to travel alone, usually to a silent retreat center or a professional conference. For that week Eberly brought Micah over to Doug’s and stayed; mostly because Doug had a lot of house plants that needed care but also because Doug liked a good fuck as soon as he got home and Eberly was a happily obliging bottom. When the two men travelled together Stephanie took care of the cats and the plants. Doug knew nothing about Stephanie’s sex life and didn’t care to. Jack was fat and Doug couldn’t imagine his dick was long enough to reach out from under his belly to pee standing up let alone reach anyone’s vagina.

It was quarter after one as Doug pulled into his parking space behind the office building. With any luck he was there in time to see DeeDee arrive, the crusty old faggot who was what’s-her-face-Amy’s regular Saturday client. DeeDee was a well known fixture in the local gay community. He had survived SF in the 70’s and 80’s without getting HIV *and* without using condoms. DeeDee was known to flaunt this horrendous fact openly...and claimed his ability to “avoid having the HIV” was wrapped up in always knowing the right astrologer to read his palm or some such nonsense. Doug wasn’t sure exactly what Amy did out of her office, but he did

know he had a number of regular clients because of her referrals, and she didn't seem to care that he didn't reciprocate. After the last couple referrals she sent his way, however, he was reconsidering the arrangement. Maybe it was time to repay the favor, so to speak. Over the years he had a couple clients that became something of a stalker but they had all been easily taken care of with the threat of a restraining order. But about six months back Amy referred a trans guy, Alex, to Doug. Alex told Doug that Amy had no idea he was trans, and Doug believed it. Alex had none of the physical tell-tale signs. Alex looked 100% natural unless you got his pants off. Then the lack of outdoor plumbing gave things away. Doug only knew this detail because Alex had bragged about it at their first session. Alex became convinced Doug needed a "real man" in his life and began following him around and leaving messages on his voicemail daily. When Doug turned down Alex's advances he had broken in and left six dead rats at the back door of his office...or rather, Doug thought Alex did it. After the rat incident, Doug had called Alex and referred him to another therapist, a friend from college who specialized in people going through gender transition. Alex hadn't taken it well and Doug caught him trying to break in with a bobby pin recently. Alex had been arrested, but what Doug didn't know yet was Alex truly had *nothing* to do with the rats.

Stewart knew they were getting close to the office and began to meow excitedly as Doug parked the Escape. Doug heaved the cat in his carrier out of the vehicle and shut the door using his right foot then clicked the doors locked with his fob. He saw Amy's car and Maggie's banged up mint green moped parked opposite his space. There was only one car in the client lot out front when he pulled in so he was excited at the prospect of seeing DeeDee arrive and what ridiculous get up he was wearing. DeeDee was a very masculine looking man, but he insisted on dressing like a menopausal hippy woman in flowing kaftans, scarves, hoop earrings and the like. The bald patch on top of his head shone as if he buffed it with floor wax and it was not unusual to see him with pink foam rollers securing all the stringy fluff circling the gleaming friar's patch. Seeing the spectacle of DeeDee was the only thing that made a Saturday afternoon of insurance paperwork worth it. Doug believed himself above such "displays of faggotry". He gathered himself and scurried up the back stairwell to the back door of his office. Stewart meowed in anticipation of catnip and bonito flakes.

Doug sat the carrier on the floor inside the door and opened the latch to let Stewart bound out into the sparsely decorated office.

“Stewart! No scarf-and-barf, OK buddy? I’m gonna give you some fishy-flakes here in your bowl and then I’ll put the crack on your beddy-bed, OK?”

Stewart meowed loudly and wrapped himself back and forth around Doug’s feet as he hung his bag on the hook on the back of the door and fluffed the heated kitty cushion in the basket hanging from the window sill.

“Damn-it, Stew-pie! You’re gonna trip me. If I break my neck, who’s gonna give you crack and flakes?”

Stewart sat and looked at Doug thoughtfully as he placed a generous pinch of bonito flakes in a small dish and sprinkled catnip straight from the jar onto the cushion. Stewart darted to the bonito flakes as Doug flipped the light switch on the wall. Then he picked up a tiny remote and turned on the surround sound system. The sound of ocean waves crashed in the room as if they were out at Bodega Bay and not in the stuffy little Mountain View office. Doug grabbed the stack of files from the past week from a tray on a shelf behind his desk and a stack of insurance forms from a shelf on the opposite side of the room and flopped onto his overstuffed chair. The clock on the wall above the front door flashed one twenty eight. Stewart licked bonito flakes from his whiskers and proceeded to have a small freak-out, running in circles, then darted out the cat door Doug had installed in the front door.

“DeeDee must be here!” Doug said out loud and stood up to peek between the blinds. As he moved past his desk he knocked the book of IDC-9 codes on the floor and bent over to pick it up. As he stood up Stewart ran back in the office and out the cat door installed on the back door. “Crazy cat. You haven’t even touched the kitty-crack yet.” he called after Stewart. Then, using his right index and middle fingers he pulled open the blinds just enough to look out onto the parking lot. A car *had* just pulled in, but it wasn’t DeeDee in his purple dragon Art Car. It was a black four door Mercedes with tinted windows. Two men got out of the front.

“Well, Amy’s clientele is coming up these days.” he said to no one as the two men mounted the stairs. But they didn’t pass Doug’s door. Instead, the one who had been driving knocked. Doug pulled his fingers from the blinds and held his breath. The sound of the ocean waves crashed over him as if he were drowning. He didn’t know why, but all of a sudden he was frightened and the room felt too hot and too small. He was glad Stewart had run off. The driver knocked again.

“Hey. We know you’re in there. I saw you looking out through the blinds and we can hear the radio on in there, man. Open the door and we can be done with this fast and easy.” one of the men said from the other side of the door.

Doug was frozen. He didn’t know what to do or say. He didn’t know who these men were or why they were knocking on his door.

“I’m with a client. Please take a card and call to make an appointment.” Doug had a business card holder mounted just to the right of his door. Most of the offices in the building did.

“Look man, we know you’re in there alone. Now open the door. I just want to have a conversation.” one of the men said.

“Hey. I get it, but I only have conversations by appointment and with a referral.” Doug replied.

“Hey. Put your faggoty face up to the window for a second.”

Doug pulled the blinds open as he had before when he was hoping to spy DeeDee in a muumuu. One of the men held a pistol up to the glass. Doug let the blinds snap back together.

“Now open the door or we’ll shoot it open. We don’t want to have to do that. We just want to talk. Got it?”

Doug opened the door reluctantly and the two men pushed in and past him, the gun now holstered. Doug wasn’t sure which one was holding it or if they both were carrying.

“How’d you know I’d be here? I don’t usually keep Saturday hours.” he asked bravely.

“We didn’t know. We just got lucky. We’re not really here to see you today anyway...but it’s lucky. Maybe we can take care of two birds with one, you know.” the man who had been driving said while looking around the sparsely filled room.

“No. I don’t know. Who are you and what do you want from me?”

The man who had been in the passenger seat looked at Doug intently before he spoke. His houndstooth blazer was well tailored. His jeans were expensive and the fine gauge silk v-neck pull-over was in good taste. Doug noticed he wasn’t wearing any socks with his Prada loafers. Doug had a pair of the same loafers in faux crocodile, but this man’s were classic black. Very LA...or Berlin...or New York...or anywhere but Mountain View.

“You know Casey Anne Rosanova.” It was a statement, not a question. In fact, Doug did know Casey. She was a relatively new client referred to him by Amy.

“I can neither confirm or deny any patients. I am a licensed medical professional you understand.” Doug said carefully. The man looked unimpressed. The other man, the one who

had been driving started to feign thumbing through a stack of client paperwork on a shelf. Doug saw the holster under his charcoal grey blazer.

“It wasn’t a question. She’s my...” The man stumbled on his words for a moment. Doug couldn’t quite tell if he was looking for the right word to use because he hadn’t thought things through or because English was not his first language. Doug thought he detected some faint accent but couldn’t be sure.

“...my kin, and I understand she has been coming to see you once a week to talk about her private life. What do you know about Amaranth Gonder?” the man finished, running his index and middle fingers over the edge of Doug’s desk. Then he rubbed the dust to his thumb and inspected his fingers. They were clean. Doug had a cleaning service that came in early Saturday mornings. He paid them to do the shared bathrooms too. Doug swallowed before answering the question. He wasn’t sure whether he should be relieved or more alarmed.

“A-amaranth Gonder? Not much. Sh—she has an office down the hall and sometimes refers clients to me.” Doug stuttered nervously.

“Down the hall, huh? Refers clients to you sometimes? Like, how many times? Like for how long?” The man now ran his right hand over the right lapel of his blazer and inhaled sharply without making any expression with his face. Doug looked over to the driver who was leaning on the book case with one elbow and the knee of his opposite leg bent, resting the ball of the foot of his bent leg on the top of the foot of his straight leg. The gun could be seen poking out from below his blazer. Doug looked back to the other man.

“Um, yeah. Like, maybe six or seven clients over the past four years?” Doug offered turning his cheek towards the man in front of him. The man looked satisfied with Doug’s answer but still had questions.

“Four years? She been here that long?”

Doug was a little surprised. Amy had never given him any reason to think she had anything to do with the unsavory type of individuals standing in front of him right now and Casey was a little odd, but all of his clients were. He wondered what this guy meant by the term “kin”. Casey said her parents lived back East and her biggest problem seemed to be home sickness as far as Doug had seen so far, but he had only met with her three times. It was hardly enough time to figure out a human being...particularly one voluntarily seeking therapy. But, Amy, wow. Doug wasn’t ever interested in having his cards read, but he understood why other people did. Really, the job Amy did wasn’t much different than his, and their clients had many similar issues and

concerns. The truth was, Doug respected Amy for knowing when people needed *professional* help and not just something vague to get by.

“At least. But I don’t know exactly how long she’s been here. I’ve been here four years and she was here before me.” This wasn’t entirely true. Doug knew Amy had been here four and half years because when they met for the first time, the day he moved his stuff into his office, she told him she had been there for six months so far and really liked it. A couple days after that they had chatted over lunch in the shared kitchen. After that, Amy started referring clients that needed *more than she could offer*, as she had explained it, to Doug. The man bought it, turning down the corners of his mouth nodding his head up and down slightly.

“Alright. Now tell me everything you know about her and her clients and her business right now and if I think you’re lying to me I’ll go find your cat and kill him. I trust he enjoyed the rats we left for him last week?” The man spoke without blinking or moving his eyes from Doug, even as he moved towards the chair where Doug’s clients usually sat during session.

“Feel free to sit down. I’m willing to wait as long as it takes to hear what you know.” The man said smoothing his hands over his pant legs before crossing his right ankle to his left knee. Doug saw a small inscription style tattoo on the inside of the man’s ankle but didn’t recognize the language it was written in. He stumbled backward, nearly tripping, looking for his chair. He found it and sat down grabbing the arm rests first.

“Um. I really don’t know her much at all. We see each other in the kitchen from time to time and one time we had a drink together at *The Whitewash*, but I don’t even know where she lives, other than to say somewhere near by.”

“Come now, Mr. Spears. *You* are a clinical psychologist, sir. Are you asking me to believe you have absolutely no other knowledge or understanding of Miss Gonder?” The man chuckled lightly. The driver echoed the chuckle. Doug was becoming increasingly nervous and passed gas. At this the other two men broke out in hilarious laughter. Once they settled themselves the man opposite Doug in the chair continued.

“But seriously now, Mr. Spears. What else can you tell me about darling Amy?”

Doug spent the next half an hour going over in minutia every conversation he had ever had with Amy that he could remember. None of it was anything that was much interesting...she likes

chocolate covered orange candies but hates marshmallow...keeps office hours Monday through Saturday but only by appointment...reads Tarot and practices some New-Age therapy or some such thing called Reiki...not married...no kids...no family he knew of...likes live music, fancy cheeses and dry rose wine. She referred Casey to him a month ago for therapy because she thought the girl was homesick and needed to deal with growing up, not get her cards read every week. Doug said he agreed with her assessment. Finally, Stewart came back in through the back door and broke the awkward energy in the room rubbing up against Doug's legs before jumping up in the strange man's lap then into the cat nip lined basket in the window before settling down to lick himself. The man wiped invisible cat fur from his lap and stood up, seemingly satisfied with what Doug had told him about Amy.

"Well, Mr. Spears, now I would like you to suck my dick." he said as simply if he had just said, "Nice to meet you." Doug instinctively got on his knees, scared for his life. He'd had his dick sucked by strangers and sucked enough strangers' dicks in truck stops that this was really only a mild violation as far as those things go. Besides, this guy was very well manicured. He would have turned Doug's head had they crossed paths at the club. The man laughed and smacked him lightly on his cheek with his open palm.

"Fuck you. I don't actually want you to suck my dick. I just wanted to see if you would."

With that the man motioned to the driver of the car and the two men left out the front door heading toward Amy's office. Doug scooped up Stewart and his bag, quickly locked the front door and left out the back the way he had come in. He didn't know what they wanted with Amy, but he didn't want to stick around to find out either. Stewart meowed softly, placated by catnip and whatever mischief he had gotten into in the hallway.

CHAPTER 2

More Interesting Than the Living Nine Times Out of Ten

Amaranth heard someone quickly walk down the back hall as she checked the clock on the wall behind her one more time. Her two PM was over thirty-five minutes late, and this was the second time. Against her better judgement she had let him off the hook the first time without any charge. She knew he had been lying to her about his excuse. It was kind of a big part of her business to know when people were being dishonest. However, she regrettably had made the exception because of who Mike was rumored to be. Now she was angry. She had rearranged her entire calendar to accommodate Mike's requested date for rescheduling his appointment. One of her most regular clients had given up their long standing time slot to suit this entitled prick...and now he was no where to be seen. It was a good thing Amaranth, or Amy as her friends called her, had enforced her reservation policy and required Mike give her a credit card when scheduling/rescheduling. She got up and crossed the small but comfortable room and locked the door. Then she pulled up the point-of-sale accounting program on her tablet, punched in the credit card number and charged the full amount: \$350. As the screen popped up "APPROVED" someone attempted to open the front door and enter the office. Amy was still for a moment. She looked over her shoulder and saw the door to the back hallway that connected to the kitchen and restrooms shared by the other offices on her floor was also bolted. She relaxed a bit and settled her focus on the front door still being lightly shaken by the knob from the outside. Now a knock came...five or six hard raps in quick succession.

"Hey! You in there?" a man's voice said in an annoyed fashion. "I have an appointment!"

Amy pulled up the app for the doorbell camera she installed a few months back when packages were being stolen. It was him. It was Mike, and he had another man with him — which was also not part of the agreement. When Jonas introduced Mike to Amy at *The Whitewash* a couple weeks back she explained her services were by appointment only, a minimum of forty five minutes, non-transferable, private, confidential, one-on-one, with a strict forty eight hour cancelation policy. The other guy standing just behind Mike at the door stuffed a set of keys in his pocket, shifted his weight uneasily from side to side and looked either way down the exterior hallway. It was Saturday and the only other person who was regularly in their office on her floor was Maggie down the hall. Maggie's office was sound insulated. The landlord had split the cost

of the insulation with Maggie after *everyone* complained about the sounds coming from her space. Maggie practiced a form of past life regression therapy that involved high pitched bells and making/mimicking guttural animal-like noises. Her clients enthusiastically swore by its effectiveness, but Amy was skeptical. She knew Maggie had at one time desired to be a professional singer, but was told she was a tone-deaf harpy. Amy agreed with the assessment and surmised Maggie gained satisfaction from making noise. All the past life stories she heard from the clients she had spoken with were versions of a similar story, and it just wasn't reasonable to Amy that *every single* client that came to see Maggie was once a prince or princess. Maggie insisted it was simply her "karmic job to care for royals" who were "re-embodied in this life as commoners". Amy didn't argue with her. Lots of folks believed her line of work to be mumbo-jumbo as well...but Amy never sent any business Maggie's way, though she did sometimes refer folks to Doug Spears, the clinical psychologist in private practice at the other end of the hall.

Amy now watched as Mike's friend pushed past him and impatiently pounded on the door. She couldn't tell for sure, but it looked as if he had a holster under his jacket with a side arm. "Not today." Amy thought to herself as she quickly and quietly stood up, put her cards, tablet, cell phone, and client/appointment book in her oversized purse, unlatched the bolt on the back door and slipped out, locking the door behind her. As she reached the stairwell at the end of the interior hallway she heard her door busted down and glass shatter. Keys in hand, she ran down the stairs and burst into the back parking lot. Without fumbling she clicked the fob and unlocked the doors of her Elantra parked just a few spots from the stairwell. As she pulled around the front of the building she could see the door to her office was hanging open and the two men had busted things up inside. The glass shelves with her stones and the small Chihuly bowl given to her by a former client could usually be seen sparkling through the window above her door from the front parking lot, and right now they were nowhere to be seen. Amy's heart sank. The bowl was insured, but it was totally irreplaceable. The two men were not in sight. They must have gone out the back door looking for her.

Amy pulled out of the parking lot and onto the street. As far as she knew Mike didn't know what she drove, but if he was who he was rumored to be, and today's events seemed to indicate that was the case, he'd have no problem tracking her down. The real question was what did he want with her? It's not like they had anything in common other than drinking at *The Whitewash* and

Amy couldn't say she had ever even seen Mike there before that night Jonas introduced them. Amy made a note to herself not to break any more of her personal rules about accepting new clients and to *never* trust Jonas *ever* again. It's not like she even really knew him. He was just the bartender...and she had only just told him what she did for work that night. Mercury must have been retrograde. That was the only way Amy could explain why she had given in and told Jonas what she did for a living or why she had let him introduce her to anyone as a potential client. Better yet, she thought, she'd just find a new bar. *The Whitewash* had been attracting a strange group of folks lately, and the live music had taken a turn for the worse for a couple months now, and that was why she had started going there to begin with...the music. Amy pulled into a gas station and parked the car in a corner space near the compressed air without turning off the engine. She pulled out her phone and pulled up the address for the nearest police station. She was starting to wonder if the whole thing with Jonas and Mike hadn't been a set-up from the start.

Most women in Amy's line of work kept offices with lots of cheesy neon lights and signs flashing in the window. Most women in Amy's line of work were also beholden to a *Big Man* and paid "dues" to operate. Those women's work was always compromised. The *Big Man* always wanted to know who was coming, why, what were they asking and how much they paid. Then he would want his cut. Amy wasn't interested in such an arrangement. She didn't have any garish signs. Her office was very professional. Her clients were private, her fees reasonable, and all by word of mouth. She was also a certified Reiki Master/Teacher, so that was what was listed if anyone bothered to look her up, but she also read Tarot, did energy balancing, mediumship work and space clearing. Reiki was only about a quarter of her business, if that. Most of her clients came to her either for Tarot or mediumship. Old houses were restless, however, but Amy didn't mind doing house calls from time to time as well. The dead were much more interesting than the living nine times out of ten.

Normally Amy wouldn't have bothered with the police but she anticipated the insurance company was going to want a police report and that bowl was worth nearly half a million dollars. She almost shit her pants when she had it appraised for her policy. Mrs. Bunty had been very appreciative of Amy's help finding her lost Pomeranian. Dog people could be strange, but Amy certainly was never one to look a gift horse in the mouth and the bowl was very pretty. The police station was just over a mile and a half away. Amy liked her office and hoped she wasn't

going to have to move to a new location, but something told her she wasn't going to be so lucky. She set up her GPS to head to the police station but decided to pull a card before backing out of the parking space. She removed the deck from the satin pouch that held the cards and shuffled lightly before turning up the top card. It was *The Hanged Man*. She laughed to herself. "I guess that's what I get for not following my own rules." she thought. But then again, this could be any of the three men...Mike, he had betrayed her by not showing up the first time then showing up late the second time with a friend...Mike's friend, he might have betrayed Mike by breaking down the door...Or Jonas. Jonas sure felt like a traitor to Amy personally at this moment. Amy replaced the cards in their satin pouch and tucked the pouch in her bag before backing out of the spot and pulling back out onto the street. The sun was shining off the windows of the stores to Amy's right hand side as she headed north. The sparkle reminded her of the bowl that used to sit in her office window.

A short woman in plain clothes with dyed black shoulder length hair and stark white two inch roots was seated behind a shabby desk in the center of the police station lobby. Other than the white roots of her hair and the lines on her hands, this woman looked no older than thirty. She smiled at Amy as she approached the desk. Other than the two women, the lobby was deserted. As Amy rested her hands on the edge of the desk the woman inquired, "How can I help you?" Until this moment Amy hadn't realized just how scared she was by the unfolding events. Her heart pounded in her throat and tears welled up under her bottom lids but she held them in as she answered.

"My name is Amaranth Danielle Gonder. I keep an office a couple miles from here. It was just broken into and vandalized by two men." Amy explained.

"Oh my. That's terrible. Are they still there?"

"I have no idea. I'm here."

"Well, how do you know the office was broken into?"

"Because I was there."

"Do you know who did it?"

"Sort of. I know who one of the men is. He was a client. Or, rather, a new client."

"Um. OK. Please have a seat and I will see if an officer is available to speak to you."

"Available to speak to me? I think these men meant me harm. Is someone going to take a report?"

“Ma’am, I need you to be patient and take a seat. I don’t know if there is currently an officer here to speak to you.”

The woman picked up a phone and dialed a number seemingly pleased with herself. Amy watched her for a moment before taking a seat as she was asked to do. After ten minutes or so a short, male, uniformed officer came around the corner with a clip board and a pen by his side in his left hand.

“Amaranth Goner?” he asked Amy.

“Um, it’s Gonder. Not Goner. Yes. I’m Amaranth. You may call me Amy.” she said as she stood up to greet the policeman. At 5’8” she was at least six inches taller than the man. Seemingly unaware of the disparity, the officer tipped his chin up to meet her eyes before speaking.

“Hello Amy. I’m Officer Juno. Please tell me what happened.”

Amy folded her arms across her chest and rolled her head to the right as she exhaled and stared off in space a bit as she began her tale. Looking down at the man made her uncomfortable, as if she were speaking to one of her cousin’s kids.

“Well, I had a client scheduled for today at two. Normally I have a regular client on Saturdays from one thirty to three and then I go home, but today was a new client. He was originally supposed to meet with me Monday last week, but had a last minute emergency come up so we rescheduled.” Amy paused to give Officer Juno time to finish his notes before she continued.

“Anyway, he was over half an hour late and I have a forty eight hour cancelation policy. Since this was the second time, I was pretty irritated and had just run the credit card on file for the full cost of the appointment when he showed up and tried to get in the office. I had locked the door already because I was getting ready to leave. So, he couldn’t just come right in. He had another man with him. I know because I have a camera at the door and could see them. The other man pushed past my client and pounded on the door.”

Officer Juno continued to take notes and didn’t even look up at Amy as he asked, “Did they know you were in the office?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t make any sound and the front window is eye level but I covered it with mini blinds and a curtain for privacy when I moved in.”

“What type of work do you do, ma’am? What was the appointment for?” Juno asked again without looking up at Amy.

“Um, well, I’m a Reiki Master/Teacher, and I also read cards. This was an appointment for a card reading.”

“Reiki? What’s that?” the officer asked, now looking at Amy with a furrowed brow.

“Well, it’s kind of like acupuncture...but not exactly. It’s a holistic practice from Japan. But it doesn’t matter. He was coming to have me read his cards. At least, that’s what he said when he made the appointment. Both times.”

“And you weren’t expecting two people for the appointment?”

“Absolutely not!” Amy answered quickly. “It’s my policy that all appointments are private one-on-one sessions. He knew this.”

“OK, ma’am. It’s OK. Take a breath.”

“I’m fine. It’s just upsetting.”

“I understand. Now, what happened next?”

“Well, once they started shaking the door I gathered my things and slipped out the back.”

“What do you mean — the back?”

“My office is over in one of those two story office strip buildings off Castro. There are sixteen offices in my building. Eight on the bottom floor and eight on my floor. Each one has it’s own front entrance and each one has a door in the back to an interior hallway where we have a shared kitchen and restrooms and a stairwell down to a small parking lot for the renters. There’s another bigger parking lot in the front for clients.”

“I see. So they probably didn’t know about the back door then?”

“I don’t know.” Amy answered.

“How do you know they broke in?”

“Because I heard it as I was going down the stairs to my car and I could see as I pulled around front of the parking lot to come here.”

“Oh. I see. OK. Well, I think I’d like to go over there and check it out. What is the client’s name?”

“Mike. Michael Musgraves.”

The officer stopped and looked at Amy intently for a second before he spoke.

“Mike Musgraves? The loan shark?”

“I have no idea what he does for a living. I only recently was introduced to him.”

“You better not be lying about this, Amy.”

Amy was offended.

“You think I have nothing better to do with my time than make false accusations about gangsters to the police? You think that would be wise in my line of work?”

"I'm just saying. But since you brought it up, what house do you report to?"

Amy's nostrils flared, unable to hide her irritation at the assumptions about her and her work.

"To myself and my God. I'm not part of any criminal stable."

"Of course not, ma'am." Officer Juno said with a tinge of sarcasm not lost on Amy. "If you give me the address we can head over there right now."

"And what if they're still there?" Amy asked.

"Then I'll arrest them. You said there's a camera right?"

"Yeah. There's a camera."

"Well, then, whether they're there or not you'll be able to show me who did what."

Amy sighed and gave the officer the address then they both headed to the parking lot.

As she pulled back into the lot in front of her office Amy saw Officer Juno was already there. A small crowd was gathered in front of her office door. Amy could see Maggie standing with her feet wide spread and her fists on her hips straining her neck to look into Amy's space. Officer Juno was walking up the stairs. Amy parked her car next to the police cruiser and went to grab her bag from the passenger side seat. The satin pouch slid out of the purse. The pouch opened and four cards fell out of the deck and onto the seat face up: five of cups, seven of swords, The Empress, and The Fool. "No shit!" Amy exclaimed out loud. "I don't need *you* to tell me that!" she told the cards as she put them back in their pouch and stuffed the pouch in her purse.

As Amy approached the small gathering of people in front of her office, Officer Juno was taking everyone's name and trying to herd them away from the door. Amy could see one of the hinges had been pulled out of the door entirely and everything was on the floor. The whole office had been tossed, but why? Whoever Mike Musgraves was or wasn't, Amy hadn't had anything to do with him before this unfortunate string of events and she certainly had never seen the other man who had been with him. Amy didn't gamble, not even pretzel sticks and peanuts with her dad and brother playing Rummy growing up. Gambling was a fool's game and Amy was no body's fool. Maggie came running in Amy's direction as she reached the top of the stairs. "Oh Amy! I'm so glad you're alright. Did you see your office?"

Amy just stared at Maggie who abruptly shut up and backed away from her. The other people gathered around were Maggie's clients and Tubbs, the building maintenance man. Amy didn't recognize Tubbs at first because he didn't usually work on Saturdays and wasn't wearing his

coveralls. Instead he was wearing dark blue creased jeans with a button down oxford, cardigan and loafers. Officer Juno said something to Maggie who thanked him and nodded and headed back to her office with her two clients while Tubbs stayed to talk with Amy and Officer Juno. Officer Juno looked at Amy with a hard stare.

“And you have no idea what they were looking for?” he questioned her as if he didn’t believe her at all. Amy was shocked.

“No idea at all! I told you. I had only recently been introduced to Mr. Musgraves and this would have been his first appointment.”

“And probably his last.” Tubbs quipped looking at all the damage in the space.

Amy surveyed the room. All her books were knocked off the shelves. The ficus was toppled and dirt was all over the floor. The Bose radio was on the floor as were all her stones and her desk lamp. The Chihuly bowl, however, was sitting, unbroken, in the center of the table that also served as her desk. She approached the bowl and picked it up gingerly turning it over in her hands.

“I can’t believe it!” she said.

“Believe what?” officer Juno asked.

“That this isn’t broken.”

“Well, maybe they just didn’t get to pushing it on the floor.” Juno replied. Tubbs laughed. He knew about the bowl because he had helped Amy install the shelf in the window above the door where it usually sat.

“What’s so funny?” Juno said to Tubbs who instantly clammed up.

“Oh, he knows what the bowl is and that it doesn’t sit on this table.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. This happens to be a Chihuly original and sits on that shelf up there above the door.” Amy pointed to the now broken glass shelf in the half round window.

“Put that down immediately! It might have useable prints. Excuse me.” Officer Juno stepped out of the office leaving Amy and Tubbs staring at each other over the ridiculously expensive glass bowl.

“We got most of it on tape.” Tubbs told Amy.

“Huh? What do you mean? I’ve got a camera on my door out there but not in here.”

“Yeah. I know. Mr. Shuppe had me install cameras on either end of the interior hallway just last week. He was watching when they were here. He’s the one who called me and asked me to come check things out.”

“What?! I wasn’t told that. That’s not in the lease.”

“Yeah. I know. But now he’s going to tell everyone about them. I’m supposed to deliver a letter on Monday morning to all the units in the building.” Tubbs replied in a matter of fact manner. Amy was feeling violated on many levels.

“Why the cameras? And why weren’t we told beforehand?”

Tubbs sighed and shrugged.

“I dunno. Doug had a weirdo last month giving him death threats. He left some dead animals in the back hallway in front of Doug’s door but we didn’t have any hard proof, so Shuppe told me to put in the cameras. I’m surprised you didn’t notice them already. It’s not like they’re hidden.”

“Oh. Well, I guess that’s OK.” Amy remembered seeing the dead rats in front of Doug’s door, but thought maybe a cat had brought them in. Sometimes Doug brought his cat, Stewart, into the office if he was going to be working late on paperwork. Doug was one of the few specialists Amy knew who still submitted to insurance on behalf of his clients. Stewart was known to patrol the back hall and kitchen in search of treats. He really was an agreeable animal. Amy had no idea about Doug’s goofy client. Doug was very professional and never talked about his clients to others, unlike Maggie.

“Is Doug OK?”

“Doug? Oh my God, yeah. He caught the guy trying to pick the front lock and the goof ball was arrested. Doug paid for one of the cameras in the hallway back there.”

Officer Juno entered the space tucking his phone in his pocket.

“Well, Amy, is there anything missing?”

Amy was taken off guard. She hadn’t even thought to look.

“Um, I don’t know. Let me look. The only thing really worth taking would have been that bowl.” She pointed to the Chihuly piece now sitting back on the table but started to take a closer inventory of the items now strewn about the room.

“No. Everything looks like it’s here, but I’m definitely going to do a serious clearing. The energy in here is just terrible.”

“Yeah. Your fung-shooey must be all mess up.” Officer Juno chided in an insulting tone.

“Look, no one said you need to believe in what I do for work, but I’m a professional and people do pay me for my services. The rent in this place isn’t free. Far from it.”

This was no lie. Amy’s office had parking and was situated just off the main strip near the train station. The rent of her office was three times per square foot what her tiny apartment was just five miles away, and that wasn’t cheap either. Juno rolled his eyes and Tubbs disappeared into the back hallway then reappeared with a tool box and started to rehang and secure the front door while Amy and Officer Juno continued to talk.

“Look Mrs. Gonder...”

“Miss, not Mrs.”

“Whatever. Miss Gonder, you never had *any* interaction with Mr. Musgraves before today?”

“Only when we met and scheduling and rescheduling his appointment.”

“And *where* did you meet Mr. Musgraves?”

“At The Whitewash.”

“The Whitewash! Do you work there too, I suppose?”

Now Amy was ready to loose her patience with this cop.

“Hardly. I’ve been going there a couple times a week for the past five years. Tuesday and Friday nights. I like the live music and they have decent wine and appetizers.”

“I see. And do you meet clients there frequently?”

“Never! This was the first time. I don’t even tell people what I do for work.”

“Well how did Mr. Musgraves find out?”

Amy felt like she was being accused of something, and resented it.

“Jonas, the bartender, had been asking me a for the past few months about what I did for work. I wouldn’t tell him, because you have no idea how people can be about my line of work and I didn’t feel like being hassled by drunks and strangers. But a few weeks ago, it was slow and we were just joking around. The band was late. I told Jonas that if the band didn’t show up I’d tell him what I did for work. The band *a/ways* shows up and I just wanted him to leave me alone. But guess what? The band didn’t show up and so I had to tell him what I did. Next thing I know he’s calling some guy over to the bar from a corner booth and telling him that I was some big time Madame and wanted to read his cards for him. It was this guy, Mike Musgraves. I never said any such thing — wanted no such thing. But I was backed into a corner, ya see? So when he asked to make an appointment I said OK. I’m not one to pick up dates *or* clients in bars.”

Tubbs finished hanging the door and secured the lock. Amy and Juno watched as he dug around in his back pocket for something and produced a bent business card.

"I'm Leon Tubbs. I live a few miles away. I do the maintenance for all of Ed Shuppe's buildings in town. If you have any more questions for me you can reach me at the number on that card."

Ed Shuppe owned a dozen buildings or so around town. He and his wife bought the properties fifty years ago when things were cheap. He was pretty old now. Tubbs was old enough to be Amy's father but young enough to be Shuppe's son and acted as his right hand man doing building management for him as well as maintenance. Vera, Ed's wife, passed away just after Amy had moved in. They had waited until their 40's to try to have children and the only one they had managed to produce had been born with severe developmental and physical disabilities. Gretchen lived in a group home where she received 24/7 medical care. The only reason Amy knew this was because one of her clients happened to be a nursing assistant at the facility and told Amy once that while he paid the bills and frequently sent gifts, Ed only ever visited his daughter on Christmas Day and the poor thing called him Santa not Daddy. Tubbs extended his hand holding the card to Officer Juno who took it and in return handed a business card to both Amy and Leon at the same time. Amy had never known Tubbs' first name. She only knew him as Tubbs. Leon didn't seem to fit. It sounded like a black name to her.

"Thank you, Mr. Tubbs. And if you have anything else to add or anything else happens in the next couple days please don't hesitate to call me."

Tubbs nodded taking the card and tucking it in the breast pocket of his shirt. "Will do. Thanks. Now I'm going home. Saturday's supposed to be my day off." Tubbs said over his shoulder as he lumbered off with his tool box. Juno turned back to Amy.

"Do you keep notes on your clients, Amy?"

"Other than contact info and credit card information for holding appointments, no. I'm not considered a medical practitioner and I've never seen any reason to track what cards come up for people. Most folks only come see me three or four times at most, and my *regulars* tend to take their own notes."

"If you say so. I want a list of everyone you have seen for the past month and there's a team on their way over right now to process the space for fingerprints. Maybe we can figure out who Mr. Musgraves' friend is. Are you able to email me the footage from your camera?"

"Yes. I think I can do that."

“Then please do that. In the mean time, why don’t you go get a bite to eat. By the time you’re done we will probably be finished over here.”

Amy wasn’t feeling particularly hungry. “I think I’ll just wait in my car if you don’t mind.”

“Suit yourself.” Juno told her.

CHAPTER 3

The Hair Down There

Amy lifted her head from her pillow ever so slightly and squinted her eyes. The sun light coming through her window seemed unnaturally bright. It hurt her head. She lifted her right hand to her forehead to shield her eyes and noticed she was still wearing her clothes from the day before — and that was very strange. She lifted the blankets over her head and looked at her legs. Yes. She was still dressed from the day before...black long sleeve t-shirt, black maxi skirt, and belt. At least she had taken her shoes off before getting in bed, but something didn't seem right. Her head hurt like she had been out for a few days drinking — if that was something she ever did, which it wasn't. Seriously though, she felt strange, disoriented, and sore all over. She flung the covers from her head and saw her purse on the floor in the corner, also strange. She usually hung it on the hook by her bedroom door at night. She tried to sit up and found she was quite woozy. Closing her eyes she willed the contents of her stomach to settle. With her eyes still closed she reached out to her night stand looking for her cell phone which usually sat plugged in to charge next to the box of tissues. It wasn't there. Once again she opened her eyes and slowly eased herself upright in bed. The room started to shift as if it might spin, but she stuck her pinkies in her ears and swallowed hard. That seemed to adjust whatever was amiss with her inner ear. She opened her eyes and allowed her pupils to adjust. For a couple seconds all she could see was a big glowing green dot in the center of her vision. Slowly the the room came into focus as her eyes adjusted. It struck her then, Liza, wasn't there next to her. Her kitty, Liza, was always right next to her, especially at bed time.

"Liza?! Kitty-cat?!" Amy croaked. Her throat seemed affected by the mystery affliction as well. It was dry and sore as if she had been screaming. There was no response from Liza. Her bedroom door was closed and locked from the inside, another strange fact. Amy never locked her bedroom door. That would be silly. She lived alone in a space that wasn't quite five hundred square feet. Now she was frightened. Everything was still and seemed quiet in the apartment. She felt alone, but she wasn't sure if that was true or not. When she swung her legs over the side of the bed she felt a sharp pain in her left hip. Feet dangling off the bed just a couple inches from the floor she peeled down her skirt over her hip from the top. The stretchy t-shirt material easily gave way revealing a huge purplish welt with two infected looking puncture wounds just behind the top crest of her pelvic bone. She lightly touched the area around the wounds and

wincing, finding it both tender and hot to the touch. Replacing the top of her skirt and planting her feet on the cold floor she slowly stood up. Her joints ached under her average weight. Her hip felt like it was on fire and when she moved to walk it felt as though a thick blade was lodged in the joint. Limping heavily she made it to her purse slumped in the corner. Bending carefully, she picked it up and limped back to her bed. Once again situated on the tousled sheets she saw a streak of blood she assumed had come from the wound on her hip. She dumped the contents of her purse out on the bed in front of her: wallet, keys, lip balm, a wad of gum wrapped in an old receipt, hand lotion, two pens, a quarter, tampon, brush, pepper spray, her cards, and her phone. What was missing: her tablet, the pouch with her bottle of Holy Water and grandmother's church head-scarf, and her client book. She opened the wallet to find everything there except the business card with Officer Juno's contact information. She picked up the phone and was relieved it still had 30% charge, but was terrified to see it was Tuesday morning. Last she remembered it was late Saturday afternoon and she locked up her office, said good bye to Juno and the two women officers who came to dust her office for prints and was heading back to her car to go home. But she didn't remember actually getting in her car or driving home, and now it was ten AM on Tuesday. She remembered she had a client scheduled on Monday. Someone must have missed her. She opened the call feature of her phone and looked at the history. Nothing outgoing since Saturday morning, but there were three incoming with two messages. The last two calls were from Danica, her Monday appointment. Danica left an angry message on the last call. But the first incoming call was late Saturday evening and was from an "unknown number"...and they left a message. Hesitantly Amy pressed the play option and held the phone up to her ear to listen. It was a strangely halting man's voice.

"Darling, Amy. If you are listening to this you must have woken up, but trust me when I tell you I have not held my breath waiting for you to do so, and I'll be very impressed should you wake at all. Your answers were quite unacceptable and so I have taken your client book and will look for what I need myself without your help. Your kitty didn't stick around to help you out. She ran down the hall, in case you're looking for her. Ciao, Sweetie. I'll be back to check on you mañana."

Amy dropped the phone shaking. She looked around the room and saw everything else around her looked in place. Had they had come back on Sunday to check on her? Had they assumed she was dead? Did she lock her bedroom door? Was Liza OK? Why hadn't any of her neighbors

noticed anything? Any other day Mrs. Dwyer across the hall was so nosey it verged on harassment. Amy picked the phone back up and cleared her throat. She found that as long as she whispered she could talk without a problem. She opened her contacts and looked for Tubbs. The number she had for him was his direct cell phone. She knew she was the only one in the building besides Doug who had it. Tubbs had told her so the day they hung the glass shelves. She and Doug were the only people in the building Tubbs didn't think were crazy. Everyone else had to call Ed to get to Tubbs. She pressed the send button. It rang twice.

"Ye—llo. Tubbs." Tubbs answered.

"Tubbs, it's me, Amy." Amy whispered.

"What's that? Amy? I can hardly hear you. Speak up."

"I can't Tubbs. I don't know what's wrong. This is as loud as I can talk right now. Please."

"Amy? Are you OK? Do you need me to fix something? I'm down at Maggie's right now."

"No, no...Tubbs. I don't know what to do. Don't say anything to Maggie, please. I don't know what happened. I'm so scared."

Tubbs interrupted her. "Amy. Slow down. Hold on. I'm stepping outside."

Amy could hear Maggie protesting in the background as Tubbs explained he would be right back.

"Amy, where are you? What's the problem? You know you had an angry woman here yesterday pounding on your door and the doors of everyone else in the building? She said she had an appointment. Are you OK?"

"No Tubbs. I'm not OK."

"Where are you?!"

"I'm at home...but it's not so simple. I just woke up."

"What do you mean you just woke up?"

"I mean...last I remember it was Saturday evening and I was heading home. Now it's Tuesday morning!" Amy tried to shriek, but only a squeak came out. Amy could audibly hear Tubbs gasp on the other end of the line.

"Amy, where are you?"

"I told you. I'm at home, but I'm afraid to leave my room. It's all so strange and I'm scared, Tubbs. I'm really scared."

"Well, why don't you call that Officer Juno?"

"Because they took his card. They took some other things too."

"They? Who's they?" Tubbs asked.

"I don't know Tubbs! I think they hurt me. I think they tried to kill me. I think they think I'm dead!"

"What?! Amy I don't understand. What do you want me to do?"

"I don't know Tubbs. I don't know. Can you come over?"

"Amy, I don't even know where you live. Don't you think you should call the police?"

"Tubbs, I'm scared. They left me a message on Saturday evening after they did whatever they did. I don't know what to do. Liza, my cat, is missing and I don't know what has happened to me for the past almost three days!" Amy was breathing hard and tears were falling down her cheeks silently. Tubbs was beside himself.

"Amy, what's your address?"

"You know where the Sunnyvale Community Center is?"

"Yeah."

"I live in the complex right behind the Senior building. Between there and the houses."

"OK. I'm going to call Juno and see if he'll meet me there."

"Juno has the address. I gave it to him last night, I mean Saturday evening...before I went to my car. Tubbs, I don't even know if my car is here!"

"Well, it's not at the office, front or back, I can tell ya that much." Tubbs told her frantically. "Now, I'm gonna hang up, but you hang in there, Amy. Don't leave the room and don't let anyone in."

Tubbs hung up the phone and Amy flopped back on her pillow. Her mouth was really dry and there was a terrible metallic taste, like she had been sucking on rusty nails. She got up and spied herself in the dresser mirror. The corners of her mouth were crusted with what appeared to be blood and she had a cut over her right eye. Her t-shirt was torn at the neck and there was something dried on the back of the shirt. She decided to not change anything so Juno would see it all if and when he got there. Suddenly Amy was hit by the urgent and overwhelming need to urinate. Instinctively she doubled over and grabbed at her crotch and immediately wished she hadn't. She winced in pain. It felt as if she had been beaten between her legs. Amy was afraid to look, but also knew it was important to pee into something and save it. A formerly regular client had been the survivor of a particularly horrible assault situation and had told her that part of the reason they weren't able to put the guy away who had done it was because after he was done with her he took her home and dropped her off and instead of calling the police immediately she had taken a shower and washed herself. She had scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed trying to gain distance between herself and the assault. She scrubbed so well they didn't have any

DNA to convict the monster and his attorney convinced the jury it was a simple case of unfortunate mistaken identity. Six months after the trial ended the guy did almost exactly the same thing to another woman who looked eerily similar to Amy's client, but this time he killed the woman. *That* woman's husband came home as the monster was washing his hands in their kitchen sink and killed him with his bare hands. Ironically, the hero husband was now serving a five year sentence for killing the monster who raped and killed his wife in their kitchen. All of this now bounced around inside Amy's throbbing head.

She went to the bathroom that adjoined her bedroom making it a master suite. The medicine cabinet was open and a bottle of Percocet she had been prescribed when she broke her ankle a couple years back was empty with the lid missing. The bottle had been nearly full. She dug through the cabinet looking for something she could pee into. Finding nothing suitable she opened the cupboard under the sink and, behind a box of pregnancy tests, found an actual specimen cup, sealed and still sterile. A couple years ago she had been dating Kevin Turley and things had been pretty serious. They had even started trying to have a baby. But when Amy pressed him about getting married Kevin freaked out. A week after the blow-out fight he up and moved to New York. Amy turned up pregnant a few weeks after that and never told him. She had the pregnancy terminated and told the doctor she had no idea who the father was. It was a lie. Kevin was the only guy she had been sleeping with. In fact, she hadn't had sex with anyone since. After the abortion she was kind of turned off dating and decided to let God decide when Mr. Right came along. She was done looking. Six months ago she heard Kevin married a woman Amy had once considered a friend. Amy harbored no jealousy or bitterness. Quite the opposite...she thought the two deserved each other; both were shallow and impulsive. All of these memories rolled around in her mind as she now held the sterile specimen cup before her face triumphantly. Quickly she hiked up her skirt and pulled at her panties and squatted over the toilet to pee into the cup. She saw the blood in the cup before lifting the skirt more to reveal her badly beaten up looking genitalia. It looked as though they had pulled the hair from her labia and pubis. Tufts were left around the edges at her bikini line. There was a cut running along the inner part of the outer labia the whole area was swollen and bruised looking. She gently pat herself dry with a wad of toilet paper and sat the cup on the edge of the sink along with the wad of toilet paper. Then she sat back onto the toilet and cried heaving sobs, each one sending a shot of pain through her abdomen.

After a short time she covered the specimen cup leaving it in the bathroom then gathered herself together and laid back down on the bed. She closed her eyes for what seemed like just a moment when she heard the sound of Juno and Tubbs calling from outside the locked bedroom door.

“Amy! It’s Officer Juno.”

“And Tubbs too!”

“Amy, are you in there?”

Amy rolled over and croaked to the two men. “Yes. I’m here. Hold on. Let me unlock the door.”

Amy stood up and had to steady herself against the wall. She limped around the bed and over to the door. As she opened the door Tubbs inhaled sharply at the sight of Amy in such disarray. Juno showed no emotion. Amy could see things were a mess behind them in the rest of her apartment. Thankfully, Liza jumped up onto the dining table and meowed to let Amy know she was back and safe. Amy opened the bedroom door wide and pushed past Juno and Tubbs toward Liza and scooped the tiny tabby up in her arms.

“Oh Liza! Mummy’s so glad you are safe and sound! Let me get you some food.”

“Really, Amy. Don’t you think that can wait?” Juno asked her.

Amy swung around to look at him holding the kitty close to her heart. Liza was rubbing her head hard and deep into her Mummy’s chest, purring, happy she was OK.

“Look, I haven’t fed my kitty since Saturday morning. I’m glad you’re here, but please try to put yourself in my shoes.”

Juno and Tubbs both instinctively looked to Amy’s feet which were bare except for some dried blood dripped over the left big toe and ankle.

“Amy, I think we should call the paramedics. You need medical attention.”

“I need to feed my kitty. And yes, I need medical attention. I don’t even want to tell you what I’ve found so far and I’m not looking forward to learning the extent of what they’ve done to me.”

Tubbs began to cry. Silent tears ran down his face and dripped from his chin. Juno looked away embarrassed.

“OK. Feed the cat, but I’m calling for an ambulance.”

“Seriously, you don’t need to do that. I can drive myself to the emergency room, if that’s where we’re going. But don’t you want to look around here first? Don’t you want to hear what happened?” Amy asked placing Liza back on the table and looking for her dish on the floor. She found it in the corner where it always was. She picked up the shallow dish and carried it into the small kitchen and placed it on the counter. The kitchen had been left untouched. In the living room the TV was on the floor with the screen shattered and the drapes were pulled from the sliding glass door and were strewn over the couch. Amy found a can of wet food in the cupboard and pulled the tab to open it. She dug around for a fork from a near by drawer and scooped a generous serving from the can, mashed it down on the dish with the back of the fork. Then she placed a plastic lid over the open can and put it in the refrigerator. Liza was meowing like crazy, running back and forth between the kitchen and the corner where her water dish was still sitting. Amy put the food dish down and Liza began to eat ferociously. Amy picked up the water dish and filled it with fresh water for the hungry kitty before turning toward officer Juno and Tubbs who were up to this point just watching her go back and forth with the dishes for the cat.

“Well? Don’t you?” She asked them again.

“Uh, yes Amy. Please tell me what happened.” Juno asked softly. Amy pulled a chair out from the small dining table and eased herself onto it. Sitting was uncomfortable and the longer she was awake to more her body hurt. Juno pulled out the opposite chair and sat down. Tubbs perched himself on the edge of an overstuffed armchair next to the couch in the living room just beyond the dining table.

“I don’t really know what all happened. The last thing I remember is walking to my car after you guys were done at my office Saturday evening.” Amy began. Juno was digging in a pocket looking for a pen to take notes. “After that I woke up here just before ten. My head hurt. It still does. Everything hurts! But when I woke up the light hurt my eyes. I was still wearing the clothes I have on now. The same clothes from Saturday. And I have some horrible...” Amy struggled for the right word. “...wounds.” she finished. Juno looked up at her with sympathy.

“What kind of wounds, Amy?” he asked gently.

“I have a giant welt on the left cheek of my ass with what looks like two puncture wounds, like they stuck nails in me or something. I think they’re infected. They’re hot to the touch. And, there’s this blood in the corners of my mouth, and the cut on my head. And...and...and my... my...” Amy began to sob. Juno was at a loss. Tubbs ran to Amy’s side and wrapped his arms

around her. Amy was a little surprised, but grateful. She needed a hug, some gentle affection. She let herself sink into Tubbs' chest as she sobbed and he lightly rubbed her back.

"Amy, there's something on your back. It's all dried." Tubbs inspected the palm of his hand sniffing it. "I think it's semen." Tubbs assessed and told Juno. Amy spoke with her face still buried in Tubbs' chest.

"I wouldn't be surprised. My hair is gone...they pulled out my hair. And I've been cut." Tubbs held her tighter while her words settled in Juno's ears.

"What? What hair?" the clueless officer asked.

"My...my...the hair down there." Amy pointed to between her legs without looking at Juno.

Tubbs smoothed the hair on top of Amy's head. Amy pulled away from Tubbs, who lightly touched her cheek and went into the kitchen to find a glass to fill with water for the violated woman. Amy wiped under her nose with the back of her hand and noticed a cut on the outside of her hand running up the side of her arm. It looked similar to the cut along her labia.

"I think they raped me. I had to pee. I had a specimen cup under my sink. I have it in the bathroom with the paper I wiped with. There's probably more. I haven't taken my clothes off yet. And they left me a voicemail."

Juno dropped his pen on the table and looked at Amy, marveling that the woman was alive.

"They did what?" he asked half seriously half rhetorically.

"They left a message. I can play it for you. I don't think they thought I was going to make it. I think they thought I was dead." Amy got up and went to the bedroom to get her cell phone which she had left on her night stand to charge. When she came back out Liza was sitting in Tubbs' lap getting a massage. Amy put the phone on speaker and played the message. Juno shook his head.

"And the number came up unknown?"

"Yes." Amy replied.

"Well, depending on how they managed that we may or may not be able to find where they were calling from. It sounded like they used something to alter the sound of their voice. At least we know they in fact were trying to kill you. That might help me get some resources on this case. So they took your client book. Did they take anything else?"

"My tablet is gone. Other than that I don't know. I haven't looked around. I only came out of my room when you got here. Was the door open?" Amy asked.

"Um, not open, but unlocked." Tubbs answered her. Amy nodded at him.

“Oh, and I don’t know if they took it, but there was something else missing from my purse.”

“Oh? What’s that?” Juno inquired.

“It’s really strange. I don’t know what they’d want it for. It’s nothing unless you’re family. I had a little pouch in my purse that I got from my Grandmother. It was an old jewelry pouch, but it didn’t have jewelry in it.”

“Well, they didn’t know that.”

“Yeah, well it would have been easy to tell, even without opening it.”

“What was in it then?”

“It was a tiny bottle of Holy Water from the Vatican blessed by John Paul and a silk head covering for church. It was my Grandmother’s. She gave me the pouch with the water and the scarf on her deathbed. She told me to never enter her church without my head covered and well...”

“Well what?”

“Well, I haven’t told you everything about my work.”

“Are you an escort, Miss Gonder?”

“WHAT?!” Amy was disgusted. “Absolutely not.” The recent memory of Kevin made her laugh and this scared Juno who now shifted uncomfortably in front of Amy. “We’re not all like that you know?” she spat at him.

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“No. You’re not. You don’t even know what you’ve just said to me or why that’s absurd. There’s no way I could do the work I do AND be a whore.”

“I told you. I’m sorry. Please continue. What haven’t you told me about your work?”

“Well, I clear spaces.”

Juno shook his head back and forth. “And just what does that mean? You clear spaces?”

Tubbs smiled and chuckled lightly under his breath. He had suspected but hadn’t known for sure until just now. Tubbs had a second cousin in the same line of work as Amy down in the Florida Panhandle.

“Ghosts. Spirits. Demons...I get them to leave people’s houses, cars, barns, whatever. The Holy Water is for the tough cases, for Demons or other malignant beings.” Amy said flatly. Juno stared at her without blinking. He didn’t know what to say or believe. “I guess you could call me a ghost-buster.” Amy finished. Juno brushed imaginary hair back from his brow and scratched the top of his head before making another note on his clip board.

“Um. OK. So they took your Holy Water?” Juno asked.

“I don’t know. I guess they did. But I have no idea how I got home let alone what or who took or did what. I’m guessing they drugged me, but you’re the cop. You figure it out.” Amy began to cry again. Tubbs looked at Amy with sincere concern. He had a daughter just a few years younger than Amy. They had been estranged for the past ten years. Fatherly emotions were being triggered in his heart and all he wanted to do was find who did this to Amy and beat the shit out of them.

“Amy, I can drive you to the emergency room.” Tubbs offered.

“That’s a very good idea.” Juno added. “The sooner the better. Go get your specimen and gather your things. Let’s go.” Juno made a couple last notes and gestured toward the door with his head. Amy got up and got her purse then looked for the shoes she had been wearing last. They were nowhere in the apartment to be found.

“My shoes are gone.” she told Juno.

“OK. I’ll add them to the list. Get another pair and let’s go.”

Amy went back into the bedroom and dug around in her closet until she found a pair of foam flip flops and slid her tiny feet into them. She picked up the specimen and wad of paper and emerged back in the living room where Tubbs was waiting standing next to the couch. Liza was standing on the cushion next to him letting him rub her ears. Juno was standing just outside the front door talking to nosey widow Dwyer. Amy approached Tubbs who wrapped his arm around her shoulder and ushered her towards the front door. Amy bent down and kissed Liza on the head telling her, “Mummy will be home soon and we’ll clean all this mess up.” Then she darted into the kitchen and grabbed a ziplock bag placing the cup and toilet paper inside before locking the door and following Tubbs past Juno and the old nosey widow down to his Silverado. Amy saw her car parked a few spots away and noticed a crack in the windshield. Juno followed shortly and approached Tubbs’ window. He rolled it down to speak to the officer.

“Meet me at el Camino Hospital?” Juno asked Tubbs.

“Yeah. I’ll follow you.”

“Great.” Juno turned away from Amy and Tubbs and patted the hood of the truck as he walked toward his car.

CHAPTER 4

A Small Discrepancy

Doug rubbed his soapy hands as vigorously as he could under the hot water splashing out of his bathroom spigot. Eberly was downstairs in the living room of the townhouse oblivious to any of the events of the past twenty four hours.

“Sweetums, can you please hurry? Stephanie and Jack have been waiting at Buca for twenty minutes already! They told them they won’t seat them until we get there!” Eberly whined loudly from the bottom of the stairs. Doug pumped another blob of soap into his palm and scrubbed again, this time scrubbing up his forearms and getting the edge of the cuffed sleeve of his chambray shirt wet. He splashed some water over his face, rubbed his index finger over his front teeth and blotted his face and arms dry with a towel he had used the night before after his shower. He felt dirty, like the first time he had given a blow job to Fr. DeMarcus in the sacristy the week after his First Communion.

“I’m coming, Babe. I know. We’re late.” Doug’s voice warbled a little. He cleared his throat as he unrolled his sleeves buttoning them at his wrists and tucked a loose shirt tail into his pleated wide wale corduroy trousers. He took one last look at his reflection before bounding down the stairs trying desperately to act as if nothing of the past twenty four hours had transpired. Stewart stood in front of the door and promptly coughed up a nasty hairball as Doug hit the bottom stair. Eberly gasped in an exasperated fashion.

“Really Stew-pie? I’d never wear trousers cut like that either, but that’s a bit much don’t you think?” Eberly moved toward the kitchen to get something to wipe up the mess but Doug stopped him with a motion of his hand.

“Eb, really, just leave it. Like you said, we’re already late and who knows how long it’s been since Jack’s last feed.”

Eberly raised a waxed eyebrow at his Lover and pursed his lips. “I told you to knock it off with the passive aggressive fat bashing.” Eberly chided Doug. Doug rolled his eyes and threw his hands in the air.

“Are you kidding? Last time we met them at Buca for brunch *his tab alone* was over \$100! He ate two appetizers by himself along with soup, salad, entrée AND dessert, not to even mention

the beer. I love Stephanie, Eb, but she could do much better than Jack. Jack is a glutton, and it's not like his brains make up for things."

Eberly walked into the kitchen and grabbed a roll of paper towel and bottle of 409 from the counter and proceeded to bend over to wipe the cat vomit up from the slate floor of the foyer in an exaggerated manner. As he sprayed the smeared floor with 409 he spoke softly and evenly to Doug.

"Lover, just because I let you tear up my ass doesn't mean I'm going to allow you to tear up my family. I love Stephanie, and Jack is a very tender soul under all that flub. And most importantly, he loves Stephanie. Love is Love, no?" Eb stood up holding the soiled paper towels away from his body between an index finger and thumb, with the roll under his arm and the 409 in his other hand. He disappeared into the kitchen. Doug heard the cabinet open and shut where the garbage was stowed and the water run in the sink while Eberly washed his graceful hands. Doug's shoulders slumped as he stood in front of the door waiting. He looked across at the opposite wall and could see himself in the gilt mirror that used to hang in his mother's sitting room. He looked old and foreign to himself, entirely changed from the person he had been the morning before. Eberly emerged from the kitchen with a small smile on his lips, pleased with himself as he saw Doug examining his reflection while waiting for him.

"Let's go." Eberly said as he snatched Doug's keys from the coffee table and handed them to him while reaching around for the door knob. Doug took the keys and patted his back pocket finding his wallet where it belonged. Eberly gave him a quick peck on the cheek as he turned the door knob and opened the door. Doug just sighed, moving aside for Eberly to exit before him. As he locked the door behind them he spoke softly to Eberly.

"You're right. I'm a monster for saying anything."

Eberly cackled. "I wouldn't go that far, but yeah, you need to be careful with that, Sugar. You've been collecting a bit of extra padding yourself these days." he informed Doug, patting his right side just above his belt. Doug winced. He was aware.

"I know. I know. I need to start running again."

These days Doug could be found most Saturdays walking at Shoreline, but he used to run. He wasn't sure why he had stopped running. He told himself something about taking time to smell the roses, but really he was just being lazy. As far as he was concerned no one in the Bay Area had any excuse for having any amount of excess body fat. Weather like that was made for the thin and beautiful and Doug loved thin and beautiful. Eberly never exercised, but somehow remained svelte and firm no matter how many glasses of merlot he sipped in the evenings. Doug opened the passenger side door of his Escape for Eberly and had a moment of panic seeing the two coffee cups in the center console. He had totally forgotten to throw them away in his hurry to get in his house after his escapades the day before. Now they sat there, one empty and one half full, screaming his deeds for all to hear...or so that was how he felt. He knew Eberly was going to ask about them. Eberly situated himself in the seat and buckled up as Doug closed the door behind him and made his way around to the drivers side. Eberly was silent as Doug closed his door and secured his own seat belt. It wasn't until they pulled out of the driveway, down the street and onto Evelyn Avenue that he said anything.

"So, who were you sipping lattes with in your car Dr. Spears?"

"No one. They're both mine." Doug lied.

Eberly picked the two cups up and sniffed them. He knew it was a lie.

"No they're not. This empty one is yours. It was a chai latte. But this one...this one that's still half full...this one is hazelnut, and you hate hazelnut. So, who's the bitch?"

Doug quickly glimpsed Eberly to his side and looked back to the road in front of him.

"She's not a bitch. It was a woman from my office building." Doug said, wishing he had some better story other than the truth. Eberly looked relieved.

"Oh. Well, as long as it's an actual bitch with an actual va-jay-jay and not some cheap twink I don't care who you have coffee with. Why didn't you just say so? Which bitch from your office? Not that horrid screeching dyke, Maggie, was it?" Doug relaxed a little. Eberly had no clue even though Doug felt like what he had done was written all over his face and hands and windshield. Eberly put the cups back down in the console.

"Yeah. It was Maggie. She needed a ride to pick up some shelves for her space because all she has is that lesbo-cycle moped. We stopped and grabbed some caffeine so I could get through the afternoon." Doug lied. He hated Maggie and wouldn't have helped her if she were drowning. Eberly laughed.

“O. M. G. Why do lesbians insist on riding those stupid things?! Get something with a trunk already! Get a Subaru like all the carpet munchers up North!” Eberly continued smiling at Doug who was grimacing. “What’s wrong, Boo? You suddenly Love lesbians or something?” Doug didn’t realize his emotions were reading on his face and tried to force a smile.

“No. I’m just embarrassed about being so late for brunch. I might as well order lunch when we get there. You know Eb, Maggie’s not a lesbian. She just looks like one.”

“And rides a moped!” Eberly laughed.

Maggie wasn’t a lesbian, but she wasn’t sought after much by men either. Maggie was kind of a sexless child-woman. Doug found her to be obnoxiously petulant. Everyone except her fan club of clients seems to feel the same way. Two years ago Ed Shuppe had thrown a holiday party for all of his tenants from all of his properties at Tao Tao. Maggie had surprised everyone by showing up with a date — an extremely feminine guy at least fifteen years younger than the fifty something pumpkin shaped woman. Eberly hadn’t been able to make it to the event and couldn’t believe it when Doug told him about it. Eberly insisted her date must have been trans or a baby-but. Doug hadn’t thought so, but it wasn’t any of his business so he just dropped the matter and let Eberly think whatever he wanted. Eberly was like that. Once an idea was set in his head there was no changing his mind. Doug had learned from Maggie a few weeks after the party that her date was in fact a young man she had met while giving a lecture to a cohort of students from some shitty massage school. She had broken things off after only a couple dates because she said he was “hung up on the age difference” even though she was positive they had been partners in multiple lives before this one. The only reason Doug had listened to her babble was because he was waiting for his lunch to heat up in the toaster oven in the shared kitchen. Doug glanced at the two coffee cups in the console and rolled down his window. He picked up the half full cup and tossed the liquid out the window. It splattered down the side of the vehicle.

“What did you do that for?” Eb asked.

“The hazelnut smell was turning my stomach.” It was a lie. Doug’s sense of smell stunk. He was just feeling guilty and didn’t want Eberly to somehow figure out what was actually in that cup. Amy’s lipstick mark was still faint on the lip of the cup.

“Are you feeling alright, Lover? Should we just call off brunch? We don’t have to go if you aren’t feeling well.” Eberly was genuinely concerned. Doug didn’t look well. There were circles under his normally bright eyes and a cloud of dis-ease seemed to be hovering about him.

“No. It’s OK. I’m fine. I just slept funny is all.”

Doug had hardly slept at all. He was still in bed when Eberly had let himself in with his key that morning with a vase of sunflowers, kombucha, and some weird vegan-chocolate-coconut-ball things. Doug had forgotten all about brunch with Stephanie and Jack in the fervor of the day before and had barely slept thinking about the look on Amy’s face when Mike had smacked her down on her windshield. Doug had helped carry her into her apartment. He had no idea what all they did to her after that. He hadn’t stuck around to find out.

After Doug left his office the day before, he had come home and laid down on the couch with Stewart stretched across his stomach purring trying to relax. He had just started to nod off when his front door opened and the two men from earlier in the day sauntered into his living room. They had used a credit card to open the door. Doug was surprised that was all it had taken to open the heavy door. The two men had closed the door behind them calmly and sat down in the chairs situated to either side of the couch as if they were all old friends. Doug pressed himself up into a seated position. This time Mike introduced himself and Oleg by first name. Oleg was his cousin and Casey Rosanova was Oleg’s wife, or so Mike told Doug. In actuality Oleg was Mike’s second cousin by marriage, but he was also a pimp and had been trying to commodify Casey since shortly after she had moved out West. But they didn’t bother to explain *this* to Doug. Mike called Casey Oleg’s wife. Casey was actually in the process of getting a divorce from a man on the East Coast who her parents had arranged for her to marry. She had only just mentioned this to Doug in their last session. He assumed Oleg was this man, but Casey had said her husband’s name was Gregory, not Oleg, a small discrepancy. Doug simply thought Casey had lied. He had no idea the extent of the malignancy sitting before him. Nor did he have any idea how much of a malignancy he was becoming himself. Mike explained he needed some information from Amy, but that she was not co-operative. He explained that the cops were at her office right now and that Amy was napping in her car waiting for the cops to be done. Then he handed Doug a small bag filled with a fine white powder. He instructed him to go get a couple cups of coffee and wait until the police were leaving then put the powder in one of the cups of coffee and offer it to Amy, as a kindness. Doug was adverse to the idea at first, but Mike and Oleg were quite persuasive. Evidently Galina’s gentleman friend was also an associate of these two thugs. They promised that as long as he did as they instructed him and didn’t call the cops that Galina would continue to enjoy her weekend and arrive home safely Monday evening. They

said to keep Amy in the parking lot until they got there. Mike handed Doug a small walkie talkie and told him to use it to call him once he had purchased the coffee. Doug took the device and agreed and the two men left his home as easily as they had entered. Stewart had run to his dish and scarfed the crunchies remaining from the morning and then proceeded to vomit them up in front of the chair where Mike had been sitting. That's why the 409 was still on the counter when Eberly cleaned up the hairball.

After Mike and Oleg left and he had cleaned up Stewart's mess, Doug did as he was told. He drove back to his office and saw Amy napping in her car parked out front of the building. He saw the police were still in her space moving about. He parked his car in the parking lot across the street and waited until the police were coming out of Amy's office and heading for her parked car. There is a small drive up coffee kiosk in the parking lot across the street where Doug was waiting. He drove up and ordered the chai latte and hazelnut latte. One time Amy had gotten coffee for the two of them. He remembered that was what she had ordered. He dumped the baggie of powder into the drink then drove over and parked next to Amy's car. The police were getting in their cars and pulling out of the parking lot. Amy was in her office. Doug pulled out the walkie talkie and pressed the button. Mike had answered him. Doug told him he was going to offer Amy the coffee and the cops were gone. Mike told him they wouldn't be long. Doug tucked the walkie talkie in the console and then mounted the stairs with the hot beverages in hand. As he reached the top of the stairs Amy was just passing Doug's door. All night Doug had played the interaction over and over in his mind.

"Hey Amy!"

"Oh, hi Doug. How are you?"

"Oh, I'm OK, but I hear you've had a rough day." Then he had extended his right hand with the drugged hazelnut latte in Amy's direction. "Thought you might like a cup of something hot."

Amy had smiled and taken the coffee graciously.

"Thanks, Doug. Hey, I heard about your weirdo client trying to break in. Tubbs said you paid for one of the cameras in the back hall."

"Uh, yeah. There's no accounting for folks these days, especially crazy people."

Amy had laughed and taken a sip of her latte. Doug didn't know what to expect. He didn't know if she was going to pass out or what. He had no idea what the powder was. Amy looked quizzically into the cup and Doug got scared for a second.

“What’s wrong? Isn’t it good?” he asked her.

“No. It’s fine. I think they added more syrup than usual, that’s all. It’s a little sweeter than normal. Thanks for the coffee. I really need to get home though. It’s been a long day and I just want to take a shower and crawl in bed with a book or something.” Amy brushed past Doug who could see Mike and Oleg were already parked next to his car in such a way that it was blocking in Amy’s car and obscuring the view anyone from the street might have of Amy’s driver side door. Amy took a big gulp of the coffee before she started down the stairs. Doug followed nervously. By the time they got to the bottom of the stairs Amy was swaying slightly on her feet. She started to stumble a bit but Mike was there and grabbed her by the elbow. Doug had grabbed the coffee from her hand before she had the chance to drop it down the front of herself. Amy had gasped recognizing Mike and stammered.

“Wha...what...what do you want? What’s going on? Doug!”

Mike had lead Amy to her car and whispered something in her ear that Doug couldn’t hear. Amy was whimpering and trying to push Mike off of her. Oleg grabbed Doug and demanded the walkie talkie back. Doug had fished it from his car and given it to him. By then Amy was backed up against the side of her car and Mike was standing over her talking close to the side of her face. She was turning her face trying to turn away from him. Mike didn’t look pleased or calm, as he had up until now. Amy squirmed enough to turn her back to Mike who abruptly grabbed her by the low ponytail at the nape of her neck and smashed her face against the windshield of her car hard enough to crack it. Doug was surprised to see Amy’s face didn’t even bruise. There was a cut on her forehead and she was knocked unconscious. Oleg rushed over and grabbed the keys from Amy’s bag and handed them to Mike. They put Amy in the back seat then Mike got in the drivers seat. Oleg had looked at Doug and instructed him to follow them. Doug didn’t dare disobey. He had followed them all the way to what he learned was Amy’s apartment. Oleg had kept a look out while Doug helped Mike carry Amy up the two flights of stairs to her third floor unit. It was strange. It had been nearly six PM on a Saturday and the place seemed deserted. There were hardly even any cars parked in the parking lot. Once Doug and Mike got Amy in her apartment she started to stir somewhat. Her cat sniffed at her bare feet. Her shoes must have fallen off in the car. Then the cat darted out the door as Oleg came in after them. Doug looked at Mike and said, “I don’t want anything else to do with this. I’m leaving.” Mike had answered him simply, “That’s fine. You’ve done your part. Now just keep your mouth shut. Don’t worry. She’ll do the same.”

Doug had stood frozen for a moment before turning and almost running to his car and driving home. Once he arrived home he got in the shower and cried as he washed himself over and over then drank four shots of bourbon in succession before laying down on his bed.

Now in the car with Eberly he truly did feel like a monster. Amy seemed so innocent. What had he done? And why? What was she doing in that line of work anyway? She should have been some mediocre primary school teacher or a baby factory for some tech guru schmuck, not reading Tarot and doing woo-woo bullshit with creepy old faggots and mob darlings. Who was this woman anyway to put him in this position? The more he thought about it the more angry he became. Really, this was all Amy's fault. She brought this on him and herself. Shit, he had probably done her a favor yesterday. While Doug was reasoning things out in his head Eberly was talking on and on about his upcoming deadline and the boring article he was editing. Doug didn't hear a word as he pulled into a parking space on a side street around the corner from Buca.

"So I told him my boyfriend was a clinical psychologist and he should give you a call and get a diagnosis." Eberly was saying as Doug pulled the key from the ignition. He snapped his head turning toward Eberly at hearing these words.

"You did what?! I don't need any new weirdo clients, Eb!"

Eberly was caught off guard. He hadn't actually given the jerk Doug's name or contact, he had just been insulting a backward tech asshole.

"You haven't been listening to a word I've been saying for the past ten minutes. Really, Doug. What the fuck is your problem today? Do you want to have brunch or not? I didn't give the fool your contact. I was just insulting him." Eberly watched as Doug angrily grabbed both paper coffee cups and crushed them looking for a trash receptacle as he exited the vehicle. Eberly watched Doug through the driver side window as Doug stomped over to a trash can and forcefully threw the paper cups in. Then he calmly unbuckled himself and waited for Doug to come around and open the door for him to get out. Doug opened the door and Eberly got out stepping past him with his nose in the air headed for Buca's door. Doug closed the Escape's door, locked the vehicle, shoved his hands in his pockets and followed his partner into the busy restaurant lobby.

Eb was already greeting Stephanie with hugs and kisses. Jack was at the hostess stand telling the irritated looking hostess that the entire party was finally present. Doug scuffed the toe of his

Campers on the tile floor waiting to follow the hostess to their table. Jack looked at Doug with disgust and waved hello. Jack and Eberly got along, but the feelings between Jack and Doug were mutual. All Doug wanted was a Bellini and a nap.

CHAPTER 5

Believe It Or Not, I Married A Rocket Scientist!

It was nearing dinner time and Amy was still in the ER. A social worker had interviewed Amy both before and after the rape kit was administered and the doctor had ordered an extensive list of tests to try to figure out what Amy had been given. She had been informed she was very lucky to be alive. So far they had identified Fentanyl, Percocet, and methamphetamine in her system. The doctor also suspected MDMA or possibly Ketamine, but it was impossible to know for sure since the assault happened on Saturday and it was now Tuesday. The amount of drugs that were still in her system was more than enough to kill a person Amy's size, especially someone who wasn't accustomed to taking such drugs. Amy told the doctor she was sure Reiki had saved her, Reiki and the Hand of God. In reality, Amy didn't see much difference between the two. In her fifteen plus years that she had been practicing the ancient healing Art, she had come to understand it as a gift from God. The doctor was skeptical but acquiesced she had no better explanation. After examination it was found that she had a head contusion, two broken ribs, a sprained right wrist, and had been both vaginally and anally penetrated, in addition to the puncture wounds where they most likely had administered the majority of the drugs. The doctor had asked if she remembered eating or drinking anything that had not been in her possession at all times because in most of these cases MDMA or Rohypnal or other similar drugs were given to victims that way to incapacitate them during the assault. Amy had no memory of eating or drinking anything on Saturday other than a cup of tea and slice of toast at breakfast and a granola bar she had brought from home around noon. The cut along her labia and arm had been made most likely by a knife of some sort and the hair on her vulva had oddly been removed with a depilatory cream. That is what was on the back of her shirt. They had used the her shirt to wipe the hair from her vulva. No semen was detected. The doctor explained to Amy that it wasn't uncommon that a sexual predator did not ejaculate. It was also possible that they had used a foreign object to violate her or a woman had assaulted Amy, though the later was unlikely given the other facts and events of the past few days. The social worker had told Amy that sometimes survivors of such attacks would have some type of flashbacks with images or sounds or smells in the weeks, months, or even years following an attack and suggested she keep a notebook close by to write down anything she might remember. The last thing Amy could remember before waking up on Tuesday was locking her office door. After that everything was just blank. They, of course, had also checked for STDs. There was no indication of exposure to

HIV, so at least there was that, but the full panel results were going to take a day or two to get back.

Tubbs wasn't allowed in the room for the exam or meeting with the social worker, but he had stayed at the hospital anyway, coming back in the room to sit with Amy whenever he was permitted to do so. Amy was grateful. Her parents were both living but they lived back East and they rarely spoke. Not even on Christmas or her birthday. Amy's brother had joined the Marines and was over seas somewhere as far as she knew, but she hadn't spoken with Dale since before he left for boot camp and he was career military now, not just a pee-on recruit. Once every couple of years he sent a greeting or post card with a sentence or two, but that was it and he never included a return address. Amy didn't know any of the rest of her family and most of them that she *knew of* lived in Canada, France, and one in Turkey. But she wouldn't know them even if she was shown a photo. She didn't do social media and her work was her life. When she wasn't with clients she was reading, doing research, writing or hanging out with Liza. It wasn't that Amy didn't like people, it's just that she preferred being alone and working at her own pace on her own terms. Once every two years she took a one month trip. When she traveled DeeDee took care of Liza for her. DeeDee was her longest standing client. They had been working together for almost twenty years. He was the one who told her about Reiki and the two of them had done Reiki I training together. DeeDee hadn't been interested in continuing any further with Reiki training. He was happy to be able to do Reiki for himself and had never wanted the "responsibility of working with others". DeeDee was probably the closest thing Amy had to a friend. When people found out what she did for a living they either were fascinated or total disbelievers and both ends of that spectrum caused problems. So, she kept the majority of her relationships on a professional level. DeeDee was the only exception, but even so, he wasn't the type of friend she was willing to call in this situation. Tubbs was practical and helpful and treated her the way she wished her own father would. She hadn't actually thought of Tubbs as a friend until this moment, sitting in the over-lighted ER — beaten, bruised, and scared. Tubbs just sat quietly holding her purse on his lap and smiling benignly at her from time to time.

Officer Juno had stuck around to brief the social worker and waited to get a report after the examination, but after that he had left. Amy mentioned to him that she had seen her car was parked in her apartment's parking lot and he wanted to go back and have a look at it and then he had other work to do. She wasn't the only one who required police attention in the South Bay

that day, but he said he would check in with her in the morning. Besides, if there was anything else that he needed to know the social worker or the doctor would let him know. Tubbs was more than happy to sit with Amy, but it was getting late and both of them were hungry. The thought of food felt strange to Amy, and while she was hungry, she also wanted to take a shower. Tubbs had called Ed Shuppe and explained what was going on and where he was. Ed had been very sympathetic and had even agreed to go over to Amy's office himself to put a sign on the door for her clients. She didn't keep client numbers in her phone as a personal policy, so she couldn't call anyone to cancel or reschedule appointments, and even if she did have the numbers in her phone, she wasn't sure who all was scheduled for the week. She kept all of that information in her client appointment book, and they had stolen that. Amy and Tubbs were sitting silently when a woman about the same age as Amy, whom they had not met yet, came in and introduced herself.

"Ms. Gonder, my name is Naomi Sondheim. I am the director of social work for this hospital. Please let me begin by offering you my complete sympathy and condolences for the horrendous experience you have had. We see a number of rape cases here every day, but this is one of the most brutal attacks I have ever encountered. I can not pretend to know everything you must be feeling and thinking right now. I can tell you things are going to be difficult for some time, but eventually they can get better. Is this your father?" Naomi nodded towards Tubbs who had tears welling up in his eyes.

"No. I'm not her father, but if I were I'd be very proud." Tubbs answered her. Amy began to cry. Naomi pulled a small packet of tissues from her pocket and extended it to Amy.

"Ms. Gonder..."

"Please. Call me Amy."

"Amy, I have been in contact with Officer Juno. Your tablet was recovered from your car but the other missing personal items were not there. Due to the nature of the crime it is the recommendation of both myself and Officer Juno that you not stay in your apartment for a while, until there is more information. Harold, I mean, Officer Juno is looking for a suspect for questioning and I understand this suspect is known to be dangerous. Do you have a friend or family member you can stay with for a while? Even if the situation were different, I understand

you live alone and being alone at a time like this can be very challenging.” Naomi’s expression was sincere. Amy began to cry harder. Tubbs answered for her.

“Yes. She has some place to stay.” Tubbs wrapped his arm around Amy’s shoulder and pulled the woman close to his side protectively.

“Thank you. Amy, are you comfortable staying with Mr. Tubbs.” Naomi asked.

“Yes. Thank you.” Amy replied.

“Because if you do not have somewhere to stay, I have a referral for a safe house but it’s in Contra Costa County and they do not accept pets.” Naomi continued.

“No. It will be fine. I have a spare room in my home and my wife can take some Zyrtec.” Tubbs declared definitively. Amy leaned into the largeness of the kind man beside her. Naomi extended her hand toward Amy with a white linen business card.

“This is my direct line. Please call me tomorrow morning to check in, or any time you feel the need. They are preparing discharge papers for you right now and if you decide you need the safe house for any reason, do not hesitate to tell me. We can arrange transport for you.”

“No. That’s OK. I’m fine to stay with Tubbs.” Amy said, drying her tears with one of Naomi’s tissues. Naomi smiled weakly.

“It was nice to meet you Mr. Tubbs. Amy, I’m so sorry for what was done to you. No one deserves that.”

“Thank you.”

Naomi turned and left the room. Tubbs held Amy by the shoulders and bent his head to look her in the eye as he spoke. “Amy, my wife and I have an extra bedroom in our home that was once my daughter’s room. You are welcome to stay as long as you need to. Plus, your kitty will be very happy because it’s an Eichler so she can go outside anytime she wants without really going outside. You’ll both be safe. I think you and my wife will get on quite well. Maddy’s been doing charts for people as a hobby for years. She’ll like having someone to talk to. I’ve already talked to her about it all earlier. The room is ready for you.”

Amy smiled through her tears and hugged Tubbs. “Thanks, Leon. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate it.” Tubbs smiled and hugged her back. No one but Maddy called him Leon, but somehow he didn’t mind. A young orderly entered the room with a clipboard full of paperwork for Amy to sign, then she was free to go.

Walking out into the parking lot to Tubbs' Silverado they passed a black four door Mercedes with a Cockapoo barking in the front seat. Amy froze and began to shake.

"What's wrong, Amy?" Tubbs asked gently guiding her past the car and toward his truck a few spaces away.

"I don't know. That car. The sight of that car makes me feel sick."

"Let's just go get Liza and your things and go home. Maddy's making a pot of soup tonight and some homemade bread."

"That sounds great, Leon. Thank you so much."

"It's truly my pleasure. I hope Juno finds the beast who did this to you. He better find him before I do!" Tubbs opened the passenger side door and helped Amy into the seat and closed the door once she was buckled in.

Back at Amy's apartment complex things were more busy than they had been before. There were kids in the parking lot playing hopscotch with sidewalk chalk and stones, and a number of older residents were out and about chatting over the BBQ pit. The smell of hot dogs and hamburgers made Amy's stomach growl. First Leon walked with her over to her car. Amy looked in the window and saw a blood stain on the back seat. She noticed the seat was pushed back farther than when she drove the car. The carpet that was usually hidden under the seat still looked new in contrast to the regularly trampled portion, and there was a half smoked cigarette in the cup holder. Amy didn't smoke. She didn't open the car, just looked through the window. Tubbs guided her from the vehicle compassionately.

"It's OK. Juno will figure it out. Let's just go get Liza and your things." Amy nodded and followed him up the three flights of stairs where widow Dwyer was waiting.

"Oh! My! Amaranth. Well how are you, Dear? Been partying a bit?" she quizzed Amy. Tubbs couldn't believe anyone could be so crass and cruel.

"Madame, I suggest you mind your business, and Amy is none of your business." he told the bitchy old busy-body.

"I don't remember speaking to you." widow Dwyer replied bringing her hand to her throat in a melodramatic gesture.

"Back off. I think I hear a bottle of vodka calling your name." Tubbs said bringing himself between the old woman and Amy as Amy turned the key in her door. Widow Dwyer made a sound like she was surprised but scuttled back in her unit. Tubbs turned and followed Amy into

the apartment. Liza was standing on the chair where Tubbs had been sitting earlier in the day. He went to the kitty and rubbed her ears while Amy started picking things up in the living room.

“Amy, leave that. Go pack your bag and get what you need for Liza. I’m pretty sure we have a litter box in the garage and I can pick up some litter. Just get your things and Liza’s food and toys and I’ll clean up the TV in here. Where’s your broom?”

Amy nodded and pointed to a closet next to the front door then disappeared into her bedroom. She could hear Tubbs talking to Liza and moving things around. First she pulled the sheets and blankets from her bed and stuffed them in the hamper against the wall. It was a good thing she had recently done laundry. The hamper was empty except for a night gown and pair of panties. She pulled some clean sheets from a shelf in her walk-in closet and made the bed up fresh. Then she pulled her suitcase out from under the bed and sat it on top of the freshly arranged bedspread. From her drawers and closet she packed two weeks worth of clothes. She didn’t know how long she’d be staying with Leon and his wife but it was early October and the weather was anyone’s guess, so she needed options. Most of her clothes were black, so at least everything matched. Then she went in the bathroom and got her toiletries case from under the sink and filled it with her necessities. There was just enough room in her suitcase to squeeze the toiletries case. She closed the suitcase then placed her pillow on top and went back into the living room to gather Liza’s tiny kitty things, the books she was using for research currently, and her notebooks. Tubbs had the broken TV upright and out of the way on the TV stand and all the broken pieces swept up. He was arranging the curtain rod back over the sliding glass door. He turned around and smiled at Amy.

“Well, they didn’t pull the rod out of the wall. It just needed to be put back in place. The TV is toast but other than that things in here are A-OK again. Liza approves.”

Liza was trotting back and forth over Tubbs' toes meowing happily. Amy smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

“I just need to grab Liza’s things and a few books and I’m ready to go.”

“Where’s your bag?”

“In on my bed.”

“OK. I’ll go get that and take it down to the truck. You get the rest of your things together and I’ll come back up to meet you. I don’t want that nasty old coot getting at you again. What’s her problem anyway? I have trouble believing you do much partying.”

“Oh, her husband died last year and everyone in the building thinks she did it. She said it was a heart attack, but she’s been nosey and rude since the day I moved in six years ago. I think she needs a good roll in the sheets...or maybe a sedative. Who knows what her problem is.” Amy answered. Tubbs laughed and passed Amy to go get her suitcase.

When Tubbs came back upstairs Amy had Liza in a carrier and all the other items in a medium sized blue Rubbermaid container. Tubbs picked up the container and Amy lifted the cat in her carrier and purse and followed Tubbs down to the truck after locking the door. Widow Dwyer watched through open blinds as the two made their way down the stairs.

It turned out Amy and Tubbs were practically neighbors. His Eichler home was located just a couple neighborhoods away from Amy in the Birdland Neighborhood. Tubbs explained, “Maddy is retired from Ames. Believe it or not, I married a rocket scientist! I was a stay at home Dad. I started working for Ed years ago after Celia moved away.”

Amy was surprised. She would never have guessed. Celia was Tubbs’ daughter.

“Celia and I rarely saw eye to eye. I wanted her to follow her passion and go to school for music, but she insisted on agricultural science. Maddy didn’t care either way, but I thought it a waste of exceptional talent to not study music. She really was something. Could have been a concert pianist! The last time we spoke, well, it was more yelling than speaking...she had taken a job tracking rainforest insects in agricultural communities in Brazil. I didn’t want her to go. It’s dangerous down there. But she went anyway. And we haven’t spoken since. Maddy talks to her on her birthday and Christmas and sometimes gets a letter, but evidently I’m too over bearing and oppressive. Who knows. Maybe I am. Later tonight or maybe tomorrow I’ll show you my workshop. You’ll see.” Tubbs finished as they pulled in the driveway.

A woman about the same height and build as Amy but with chin length white hair and glasses was waiting for them at the door. Amy assumed correctly that it was Maddy. She was smiling and wearing a floor length skirt with a tropical flower print and a coordinated loose fitting solid color tunic. Tubbs smiled back at her and said to Amy while still looking at Maddy, “That’s my girl there. Isn’t she pretty?” Amy agreed. Maddy was pretty. Tubbs maneuvered Amy’s bag from the truck and headed toward the door. Amy followed with Liza in her crate meowing.

“You must be Amy!” Maddy said sweetly as they approached the door. “Please, come in and make yourself at home.”

Amy sighed in relief and smiled back. “Thank you.” She could smell chicken soup cooking on the stove inside just beyond the center courtyard. “Dinner smells wonderful, but if you don’t mind, I’d really like to shower before I eat.”

“Certainly. I still need to boil the noodles and the bread is still too warm to cut just yet. Your room is ready with fresh sheets and towels and even has it’s own bathroom. Leon will show you. This must be Liza.” Maddy peeked at Liza in the crate. “Hello there Miss Kitty! You can go wherever you want, but please don’t be offended if you make me sneeze.” Maddy said to the cat.

“Maddy’s allergic, but Celia always had cats growing up.” Tubbs explained.

“Oh, well, I think Liza will probably want to spend most of her time in this lovely courtyard anyway.” Amy said.

“Probably. All of ours always did. Does she like watching birds? I have a feeder over there and we get a good number of finches throughout the day. Plus, the parrots are known to fly by and perch in the neighbor’s magnolia tree over there.” Maddy replied. Amy had heard about the flock of Sunnyvale parrots but had never actually seen them herself. She was looking forward to it.

“Follow me!” Leon said to Amy. “I’ll bring the other box in and leave it at your door for when you’re done with the shower. Why don’t you let Liza look around here in the courtyard until I get the litter box set up for her?”

Amy just nodded and placed the cat carrier on the ground and opened the latch. Liza stuck her head out and looked around before deciding it was safe to come out. She walked the perimeter of the enclosed courtyard then settled down next to a small koi pond and took a bath. Maddy laughed.

“That’s a good idea, Liza. Mummy needs a good bath too.” Amy said to the kitty.

“Oh, well, if you’re going to take a bath, the stopper for the tub is in the medicine cabinet over the sink. Leon will show you. I think there’s some epsom salts too.” Maddy smiled again and disappeared into the kitchen. Amy followed Leon around through the house to the back left corner and graciously accepted her accommodations.

CHAPTER 6

You Don't Pay My Mortgage

Eberly had refused to speak with Doug the entire car ride back from Buca. Doug and Jack had a particularly embarrassing argument and the manager had told Doug he was no longer welcome at the restaurant. Eberly almost had told him to leave by himself, but Stephanie took him aside and told him it was OK. They could get together later in the week. She and Jack did not hold Doug's behavior against him.

Everything had been fine until the waiter had come by with the dessert tray and Jack ordered not one but two desserts...a slice of cheese cake *and* tiramisu. Jack had laughed with the waiter saying he could splurge because all he had ordered for brunch was soup and salad. Under his breath Doug had said, "Yeah a giant bowl of cream soup and some lettuce with your salad dressing and bread." Eberly had kicked Doug as hard as he could under the table. Brunch had been so pleasant up until this point other than Doug being distant and inattentive to the conversation. Usually Jack let Doug's rude comments and digs roll off his back as if he didn't hear, but not this time. It had come as a shock to everyone when Jack looked at Doug and told him, "Go fuck yourself." Doug erupted in a tirade of telling Jack he should be ashamed to speak that way in a family restaurant with children seated next to them. However, the mother of the children seated at the table next to them, a portly woman herself, turned to Jack and pat his quivering hand on the table and told him to not "think a thing of it". At which point Doug had asked her if she just made babies or did she eat them too. Eberly and Stephanie sat in silent horror as Jack actually began to cry. At that point the waiter ran away and returned promptly with the manager who told Doug he needed to leave immediately and not return. Doug pushed away from the table and skulked out. Eberly apologized the woman and her children and hugged Jack then asked the manager if they required he leave as well. The manager said no, but not to bring Doug back ever again to that or any other Buca location. Stephanie then hugged Eberly and told him not to worry. Eberly had opened the small attache he carried and, producing a slender leather envelope, had pulled out four crisp one hundred dollar bills, placing two on the table where he had been sitting and two in front of the mother at the adjacent table before following after Doug who he found sitting in the Escape with the engine running waiting for him. They road back to Doug's downtown Mountain View townhouse in tense silence.

As Doug pulled into his parking space Eberly cleared his throat before he spoke.

"I should leave and not ever come back. What you did back there was an embarrassment to me and your profession. But since I Love you, I'm going to come in and give you a chance to explain yourself." Eberly spoke deliberately while looking at Doug's unmoving profile. Doug let Eberly finish then turned his hands over in his lap and sucked his teeth before getting out of the vehicle and walking to his front door leaving Eberly to open his own door for once. Eberly got out and slammed the door of the Escape behind him.

"Seriously, Mister. You are walking a very thin line right now." Eberly said to the back of Doug's head as he unlocked the door. Doug turned to Eberly and looked at him with mild irritation. He agreed his behavior had gotten a bit out of hand, but after the past twenty four hours he really didn't care. He wasn't sure what was going on. He had never felt both so entirely trapped and liberated at the same time. The cognitive dissonance created by Mike and Oleg was messing with him and whether he wanted to admit it or not, the guilt of what happened to Amy was clawing at him from the inside like a caged animal desperate to live. He spoke flatly to Eberly. "Come in if you want and let's get this over with." Then Doug turned and disappeared into the townhouse. When Eberly walked in Doug was in the dining room pouring himself a double shot of bourbon.

"I'd prefer to have this conversation sober, then you can get smashed all you want after I leave." Eberly announced. Doug took a sip of the drink and swished it in his mouth then turned to Eberly.

"You're free to leave. I will do as I please in my house. You don't pay my mortgage."

"Fair enough, but really...what is your problem? Jack is a good person and it's not like you're sticking your dick in him. It's not like you live with him. It's not like he's your family! You know, we didn't bring it up over brunch, but Jack's father just died last week. He took a bottle of sleeping pills and Jack found him when he went over to drop off some begonias for his mother's planter boxes. Can you think of someone other than yourself for once? Jack is big, but he's not *that* big and like I said earlier, you've packed on some weight yourself these past few months so you really should check yourself. Now, I'm going to be quiet and give you a chance to explain to me why you've had a bug up your ass all day and why I shouldn't just go upstairs and gather the things from my drawer and not come back." Eberly sat down in the chair Mike had sat in the afternoon before. The sunflowers he had brought in that morning were arranged in a vase on the coffee table obscuring his face from where Doug was standing in the dining room. Doug

downed the shot and poured himself a second before sitting on the couch on the side farthest from where Eberly was righteously seated, in the same place he sat while being instructed by Mike and Oleg. He sat his drink on the table in front of him and sighed deeply before looking to Eberly and telling him everything that had happened the day before including how the rats weren't left by Alex. He stopped for a moment after talking about leaving Amy's apartment to gauge Eberly's reaction. Eberly had a complete look of terror on his face.

"You can leave and never come back if you want, but please, don't tell anyone, if not for my sake, for Galina's." Doug told Eberly. Eberly began to cry.

"Oh my God, Doug! What are you going to do? You have to go to the police."

"No. I can't. They told me they'd kill Galina, and they threatened Stewart."

At the sound of his name, Stewart sauntered down the stairs into the living room and meowed a long lazy meow. Eberly looked at Stewart.

"Oh, Stew-pie! What are we going to do? You can come live with me and Micah I guess, but your Daddy is in a lot of trouble." Eberly looked back to Doug. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know, Eb. I really don't know. Promise me you won't say anything."

Eberly got up from the chair and looked around the room before approaching Stewart and rubbing the kitty's ears. "I don't know, Doug. I'll keep my mouth shut, but I don't know if I can be with you anymore. I need some time to think things through." Eb said still rubbing Stewart's marmalade ears.

"Yeah. I would too." Doug replied leaning forward in his seat and staring at the palms of his hands against the corduroy of his pants. Eb walked over to Doug and kissed his forehead and whispered, "I Love you and I'm going home. Don't call me tonight. I'll call you tomorrow after work." Eberly turned and walked out stopping just briefly to touch one of the sunflowers on the table. As the door closed behind him Stewart trotted over to the couch and situated himself in a ball next to Doug. Doug began to cry.

Behind the wheel of his classic VW Type 4, Eberly pulled on his driving gloves and sucked back his tears. He looked at himself in the rearview mirror. "Eberly, you need to cut this one loose." he said out loud to himself. Then looked back to Doug's front door and sighed heavily before backing out of the parking spot and driving off. He got half way to his Los Gatos flat and decided to turn around and head back to Palo Alto to Stephanie and Jack's. Stephanie and Jack lived in

married student housing on Stanford's campus. Stephanie was finishing a doctorate in Art history. Jack owned and ran a small flower shop not far from campus. That's where Eb had gotten the sunflowers for Doug. Flowers were how Jack and Stephanie had fallen in love. He had just opened his shop when Stephanie had began her masters at Stanford. She had ordered flowers from the shop for the tables at a faculty honors event and Jack had delivered them himself because he didn't have a delivery person and it was his first big order. He fell in love with Stephanie the moment they spoke. Jack had sent Stephanie flowers every day for a month until she accepted a dinner date, and the rest, as Stephanie explained, was history. On first appearance the couple had nothing in common, but that was in fact not true. Jack was a serious Art lover and specialized in flowers that were favored as subject matter by famous artists. This time of year he sourced and carried fifteen different heirloom varieties of sunflowers and all were arranged in greenish two tone vases like the famous painting by Van Gogh. Stephanie was set to graduate in the spring. Living in married student housing they finally had enough money saved for a down payment on a modest house. Jack was looking forward to growing his own sunflowers in a postage stamp yard in Willow Glenn.

As he approached the student apartments on campus he saw Stephanie and Jack's Bronco parked slightly crooked in an end spot. Eberly was lucky and found a visitor spot near by. He slipped the driving gloves off his graceful hands and placed them on the dashboard. Then he grabbed his bag and walked over to the apartment's call box and pushed the button for Stephanie and Jack's unit. Stephanie answered the buzzer.

"Hello? If this is Doug, go away."

"No Steph-Steph. It's Uncle Eb. Can I come in?"

"Oh. OK. Sure. Hold on."

Stephanie buzzed Eberly in and he made his way to their ground floor unit's door. Stephanie was standing in the doorway in her stocking feet sipping a glass of white wine. Eberly extended his arms in a hug motion as he approached her.

"Oh, Sweetie, I'm so so so so so sorry. Can I come in?" he asked as he hugged his niece.

"Of course Uncle Eb. You're always welcome. Jack's taking a nap. Do you want a glass of wine?" she asked as she turned toward the kitchen.

"That sounds divine." Eberly answered following her.

“Jack is not taking a nap.” Jack said plodding down the hall from their bedroom rubbing his eyes and yawning. Eberly could see he had been crying. “Jack is right here.” he finished as he reached where Eberly and Stephanie were standing now both with a glass of sauvignon blanc.

“Jack, I am so sorry for how Doug behaved. I told him not to call me tonight that I needed to sleep on things.” Eberly offered a hug to Jack who only half heartedly accepted the contact.

“It’s OK, Eb. I know I’m not attractive, and I know Doug has a fat issue, but that was just too much today. I don’t want to see him at all for a while. If you’re staying with him, I understand. Love is Love, but I just can’t be around him for a while. Everything is too fresh.” Jack intimated while accepting a glass of wine from his wife.

“Oh, Honey, I completely understand. And I need to tell you guys something but you have to PROMISE to not tell ANYONE. It’s a matter of life and death...for Galina, and if he’s not careful, maybe Doug too.” Eberly explained to the young couple.

“Come in here Uncle Eb. Let’s sit in here and you can tell us.” Stephanie said over her shoulder walking into the small living room and sitting in an authentic Deco chair that had been in Eberly’s family for almost one hundred years. Jack situated himself on the floor with his back against the love seat and Eb sat in the bentwood rocker he had purchased for Stephanie’s birthday on his and Doug’s last trip to Maine. Eberly took a sip of his wine and explained everything that happened from the time he arrived at Doug’s in the morning to when they had gotten back to Doug’s place after the incident at Buca.

“Oh my God! Uncle Eb! What are you going to do?” Stephanie was genuinely concerned. The look on Jack’s face was another story.

“I don’t know Steph-Steph. I don’t know...I have to sleep on it. In the morning I’ll see how I feel. But you can’t say ANYTHING to ANYONE or they might kill for Galina. That poor old woman. I thought something wasn’t right when Doug told me about her trip, but who am I?”

Jack got up scowling and headed back for the hallway to the bedroom.

“Jack-Jack, please, don’t say anything. I understand you don’t like Doug. I don’t like Doug right now either, but Galina is totally innocent. Galina Loves you and Stephanie.” Eb said desperately towards Jack’s wide spread back.

“I know Eb. I know.” was all he said before disappearing into the bedroom and closing the door. Stephanie looked at Eberly apologetically.

“It’s been a long day. Jack is tired. His Mom found a note from his Dad yesterday. He had been cheating on her for the last twenty years with her younger sister. Jack is devastated.”

Eberly gasped. “Oh, Steph-Steph. I am so sorry, Sweetie. Is there anything I can do?”

“No. Just keep Doug away, and maybe, if you’re over in Sunnyvale, pick up a box of See’s nuts and chews for next time you stop by. Chocolate always cheers Jack up.”

“Anything, Lovey. I need to be down that way on Wednesday for a meeting with an expert anyway. If you want I can pick up Spice Hut as well and swing by for din-din Wednesday night?”

“Jack Loves Spice Hut. Do you need me to write the order down?”

“Two orders of chicken lollipop, one chicken mahkini, one veggie korma, one saag paneer, two orders of rice, four orders garlic naan, one mango lassi, and one iced chai?”

“I don’t know how you remember these things Uncle Eb.”

“Oh, well, any editor worth his weight in salt has a good memory. Accuracy and consistency count for everything.”

Stephanie got up and hugged her uncle then picked up the remote and turned on the TV. “In the mood for some *Antique Roadshow*? I have some research to do for my paper and have a few episodes I need to watch for reference points.”

“Divine!” Eberly answered his niece and settled back into the rocking chair. “Bring that bottle in here!” he called after her as she was heading toward the kitchen.

“You read my mind, Uncle Eb. You read my mind.”

CHAPTER 7

That's The Best Part

Tubbs was washing his face and hands in the sink when Amy came in the kitchen Wednesday morning. Maddy was over at the Community Center doing Tai Chi with all the old Chinese ladies. Tubbs had been digging around in the very back of his shop looking for a box he had tucked away years before. In the process he had gotten cob webs and dust in his beard, hair, and eyebrows. The small locked metal box was now sitting on the kitchen table. Amy handed Tubbs the tea towel that was hanging on the front of the oven and watched him dry his face and hands.

"I hope you slept OK." Tubbs said somewhat muffled into the towel.

"Yeah. I slept fine." It was a lie, but Amy knew the truth would just upset Tubbs. Besides, it would have been much worse had she been in her own room wondering if they were coming back and exactly what all had happened to her. Liza stayed by her side all night purring and giving her head bumps.

"That's good. Are you going into the office today? You can ride with me." Tubbs told Amy hopefully.

"Um. No. I, uh, I'm not ready to see clients again just yet. I don't even know who I was supposed to see today. I think I had three today, but my head just isn't in it right now. Plus I need to call Juno and what's-her-name from the hospital. Ed put a sign my door, right?"

Tubbs was a bummed. He had been looking forward to spending a little more time with Amy, but he understood.

"Oh yeah. It says — Family Emergency. Please call to reschedule."

"OK. That's good. If anyone wants to reschedule they can call. I'll have to pick up a new appointment book." Amy sat down at the kitchen table and saw the box but didn't say anything. Tubbs saw her notice the thing.

"A little buried treasure I was out hunting for this morning." He smiled and picked up the box. Something small but heavy sounding rattled around inside.

"I wasn't being nosey." Amy replied.

"I know. You're the least nosey person I've ever known. If you're curious though I'll show you what's inside."

"Do I want to know?" Amy smiled coyly. Tubbs raised his brows and pursed his lips tilting his head to the left.

“Well, I don’t know. You just might not.”

“Then let’s let sleeping dogs lie.” Amy concluded.

Tubbs chuckled his small chuckle and tucked the box under his left arm then pat the table lightly with the palm of his right hand.

“That’s my girl. Help yourself to whatever you can find in here. Maddy keeps the place pretty well stocked. Of course, you’re welcome to pick up whatever you want as well. There’s a Wild Oats not too far from here, just a few blocks really. I walk there all the time.” Tubbs headed toward the courtyard as he continued to speak to Amy. “There’s a house key there on the table for you. I have to get going. I have three properties to check on before I head over to your spot. Maggie has some B-S problem again I’ve been told. Is there anything from your office you’d like me to bring back here for you? Maybe that bowl?” Leon stopped by the door waiting for Amy to reply. Amy picked up the house key and turned it over before covering it with her palm.

“Um, yeah. You could bring that bowl here. Everything else is mostly replaceable if they come back. Thanks Leon. You and Maddy are very kind to let me and Liza stay here.” Amy said from the table.

“We’re happy to help. Now if you need anything before Maddy gets home just give me a jingle, but Maddy should be back in an hour or so.”

“OK.”

“Now, I know I don’t really need to tell you this, but, don’t answer the door. Neither Maddy or I are expecting anyone for anything and who knows who these crazy assholes are.”

“I know who they are, Leon.” Amy said in a far off voice. Tubbs whipped around.

“What?! You do? Who are they? Why are they after you?” Tubbs now strode back towards the table waiting for Amy to answer him.

“They’re organized crime. I’ve never had a problem with them before. We’ve always stayed clear of each other. I’m not sure what changed, but it must have something to do with one or more of my clients.”

Tubbs frowned. “Hmm. Well, you’re safe here. I’ll die before I let them touch you again.” he said as he walked back to the door and out through the courtyard leaving Amy alone for the first time since Tubbs and Juno had shown up at her apartment the day before.

Amy waited until she heard Tubbs’ Silverado pull out of the driveway and down the street before she got up and walked around the house checking out the floor plan and all the evidence of Leon and Maddy’s life together. There were photos of Leon with a woman who must have been

his mother. The age was about right and the resemblance was obvious. There were photos of Maddy smiling in a long white lab coat with a group of men also in lab coats and smiling in front of a giant metal sphere...photos of Maddy and Leon at some tropical location...paintings of fruit in bowls that looked to have been signed by Maddy. Then, as Amy rounded the corner approaching the door of the bedroom shared by Maddy and Leon there were more than a dozen blue ribbons with musical notes in the center and after the arrangement of ribbons there was a large framed collage of photos of a girl who could only be Celia. The photos ranged in age from infancy to early twenties, some with her seated at a baby grand piano with blue ribbons. It was a kind of shrine, really, and for a moment Amy felt strange, like she were the girl in the photos and not the woman standing in the hall. But that was just silly. Amy didn't play any instrument and Leon was nothing like her father. Amy's father was a calculating and preoccupied man who was much more interested in bragging about his Marine-son than bothering to remember he even had a daughter. David Gonder never wanted a daughter. He was only interested in sons. Growing up he was always trying to push Amy into tom-boy activities. When she stubbornly preferred to draw pictures, sing songs, and play hopscotch instead of play softball, have spitting contests, and go fishing he began to ignore her. When she enrolled at a community college to take some obscure history classes instead of applying to a four year university to study law like he wanted he had stopped paying attention to her entirely. Half way into her first year at community college she met Duane. He was also into esoteric knowledge and introduced her to *The Gnostic Gospels*. Reading the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* had changed her life. When Duane told her he was going out to California to work Crush she followed him, hungry for sunshine and male company that listened when she spoke and thought her brains were something interesting and wonderful, instead of superfluous and useless. Her parents had put on a big show of being distraught she was leaving home but it was just that — a show. Once she was out of site she was out of mind. If she didn't call to check in she never heard from her parents, and eventually that came to suit her just fine. Her mother never had anything positive to say to her about her life and her father only went on and on about Dale. Anything she ever shared with them was met with some story of Dale or some cousin or child of a friend who were "doing so much better at life" than Amy. Finally, enough had been enough. Amy stopped calling the day she met her first deck of cards. That was more than twenty years ago now.

Liza was wrapping herself around Amy's ankles and meowing loudly. She was hungry and so was Amy. Amy shook the memories from her head and walked back toward the kitchen the way she came, leaving the blue ribbons behind her. Liza bounded around the square towards their room. Amy opened the door and the unmade bed revealed itself before her. All of a sudden Amy was lightheaded and her heart began to pound in her ears. A wave of terror flooded her being. She looked from side to side in the room and then took a deep breath. She was alone. There was no one there, but the sight of the sheets like that was upsetting her. She remembered what Naomi had said the day before. On the night stand Amy had a notebook and blue Bic pen. She plopped down on the bed and grabbed the book making a quick note with the date and time. Liza was scratching at the blue Rubbermaid container where the cans of wet food and crunchies were stashed. Amy felt bad and filled the kitty's dish with crunchies. After she filled the dish she made the bed pulling the sheets as tightly as she could on the full sized mattress and got in the shower. As she stepped out of the shower her phone rang on the counter. With a towel wrapped around her hair she picked up the device and looked at the ID. It was an unknown number. The breath caught in Amy's throat as she opted to screen the call.

The person you are calling is screening this call. Please state your reason for calling.

The caller hung up without offering any explanation. Amy put down the phone and quickly finished getting dressed. As she picked up her hairdryer she heard the front door open and Maddy call out, "Amy, it's just me. I'm back!" Amy was relieved. With hair still wet down her back she walked around the house to meet Maddy at the interior courtyard door.

"I'm here." Amy said to Maddy as she was juggling locking the door and a bag of groceries. Amy took the bag from Maddy's arms and carried it to the kitchen counter while Maddy locked the door and smoothed her already smooth hair around her face.

"Have you had anything to eat yet?" she asked Amy.

"No. Not yet. I hadn't even looked."

"Oh, well, that's lucky. I picked up a couple scrambled egg burritos and a few other things on the way home from Tai Chi. Have you ever tried Tai Chi?"

As a matter of fact Amy *had* tried Tai Chi in high school as a gym elective. She had been willing to try *anything* to avoid playing basketball and Tai Chi turned out to be kind of like dancing, which Amy enjoyed.

"Yes. A little bit." Amy told Maddy who was now un-bagging the groceries onto the counter: two foil wrapped burritos, a package of organic strawberries, a block of sharp cheese, waxed paper, milk, orange juice, a giant artichoke, and a copy of Wellbeing Journal.

"Well, you'll have to join me some time then! We practice three times a week next to the duck pond at the Community Center." Maddy handed one of the burritos to Amy who was standing watching her.

"Maybe. We'll see how quickly I get back into the swing of things with my clients." Amy began to peel the foil from the corner of her burrito. Maddy pulled two glasses from the cupboard and filled them with juice and put them on the table before she sat down with her burrito. Amy joined her.

"You know, you can stay with us as long as you need. Leon has been so happy to have you here with us. I don't know if he mentioned it to you or not, but he and our daughter don't speak anymore and he misses her. You're what, forty two — forty three?"

"I'll be forty two end of January." Amy answered then took a bite of the burrito.

"Ah. Celia is thirty nine. She had enough of being treated like a little girl and left the Country. Leon just didn't know how to let her go, so he lost her." Maddy sighed heavily and took a sip of juice.

"Um, yeah. He said something about bugs in Brazil."

Maddy laughed. "He still doesn't get it." Amy chewed thoughtfully. "So, is there anything I can help you with today? Or are you just going to take it easy?" Maddy finally asked Amy.

"I need to make a couple phone calls, but other than that, I think I'm just going to take it easy. If there's anything *I* can help *you* with, though, let me know."

"That's quite alright for today. You just take time to rest or do whatever you feel like you need to do. In a few days you can start helping me with things if you like, but really all we need you to do is keep your space clean and pick up after Liza. Did Leon show you where the laundry is in the garage?"

Amy swallowed a mouthful of breakfast before answering Maddy, "Yeah, he did. He gave me a quick tour of his shop after dinner last night."

"Oh, of course...his shop. Did he show you his little guys?"

Amy smiled. He had. In his garage workshop Leon carved these wonderfully whimsical little creatures and built diorama style environments to place them in. They were sculptures. He said he had started them when Celia was just a tiny girl as props for story time before bed and they

had become quite popular. A couple boutique style toy stores had been carrying them in Sebastopol, Carmel, and Mendocino for over thirty years now.

“Yes. They are wonderful.” Amy admitted. Maddy smiled.

“Well, every now and then he gets a bunch of them together and hides them around the house just to annoy me. But really, I Love them too and making them makes him so happy. That’s the best part.”

“I suppose it is.”

Amy finished the last couple bites of her breakfast then excused herself from the table where Maddy was still absently munching and thumbing through her new magazine. Liza followed her Mummy.

Back in her room Amy pulled out her cell phone and dialed Juno’s number, which she now had programmed in her contacts list. It rang five times before he answered.

“Juno here. Amy?”

“Yeah. It’s me.”

“How are you today?” he inquired.

“Fine. I guess.”

“I understand you are staying with Mr. Tubbs and his wife.”

“Yes. That’s right.”

“Well, when I went back and checked on your car yesterday it was unlocked so I went through things.”

“Yeah? I saw blood on the back seat.”

“It’s yours. I also found one black sandal-thing shoe.”

“Yeah. I was wearing those. But you only found one? Did you find the Holy Water?”

“Just one shoe in the car. No Holy Water. Sorry. But I did find your Tablet. It was wedged between the front passenger seat and the console. Maybe you hid it there? Also, I found the other shoe in the bushes out in front of your office building.” Amy inhaled fast and sharp. Juno continued. “It looks like they knocked you out some way and began the assault in the parking lot then put you in the back of your car and drove you to your apartment. Are you sure you don’t remember eating or drinking anything before the blackout?”

"No. I told you. The last thing I remember is locking my office door after you guys left. Wait..."

Amy was having a faint recollection of talking to someone — someone she knew. Juno was getting impatient.

"Wait, what, Amy? Do you remember something?"

"Maybe. I feel like I talked to someone as I came out of the office. But I can't tell you who or about what."

"OK. Well, if you remember anything else, write it down and then give me a call. I'm going to go back over to the office again today and ask some questions. Not a whole lot of folks were around yesterday when I stopped by. How well do you know Doug Spears?"

"Not well, really. Just professionally. I sometimes refer clients to him. We went out one time for drinks and music, but not like a date. He's super gay, you know."

"I didn't know. Does he have a partner?"

"Yeah. He and Eb have been together as long as I've known him."

"Eb? Does he have a last name? Do they live together?"

"I think his last name is Gentry but don't quote me on that. He edits some tech rag. I've only met him a couple times in passing. I don't think they live together. Doug once said something about Eb staying at his place to watch Stewart while he was away. Stewart is his cat."

"Ah yes, Stewart. I've heard all about Stewart from Mr. Shuppe."

"Oh yeah, Ed Loves all furry creatures and Stewart mouses the building for us."

"OK, Amy. If there is anything else you remember, let me know."

"Can I get my car?"

"What?"

"My car? Can I get it and drive it?"

"Yes, but, it's probably best that you have an escort when picking it up. I can do that tomorrow morning at ten if you like."

"Yes. That works for me. Do you have the address here?"

"Yes. I'll see you tomorrow at ten. Try to have a nice day and not think too hard about things."

"OK. Thanks, Juno."

"You're welcome. Bye."

Juno hung up before Amy could say goodbye. Amy dug Naomi's card from her purse and dialed the number to check in as she had requested. It rang three times before going to voicemail. Amy left a short message.

"Hi Naomi. This is Amy, from yesterday. Just checking in. I'm fine. You were right. I think I've had a couple flashbacks, but I'm not sure. I'll call you back if I feel like I need to talk. Thanks." Amy hung up the phone then fell back onto the made bed and fell into a fitful sleep. Liza kept a close watch. Around five thirty she was roused from her sleep by the ringing of her phone. It was Tubbs.

"Hi Leon."

"Hi Amers. How's your day been?"

"Fine. Mostly I've slept."

"Well, after what you've been through I bet you're tired all the way down to the bottom of your soul."

"You said it."

"Hey, I'm about to grab that bowl and finish up here then head home for the day. You sure there isn't anything else here you want? How about that big stone that sits next to the bowl?"

"Yeah. If you want, you can bring that too. But I don't want to put you out."

"It's not a problem. Oh wait..."

"What?"

"There's someone walking up to your door. Not one of your clients that I recognize." Tubbs felt the back of his waistband for the gun he had dug out of the storage in his garage earlier that day. He bought it back in the 60's when he was still living in Oakland and the riots were at their peak. He had tucked it away when they bought the house in Sunnyvale just before Celia was born. Maddy didn't even know he had it anymore. It was there.

"What do they look like?" Amy asked.

"Late twenties, early thirties. Six foot or so. A little dumpy, pudgie-like. Brown hair. Medium-olive skin. Glasses. He's got a vase of sunflowers."

It didn't sound like any of Amy's clients.

"Maybe it's just a delivery guy, Leon."

"Did you order anything?"

"No, but..."

"But nothing...I'll be home in a bit, right after I check on this and get your stuff."

"Tubbs, don't go getting...." but Tubbs hung up before Amy could finish telling him not to put himself in danger for her.

Tubbs approached the man who was now standing at Amy's office door. He watched as he knocked. When no one answered he sat the vase in front of the door and took a brochure from a plastic receptacle to the right of Amy's door.

"Hey. You down there. Hold on." Tubbs said. Jack looked up startled.

"Oh, hi there. I was just looking for Ms. Gonder."

"Oh yeah? And what do you want with Ms. Gonder?" Tubbs asked as he stopped just a couple feet from Jack.

"Nothing. I just heard what happened to her and wanted to give her these flowers." Jack made sure to come by when he knew Doug was with a client. He sat in the parking lot across the street for almost two hours waiting to see someone enter the office for a session before he got out of his car and crossed the street with the vase. He had no idea what to expect to find. He didn't even know if Amy was alive or not. He didn't even know what Amy looked like.

"Oh yeah? And who are you to be giving Amy flowers?"

"Is she OK?"

"Who are you?"

Jack didn't know how to answer the pointed question. He knew the cops had been around earlier asking questions. He had seen them come out of Doug's office shortly after he arrived and watched as they knocked on every door except Amy's. Tubbs had only just finished speaking with Juno before he called Amy. Juno was already on his way back to the station.

"Um, no one really. A friend of a friend. I just heard she had been hurt and wanted to give her some flowers. That's all."

"That's nice and everything, but you still haven't told me who you are."

"Yeah, well I don't know who you are either. For all I know you're the one who hurt Amy." Jack spat. Tubbs was not amused.

"Now, listen here son, you need to tell me who you are and why you're here or I'm gonna call the cops."

Jack thought about it and decided to take a chance.

"My name's Jack. Is there somewhere else we can talk where we can sit down in private?" Jack was looking nervously down towards Doug's office. Doug often walked his clients to the door at the end of a session and he didn't want to be seen.

"I'm Tubbs. I take care of this building. I was just going to go in here and pick a couple things up for Amy. Come on in with me for a minute." Tubbs had a feeling about this guy. He didn't seem like the type that would do what was done to Amy. He didn't seem like some slick mobster. He

seemed like a doughy book-reading momma's boy. Besides, if he was trouble Tubbs had his leaded friend tucked in his belt to help out. Jack relaxed a bit. Tubbs opened the door to Amy's office and the two men entered. There was still glass on the floor. Leon closed the door as Jack sat the vase on Amy's table next to the Chihuly bowl. Leon grabbed a broom from behind the door and began sweeping up the mess from the previous week. Jack sat down in the comfy chair where Amy's clients normally sat.

"Is she OK? I know what happened, well, some of it anyway." Jack was genuinely concerned and Tubbs could see that. Tubbs was also very keen to learn what Jack had to say.

"What do you mean you *know what happened*? What do you know?" Tubbs asked cautiously.

"Well, I know Doug Spears is a class A, royal asshole."

Tubs just stood leaning on the broom next to the pile of shattered glass waiting for Jack to continue. Jack obliged.

"I guess Amy referred a client to him recently who is some mob-boss's wife or daughter or girlfriend or something and they came around looking for Amy because she's the one who referred her to Doug, the class A asshole. They ruffed Doug up a bit and left some dead rats or something at his door then they followed him home and made him help them get her."

Tubbs eyes widened at the revelation that Doug had helped harm Amy. So that was why he had been so eager to help pay for the cameras!

"What do you mean he helped them get her?" Tubbs asked.

"Look man, I don't know why I'm even telling you this." Jack replied.

"You're telling me because you know it's the right thing to do. Now finish. Tell me the rest. How did Doug help?"

"He came back and gave her a cup of drugged coffee. Then these gangsters beat her up and stuffed her in her own car and made Doug follow them back to her apartment to help carry her in. Then he said he left. He didn't know what if anything happened to her after that."

Tubbs vision began to narrow. He recognized the wave of rage and closed his eyes as he let the emotion crash over him and recede.

"Seriously...that's all I know. Is she OK?" Jack asked once more.

Tubbs took a breath and gathered himself before he spoke to the now terrified Jack.

"She's well enough. How do you know Doug?"

Jack rubbed the wedding ring on his finger with the tip of his thumb. as he spoke.

"He's my wife's, uncle's boyfriend. And for the record he's a piece of shit."

Tubbs breathed heavily through his nose a couple times.

"If what you say is true, he's more than a piece of shit. He's the whole stinking pile."

"I've been saying that for years now." Jack replied pushing himself up and out of the chair. "Can I leave the flowers here?" he asked Tubbs.

"Yes. I'll see she gets them."

Jack opened the front door and peeked out to see the coast was clear before leaving.

"Hey, don't tell Doug I was here, OK?"

"I won't, but I am going to tell the cops what you told me."

"Do what you want. I don't care anymore." Jack slipped out the door and made it back to his car without Doug being any the wiser.

Tubbs sank down in the chair where Jack had been sitting and cried hot angry tears into his wide hands. After a couple minutes he finished sweeping the broken glass into the garbage, picked up the bowl, the big smokey quartz point, and the vase of sunflowers and piled into his truck. He took the pistol from his waistband and replaced it in the lockbox and slid the box into the hidden storage compartment under his console. Doug was still in his office with a client.

Tubbs wasn't sure exactly what he wanted to do. Did he want to call Juno immediately, or did he want to try and find a little more information on his own first? What he really wanted to do was go home and see Amy was still safe, kiss his beautiful wife and have some dinner. He'd decide what to do next once he had eaten. It was never a good idea to make a decision like this on an empty stomach. He was lucky Maddy was such a good cook.

CHAPTER 8

Sucking Mafioso Schlong Now

Doug found himself checking the clock over Garrett's head more than once during the hour and a half session. He chastised himself internally. Normally he prided himself on being "one hundred percent present" with *and* for his clients. But the earlier meeting with Officer Juno had him shook, even if he was relieved to learn Amy was alive and recovering. Doug was careful not to ask too many questions and Juno hadn't offered any additional information beyond the fact that Amy was OK. Juno asked a lot of questions and wanted to know all kinds of things Doug wasn't expecting. He had asked awkwardly if he and Eberly were romantically involved or just friends. He wanted to know how often he travelled and if any of his clients paid in cash. He wanted to know if he enjoyed going to drag clubs or if he partook in the "pageantry" of such establishments. "Lord, no!" was how Doug had responded to that one and wondered to himself if this cop thought that about him, what would he think of DeeDee? Some of the older guys in the local community referred to DeeDee as "Klinger". DeeDee had, in fact, served in Korea. That was a fact not many knew of, and Doug only knew because he spoke once at the VA at a seminar for providers helping LGBT Vets living with PTSD and DeeDee had been one of the volunteers checking speakers in as they arrived. DeeDee was in his full witchy robe regalia except he was also wearing the jacket to his Air Force dress blues with a patch indicating he was a combat Veteran of the Korean War. Doug had been his regular shabby-chic self. That's how Eberly described Doug's personal style, "shabby-chic". Upon meeting over the check-in table, the two men pretended they didn't know each other. It was easier for everyone and it worked. Doug mentioned DeeDee to Juno who took down some notes.

Now, in his chair in his position of authority, Doug counted the minutes as Garrett rambled on and on about yet another perceived slight visited upon him by his boss. Garrett was notorious for his joy in playing the victim and the story he was telling Doug was similar to so many of the other stories he told Doug. It took all of Doug's will power to not yawn while he was also ready to crawl out of his skin with his own anxiety over the past few days. Galina had made it home safely, thank God. She called Doug Monday night to tell him how wonderful everything had been and they had dinner Tuesday evening at her favorite diner, so she could give Doug the matching T-shirts she bought for him and Eberly on the Santa Cruz Boardwalk. Eberly hadn't called Doug until Tuesday evening just after he got home from dinner with Galina. He mentioned Galina had

gotten home but didn't mention the T-shirts. Other than that, the conversation was short and mostly one-sided. Eberly said he was still pretty upset and needed more time to think. Doug was relieved. If he were honest with himself he had to admit that Eberly had been wearing his nerves thin for some time with his overly exaggerated effeminate mannerisms, particularly his propensity to infantilize those around him with baby talk nick names. It was one of the things Doug hated in particular about being gay — when men like Eberly epitomized that particular speech style stereotype. One time he had said something to Eb about it. It didn't go over well. The first time Doug heard Eb refer to Jack as "Jack-Jack" he told him that if he wanted to date a woman he would...couldn't Eb just own the fact that he was a man and talk like one? Eberly had flown into a fit demanding to know exactly what a man sounded like and wasn't that a dick in his mouth. Doug hadn't brought it up again, but it still bothered him.

Finally Garrett said, "Well, I don't know. I feel like this is the story of my life! It's always the same. Everything I tell you is the same."

Doug was shaken from his own inner dialogue and coughed a small cough as he replied, "I suppose life keeps giving us the same lessons until we get it. What do you think you are meant to learn from this situation?"

The truth was Doug hadn't really listened to what Garrett had been saying but Garrett seemed more than satisfied with this canned-soup, self-help guru perspective.

"Dr. Spears you are absolutely right!"

Doug smiled and nodded telling him their time was up for the week. He was very relieved to be done for the day. That morning Doug had put a pork loin in his crockpot with a stick of butter, a couple small potatoes, carrots, garlic and an onion. It had been years since he had used the slow cooker but his mother used to do it all the time. Once a week they had pot roast or pork loin when he was growing up, and right now he was missing his mother sharply. Galina was great as an aunt, but nothing was a replacement for the Love of a mother and all Doug wanted was a hug right now and to be told he was Anya's "best boy". He needed to be *someone's* best *something*. Garrett uncrossed his legs and got up from the chair across from Doug. Doug got up and followed him to the door. As he was turning to close the door behind Garrett, Eberly's orange VW caught his eye as it pulled into the parking lot. Doug's stomach sunk. He really wasn't in the mood. He had also left Stewart at home in the townhouse sleeping on the back of the sofa and was anxious to get home and see his trusty companion was safe. Doug closed and locked the door and stood quietly by the window watching through the slightly open blinds as

Eberly took off his driving gloves and exited the car with what looked like a bag of take out. "Great." Doug thought. "Just what I need." Doug started to gather his things and prepared to leave out the back door but heard Maggie in the hallway yammering about something to Andrew, the newest tenant in the building. So, he was trapped.

Eberly attempted to open the door. Finding it locked he knocked loudly.

"Doug. Doug-Doug! I know you're in there. I can smell your cologne. Open up. I have yum-yums." Eberly said trying to entice Doug. Doug rolled his eyes.

"Hold on, Eb. I was just getting ready to leave."

Doug unlocked and opened the door to Eberly and the aroma of pungent Indian food. Eb held the bag up triumphantly.

"I got you Spice Hut!" Eberly announced cheerily. Doug looked from Eb's forced grin to the heavy laden plastic bag and frowned.

"I wish you would have called and asked, Eb. I have dinner plans." Doug stated without moving away from the door to allow Eberly entrance to the office. Eberly's face fell at the news.

"Since when do you have dinner plans on Hump-day that don't involve me? Are you dating already? Sucking mafioso schlong now?" Eberly laughed at his joke. Doug glared sullenly at him.

"It's none of your business, schlong or no schlong...but no. I'm not."

"Well, maybe you've gotten a taste for pussy then? Is the old baby-clock ticking?" Eberly poked Doug's slight bulge just below the belt. Doug was now at his limit.

"Look, my day has been long and I have plans that I've been looking forward to since I got up this morning. So if you don't mind, take your stinking bag and gobble elsewhere." It wasn't often that Doug used double entendre and Eberly was actually offended.

"Well, if that's how it is, Lover, I guess I'll take my stinking bag and go gobble with someone who loves me. Make sure you get a good look at my cheeks as I walk away because it just might be the last time you get to gaze upon them. I wasn't here to eat with you anyway, by the way. I was just being nice and bringing you dinner. I have other plans too." Eberly turned on his heel and sashayed down the stairs and back to his car taking the food with him. Doug closed and locked the door and headed home to eat his slow cooked pork and be with Stewart.

In his car, Eberly sat the bag of unwanted samosas, dahl and rice on the back seat with the other two bags of food, See's chocolates and his briefcase. Tears stung at the corners of his eyes. He looked himself in the eye in the rear view mirror and said, "Girl, he is not worth the loss

of moisture.” Then he pulled the driving gloves over his graceful hands and started the old diesel engine. Just as he was preparing to back out of the parking space he saw the maintenance man, unlocking the door of his truck while holding a box and a vase of what appeared to be Jack’s sunflowers. He started to roll his window down to inquire about the flowers but thought better of it. He’d just ask Jack about it over dinner when he got there. Tubbs didn’t look like he was in a good mood and Eberly didn’t have the energy to deal with cranky old breeders any more than he had the energy to deal with bitchy fags and he wanted to get to Palo Alto while dinner was still at least warm, if not hot.

When he got to Stephanie and Jack’s the Bronco was nowhere to be seen and he was a little concerned Stephanie had forgotten their plans. He pulled out his cell phone and rang his niece. “Hello? Uncle Eb?”

“Oh! Steph-Steph! It’s so good to hear your voice. I’m here but where are you? Where’s the Bronco?”

“Oh, Uncle Eb, Jack took it to work today. He’s just not home yet. He said he had a lot of orders today and was going to need to help Jeffie with deliveries. He just called. He should be here any minute. Come on in.”

“OK. See you in a jiffy.”

Eberly stuffed the phone in his bag and turned over the center console stretching his long arms into the back seat to reach the bags of food, chocolates and his briefcase. He had learned the hard way not to leave anything too tempting in the car on the campus, even in front of Stephanie’s apartment. He lost his last briefcase that way — a beautiful vintage PRADA thing he had found stuffed in a back corner of a shop in BC. It was in questionable shape when he bought it but it was a real quality piece and after he had it fixed was told he could probably get two thousand or more for it. He Loved that bag and always looked twice when he saw someone carrying one similar. Once, in the City, he thought he saw it in the window of a shop on Haight Street. There was a small patch that had been made in the interior of his bag that was a give away detail. But the owner of the shop said it was already paid for and on hold and wouldn’t let Eb see the inside. It probably was his bag. He didn’t say anything but he never went back to that store again and a few months later it closed it’s doors and became some other junk shop, the way so many store fronts turn over on Haight Street.

By the time Eberly locked up his car Stephanie was standing at the front door of the building holding it open for her uncle. Eberly approached excitedly giving his niece air kisses on either cheek exaggerating the load in his arms. Stephanie smiled and took two bags of food and the box of chocolates from him.

“Oh! You remembered! Jack will be so happy. Thank you, Uncle Eb.”

“No problem, Steph-Steph. I have some extra food here. I got something to drop off for Doug, but found out he has dinner plans.”

“That’s fine Uncle Eb. I’m sure it will get eaten.”

Stephanie ushered Eberly into the lobby of the building and closed the door behind them. The front door of Stephanie’s apartment was open. Eberly walked in and sat the rest of the items in his hands on a side table.

“Steph-Steph, did Jack have a delivery over at Doug’s office today?”

Stephanie looked at Eberly quizzically.

“Not that I know of. He doesn’t usually take orders that far from the shop unless it’s a big one and he didn’t mention any big deliveries today...just that he had a lot of deliveries today. Why?”

“Oh, it’s probably nothing. Maybe even someone copying Jack’s work. I don’t know. Like I said, I stopped by Doug’s office to take him some dinner...” Eberly stopped briefly as Stephanie handed him a glass of chardonnay. The two raised their glasses in cheers and took a sip before Eberly continued. “As I was saying...when I stopped by Doug’s, as I was leaving I saw the maintenance guy leaving with a big vase of sunflowers and it looked like one of Jack’s Deluxe Van Gogh orders. I thought it was strange and was wondering. That’s all.” Eberly took another sip of chardonnay and started to open the bags and take out each container placing them on the small farm-style dining table.

“I don’t know Uncle Eb. That is strange. We can ask Jack when he gets here.” Stephanie was saying as Jack opened the front door.

“Ask Jack what?” he said as he closed the door behind him and took off his shoes from the back using his big toe and leaving the laces tied.

“Uncle Eb was just saying he saw someone with one of your arrangements at Doug’s office today. Did you have a delivery over there?” Stephanie asked innocently. Jack blushed.

“Um...yeah. Sort of. I felt bad about Amy and tried to deliver an arrangement to her office, but she wasn’t there. I left them with the maintenance guy.”

Eberly raised his eyebrows. “Why, Jack-Jack, that was very thoughtful. But also kind of dangerous don’t you think. Did you see the Doug-monster?” Eberly asked as he extended the

box of chocolates to Jack using both hands. Jack looked at the box and smiled taking it from Eberly.

“Um, no. I didn’t, thank God. Thanks for the chocolates, Eb. You know these are my favorite?”

“A little birdie told me, and I thought if I had been through what you’ve been through I sure could use a box of chocolate to sweeten things up.”

Jack opened the box and offered the candies to Eberly and Stephanie before pulling out a dark chocolate bottom dipped walnut caramel square and stuffing the whole thing in his mouth. It broke the moment and distracted Eberly from the vase of flowers for the time being.

“Let’s stop hovering at the door and get in here you guys. I’m famished!” Stephanie said to her two favorite men who both followed her back over to the table where she had already placed three dinner plates and sets of flatware and cloth napkins and opened all of the containers. Jack picked up his mango lassi and took a sip. Eberly made a face.

“I don’t know how you can drink that stuff, Jack. It might be as thick as cum, but cum tastes better.” Eb chided playfully. Jack rolled his eyes and Stephanie giggled.

“You forgot my iced chai!” Stephanie exclaimed suddenly realizing it was missing from the table. Eberly struck his thigh with his palm.

“Oh! Steph-Steph, I’m so sorry!”

“It’s OK. I don’t need it. I’d rather drink wine anyway.”

“Oh, I’m with you on that, Sweetie.” Eberly turned to Jack. “There’s extra samosas and I also got some dahl if you’re interested, Jack.”

Jack was filling his plate. “Yeah. I saw. That’s what Doug orders, right? Were you missing him?” Jack asked flatly.

“Not exactly. I told you, I was over at his office. I thought I’d take him some dinner and just see where things stood between us.”

“And? Where do they stand, Eb?” Jack asked dipping a piece of naan in the buttery sauce of the chicken mahkini and stuffing it in his mouth.

“On the San Andreas fault, evidently. He told me he had plans and to take my stinking sack and go gobble elsewhere.”

Jack made a sound of disgust at the top of his throat. “What a schmuck.”

“Jack!” Stephanie reprimanded.

“No Stephanie. I’ve had it with him. He’s rude, and arrogant, and mean to me. And these days he’s not so svelte himself and after what Eb said he did to that poor woman, I hope some

mobster gives him a Columbian neck tie. He has it coming.” Jack said, uncharacteristically cruel.

“Jack!” Stephanie began but Eberly stopped her with a single motion of her hand.

“It’s OK, Steph-Steph. I understand where Jack is coming from. Let’s just enjoy dinner and watch some Antique Roadshow. Did you learn anything about Amy, Jack?”

Jack sat his plate on the coffee table and sat down in his favorite spot on the floor in front of the love seat and hesitated for a moment before he replied.

“Yeah. She’s alive and recovering.”

“Well praise the sweet baby Jesus for that!” Eberly said. Stephanie laughed. With the exception of one aunt who married into the family, the Gettlemons were Jews.

“And...” Jack trailed off.

“And what, Honeybear?” Stephanie coaxed.

“And I told that guy Tubbs what I knew about Doug.” Jack finished in a whisper.

Eberly’s eyes got wide. Stephanie spoke.

“You did what?”

“I told him. I told him everything.”

“And what did he say?” Eberly was almost frantic. It was a combination of terrified, comforted, and jealous that he hadn’t been the one to tell Tubbs.

“He said he was going to tell the police.”

Stephanie slumped back in her chair in resignation to the truth. Eberly laughed a strange high pitch cackle that somehow felt out of place. It made Jack nervous.

“I’m sorry, Eb.”

“For what? I’m just jealous I wasn’t the one who tattled. Well, we will see where the papadums fall, won’t we.” Eberly replied pressing a papadum chip into his mouth and crunching it.

“Yeah. I guess we will.” Stephanie said, and turned on the TV.

Back in Mountain View Doug sat at his table alone slumped over a bowl of comfort food, sharing a piece of pork every now and then with Stewart, listening to a Dan Savage podcast about some forty-something guy finally coming out and leaving his wife for her yoga instructor. “What a dumb bitch.” he thought to himself. “All that time and she never had a clue he was gay?”

CHAPTER 9

Either Way The Shoe Fit

Amy yawned and stretched her legs behind her on her bed in Leon and Maddy's house. Liza stirred next to her. She had started to hunt down her copy of *The Consolation of Philosophy* after it was referenced for the third time in a short Pieper piece she had been reading. The nearly ancient text was resonating on a deep level with her at the moment and she wondered, not half jokingly, if she might be headed for decapitation or some other such unjustly imposed demise. Amy had begun to categorize time as *before* the attack and *after* the attack. When she began the book just a few days *before the attack* she had been enjoying the poetry and tragic nature of the story and the position of the author. Up to that point she couldn't decide if he was brilliant and brave or merely grasping at crazy straws hoping his unjust oppressors would own up to their oppression. Now, *after the attack*, she decided he was all of the above. She considered her own situation in a similar light. Nothing was either/or. It was and/also. After this, was she going to be able to ever see clients again or was she going to be forced to find a new way of paying her bills? Sure, she could just re-open her office...or open one in a new location. But what would stop them from coming after her again? And what else could she do for work? She'd been making money this way for a very long time. And why were they after her anyway? She truly had no idea. Maybe she could find something a little more affordable in San Jose or Santa Cruz. *Maybe*. But security was always going to be a priority now. Mountain View *was* getting expensive and she hadn't been able to raise her prices as much as rent had increased over the past four years. A month prior to the attack she had sold a couple wood block prints from the exquisite collection that had been left to her by a Great Aunt she had only met twice. The purchasing party was an odd man with unusually small features and a complexion like paste who found her through the appraiser who had helped Amy get the works insured. The proceeds of the sale gave her enough to pay the rent on her apartment through the coming Easter, but if she didn't get back to seeing clients in a couple weeks, she was going to be forced to give up the office space. A woman she took some workshops from saw clients out of a room in her San Mateo apartment. Amy didn't want to do that. That would require her to dedicate the entire living room to work space, and she didn't want her TV in the bedroom. Nor did she want to share her personal bathroom with clients. They'd have to walk through her bedroom to do that. She needed her personal space and privacy. Personal boundaries could sometimes become an issue with clients, particularly new clients, and there were a couple times Amy had

to discontinue seeing a client because of it. She needed her *home* to be her private sanctuary, especially now.

On the floor in front of the night stand Amy found her giant purse and fished out the satin pouch containing the majority of her livelihood for the past decade and a half. The weight of the cards slid, in a solid feeling mass, inside of the silky pouch. She unfastened the drawstring and slid the deck into her hands and sat up. It had been a long time since she had read cards for any reason in the space where she slept. Other than a card now and then when away from the office, she reserved reading for in the office. But these were different times and she desperately needed some unbiased guidance. Amy sat up and propped herself against the bolster pillows Maddy had on the bed and shuffled the deck. After a couple minutes she turned up three cards: *Nine of Wands*, *The Wheel*, *The Paige of Cups*. The cards never lied. Yes, she had a life changing experience from which she was recovering. But who, or what was the *Paige of Cups*? Certainly not Leon. Though not close friends, they had known each other for a while now. Juno? Maddy? Certainly not her attacker. She wasn't interested in any creative or business ventures with anyone who would harm her that way. As Amy was putting the cards back in their pouch and the pouch back in her bag her phone rang. It was Miriam Gomez, a steady client of the past five years.

"Holla, Amy! It's Miriam. Miriam Gomez?"

"Hi Miriam. Do we have an appointment?"

"Si, Amy. I stopped by the office earlier for our two PM, but you were no there. Just a sign. Family emergency. You are OK, Amy?"

"Yes, Miriam, I'm going to be OK. But it's going to be a few days before I can actually start rescheduling appointments. I'm so glad you called. Can I please have your number again?"

"Oye! Amy? What happen?"

"The office was broken into and I was attacked. I need your number because they stole my client book. Can I please have your number? When I figure out where I am going to be seeing clients I will call you to reschedule immediately."

"Oye! Amy! That is terrible! I glad you are OK. My number is probably on your caller ID right now."

"OK, Miriam. You're right. It is. I will write it down and call you as soon as I'm ready to start scheduling."

"OK, Amy. Feel better soon. I talk to you soon I think."

Amy breathed a sigh of relief as she hung up the phone and decided to just save the number in her phone's contacts instead of writing it down on a piece of paper until she got another client book to fill. Maybe if she had just kept them all there to begin with she wouldn't be in this situation. Then again, maybe she was lucky that they had only taken the book and not her phone as well.

In the center of the house Amy could hear Maddy greeting Leon coming in the door. She couldn't hear exactly what they were saying, but Leon didn't sound like his usually carefree self. He sounded upset, agitated. It sounded as if Maddy was trying to soothe him. Amy swung her feet onto the floor next to the bed and searched with a big toe for her house shoes. She slipped her feet into them as she stood up and headed to the door. Liza followed and slipped into the courtyard as Amy rounded the hall corner to the center of the house. Maddy was putting a giant vase of sunflowers on the coffee table and Leon was holding Amy's bowl and the big smokey quartz point from above her office door.

"Just slow down, Baby. Put your things down and go wash your face. I'll pour us a couple drinks and then you can tell me everything." Maddy was saying as she sat the vase down and turned back towards Leon. She stopped with a small surprise upon seeing Amy. They were all still getting used to each other. "Oh, Amy! I thought you were sleeping, Dear. The sunflowers are for you, evidently." Maddy said pointing to the strangely familiar looking arrangement.

"Yeah. Those and more." Leon extended his hands with the bowl and the rock towards Amy. "Thank you, Leon. Let me go put these in my room." Amy took the items one at a time from Leon and positioned them carefully in her arms. They fit one in each of Leon's large hands, but Amy needed to cradle them carefully in her arms to hold on to them. She turned to take them back to the room.

"What about the flowers?" Leon asked behind her. Amy stopped for a second while she answered.

"They're so pretty. Just leave them where everyone can enjoy them."

"OK. Do you want Maddy to pour you a drink too? You *need* to hear what I have to say." Leon called after Amy who had disappeared down the hall.

"I'll have whatever you guys are having." Amy called from within the room where she was placing the bowl and the stone on the nightstand with the alarm clock and her flashback notebook.

Leon placed his tool box and the small metal lock box containing his gun on the floor just inside the door. Maddy returned with three bourbon sodas and saw the lock box for the first time in over thirty years.

“Leon! Is that what I think it is?” She asked, shocked. Leon was sheepishly looking at his hands.

“I need to wash my hands. Can we talk about *that* later? In private?” He implored her just as Amy appeared around the corner with her hands free.

“If you guys need some privacy, just let me know. I can go for a walk for a bit.” Amy told them with a smile.

“Don’t be silly. We don’t need privacy from you. A husband and wife can naturally have such personal conversation before they go to sleep at night.” Maddy explained to Amy while watching her husband disappear down the other hall towards their bedroom suite. Maddy sat one of the three glasses on a side table and handed one to Amy bumping it lightly with the other glass in a cheers gesture before taking a sip. Amy nodded and took a sip as well.

“Dinner smells great, Maddy. What are you making in there? Do you need any help?”

“That’s OK. There’s not a whole lot to do at this point. Not until the lasagna is done baking. I have the salad done already. It just needs tossed with the dressing when we sit down. Let’s have a seat in the living room until he gets back out here.”

Amy followed Maddy to the sofa. The two women sat on either end turned towards each other. Amy slipped her feet out of her house shoes and tucked them up under herself. Maddy sat reclining somewhat with her legs crossed at the knees.

“Did you have a good rest?” she asked Amy.

“Oh, I napped some, but I was reading just now.”

“Something good, I hope?” Maddy asked.

“It’s very good, but I’m not sure I’m ready to be reading it right now. I think I might need some distance. It’s kind of a serendipity.” Amy started to explain as Leon returned with his hands and face washed, hair damp and brushed back from his face wearing a clean T-shirt and sweat pants instead of his button down and cover-alls.

“Your drink is right over there.” Maddy told him pointing to the sweating glass on the side table. Leon nodded in appreciation and went to it holding it up to the room in a gesture of cheers before taking a sip.

“Man that’s the stuff!” Leon said smacking his lips and heading for one of the two large armchairs adjacent to the sofa and across from the TV. Maddy watched him as he sat down being careful not to spill his drink.

“So, what’s the story with the sunflowers?” Maddy asked Leon nodding with her nose and forehead towards the giant arrangement situated somewhat between them on the coffee table. “They’re real pretty.” Amy offered, thinking Leon had gotten them for her for a second, but then remembering the conversation from earlier.

“Some guy named Jack brought them by the office for you today. He wanted to see you. He said he was Doug’s boyfriend’s daughter’s husband or something...I can’t quite remember. He’s related to Doug somehow anyway.”

Amy thought the name sounded familiar from the conversation she and Doug had over drinks that one time at *The Whitewash*.

“Yeah? I’m sure Doug just mentioned to him something about what happened at the office.” Amy offered giving Doug and this Jack person the benefit of the doubt — in contrast to the accusatory tone in Leon’s voice. Maddy was biting at the corner of the inside of her lip impatiently.

“So you know this clown, Jack, then?” Leon asked Amy.

“No, but the name sounds familiar. I think I remember Doug mentioning him. Why?”

“Why? Because he told me he felt bad and wanted to give you flowers because Doug said he helped do this to you!”

Amy almost spit out the drink in her mouth. Instead a little went up her nose when she tried to swallow. She covered her face trying to regain her composure.

“What?! Doug did what?”

Leon was nodding his head emphatically up and down. “That’s what I said. Doug helped do this to you. This Jack-guy told me Doug’s boyfriend told him Doug said two guys came to his office to question him about a client he’s seeing currently who happens to be the wife or daughter or something of some mob jerk and they wanted to know about you and your clients and threatened Doug so he drugged some coffee and gave it to you for them and they beat you up and did whatever. He helped carry you into your apartment.” Leon finished looking at Amy as she took in what he was saying to her. Maddy was shaking her head back and forth in disapproval.

“Some people. Did you talk to this Doug person?” Maddy asked.

“Well, no. I wanted to talk to Amy first and maybe even the police. I think I’m going to call Juno.”

“No. Wait.”

Leon and Maddy turned toward Amy who chugged her drink and looked at them.

“Wait. Don’t call him just yet. You’ll probably just get his voice mail and he’s coming here tomorrow morning to pick me up to go get my car anyway. I need to sit with this information right now and I think Maddy has made another delicious dinner. Can’t we just enjoy that?”

“I don’t see why not. Sounds reasonable to me.” Maddy said as she got up and swiped Amy’s empty glass from the coffee table in front of her. “Let me fill that for you.” she said as she moved toward the kitchen.

“Thanks for bringing my stuff, Leon. I can’t imagine how that bowl made it without being broken. It should have been on the floor with that stone and shattered in a hundred pieces.”

“Yeah. I know. I’ve been thinking about that too.” Leon said.

“It’s the strangest thing. I haven’t said anything about it to anyone in a very long time. I think the last person I mentioned something like this to was my last boyfriend, but Lord knows that’s been a while, now.” Amy laughed.

“No, no. What is it Amy? You can tell me.” Leon said making a gesture as if he were locking his mouth with a key. Amy smiled and cocked her head to the side slightly.

“It’s nothing. It’s just, my whole life, whenever something scary has happened there has always been something like that bowl to just, I don’t know, let me know that someone or something is watching out for me. See, it’s nothing. It’s silly.”

“I think you and I both know that isn’t silly. It’s probably a Grandparent loving you from beyond the grave.” Leon offered sincerely. Amy shook her head.

“Maybe, but I don’t know why. I never really knew any of my Grandparents and I think one of them might still be alive in a nursing facility of some sort up in Canada. My family isn’t exactly what you’d call close or anything. But, then again, maybe it’s my Great Aunt Bella. I only met her a couple times, but she left me some Art when she died. I think I’m the only niece she ever actually met.”

Leon laughed. “I don’t know what to tell ya. If I were Maggie I might tell you it was someone from a past life!”

Amy smiled. “And who knows? She might be right about that.”

Maddy appeared between the two of them with her hands covered in oven mitts.

“Dinner is ready and your drink is on the table, Amy.”

Leon finished his drink and handed his glass toward Maddy who just looked at it.

“What about my drink?”

"It's still in the bottle. Come on. Let's eat." Maddy said to Leon and turned toward the already set dining table.

After dinner Amy helped clear the dishes from the table but Leon wouldn't let her wash any of them. Maddy excused herself to take a bubble bath so Amy decided to take a walk. Leon smiled and told her to take her phone with her, just in case. Amy went back to her room and fished a pair of Keds out of her suitcase. She tucked her phone in the pocket of her jeans and the house key in the other pocket. When she got back she'd have to remember to put the key on the ring with her other keys so it didn't get lost. Amy stepped out of her room and slid the sliding glass door open into the center courtyard. Liza was lying on her side next to the koi pond watching the fish swim back and forth. She looked at Amy and meowed softly as she passed by.

"It's OK, Liza. Mummy is going to take a short walk...to get out and get some fresh air."

The kitty seemed satisfied with this explanation and went back to watching the fish swim. Amy could hear the water running in Maddy's tub. She had mentioned earlier in passing they had a jacuzzi. Amy slipped out the front gate locking it behind her.

The shadows were long against the sidewalk as Amy headed to her right and down the long curved street. Across the street she saw the magnolia tree in the neighbors yard. It's leaves were green and glossy but there were no buds or flowers. Amy didn't know when a magnolia tree was supposed to bloom. She just knew they smelled lovely when they did. Being alone outside, Amy felt exposed and a little like a child being given the privilege of crossing the street alone for the first time. It was just a common suburban street, but Amy saw the World through new eyes. It was only a little before seven but there could be danger around any corner. Who knew when and where her attacker might find her again. Amy's heart began to pound in her throat and she looked back toward the house nearly deciding it was too dangerous to continue her walk, but she stopped herself. She wouldn't live in fear. She couldn't just give up and stay in the bedroom in Maddy and Leon's house for the rest of her life. Something told her Leon wouldn't mind if she did, but that wasn't the kind of life she wanted to live. That's not the type of person she was. She was pretty sure just around the curve the street became a cul du sac. She made a deal with herself that she would walk down to the cul du sac and back. That would be enough for today. Tomorrow she was going to have to face driving and time alone with Juno in his car, and probably more questions.

As she walked Amy thought about Boethius and his conversations with Lady Philosophy. Amy tossed around whether or not it was reasonable of Lady Philosophy to have been so hard on the poor guy for feeling bereft. After all, wasn't it reasonable to feel hurt at being unjustly attacked, having your life turned upside down and ultimately put to death without any good reason or recourse? Wasn't it human? Wasn't the desire for justice justified? Wasn't it reasonable? At the same time Amy was keenly aware of how out of control the situation was. She couldn't be held accountable for the actions of the men who hurt her...even Doug. Especially Doug! Goodness, Doug! She couldn't believe Doug would do something like this to her — to anyone. Why didn't he tell the police? What had they threatened him with? She could only imagine. If they did what they did to her, what were they willing to do to Doug? Still, he betrayed her! Then she remembered the cards that fell from her deck when she left her office as it was being vandalized. She had assumed Jonas was who the Hanged Man card was talking about, but maybe it was Doug. Either way, the shoe fit. There was enough betrayal to go around. Just as she started to think about the Paige of Cups a loud ruckus above her caused her to look to the skies. Above her a flock of over thirty parrots flew in an elongated yoni-like formation overhead. The green, blue, yellow and red of their feathers flashed like a team of paper kites at Shoreline on a Sunday in June. The birds squeaked and flapped and dipped and swooped in synchrony. Amy turned around in awe following them with her eyes raised. Soon they disappeared out of site back around the corner from where she had come and were gone. Amy walked along the curb of the cul du sac and headed back towards the house. The sun was low in the sky and in the short time since she left it had switched from early evening to dusk. As she turned the corner she could hear the birds once more and remembered what Maddy said about the magnolia tree. As she approached the house she saw them, all thirty some of them, perched in the flowerless tree squawking merrily. Just before Leon and Maddy's driveway she saw a long green feather and picked it up. Liza would love to play with that. She put it in her pocket with her phone.

As she entered the house through the main door in the courtyard, Amy saw Liza was curled up on Leon's lap in his arm chair. Maddy was in the arm chair next to him and they were watching Wheel of Fortune. Amy wondered what Maddy would have to say to Lady Philosophy about things. As Amy passed the old couple, Liza didn't even lift her face to look in Amy's direction. "Well, I guess I know where Leon stands with Liza." Amy thought to herself as she slipped down the hall to her room to draw herself her own hot bath. Maybe Juno would walk her up to her apartment tomorrow while she picked up a few other things. She was pretty sure she had a

couple bath bombs from Lush one of her clients had given her last Christmas. She had kept them in her lingerie drawer since her apartment only had a stand up shower, not a tub; and she wanted to check her mail as well. Every couple years or so her brother broke down and sent her a letter around this time of year. It's not that she expected the letter from him or anything, but it was the time of year one might arrive and it sure would be nice to feel like she actually had a family right now.

CHAPTER 10

Someone Said They'd Been Gyped

Juno lifted the razor to his up-stretched throat and dragged it along the skin to the side of his adams apple. He tapped the razor on the edge of the sink sending the gathered shaving foam and tiny hairs into the porcelain bowl with a splat, then rinsed the blade under a stream of hot water and repeated the action methodically until his face and throat were smooth and shadow free. Then he ran the hottest water over a washcloth and wrung it out allowing his hands to blush a bright red against the heat. Blotting shaving foam residue from his cheeks, chin and neck he appraised his reflection in the mirror. The Chief had asked him if he needed to take a little time for R&R the day before when he dropped his car off for the night. Juno scrutinized his face now looking for signs of fatigue the Chief might have been seeing. He didn't see any. His complexion was bright. His eyes were sharp and alert. He wasn't sure what the problem was or why the Chief was concerned. His paperwork was all up to date. His weapons were all clean and accounted for. He was hoping to finally get a permanent partner assignment soon. That was the only thing that was really bothering him about work...that and the fact that no one internally seemed to be interested in returning his calls recently. He had called Sunnyvale with some questions about an open investigation they currently had against this Mike Musgraves because there were some striking similarities. He wanted to see the toxicology report from the other woman who had been similarly assaulted. He had been especially interested to find out more once he learned the victim in the Sunnyvale case also read Tarot, had her pubic hair removed, and was around the same age as Amaranth. But so far, no response was forth coming and now the off-hand comment from the Chief wasn't sitting right with him. It almost felt like someone on the force was protecting this Musgraves fella. Juno had heard of other corruption issues in other precincts, but not in Mountain View. He knew he was technically crossing a line taking Amaranth to her apartment today to pick up her car. He knew he really should have Sunnyvale take care of it since she lived in Sunnyvale. But this was his case, damn it. It started in Mountain View and Sunnyvale didn't seem interested in doing a damn thing to help. So, he would do what he thought was right. Amaranth, of course, had no idea that any of this was an issue.

Amaranth. Juno liked saying her name to himself. She asked him to call her Amy, so to her face he did. But in his mind he always called her Amaranth. After their first meeting he had looked up the name, because he had never heard of it before. Upon learning what amaranth was he was a

little confused. It seemed a strange thing to name a child. Would someone ever name their child Wheat or Sorghum or stranger yet, Corn? But somehow the unusual name suited Amy in Juno's mind...far more, at least, than the shortened version, Amy, did. Juno opened the medicine cabinet and found the bottle of aftershave his mother sent him in his stocking last Christmas and opened it for the first time. He brought the open mouth of the bottle to his nose and sniffed. It smelled of cedar and tobacco and something lightly floral he couldn't quite place. It seemed pleasant enough, not too strong. He dumped a splash into his palm, rubbed his hands together then slapped the stuff on his neck and cheeks. A little spot of blood was rising in a follicle just below his jaw line on the right. He tore a corner off a tissue and stuck it on the spot while he ran water into the sink to rinse the spent shave foam down the drain, then wiped the bowl clean with the wash cloth.

On his way out of the bathroom he picked up his kevlar vest from a chair next to his bed and hoisted it on. Then he opened his closet and pulled a freshly laundered and starched shirt from the rack and secured it over the vest tucking everything neatly into his trousers. He secured his belt and holster then attached his badge and body camera. Last he picked up his duffle bag with his gym clothes, jeans and polo shirt for after work and headed for his front door. Just before walking out the door he stopped to sprinkle a pinch of flake food into his fish tank. The bobble-eyed gold fish swam in excited circles grabbing the brightly colored flakes. Juno sighed as he locked the door behind him. Hopefully the coffee in the staff room wouldn't be burned when he got there and there would be a cherry danish left. Simms usually put one aside for him if he got there first, but Juno didn't count on Simms. No one did.

Normally Juno wore street clothes into work and dressed in the locker room but he shaved this morning, so he suited up at home. Plus, he wasn't feeling as comfortable in the locker room these days. One of the new hires was gay and had accused another guy of sexual harassment when he said something to him about walking around the locker room naked. Juno just wasn't interested in the drama. He wasn't there when the actual incident happened, and he could believe either side's story. He knew Johnson had a habit of making off-color comments to everyone, including Juno. Juno also knew Guzman was overly sensitive and he just wasn't interested in taking sides. So, he had started to suit up at home more often and had even joined a gym in San Jose to avoid the in-house facility. He still kept stuff in his locker sometimes

though. And he kept all his work files locked in his desk. He never brought things like that home. It wasn't worth it for his own sanity.

As he pulled the key out of his Wrangler Juno caught sight of himself in the rearview mirror. The piece of tissue was still stuck to his jaw. He plucked the tab of paper from his face and rolled it between his fingers letting it fall to the floor. He locked his doors and trudged into his desk, tucking the duffle bag down by his feet. It was still dark outside as a number of officers trudged in, like him, for the shift change. Guys and gals coming off the night shift were either leaving for home or ducking into the locker room to wash up and change before leaving. Everyone had their own lives and schedules and Juno didn't bother to keep track. He had become even more secluded in his personal practices since picking up Amaranth's case and the strange way no one seemed to want to answer any of his questions. He was starting to feel like he was being watched. A number of times he thought he had caught co-workers giving him what felt like judgmental sideways stares. But he was probably just imagining things. Or was he? He couldn't be sure.

As Juno opened his laptop to sign in and check his email a small envelope slipped out. His name was printed in even block letters on the front and it was sealed tightly from corner to corner. Juno looked from side to side to see if anyone had seen what had just happened. No one appeared to be paying him any attention. Careful to not expose the envelope to his body cam, Juno folded it in half and stuffed it in his front right pants pocket before sitting down. He'd have a look at the envelope in the bathroom or some other private place. Someone had obviously gone to great lengths to conceal passing on to him whatever the envelope contained.

It was a quarter to six when Juno opened his email. Thankfully, the background inquiry he had submitted on Amaranth had come back. He opened the file. No arrests. No tickets. No marriages. No children. No nothing. She was squeaky. Five years ago she had been entered into LiveScan when she taught a meditation class for high school age kids for the City of Sunnyvale's Community Center. No complaints. No violations. She had an older brother, Dale Herman Gonder, Marine Lieutenant Colonel, currently serving and stationed in Jordan. Wow. He hadn't been expecting that. Her father, Gary Dean Gonder, Esq. was partner in a small firm, Gonder & Ferris, specializing in patent law in Hoboken, New Jersey. Her mother, Elizabeth Shareen (Farouq) Gonder was a retired show dog groomer and amateur stone cutter. Was dog

grooming something you could “retire” from, Juno wondered to himself. Gary had a couple recent tickets for speeding and Elizabeth had an outstanding parking ticket, but other than that, there was nothing strange. All of Amaranth’s other family seemingly lived in other Countries or were non-existent. The only other known associates listed in the file were: Denis Devon Ellington, aka DeeDee, aka Klinger, aka Poop-Shooter-Ellington, retired Air Force Colonel, Kevin Turley, a middle class life insurance salesman in Rochester, New York, and Duane Tibman, deceased, farm worker/drifter. Amy had a couple years of community college in New Jersey years ago, but otherwise had been a Reiki Master/Teacher and Tarot Reader for almost two decades. She’d lived in the same apartment for the past fifteen years. Before her current office she had offered her services through the East/West Book Store on Castro in Mountain View, and she had taught a number of workshops across the US and Canada. Nothing seemed particularly sinister or out of line. No red flags other than she seemed to be a bit of a loner. Juno wanted to get his hands on that client book. He could understand Amaranth not wanting to bring her work into her personal life. He felt quite the same, but he still thought it a bit strange that she didn’t have *any* information on her clients in her possession. Then again, he had never actually met a *real* Tarot reader. His mother had always warned him against “inviting the devil” into his life with such things. He always thought his mother was a bit extreme in her views, but he also had never been interested in tempting evil, even if it were a farce. While he saw no real harm in Amaranth or the work she did, he also had never been interested in knowing the future, so to speak. It ruined the surprise. He also knew a lot of the women in her line of work were, in fact, in bed with the underground. But the Gypsies he had encountered in a couple cases kept office space very different from Amaranth’s set-up and had skipped town shortly after he had crossed paths with them. Then it occurred to him...was Amaranth a Gypsy? She didn’t look like the women he had encountered in the pick-pocket ring a couple years back...or the boys he picked up for stripping copper pipes from houses being renovated last fall. He didn’t know what to think. What was a Gypsy anyway? Wasn’t it just a label, like Metalhead, or Drifter, or Thief, or Cop for that matter? He wasn’t sure. But he sure knew what it meant when someone said they’d been “Gyped”.

Juno stared at the photo of Amaranth from her LiveScan on file. Her hair was a good ten inches longer now than it was then, and she was twenty pounds or so heavier, but that wasn’t so strange for a woman her age. What did seem a little strange though were her eyes. In the photo her eyes seemed so much more bright and hopeful. Maybe the attack had stolen the sparkle

and smile from her eyes, but maybe it had been something else. Kevin Turley had a couple complaints for suspected domestic violence in the past twelve months. He made a note to ask Amaranth about Mr. Turley. Mr. Tibman had died in a farm equipment malfunction more than a decade ago. Juno doubted he would have had anything to do with the current issue. But, Mr. Turley may be a different case. Jealous lovers, even ex-lovers, could pull some horrible antics when push came to shove. He remembered when he was in high school and his much older sister, Elaine, had a jealous boyfriend who paid some kid to cut her brake lines. Luckily there had also been a problem with the old vehicle's ignition, unrelated to the sabotage, and the car refused to turn over when Elaine tried to start it and so, had it towed. They found the cut brake lines when the car was taken to the garage for maintenance. Chuck was arrested after the kid snitched on him and the whole incident was in large part what had propelled Juno into a career in law enforcement. Now Elaine was married with five kids out near Mount Shasta. Juno joined them for holidays, but last Christmas had been hard. He felt a sharp pang of loneliness when his brother-in-law, Shane, had given Elaine a kiss after she sat the standing rib roast on the table for dinner. He wasn't attracted to his sister, but he did find himself envying the fact that Shane had a strong and loving partner to share his life. Juno was facing down forty in a couple years and was tired of the bar scene but had no idea how or where else to meet women in The Bay Area. As soon as he told women he was a cop they either became super clingy and wanted him to look up every guy they had ever swapped spit with, or they ran in the opposite direction as if he had the plague. His mother still lived back in Missouri and was always telling him to go back to church. She said he'd be "sure to find a nice girl there". Juno hadn't been to church in years and wasn't interested. The last time had been for his Father's funeral, and the time before that had been for his Grandfather's funeral. He honestly wasn't sure if he actually believed in a God and thought it would be false advertising and a bit disingenuous for him to attend services just to meet women, particularly women from whom he had such a different life perspective. He didn't have the heart to tell his mother the truth of his feelings. Jesus was everything to his mother, especially since his Father passed away.

Juno clicked on the print icon to print out the file on Amaranth as well as a couple others for the other two cases he was currently working. He was hoping to make Detective at his next performance review. The printer was located in the staff room next to the coffee cart and he was way over due for his dose of caffeine. Clipboard with pen in hand he headed toward the staff room taking care to make sure his duffle bag was entirely concealed beneath his desk so no

one would trip over it. The pages were printing as he entered the staff room. The smell of coffee filled his nose and the box of danish sat with the tape seal still apparently untouched. Juno smiled and thought it might turn out to be his lucky day. He poured himself a steaming cup of black coffee that smelled fresh and just right and plucked the only cherry danish from the box. Then he scooped the papers from the printer and headed back to his desk. He sipped the coffee and broke off pieces of danish as he continued to review his case files and answer email. As he stuffed the last piece of danish in his mouth he glanced at his watch and saw it was a little after nine. He drank the last sip of coffee and decided it was time to visit the restroom. He didn't really need to go, but he wanted to try before hitting the streets for the day and he wanted to have a look at what was in that envelope before going to pick up Amaranth from the Tubbs' home. He pat his pocket to make sure the envelope was still there then he removed his body cam and headed for the single occupancy bathroom on the next floor.

On his way to the restroom, Juno had to pass the Chief's office. The door was open and he could hear the Chief talking gregariously with another officer as he approached. As he passed the door, the Chief called out to him.

"Juno! Hey, make sure you check in with me before the end of your shift today, K?"

Juno stopped and turned around to face the Chief. He didn't recognize the uniformed officer in the office with him.

"Sure. Let me know if there is a time that works best for you, otherwise I will just make sure I come by to look for you when I turn the car in later."

"That should be fine, Juno. Oh, and Juno."

"What's that, Sir?"

"Don't waste too much of your time on that Gonder case. The Smythe case is the one that really needs attention."

"OK, Sir. Thank you."

Juno turned and walked quickly to the restroom door that was slightly ajar five yards or so down from the Chief's office and slipped inside. The light came on as the door closed. Juno locked the door and pulled the envelope from his pocket. Why on Earth did the Chief want him to focus on the Smythe case? Since when were a few stolen bikes more important than an attempted homicide and brutal sexual assault? The envelope was difficult to open. It seemed to have been glued shut with something more than just the regular gum of the envelope. He ended up tearing a corner off of the enclosed paper to free the contents from the plain paper pouch. It was a

piece of eight and a half by eleven standard printer paper folded into quarters. Juno sat the torn envelope on the edge of the sink as he unfolded the paper. There were two photos on the paper, one above the other, and to the right of the photos was some print. The first image was of Mike Musgraves. Next to it was some background info including his last known address. Below it was a photo of another man who looked a whole lot like Mike Musgraves just with a different hair cut and wearing an Alameda County Sheriff's uniform. It said his name was Steve Musgraves and gave some info on him. Bottom line was Mike Musgraves had a slightly older brother, Steve, who was a cop. Well, that explained a few things, but now Juno was angry. He wasn't willing to let this guy get away with what he did to Amaranth just because his big brother was a cop. He had heard how they did things in Alameda and wasn't impressed. If anything he was disgusted. Juno refolded the paper, tucked it back in the envelope and pushed the envelope back into his pocket. Then he took a couple minutes to empty his bowels and wash his hands before heading back to his desk. The Chief's office door was now closed but he could hear the muffled sounds of two men talking behind the door. Juno got the feeling the Chief might know about the envelope.

It was now nine thirty and Juno knew he needed to get moving if he were going to be on time to pick up Amaranth. After that he just might go check out the address for Mike Musgraves. Juno replaced his body cam and gathered his duffle bag and clip board with files and notes and went to pick up his car from the lot. It was a good thing he didn't have a partner yet. Otherwise, he'd have trouble going to pick up Amaranth. Today was feeling like his lucky day. As Juno pulled his car from the lot and onto the street he found himself imagining Amaranth and what she might be wearing or say to him when he arrived. He saw her face with tears from the other day and the sound of her voice as she had spoken through her bedroom door in her apartment. He knew to expect she'd be wearing black. He only took a quick glance in her bedroom closet, but just about everything in there had been black. It was kind of like her uniform, he thought as he brushed a couple danish crumbs from just above the badge secured on the breast of his uniform's shirt while he waited for a light to turn green.

Just a couple minutes before ten he pulled into the driveway of the Tubbs' residence. Leon was standing in the front doorway of the courtyard when he pulled up. Quickly he checked his breath in a cupped hand and dug around in the console for a mint or piece of gum. As he placed a stick of gum in his mouth he glimpsed himself in the rearview mirror. He had missed a couple hairs

just under his nose. Oh well. He was human. He had tucked the duffle bag in the trunk of the cruiser but his clipboard was on the passenger seat beside him. He picked it up and eased it between the drivers seat and the console to the side of the shot gun before getting out of the vehicle.

“Boy am I glad to see you!” Leon Tubbs said as Juno mounted the wide low steps leading up to the doorway. Juno smoothed a hand over his head as he looked at the older man.

“Oh yeah? Well, that’s not something I get to hear very often.” Juno replied with a small laugh.

“Yeah. Well, we have some things to tell you.” Leon started.

“Is Amy OK? Is she ready.” Juno inquired.

“I’m fine. I’m right here. I’m ready to go.” Amy said from behind Leon. Juno hadn’t seen her there until she spoke and he felt his breath catch slightly. Her long auburn hair was loose around her face and she was wearing a long black T-shirt dress that fit her very well and large carved stone hoop earrings. She looked beautiful and Juno was acutely aware for the first time that he was smitten with this somewhat mysterious woman. Leon smiled at the younger man recognizing the expression on his face. If Amy saw it she made no indication.

“Did you have something you needed to tell me before we leave?” Juno asked Leon and Amy feeling his face blush a bit.

“You bet we do!” Leon said excitedly. “Why don’t you step into the courtyard for a minute?” Leon stepped aside making room for Juno to enter the courtyard and closed the door behind him.

“What is it?” Juno asked Amy who was now standing directly in front of him. She was wearing flat shoes so the height difference wasn’t so pronounced as it had been the other day. He was a strong five foot four inches and she was probably five foot seven or eight. Not as big of a difference as it had seemed at first.

“Doug Spears did it! Well, he helped do it to her!” Leon spat before Amy could say anything. She was just looking at Juno, the two having locked eyes. The air between them seemed to stand still until Leon’s words sunk into Juno’s ears. He turned toward Leon.

“Doug Spears? I thought he was gay?”

“Well, I didn’t say he raped her. But he was the one who drugged her and he helped carry her into her apartment.”

Juno looked back and forth between Leon and Amy as the two explained to him about Jack and the sunflowers and Doug and what they had pieced together. When they finished Leon had his arm around Amy’s shoulder and Juno was very aware of being jealous of Leon’s position. At this

moment there was nothing he wanted more than to hold Amaranth close to him and whisper in her ear that he would keep her safe forever. But first things first.

"I can follow you two over to Amy's place to pick up her car if you want." Leon offered. Juno was a little disappointed at the idea but quickly remembered his authority.

"No, that's not necessary. I expect you have work to attend to today Mr. Tubbs and I don't want to keep you." Juno replied. Leon smirked a knowing smile at the younger man.

"You're right. I do. If you need me I will be at Amy's office site after lunch. I have to go to one of the other sites first today. And Doug should be in his office until around five thirty. He usually has clients all day on Wednesdays." Leon offered helpfully.

"Thank you." Juno replied and turned to Amy. "Are you ready?" he asked her somewhat nervously.

"Yes." Amy said tugging at her bag on her right shoulder.

"Follow me." Juno said and headed toward his car. Amy followed a couple steps behind.

"You kids be careful out there!" Leon offered hopefully after them. Juno just nodded, a bit annoyed, and opened the passenger side door for Amy indicating for her to sit up front and not in the back like a criminal would.

As Juno situated himself behind the steering wheel he smoothed his hand over the front of his shirt resting the palm of his hand securely over his body cam and looked at Amy. She was looking around the car at all the law enforcement vehicle modifications. Her eyes finally rested on the shotgun positioned between her and the very nervous Juno.

"Amy. I..." Juno stopped for a moment lowering his gaze from her un-expecting face.

"Amy. I'm sorry. I have to tell you something and I don't know that it's the right thing to do, but I know I just can't *not* say anything."

The expression on Amy's face went from un-expecting and calm to a furrowed brow.

"Is there something wrong? Have Leon or I done something wrong? Should we have called you last night when we found out about Doug?"

"No. I mean, yeah you could have, but that's not what I'm trying to say to you here." They were still in Leon's drive way but Leon had gone in the house and was nowhere to be seen. Juno decided to take a chance.

"Amy, it's totally inappropriate, but I think I'd regret it if I didn't say anything. Amy, I'm very attracted to you." Juno said then lifted his eyes to meet Amy's but she had sat back in her seat and was looking straight ahead out the windshield.

“Amy. Please say something. You have no idea. I’m so embarrassed. This is entirely unfair of me. I’m sorry”

“No. It’s OK.” Amy said. She was thinking of the Paige of Cups from the day before. “It’s OK. You’ve been very kind to me.” Amy said and turned to Juno with a smile. Juno still had his hand over the camera.

“Do you think I could take you to dinner some time?” Juno asked bravely.

“Sure. My schedule opened up recently.” She joked. Juno relaxed.

“That would be great. How about this Friday night, then?”

“Sure. Pick me up at eight?”

Juno smiled and rubbed the back of his hand under his nose where the stray hairs missed by his razor tickled his knuckle.

“I’ll look forward to it. Now, let’s not talk about it anymore. Let’s stick to business.” Juno said as he started the car and backed out of the driveway. Amy sat back into her seat and looked out the passenger side window with her face turned away from Juno as he drove. She had a strange light feeling in her chest. Juno was sweet, and more than a little handsome.

CHAPTER 11

Some Mommy Time

Doug Was walking haltingly up the stairs struggling a little with Stewart's carrier. Doug wasn't the only one with a spreading waist line. Stewart was quite ample as well these days.

"Stew-poo, no more treats this week. Nothing but crunchies...for you AND Daddy." Doug had taken time to wash some lettuce and veggies for a salad before he left his house and had all the clean chopped items individually packed, including a side of oil and vinegar, in an insulated lunchbox he had since he was in college. Stewart meowed in clear objection.

"Really Stew-pie, it's not so bad. You can still catch meeces." Doug stopped just before the top step. He could hear Maggie talking to Tubbs in the hall behind the offices.

"They were gorgeous, Tubbs! Where were they from? I just Love sunflowers and that vase! It was just like a Van Gogh painting!" Maggie squealed. Doug's heart began to pound. Was Maggie talking about Jack's sunflowers? Why would Tubbs have any of Jack's sunflowers?

"I don't know where he got them. He was just dropping them off for Amy. I happened to see him and told him I would take them to her myself. Ask Doug next time you see him. He'd know. I'm sure." Tubbs answered Maggie.

So they *were* talking about Jack's sunflowers! Doug felt like he might throw up. Quickly, and as quietly as he could, he started back down the stairs and headed towards his car. He needed a mental health day himself now *and* to find out more about the sunflowers. He started his Escape and backed out of the parking space without even securing Stewart's carrier with a seatbelt. The carrier lurched forward with the weight of the fat kitty.

"Oh, Stew-poo, Daddy's sorry. We'll be home in a minute Big Guy. I promise. And then you can have kitty crack." Doug said going back on his earlier assertion. Stewart meowed softly and settled himself in the back of the carrier causing it to slide back into place on the seat.

Doug's mind was reeling. Should he call Eberly? Was it Eberly who brought the flowers? It wouldn't be unlike him, but it also wouldn't be unlike him to spill the beans either. Had Eberly told Tubbs about what Doug had done? Or had Mike or Oleg brought the flowers by? Had *they* found Eberly and Jack and Stephanie and hurt them too? Doug was beside himself. He didn't know just how much trouble he was in, if any, and he resented the entire situation. He didn't

have anything against Amy and he also didn't want anyone in his tiny world to get hurt. He knew he hadn't done anything wrong...really...other than be an accomplice to an assault. Oh my God! He was in so much trouble. He was going to lose his license! He was going to lose his house! He was going to lose....everything! Any why? Because he took on a new client? He just wanted to go home and lie down and close his eyes and wake up and have it be two weeks ago when his biggest concerns were switching to the next bigger hole in his belt, what to order at brunch, and Eberly chastising him for his poor fashion sense. This was all too much. He was so caught up in his thoughts, Doug blew right through a stop sign and nearly collided with an old Chinese woman driving a beat-up old Lexus. The woman honked and yelled something at him out her window, but Doug didn't care. He just wanted the relative safety of his bedroom and his fleece bathrobe.

Back in his townhouse Doug freed Stewart from his carrier and dropped his bag and lunchbox on the floor in the foyer then ran up the stairs to his bathroom and threw up. He hadn't had anything for breakfast other than a cup of Earl Grey with milk. The dairy tasted sour in the back of his throat and stomach acid stung inside his sinuses. Doug spat a gooey string of vomit and mucus in the toilet and wiped his mouth with a wad of tissue before blowing his nose and flushing it all down. Then he rinsed out his mouth and washed his face with cold water. Standing bent over the sink with his head under the stream, he let the cold water wet his head. Rubbing his hands over his face and scalp he felt the thinning patch at the crown of his head. Just one more insult for the day. Still hunched over the sink bowl, he turned off the spigot and felt around for the hand towel hanging on the wall next to the sink. Finding it, he wiped his face and blotted at his dripping hair. Stewart sat in the doorway looking at him quizzically, his orange and yellow striped tail with its white tip flicking back and forth around the kitty's bottom planted solidly on the floor.

"Oh, Stew-poo! Look at your stupid Daddy! It's OK kitty. We're OK." Doug lied to the cat scooping him up in his arms and holding his warm furry body to his cheek, hugging him tight. Stewart purred and relaxed his weight into his Daddy's hug. Doug took the kitty over to his bed and laid him carefully on the corner of the mattress.

"Daddy will be right back and we can have a good snuggle and maybe watch some TV." Doug picked up the remote from his nightstand and turned on the wall-mounted flat screen at the foot

of the bed. Some cooking show maven was whisking heavy whipping cream into a thick froth. Stewart settled in and watched while Doug plodded down the stairs to get his bag with his laptop and phone...plus a bag of potato chips and a soda. He took his lunch box into the kitchen and put it on the empty top shelf in the fridge then plucked a root beer from the bottom shelf and a bag of chips and bonito flakes from a cupboard and headed back up the stairs. Stewart was now laying on his back in a kind of C shape with his paws outstretched in the air and his white belly exposed. Doug sat the items in his hands down near his pillow and rubbed the kitty's belly. Stewart sprung into action biting playfully at his Daddy's hands.

"Oh, Stew-poo, what would Daddy do without you, Buddy?" Stewart looked at him blankly and winked one eye. Doug pulled off his clothes and rifled through a drawer looking for his grey elastic waisted jersey knit gym shorts and a soft well worn T-shirt from college and pulled his fleece robe from a hook on the wall and put it on. Sitting on the bed his dark trouser socks offended even *his* fashion sensibilities. So, he peeled them off tossing them into the corner in the direction of his hamper. Then he sprinkled some bonito flakes on the comforter for Stewart, cracked open the bottle of root beer and tore at the corner of the bag of potato chips. Crunching on a chip he pulled his laptop and cell phone out of his bag and started to dial his clients for the day. It was quarter of eleven. His first appointment was at eleven fifteen. With any luck he'd catch Sarah before she had left. It rang twice before going to voicemail. Damn. She was probably driving.

"Hi? Sarah? This is Dr. Spears. I'm very sorry to do this so last minute, but I was suddenly ill and need to cancel our appointment for today. Please give me a call back later and we can reschedule. Again, I'm so sorry for the last minute call. Talk to you soon." Doug hated leaving messages, but right now he didn't really have any good options. At least he wasn't totally lying... for once. He *had* actually gotten suddenly ill, hadn't he? Doug went through the list of four clients for the day and called leaving a message on voicemail for all but one. Paul's voicemail was full. It was annoying. Part of Paul's problem was he was so apathetic about everything in his life. Doug wasn't surprised his voicemail was full. He pulled up the client file on his laptop and found an email address then sent an email to Paul. When he was done he put the laptop back in his bag and sat with the phone resting in his lap.

Doug picked up the remote and pulled up the menu of his DVR. He needed something to distract him, to create a sense of normal, of comfort. And there it was: *Close Encounters of the*

Third Kind. He remembered for a moment he and his father watching the movie on TBS when he was seven or eight then building a mashed potato mountain at dinner and acting the famous dinner scene out with his father. His mother had yelled at both of them to stop it. His father had turned to his mother and said in all seriousness, "This is important. This means something." Then he and Doug had busted out laughing and Anya had gotten up from the table snatching both their unfinished plates from them and scraped the uneaten food into the trash. Later his father had taken him to Dairy Queen and told him they were both in the dog house. Now Doug was missing both his Mother *and* Father. He pressed play and turned down the volume to almost nothing. Stewart rolled back up into a ball next to Doug and rested his chin over Doug's ankle to watch.

Doug picked up his phone and looked at the "Favorites" list on his contacts. In the time since he and Eberly had started to cool things down Eberly had fallen from number one on the list to number seven. Galina was now number one. Doug dialed her first.

"Preevyet, Doug!" Galina answered.

"Hi Galina. I just wanted to call and check in. See how you're doing." Doug had a feeling in his stomach like the day before the first day of school.

"Oh, Doug, this old Bubbie is fine just fine. How are you, Dear? How is mister Eberly these days? Did he like the T-shirt? It made me think of him. That's why I purchase them."

Doug looked over to the chair next to his hamper and saw the T-shirts still folded with tags on them resting on the seat with a folded pair of old jeans.

"Oh, he Loved it. You know he does." Doug lied to the sweet old woman.

"Thant's nice, Dear. Are we still on for lunch Saturday?"

"Yes. Galina. Unless the good Lord says my time is up!" Doug laughed nervously.

"Don't be silly. I'll be rotting in the ground long before your time is up." Galina said with an air of annoyance.

"One never can tell, Bubbs." Doug reminded her.

"Oh, Doug, what's wrong, Dear? Maybe Galina will make lunch on Saturday? It's been some time since I made a pot of borscht or baked some good black bread. No?"

"Galina that would be wonderful!" Doug said sincerely. Anya had made borscht when Doug was growing up too, but she never used meat in her recipe. Doug relished the chunks of beef and the big round bone in Galina's soup and her bread was always a better texture than his mother's ever was. She used to bake double batches and give half to Anya every week until Doug

graduated from high school. After that, Galina stopped baking so much and Anya just bought seeded rye from a bakery.

“Well, I will look forward to seeing you then, Dear, and if you want mister Eberly is welcome to join us too since it’s such a special meal.”

“I’ll ask him Galina, but I think he has other plans already.” Doug had no idea if Eberly had plans, but even if they hadn’t been fighting, Doug didn’t feel like sharing this with him anyway. But Galina didn’t need to know that.

“Well maybe my new gentleman friend will join us. I think he’d like to meet you and I think I’d like you to meet him.” Doug almost choked on spittle.

“Oh, Galina. I do want to meet him, but can’t it just be us on Saturday? Just family.” Doug almost begged. He really had no interest in meeting Galina’s new gentleman friend. He was certain he was, in fact, no gentleman but he didn’t know how to explain that to Galina without upsetting her too much.

“Why, Doug, you sweet boy. Galina knows. You just need some mommy time.” Doug was relieved.

“Yes. Galina. I Love you.”

“I Love you too, Dear. Now, I need to go.”

“OK. Be safe and let me know if you need anything anytime. Even in the middle of the night. Even early in the morning. If you need anything, just call. OK?”

Galina laughed. “Of course Doug. You’re my baby too, my Love.”

“OK. See you later.”

“Yes. Bye-bye.”

“Bye.” Doug hung up and took a deep breath. Good old Galina. What a gem. No one could ever be a better aunt to Doug even if they were blood. Stewart shifted his weight and rubbed his face against Doug’s ankle. Doug reached down and rubbed the kitty’s ears then slumped back onto his pillow. He needed to call Eberly. He picked up the phone and pressed Eberly’s name on the contacts list. It only rang once.

“Douglas. What a surprise.” Eberly answered.

“Eb, we need to talk.”

“What? Shall I come by and get my drawer? Do you have it boxed up for me already? You know, I want that Deco side table I bought in BC last spring too. The only reason it’s in your place is because it didn’t fit in mine at the time and now I have room for it.” Eb lied. He didn’t have room

for it, but he thought it would make a lovely housewarming gift once Stephanie graduated and she and Jack settled in their new place. It would be perfect next to the Gettleman family chair. In the mean time he could squeeze it in his bedroom. It would be a little crowded, but it would only be temporary.

“That’s not why I called, but whatever you want. I don’t care about the table and if it’s over for us I’m a big boy and so are you.” Doug didn’t care about the table. He had never even liked it. He thought it was hideous. It was on the small landing in the middle of his staircase and Doug frequently stubbed his toe on it coming down the stairs in the morning.

“Well if that’s how it is...” Eberly started.

“Yeah. That’s how it is, Eb. Look, I just want to know, did you send sunflowers to Amaranth Gonder?”

Eberly was silent for a moment. Doug thought he had his answer.

“No. I didn’t.” He finally replied in a voice Doug had never heard before...a voice totally devoid of feminine aspect. The answer was like a sucker punch.

“Then who the fuck did, Eberly? Who the fuck sent Jack’s sunflowers to Amaranth Gonder?”

“Well, Lover. I may have told Jack-Jack and Steph-Steph about your little situation and Jack-Jack may have felt bad for the poor woman you so cruelly assaulted and he just may have taken her a big beautiful vase of flowers. But she wasn’t there so he gave them to some janitor.” Doug felt the blood rising to his face in anger and fear.

“You did what? We are definitely over. You are the worst boyfriend ever. Have you and I EVER had anything that was private between the two of us? ANYTHING?”

“Considering there was a man on either side of me getting their lollipop licked that first time we met, I’d have to say no, probably not.” Eberly was right in his recollection. There had been two other couples enjoying themselves at the truck stop that fateful night. Doug was not amused. He had always taken Eberly’s confidences very seriously, whether personal or work related. This was more betrayal than he could stand for.

“Then yeah, come get your shit tonight. I’ll have it by the curb where the trash belongs.”

Eberly let out a high pitched cut-off sound from the back of his throat before hanging up the phone.

Doug became light headed and his thoughts began to swim as his sight narrowed with anger and fear. Who all knew? Had they told the police yet? He closed his eyes and fell back onto the pillow but he was just a little too close to the wall and smacked the balding crown of his head on

the drywall leaving a small dent. He rolled to his side grasping the top of his head in pain. Stewart meowed and scrambled off the bed and into Doug's slightly open closet to hide. "Damn it! Stew-pie you better not pee in there!"

Doug got up and knelt down next to the bed and fished with one arm for a Rubbermaid container. He found an empty one among the others filled with winter sweaters and other cold-weather clothes he used when traveling and threw it on the bed. Then he went to his dresser and pulled out the drawer with Eberly's things and dumped it in. Then he went back in the bathroom and grabbed Eberly's toothbrush, toothpaste, aftershave, face wash and lotion and threw them on top of the pile of now unfolded clothes, sex toys and lube. He secured the lid and tore off his gym shorts replacing them with the jeans sitting on his chair. Reminded once again of the T-shirts from Galina, he took one and stuffed it in the box with Eberly's other things. Then he put on the plastic Adidas slides he saved for wearing in public showers and carried the box down the stairs and sat it by the door. Then he went back up to the landing and picked up the side table and carried it down as well. He stacked the box on top of the table then lifted both items up from the lip of the table and carried them out to the curb at the end of the driveway.

Back in the townhouse Stewart was sniffing the empty space where the table had once sat. Doug bent over and rubbed the kitty's ears. "Don't worry Stew-poo. I'm sure Eberly still Loves you. It's not your fault. Eb is just an asshole Daddy used to fuck." Stewart looked up at Doug and ran down the stairs to his bowl of crunchies. Doug stomped up the stairs to get his wallet, phone, sunglasses and keys. As he walked out the front door he had the sunglasses resting on his head. As he locked the door he called in to Stewart. "Back real soon, Stew-pie. Be good." He called through the door.

Doug situated himself behind the wheel of the Escape and backed out almost hitting the pile of Eberly's belongings. He stopped and pulled out his phone just long enough to text Eb:

You're shit's at the curb. Get it before gypsies steal it.

Then he finished backing out the driveway and sped off toward Palo Alto. Lunch hour traffic was heavy and it took Doug forty five minutes to get to downtown Palo Alto. He passed Jack and Stephanie's Bronco parked a few blocks from Jack's shop. It took almost twenty minutes but he finally found a parking spot just a couple blocks away. Dressed in his Dartmouth shirt, faded jeans, sunglasses and Adidas sandals on the Palo Alto street, Doug looked more like a Stanford

undergrad than he did a grown man with a private clinical practice. He could see Jack's shop. The door was open and Doug could see Jack behind the counter laughing with a woman holding a giant vase of roses. The sight of the flowers made him even more angry. If Eb's stuff was still at the curb when he got home he'd add the sunflowers on his coffee table to the pile. Otherwise he'd just enjoy smashing the vase and throwing the flowers in his compost bucket.

A bell chimed as Doug walked in the door of Jack's shop, *Masterpiece Flowers*. He almost knocked over a sandwich board with a color saturated photo of one of Jack's O'Keefe Iris arrangements. The shop was full of sunflowers and giant floribundas in black buckets. Jack looked at Doug with hatred as he scrambled to stop the sandwich board from toppling over while he and the woman at the counter continued to speak.

"Think nothing of it Linda. I'm just so happy your event was a success. You let me know. If this is going to be a quarterly thing for you now we can just put it on the calendar."

"Jack, that would be wonderful. I'll have Bethany call you later to officially set up the account." the woman said to Jack.

"Great. I look forward to it." Jack said and smiled. The top three buttons of his light blue oxford were unbuttoned and the neck band of his white t-shirt was stretched and rolled and there was a small mustard stain over his right breast. "Linda" turned around, roses in her arms, to walk out with an ear to ear grin and passed Doug without even acknowledging him.

"See you later, Jack!" she called over her shoulder as she walked out the door.

Jack and Doug waited for her to be out of sight before either spoke. Jack was first. He had the better view of the street from his position.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he wasted no time letting Doug know he wasn't welcome.

"Was it you who took sunflowers to my office?"

"Not your office, you piece of shit. To that poor woman you almost killed with your spinelessness."

"Whatever. You know you have mustard on your shirt? Maybe if you took time to breath between bites you wouldn't look like such a pig all the time."

"Nice, Doug. But today I'm the one with the upper hand." Jack had his hand under the counter looking for the handgun he bought the year before after those kids from East Palo Alto had robbed him at gunpoint. The gun was nestled in a hidden cubbyhole next to an alarm button he had installed around the same time. It would alert both the security company and the police.

"I'm pretty sure the police know about you and your charade by now, Doug."

Doug just shook his head back and forth. He wanted to choke the fat prick.

"And just what did you tell them?"

"Oh I didn't tell them anything. I told that Mr. Tubbs all about you though, and I have a feeling he might have made a phone call or two."

Doug lurched toward Jack but before he could get across the counter to grab and shake him Jack pulled the gun out and shot Doug twice, in the shoulder and chest, then pressed the alarm button. Doug laid on the floor of the shop, blood oozing out of the wounds, gasping for breath. Jack picked up the phone and dialed 9-1-1. He was crying.

"A man tried to attack me in my shop. I shot him. He's bleeding!" Jack screamed into the phone. It was the last thing Doug heard before passing out. He never heard the sirens or saw the EMTs that packed his wounds and hoisted him into the ambulance. Jack was loaded into the back of a Palo Alto police cruiser and taken to the station for questioning. Poor Jeff was left to mop up the mess and close the shop for the day. He hadn't seen any of it unfold. He had been in the back loading the delivery van for the afternoon run.

CHAPTER 12

It Was An Attitude

Juno had gotten up early that morning even though he didn't have anywhere special to be. After everything that had happened over the past two days he was, on one hand, relieved to have some time off, especially with pay. On the other hand, he felt like he was being punished for the bad behavior of other people, and that was something he resented. He had just left Amaranth with her car and was on his way to check out Mike Musgraves' last known address on Wednesday when he had gotten the call from the Chief over his radio to return to the station immediately. It was now Friday morning and he wasn't sure what, if anything, Amaranth knew yet. At least they'd have something to talk about over dinner later. He was pretty sure the Chief wouldn't approve of him having dinner with Amy but he didn't care at this point. He knew when he was being lied to and he didn't have any intentions of covering for crooked cops, even if it cost him his job. He had spent most of Thursday searching the internal job board for positions in other States. He was ready to leave California. There was so little support for officers, particularly if you weren't in the inner circle of "cool kids" on the force, which he most certainly wasn't. He never had been. California politics had been getting increasingly oppressive over the past couple years. At first he had enjoyed California's lingering remnants of Hippy Culture, but lately he was beginning to understand why his parents were so anti-hippie when he was growing up.

Juno had attended the Police Academy in Missouri the autumn following his high school graduation. After graduating from the Academy he had worked in his hometown of Parkville for almost two years before taking a beat position in Mountain View, following his big sister's lead, and moving out West. His mother had cried for a week when he told his parents he had taken the job and he had been in Mountain View ever since. He had been hoping to make detective now for almost five years. After seventeen years on the Mountain View Force he was starting to get the feeling that it was a futile case...especially now. Knowing that there were guys on the Force in California with brothers like Mike Musgraves he was starting to understand why his career was stalled and he was at home on a two week paid vacation. On a frustrated whim he had pulled up the internal jobs posting page Thursday morning...after going out and getting shit-faced drunk Wednesday night. It was the first time he had done that since he had turned twenty one and his buddy Franky had gotten engaged. That bachelor party had been wild and Franky

and Victoria divorced after only six months. After the ridiculous conversation he had with the Chief Wednesday afternoon, he had gone home, locked his weapons, badge and belt in his safe, changed into street clothes and headed out on foot looking for some kind of wholesome-ish trouble to get into to take his mind off everything. That was around four in the afternoon. He had stumbled back into his apartment around two thirty Thursday morning with the number of some woman called Sharon in his back pocket. He had no idea who Sharon was and was most certainly not going to call to find out. He was just glad to know he hadn't been a total loser sitting drinking alone all night. He had talked to at least one woman.

When he made it back to the station Wednesday, the Chief told him the case was being taken over by someone from Sunnyvale and that he was to take the next two weeks off to get his head straight and get some distance from his emotional attachments. Another officer had followed him out to the parking lot and told him "off the record" that there had been calls from Alameda County earlier in the day, after Doug Spears ended up in Stanford's emergency room. The paper with the photos of Mike and his Alameda County Sheriff big brother was now in Juno's safe with his weapons, belt and badge. He wasn't suspended or even getting any official reprimand for anything. He was just strongly encouraged to take a two week leave of absence, though it was implied that it was not optional. Juno had begrudgingly accommodated the request.

There were tons of openings all over the State and Country for Juno to apply to. Theoretically he could move just about anywhere if he played his cards right, even Hawai'i. But he wasn't interested in Hawai'i. He had taken a trip to Maui with a couple buddies years ago and while he enjoyed the trip he had decided island life was not a full-time thing for him. He was a pretty mellow guy most of the time, but not *that* mellow. Detroit sounded like an interesting option. He had a cousin that lived in the suburbs there and had mentioned something about being able to buy a two bath three bedroom house for well under ten grand, and that had blown Juno's mind at the time. New England was also attractive to Juno, who was no stranger to winter storms having grown up in the Mid-West. He was familiar with small town dynamics, old farm houses and old family money. Part of his discontent in California came from the fickleness of the culture. It was hard to make friends and no one seemed to have any loyalty to anyone but themselves. He knew he didn't really belong. Maybe this was a blessing in disguise. Maybe it was his lucky day.

Juno closed his laptop and sat it on the pillow next to him and looked out the window. It was a day like any other in The Bay. The sun was golden and shining against a bright blue sky. It was neither too warm or too cool. The birds were singing and people were out and about. He could see a couple of women power walking along the walk way in the park just across the street from Juno's apartment. They looked like most of the women out power walking on any given day in The Bay: yoga pants, yoga top, designer tennis shoes, floppy messy pony-tail/bun, fake tits, wrist and ankle weights. Some pushed strollers others didn't. Either way, none of those women had ever interested Juno. They were all the same — boring and average.

Plodding into the bathroom, Juno turned the water on in the shower to heat up while he undressed and chose a clean towel and wash cloth from the linen closet. The last date he had been on had been with Naomi, the social worker from El Camino Hospital. They had met through an online dating service and had laughed when they realized they knew each other from work, so to speak. They had gone out for lunch one Saturday. Naomi had been nice enough, but was very Jewish and adamant that her mother expected any man she marry either also be Jewish or be willing to convert. Juno was neither and had politely excused himself from the table. He paid the bill for both of them and told her he saw no reason to continue the date. Naomi had been somewhat surprised, but accepting. Juno was glad they had chosen to meet for lunch instead of him picking her up for dinner. He explained to her that while he was sure she was very nice that he had no interest in converting to any religion and wasn't in the market for a "fuck buddy", so he was going to go home and hope she had a nice rest of her day. Then he went home and deactivated his online dating profile. He wasn't interested in any more dates like that and resigned himself to letting fate do its thing instead.

Lathering up in the shower he found himself wondering where Amaranth was going to want to have dinner. He wondered what she'd be wearing, whether she'd be happy or sad, or some other way. He wondered if she would let him hold her hand, open doors for her, or even kiss her cheek. He wanted so much more than that. He wanted to hold her. He wanted to see her...he wanted to see her NOW! He wanted to see her everyday. Eyes closed and hair full of suds Juno scrubbed and scrubbed imagining Amy's face before him. If he took a position somewhere else how was he going to see Amaranth everyday? It would figure that he's meet someone he was actually interested in at the same time he was looking to leave. Maybe it wasn't his lucky day after all. Then again...oh, it was too crazy to even fantasize about. Or was it?

Juno stepped out of the shower and rubbed himself dry with his fresh clean towel starting with his hair and working down to his feet. He was in pretty good shape. He was a decent looking guy. He knew he was on the short side, but that had never really been an issue, other than reaching things on the top shelf. No one in his family was particularly tall with the exception of his Uncle Ben, but Ben wasn't a blood relative. He was his father's sister's husband. Aunt Pauline had been a cheerleader in high school and college and Ben played college basket ball. Now they were both old. Ben was retired from the Post Office and Pauline was a retired preschool teacher. Amaranth didn't seem to notice the height difference so why should he even think about it. He knew when women were turned off by his height. They would treat him in a joking manner, as if he were a child. It was an attitude he was keenly aware of when he encountered it. Amaranth had no such attitude. Pulling a beige henley over his head Juno looked at himself in the mirror. No. Today was his lucky day. He felt good. He pulled on a clean pair of jeans over his stark white boxer briefs and smoothed the shirt over the waistband of the pants, combed his short hair and slapped some cologne on over his light stubble. He hadn't shaved in a couple days now and he kind of liked the rugged look. It helped him gain some distance between being Officer Juno and being Harold Juno, guy on the street.

Juno walked bare foot into his living room. The clock on the wall read one thirty. He had spent the morning in bed sipping coffee and reading every job posting. He had even ended up applying to two — one in downtown Detroit and one just outside of Philly in a place called Pottstown. Now he was all cleaned up and feeling hungry. He really wanted to go see Amy now. He wasn't at work and she wasn't either. What had she said, her schedule had recently opened up? He really wanted to go pick her up and drive away and never come back. That's what he really wanted to do, but he knew that was just a fantasy. Or was it? He could certainly call and see what Amaranth was doing right now. Maybe she'd want to go have ice cream and walk at Shoreline, or catch a movie, or run away and get married and live happily ever after. Juno sighed heavily and scanned the room for his personal phone. It was plugged in next to the TV charging. He picked up the phone and went back into his bedroom to find Amy's number. Seeing his bed was still unmade he sat the phone on his dresser and fixed the sheets and comforter neatly. Then he sat on the corner of the bed and dialed Amaranth's cell phone. It rang three times.

"Hello?" Amaranth answered sounding somewhat apprehensive.

"Hello? Amy?"

"Yes. This is Amy. With whom am I speaking?"

"Amy, it's me, Juno."

"Oh, Juno. I didn't recognize the number. Usually you come up as unknown on the caller ID."

"Yeah. That's how all the work phones are."

"Oh. So this is your personal number?"

"Yes."

"Then I will save it and make sure I keep it."

"Yes. I'd like that. Amy..."

"What's that, Juno."

"Amy, my name's Harold."

"I know."

"You know? How'd you know?"

"Because Naomi called you Harold at the hospital."

"She did?"

"Yeah...after you left. She referred to you and called you Harold then corrected herself and called you Officer Juno. I'd just never called you Harold because you never told me I could."

"Oh. Well, please. Call me Harold...or Harry. My friends call me Harry."

Amaranth giggled.

"What's so funny?" Juno asked.

"I don't know. You don't seem like a Harry to me. I'll call you Harold, but I'm not calling you Harry."

"Well, I'm not calling you Amy anymore then."

"Why?"

"Because you don't seem like an Amy to me. I never think of you as an Amy. I always think of you as Amaranth."

"Oh. Well, OK. But the only other people who actually call me Amaranth are my parents and my brother."

"Well, that sounds like company I wouldn't mind keeping."

Amaranth and Harold were both silent for a long awkward moment. Juno spoke first.

"Amaranth, I have so much I want to tell you. Are you busy right now?" Amy laughed.

"Busy doing what? Me and Liza have just been sitting around Tubbs' house reading and drinking iced tea. Maddy is at some book club or something and Tubbs is on site at one of the

properties. Until I figure out where I'm going to be setting up office for sure I've been postponing rescheduling any clients. Why? Don't we still have plans later tonight?"

"Yeah. We do. But I was hoping we could get together a little sooner, like maybe in the next half hour?" Juno said nervously.

"Sure. That's fine with me, but don't you have work?"

"That's what I want to talk to you about."

"Did they fire you?" Amy asked abruptly. Juno was taken aback.

"Uh, no. What made you ask that?"

"Oh, nothing serious, not really for any reason at all. Just a feeling."

"Well, it's not exactly like that, but I don't want to talk about it over the phone anyway. Can I come pick you up? Juno asked in an almost desperate plea. Amy was silent for a moment on the other end of the line. Juno was getting worried that he was being too forward with this woman who had already been through so much.

"Yeah. Please. I'd Love to get out of the house. See you soon?"

"Yes. I'm on my way. Love you." Juno hung up and then realized what he had just said to Amaranth. Love you? Where had that come from?

Back at Leon and Maddy's Amy sat on her bed staring at the phone in her hand. Had Harold just told her he Loved her? She was going to have to think about this fast. Amy grabbed her purse and dug around for the satin pouch of cards. She slid the cards out of their pouch into her left hand and began to shuffle. Then she took a deep breath and turned up three cards: The Lovers, Queen of Cups, and once again, The Paige of Cups. Well, the cards couldn't be more clear. She closed her eyes and placed one hand over her third eye and one over her heart and breathed deeply into each center seeking to clear away any distraction. Yes. She found Harold attractive. Yes. It was kind of soon for him to be telling her he loved her. No. She did not feel threatened or afraid of Harold. Amy opened her eyes and took another deep breath before slipping the cards back into their pouch. Then, going to the bathroom she washed her face and hands, brushed her teeth and combed her hair. Just as she was slipping her feet into a pair of sling back sandals the door bell rang. Liza meowed and walked out into the hallway pawing at the sliding glass door into the center courtyard. Amy opened the door letting the cat out, walked to the front door and slipped the metal shutter back from the peep hole. It was Harold. He had his hands in his pocket and was looking behind him at his Jeep parked on the street in front of Leon and Maddy's house. Amy smiled before opening the door.

“Hi Harold.” Amy said as Juno turned around to face her. His face froze for a moment before breaking into a smile reflecting the smile on Amy’s face.

“Hi Amaranth. Can I come in?”

“Well, I don’t see why not. Just into the court yard here. Maddy and Leon haven’t told me I can’t have anyone over, but they haven’t told me I could either and I don’t want to overstep. Come on in and wait here while I get my purse and wrangle Liza in the house and...” Amy turned away from Juno making room for him to pass and to turn back towards her room. Juno stepped in the door and surprised Amy by taking her hand and closing the door behind himself.

“Amaranth. I know it’s presumptuous of me to touch you like this.” He said looking down at her hand in his. Amy looked at their hands together as well.

“It is a bit presumptuous, Harold.” Amy pulled her hand away from his gentle clasp. “Let me get my things and we can go somewhere else to talk.”

Juno watched as Amy disappeared into her room and reappeared with her purse. She sat the bag on a metal table in the courtyard and shooed Liza back into the house then followed the kitty in the sliding glass door so she could lock it from the inside before coming back out through the center door. Then she fished her keys from her purse and locked the interior door and motioned to Juno to exit through the door he had come in. Amy locked the door behind them and pulled out her phone.

“i just want to text Maddy and let her know I’m going out so she doesn’t worry.”

Juno nodded. His hands were back in his pockets. “Yeah. That’s a good idea.”

Juno started to walk toward his car and Amy followed. He opened the passenger sided door and waited until Amy was seated comfortably before closing the door. Then he walked around and climbed in the driver side. He looked over at Amy who was watching him without scrutiny.

“Doug Spears is in the hospital and I’ve been asked to take a two week leave of absence. Your case is going to be handled by someone from Sunnyvale PD.”

“I know.” Amy replied.

“You do?”

“Yeah. They called from Sunnyvale this morning and told me I could go back to my apartment if I wanted. I do want to, but Leon was upset when I said I was going to pack up.”

“Well, I would be too. I can’t believe they told you to go back to that apartment.”

“I don’t know. The officer told me he was certain I didn’t need to worry about Mike Musgraves anymore but wouldn’t tell me how or why he knew that. I’m sorry about your leave of absence. I

didn't know anything about that. All I was told was it was being handled by Sunnyvale because they had jurisdiction or something."

"Well there's more to it than that, but I don't know exactly how much more. But we have time. Do you like ice cream?"

Amy smiled. "Sure."

"Let's go get some ice cream and maybe walk around Shoreline?"

"That sounds nice."

Juno put on his seat belt and started the car. As they headed down El Camino Real toward Mountain View he told Amy everything, from the secret envelope with the information about Mike and his older brother to the Chief demanding his leave of absence and the job openings he had applied for. Amy listened quietly just nodding from time to time. Juno finished just as they were pulling into the parking lot at Shoreline Park.

"Well, that's all just crazy." Amy said in a matter of fact tone.

"I know." Juno replied. "None of it makes any sense to me." Juno removed his key from the ignition and unbuckled himself as Amy wrestled with her seat belt. He quickly moved around to the passenger side and opened Amy's door. As he closed the door behind her he offered his elbow to her to take as they walked. Amy pulled her purse over her right shoulder and linked her left elbow through Juno's. The man smiled and pulled his sunglasses out of a pocket and placed them on his face and they headed toward the snack bar.

At the snack bar they both got an ice cream sandwich and then headed to walk the path around the water. The sun cast shadows equal to their height behind them as they walked arm in arm largely in silence. When they got to the side of the estuary opposite the snack bar Juno gestured toward a bench under an oak tree. Amy sat down placing her purse on the seat beside her. Juno sat down beside her and boldly put his arm around her shoulder. Amy sat stiffly for a moment before relaxing and leaning into his shoulder. There were a three or four couples out on the water in paddle boats.

"That looks like fun." Amy said.

"You wanna go back and rent one?" Juno asked.

"No. Not today. But next time."

"Yeah. Next time." Juno smiled reassured that there was going to be a next time. But he wanted more than that and he didn't feel like he had much time. Before leaving his apartment Juno had

done something that bordered on crazy. He had opened his freezer and dug around until he found the plastic baggie stuffed in a small Rubbermaid container in the bottom back left corner. He opened the container and retrieved from among the contents his Grandmother's diamond ring and put it in his front left pocket. He pat his pocket now and felt the ring there digging slightly into his upper thigh.

"Amaranth, I'm going to leave California. I don't know where I'm going yet, but it's only a matter of time before I find a place to transfer, and I know we hardly know each other, but I'm not a young man anymore and I don't want to leave you."

Amy turned her body to face Juno while he spoke. She removed her sunglasses and put them on top of her purse then gently removed the sunglasses from Juno's face so she could see his blue eyes as he spoke to her. He didn't even flinch as her hand brushed his cheek.

"You can tell me I'm crazy and I will take you home right now and never bother you again. Or..."

"Or what?" Amy asked. Juno was digging around in his pocket for something. He pulled out a very large antique looking diamond ring and held it up between his and Amy's faces. Amy's mouth opened slightly in genuine surprise.

"Or, you could put this ring on your hand and come home with me tonight." Juno lowered the ring and placed it in the palm of Amy's hand and leaned forward kissing Amy's slightly parted lips softly. Amy didn't pull away. She closed her hand around the ring and kissed Juno back. She was old enough. There was no reason to drag things out any more, and besides, his kiss was sincere and the cards never lied.

Amy whispered in Juno's ear, "Put it on my finger."

Juno took the ring that had been in his family since his Great Grandmother and Grandfather and slipped it on Amy's right ring finger. It fit perfectly.

"I'm, I'm sorry." Amy said looking at the ring on her finger.

"For what?" Juno was confused.

"I'm sorry, I'm not healed yet, you know, down there. They cut me."

Juno closed his eyes and willed the anger about what had been done to Amy recede.

"It's OK. I'm happy to wait until you're ready. You tell me when you're ready. You tell me what's too much and what's OK. We have the rest of our lives."

"I believe we do, Harold. I believe we do."

CHAPTER 13

I'm Sorry I Love You

Jack pushed his feet into his shoes by the door then walked back over to Stephanie sitting at the dining room table where she was eating a bowl of cereal. He kissed her on the top of her head.

"I'm sorry. I want to get in early before Jeff shows up and get the place ready for today's delivery." Jack lied.

"Are you sure you can't just take the day off and rest a bit?" Stephanie asked. Jack had been released late Thursday evening. Doug's right arm was paralyzed and his lung was punctured but he was going to make it and live a mostly normal life. Jack was not going to be charged. Footage from the camera behind the counter confirmed his story of self defense and neither man was interested in pressing charges against the other. In fact, once he had woken up and was stabilized, Doug told the police everything that had happened with Mike Musgraves and Oleg and was willing to testify against them. The only catch was Doug might be forced into witness protection, but that was yet to be seen. Eberly had gone to the hospital and been by Doug's side and was still there as far as Stephanie knew. She wanted Jack to just take it easy for a day or two. They had all been through a lot lately. But he insisted on going into the shop even though Jeff and Dana, the undergrad Jack had recently hired for weekends, were more than able to run the shop for a couple days.

"I want to make sure there's no blood on the floor and there's a big delivery coming in today and I want the back room cleared this time." Jack lied again. The shipment coming in today was no bigger than any other shipment. He just wanted some time in the shop by himself to think.

"OK. Well, call me when you're on your way home. I want to have dinner ready and waiting for you." Stephanie smiled sadly at her husband who was walking out the front door.

"OK." Jack said over his shoulder.

"I Love you, Honey Bear!" Stephanie cried.

"I Love you too." Jack said without turning around.

Once in the shop Jack looked around. Jeff had done a good job cleaning up. Jack knew he would. Jeff was a good employee and an even better person. He had cleaned up and filled in for Jack without even asking questions or complaining. Jack closed the door behind him but didn't bother to lock the door. He walked into the back room workshop area and surveyed the

collection of vases on the wall. A beautiful blue glass mosaic barrel shaped vase stuck out to him. He plucked it from the wall and set it in the middle of the work station. Then he fit a piece of soaked floral foam into the bottom before turning toward the cooler. Inside the cooler he pulled twelve of the most beautiful and expensive long stem roses and giant pom pom spider mums from buckets and carried them gently in his arms back into the workshop. He carefully wrapped the stems of each mum with fine floral wire then expertly arranged the roses and mums in the floral foam in the base of the vase. He finished the arrangement with a modest spray of baby's breath and a couple sprigs of greenery before choosing a card with a shiny red heart on the front. On the back of the card he wrote: *To my Stephanie: I'm sorry I Love you. -Jack*. Then he sealed the card in an envelope, clearly wrote Stephanie's name on it, placed it in a plastic card holder near the front of the arrangement and tucked the arrangement on a table in the center of the walk-in flower cooler. Then he walked around the shop giving everything a once over one last time. Then he walked into the front of the shop and found his gun where he had left it in the cubby hole and sat it on the counter.

Back at married student housing the phone was ringing. Stephanie answered it.

"Oh, hi Uncle Eb."

"Hi Steph-Steph. Is Jack-Jack there?"

"No Uncle Eb. He went in to work early. He said something about clearing out the back for a big delivery today."

"Something about that doesn't sound right, Steph-Steph."

"I agree Uncle Eb, but I don't want to push it with Jack right now. He's had such a horrible couple months and we've both been under a lot of stress with the house in escrow and my final panel coming up and his Dad and everything with that and now the Doug stuff. How is Doug, anyway?"

"Steph-Steph you are a true angel. I can't believe you're even asking after Doug after everything."

"Doug's been a real asshole to Jack, Uncle Eb, but he didn't deserve what that Musgraves guy did to him either. I can't even imagine! He must have been terrified. For all of us!"

"He is, Steph. He is. And to be honest, I'm pretty scared too. I just wanted to talk to Jack and let him know how sorry Doug and I both are."

"Well, you're gonna have to catch him on his cell because he's not here. I'm sure he's at the shop by now, but he won't answer the phone until after nine."

“Oh, well, I think I might just walk over there. I’m just around the corner at a coffee shop right now. I have a meeting with an expert at the University in an hour. After my meeting you want to go get some lunchy-lunch?”

“Sure Uncle Eb. I’m just working on editing today. Just ring me when you’re on your way over.”

“It’s a plan. See you later, Steph-Steph. Love you.”

“Love you too, Uncle Eb.”

Stephanie hung up the phone feeling better about everything. Maybe things were going to start going back to normal now. Uncle Eb would go talk to Jack and work his Eberly-magic and they would all go back to having brunch and drinking good wine and talking about Art.

Eberly hung up the phone feeling ominous. Something wasn’t right with Jack and he was going to get to the bottom of things so his niece could focus on finishing her paper and preparing the catalog he’d been helping her compile of *The Gettleman Family Art and Antique Collection* that was going on exhibit the coming Spring at City Hall back in Tuscaloosa where (Great) Grammy and Pop-Pop were buried. Eberly tossed his empty paper coffee cup in the trash and smiled at the barista as he walked out toward Jack’s shop around the corner. It was just after eight Friday morning and the Palo Alto streets were just starting to really show signs of life. As Eberly turned the corner he saw the lights were on in Jack’s shop. With a skip in his step he quickened his pace to the door. As he clasped the handle of the door he saw in horror, Jack standing behind the counter holding a pistol to the side of his head. Eberly desperately pulled at the door expecting it to be locked, but it wasn’t and swung into his chest causing him to stumble as he pressed forward into the shop.

“Jack-Jack! No!” he screamed with hands out-stretched toward Jack. Jack opened his eyes in shock at being caught by Eberly. He calmly turned the gun away from himself and at Eberly who kept running toward Jack in horror. Jack pulled the trigger hitting Eberly squarely in the forehead. Eberly fell dead to the ground in the same place Doug had laid bleeding just a couple days before. Not even looking to see if Eberly were still breathing, Jack turned the gun on himself wrapping his mouth around the barrel and pulled the trigger slumping to the ground. By the time Jeff and Dana arrived an hour later both had stopped bleeding. No one knew it yet, but Stephanie was about to come into a sizable chunk of money. On Tuesday Eberly had updated his ten million dollar life insurance policy changing the beneficiary from Doug to Stephanie. She was going to be able to pay for her new house outright and still have enough left over to pay for the funerals and her student loans.

THE END

EPILOGUE

Mike stood across from Oleg at the pool table in Oleg's basement with his phone to his ear.

"Yeah. I get it, Steve."

"I'm not sure you do. The guy's willing to testify."

"I can take care of that, you know."

"I don't want to know, and no. You can't take care of this one, Mikey. And neither can I. There's just too many strings and I'm out of favors right now. You and your buddy need to just lay low for a while."

"How long's a while?"

"A long while, like a year or more."

"A year or more! Steve, I might as well go back East."

"You said it. Not me."

"Come on, man. You can't be serious."

"Totally serious. Get the fuck out and stay out for a while and don't bother calling me again for the next five years. And you better not go home either. They have Mom under close watch. Now, I'm gonna hang up. Just talkin' to you could cost me my ass. Five years man. Five years, at least. Got it?"

"Yeah yeah yeah. Five years and stay away from home."

Steve had already hung up before Mike had even finished the sentence. Oleg watched Mike expectantly.

"So?" he asked Mike.

"So, what? You heard what I said. We've been advised to move. Things are hotter than we thought."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, that faggot went and got himself shot and now he's ready to testify against us and evidently they got DNA evidence at one of the girl's places and Steve said he's not willing to go to jail for me."

"We could just have someone take care of that Doug-guy."

"No. We can't. It would just keep us here longer and be one more to add to the list. You do what you want, but I'm going home and grabbing my go bag."

"OK. Where we going then?"

"Detroit. I got an old friend I hear is out there now."

“Cool.”