

Picture Imperfect

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As I studied the exterior of the old house, it occurred to me that the real estate agent's description of the place as 'needing a little work' was an understatement.

Based on specs, it was absolutely what I'd asked for: a quiet neighborhood, lots of trees, a two-story house with basement and attic, set back from the road on a good-sized lot. I'd been out of the country on business, and had been forced to leave the details in the hands of the agent. I suppose my perception might also have been affected by the fact that it was late fall, the trees had already shed their leaves, and even the hardy asters planted in the flower boxes along the front porch were looking pretty pathetic. Granted, the dark red brick and gray stone exterior was nice enough, but the peeling paint on the eaves, the slight sag in the roofline, and the general air of genteel shabbiness went beyond my idea of needing 'a little work'.

A cold breeze whipped dead leaves into the air and tugged at my hair and jacket. I shrugged deeper into the garment, shoving my hands into my jeans pockets. As a southern girl, just back from the warm Mediterranean, I suspected I was woefully unprepared for a northeastern US winter. At least the real estate agent had assured me that the central heating worked, though there was no telling, from the appearance of the place, if that should have been qualified with a 'just barely'.

Served me right, I supposed, for not waiting until I came back to do this myself.

I stepped back and shut the door of the red Ford sedan, circling to the back to open the trunk and pull out my backpack, sleeping bag, and a folding camp cot. The rest of my luggage was coming later this evening, and my furniture, which had been in storage in Georgia for the past six months, would be arriving sometime in the next couple of days. That would give me some time to decide where things would go before they got here, but it also meant I'd be roughing it for a few days. I slammed the trunk shut, and made my way across the dead grass and scattered leaves to the front porch.

The wood creaked under my weight, though not enough to make me fear I was going to fall through it. The storm door was closed, but the latch was sprung, which meant a good strong wind from the wrong direction would probably send it slamming against the wall. I tugged it open, slid the key into the lock, and opened the heavy front door.

A welcome wave of warmth flowed out through the opening. At least the real estate agent hadn't lied about the central heating. I stepped inside, closing the door behind me with my elbow.

Light filtering through ancient curtains at the windows revealed the foyer, a good-sized room floored in equally ancient white, gold, and brown linoleum. A large and rather tacky chandelier hung in the center of the room. On the left side, a staircase led upward, curving about halfway up to meet the second floor on the right-hand side of the foyer. A second-floor balcony overlooked the main area. Doors led off the foyer, one on the left side, in front of the stairs, one on the right, and one straight back, beneath the upper flight of stairs. A fourth door, tucked under the stairs, probably led to either a storeroom or a small downstairs bathroom. The air had a closed up smell to it, with overtones that made me think the last person out the door hadn't taken the garbage with them, or flushed the toilet.

I set my things on the floor close to the door and went on a tour of inspection, starting with the door on the left.

The room was large and empty, and echoed with my footsteps. The flooring was hardwood, worn and in need of wax. There were old-fashioned radiators at the front and back of the long room. Someone in the past had painted them bright primary colors, red, blue, and yellow on alternating vanes. The walls were papered in brown and cream stripes down to the wainscoting, which was stained dark and looked dry. Baseboard vents, black metal, marked where the central heating ducts had been installed. Curtains, dusty gold, hung at the windows.

I blew my breath out through tight lips. This place had obviously sat unoccupied for a long time. Somewhere, the real estate agent was probably congratulating herself on unloading an otherwise unsellable house.

The floor creaked and popped underfoot as I crossed to the back of the room, where a door and a serving hatch led to the kitchen.

More linoleum, apparently from the same lot as that in the foyer, covered the floor. The pine cabinets and green Formica countertops reminded me of my grandmother's kitchen back in Georgia. There were no appliances. I turned on the tap to check for water, but nothing came out, even though the agent had assured me the utilities would be on before I arrived. I frowned. Looked like I'd be roughing it more than I'd thought.

There were two other doors, besides the one from the foyer and the one from the dining room. One opened into the back yard, and the other onto a flight of stairs leading down to the basement. I hesitated, staring down the dark flight. The basement could wait. I closed the door and wandered on.

The door under the stairs in the foyer led, as I'd suspected, to a small bathroom. I flipped the switch and was pleasantly surprised when the light came on. The room was fairly clean, and looked as if it hadn't been touched in a while. I switched the light off and pulled the door shut.

The last door leading off the foyer went to a den with a rock fireplace. There were signs someone had been using the room. The remains of a long-dead fire rested in the stone hearth. Empty soda cans, beer bottles, and crumpled wrappers from fast food meals were scattered around, though the majority of the wrappers had been tossed haphazardly in the direction of the fireplace. Built-

in bookshelves to one side of the rock chimney column held a collection of empty soda cups and other snacking detritus. The floor, more hardwood, was caked in places with dried mud. Several discolored spots looked as if an animal had relieved itself there. Hints of spoiled food, mouse droppings, and stale cigarette smoke made me wrinkle my nose. I made a mental note of the cleaning products to buy, and turned to make my way upstairs.

There were four bedrooms and a bathroom, with the large master bedroom overlooking the front yard. All the bedrooms contained nothing but curtains on the windows and a layer of dust, with the exception of the bedroom closest to the stairs. A thick foam rubber pad, yellowed by exposure to the air, occupied the center of the room. There was a dirty blanket on top of it, and the sour stench of abandoned used condoms marked it as some young Romeo's favorite place to bring his girl. Or girls. Didn't matter which; I was going to have to check all the doors and windows to see how they were getting in. An arrangement of empty wine bottles, their mouths plugged with burned-down candles, proved someone had at least tried to make the love nest romantic. Hot wax had run down the sides of the bottles to pool on the floor. It had long ago solidified into layered white mounds.

I sighed, and added one paint scraper to the list of cleaning supplies.

The bathroom was filthy. Someone had repeatedly used the commode, and had left it unflushed due to the lack of water to the house. There were also numerous used condoms piled in one corner.

Rubber gloves and heavy-duty disinfectant...added to the list. I pulled the door shut behind me, hoping to cut the sewerage smell down.

The pull-down ladder to the attic had been left down. I paused at the bottom to listen for a moment, but there were no sounds suggesting the lovebirds, or anyone else for that matter, might be up there. I climbed the narrow ladder carefully, peering into the attic.

It had been floored in wood planking, but the ceiling was low and uninsulated, making the space suitable for storage but nothing else. Dim lighting came though the filthy front windowpanes. Dust-covered boxes had been left stacked in corners and along walls, the abandoned remnants of past habitations. The air was chilly, in spite of the open door and the heat rising from below. I decided to leave the attic for future exploration and backed down the ladder, folding it and pushing it back into place, flush with the ceiling.

First things first. I went downstairs to the foyer and knelt by the backpack, digging the pouch I was using as a purse out. I needed food, water, and cleaning supplies, and I wanted to get them and get back before the short winter day ended. Plus, I needed to figure out where I was going to set up my cot for the night. Likely it would be downstairs somewhere. The smell from the upstairs bathroom was bound to keep me awake, otherwise.

* * *

Greenery, a suburb of New York City, had the quiet air of dignity that small, well-established communities get when they've successfully resisted the encroachment of a much bigger neighbor. I stopped at the corner gas station for a map and directions, and set out for the supermarket along well-maintained, broad streets that begged the inevitable comparisons with some of the narrow, crowded, and noisy roads I'd seen during my time along the Mediterranean. The supermarket was easily enough found, and well stocked. I thought of the markets I'd been in as I passed along the aisles pushing my cart, and decided that we Americans were more spoiled than we realized.

Stacks of boxes and luggage lined the front porch when I returned to the house, and a dark sedan sat in the driveway. A woman, middle-aged, not quite plump, dressed impeccably in a neat, dark blue suit and a frilly white blouse, climbed out of the sedan as soon as she saw me pull up. Carla Snyder, my agent—literary, not real estate. She smiled at me, an expression that wavered as a strong gust of cold air flared her skirt and threatened to knot her dark, curly hair. I parked and climbed out, returning her smile. It was good to see a familiar face, even though I knew she wouldn't have come out here on a social visit.

“Dana, I'll bet you're wishing you'd stayed in the Mediterranean,” she called out over the wind. “You picked the wrong time of year to come back.”

“Perfect time of year,” I countered, grinning, as I moved to the back of the Ford to open the trunk. “I'm going to be indoors writing anyway. It might as well be when there's nothing going on outside to distract me.”

“Maybe.” She came around to the back of the car, gathering her dark hair with one hand to keep it from getting too messed up. “I've brought the new contract for you to sign and—Good lord. Are you planning on opening a cleaning business?”

I laughed, tucking the long handles of the new broom and mop under one arm before grabbing a few bags of supplies, lifting them from the trunk.

“The house isn't in pristine condition. I have my doubts that anyone from the realtor's has been inside it for a while.”

She grimaced. “Sorry. I'll have to get onto Belle about that. She should have checked the place over before she recommended it. Here, let me help.” She eyed the remaining bags, the bucket, and the boxes of bottled water, and wisely opted for the bags and the bucket.

“Thanks.”

We crossed the yard to the front porch, the bags rattling and the bucket making plastic thumps against Carla's leg. I stepped up onto the aging wooden stairs carefully, listening for any sign that the combined weight of my possessions and myself were more than they could handle, but they showed no signs of caving in.

“I tried calling you earlier, but you don't have a phone yet,” Carla said, sounding as if not having a phone in New York was a cardinal sin. The heels of her neat blue pumps clicked on the stairs as she followed me up. Her gaze went to the boxes. “They were unloading your things when I got here, and with the way crime is these days, I figured I'd better stand guard to make sure nothing went missing.”

“Thanks,” I said again. “All my notes and research are in those boxes.”

“Then I'm doubly glad I stayed.”

I edged the storm door open with the toe of my shoe, managed to insert the key in the lock without dropping my bags, and pushed the door open. The sun had shifted, spilling more light in through the windows. The linoleum looked even more worn, and the dusty crystals of the chandelier looked even tackier.

There was a sound that hadn't been there before. I stopped abruptly, listening. Carla came in behind me. She wrinkled her nose.

“What is that smell?”

Water. There was water running. Upstairs, from the sound of it. I cursed and dropped my supplies, rushing up the stairs two at a time. I flung the door open to find that someone had apparently turned the hot water knob at the sink while checking for water, and had left the valve open. Steam rose in a choking wave, scented by the wastes in the toilet. Gagging, I bent low to avoid most of the steam and went in, twisting the knob to shut off the flow.

“You weren't joking, were you?” Carla's muffled voice remarked. Startled, I glanced at the door. She stood just back of the opening, her hands pressed over her mouth and nose, her eyes narrowed to a squint. She stared past me at the toilet. I thought back to what I'd said before charging up the stairs, and gave her a grimace.

“Sorry. Yeah, someone left quite a mess. Check out the room next to this one.” I jerked my head in the direction I wanted her to go.

She moved off with alacrity. I stepped back into the upstairs hall, pulling the door shut behind me. It was probably already too late, but maybe I could keep some of the stench contained. She'd stopped in the next doorway, staring inside, her mouth a tight, thin line.

“Belle will definitely be hearing from me. You really shouldn't have to be cleaning this up. Someone should have checked the house.”

I sniffed the shoulder of my jacket and made a face.

“Well, I'm not going to be able to wait for someone to come out and clean it for me. The only shower's in there, and I'm definitely going to need one. That smell's sticking to me.”

She gave her own clothes a delicate sniff, grimacing in distaste. “Why did you leave the water running in the first place?”

I started toward the stairs. “I didn't. The water hadn't been turned on yet when I left. If you'll get that contract, I'll start hauling my belongings in from the porch.”

She followed me downstairs, passing me on the porch as I leaned down to grab the handles of two large suitcases. I'd wrestled them and one trunk inside the foyer before she returned. I paused next to a bigger, hard-sided travel case as she came back up the porch stairs, carrying a large manila envelope.

“If you don't mind, Dana, I'll leave this with you and head on. I've got a dinner meeting tonight, and I'm not going smelling like this. Bring the contract by the office when you've had a chance to look it over and sign it.”

I reached out, taking the envelope. “Sure. Have a great dinner.”

She smiled and turned to go. “I intend to.”

* * *

Cleaning the bathroom took fortitude and more disinfectant than I could remember ever using before in my life. By the time I had the place cleaned up and had taken a shower, I smelled equally of soap, shampoo, and Lysol.

While showering, I'd thought about where I was going to set up my cot, and had decided if I could get the den cleaned before bedtime, it would be the best place on the ground floor for it, since it was smaller than the living room/dining room and felt comparatively warmer. Plus, it only had one window, making it less work to make private. Food trash, cups, bottles, and cans went into a large garbage bag. It was while I was cleaning the trash from the shelves that I found the diary.

Once, it had been quite a handsome book. The exterior was mahogany-colored leather, bordered in broken lines of gold. The pages were edged in gold, and there was a bronze ribbon attached, which served as a bookmark. There were also signs of wear and tear, including scuff marks that ruined the smooth leather, and discolored rings where someone had carelessly set wet cups. Since I'd found the diary beneath a couple of empty paper cups from a local fast food place, I was pretty sure some of the marks were recent.

Curious, I flipped through it, looking for the name of its owner. The handwriting started out as a careful, childish scrawl, progressing over time to that of a confident young adult. The earliest entry was dated in 1933, and the last was dated February 14th, 1950, nearly forty years ago:

Packed and ready to go. Funny, on Valentine's Day from all days. I guess it's the perfect day to move seeing how....

The remainder of the entry was smudged and illegible. There was no name, either on the inside front cover, or anywhere through the book, that identified the writer. The dates, however, could possibly be used to identify the family who had lived here when it was written. Someone in that family, if they could be tracked down, might like to have the book.

There was a knock on the door. Startled, I looked up, snapping the book shut. It was already getting dark outside, with the shorter days of late fall. I couldn't imagine who might be calling at this time of day. Hardly anyone I knew was aware that I was back in the country yet.

I crossed the den to the foyer, my footsteps echoing in the nearly empty rooms. A quick check of the boxes and suitcases showed that there was nothing missing that the airline might be delivering late, and I doubted it was Carla again, since she would be at her meeting by now. I reached the door, realized I was still carrying the diary, and paused to toss it onto one of the hard-sided shipping cases. The book slid across the dark plastic surface and fell into the gap between the case and the wall. I frowned, but decided to rescue it later.

I switched the porch light on, twitching back the curtain to look outside. There was a woman and a teenage girl, their breaths white trails of vapor in the cold night air. The woman was holding a covered casserole, protecting her hands from its hot contents with two pot holders. Just the local welcoming committee. It surprised me. I hadn't thought anyone did that sort of thing anymore. I unlocked the door and opened it, looking out at them with a mildly questioning expression.

Neither of them had been directly facing the door, but both straightened, looking at me. The woman smiled. She looked to be in her early forties, with dark brown hair shot with gray strands, cut in a perky and expensive-looking style. Her eyes, a bright, sky blue, and her open, friendly face, spoke of a lack of serious worries in life. Beneath her heavy coat, she wore a multi-colored angora sweater and blue wool slacks.

The girl, in her late teens, was an unfinished version of her mother. Her dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and there was an excessive amount of blue eye shadow on her lids and a thick layer of mascara on her lashes. She was dressed in a heavy, fleece-lined denim jacket, a red tee shirt with the name of some rock band I'd never heard of, and a pair of faded blue jeans. She looked bored, as if she had a lot of other things she'd rather be doing than greeting a total stranger.

"Hello," the woman said. "I'm Betty Carmichael, and this is my daughter Jennifer. We live in the house next door. We saw you moving in earlier, and thought you'd appreciate not having to cook tonight."

"Thank you. Would you like to come in?" I moved back, opening the door wide. Betty stepped past me into the foyer. She was about my height, 5'6". Jennifer, slightly taller than her mother, followed with a mulish look.

Betty's gaze moved about the room, taking in my scanty belongings and the general shabbiness of the place. The smell of Lysol was strong in the air, competing with the hints of some sort of

savory dish in the casserole. I hoped the combined scents covered any remaining traces from the upstairs bathroom. She looked back at me, keeping her impressions off her face.

I held up my rubber-gloved hands, smiling. “Erm... would you mind carrying that through to the kitchen? I would need to wash my hands before I could touch it.”

“Oh! Of course. Where...?”

“That way.” I nodded toward the kitchen door. She started off that direction. The girl didn't move, other than to throw a quick glance toward the top of the stairs. “I'm Dana Trent, by the way.” I followed Betty toward the kitchen. “Would you like to stay and eat with me?”

“No, I'm afraid we can't tonight. I've promised Jennifer we would go to the mall and get those new sneakers all the kids can't live without this season.” There was amusement in her voice. She paused in the center of the kitchen, looking for a stove that wasn't there, and moved toward the counter next to the sink instead, settling the casserole on top of the two potholders. “Would you care for a couple of extra pairs of hands to clean tomorrow, though? This place was empty for so long. I imagine there's dust on everything.”

“I'd love to have the help. Thank you.”

She smiled, turning to cross back to the foyer. She passed me near the kitchen door, pausing again once she'd stepped out from under the second flight of stairs. Jennifer had disappeared.

“Now where has she—”

The girl reappeared abruptly, coming out of the den with a speed that made me suspect she hadn't wanted anyone to know what she was doing in there. I narrowed my eyes slightly, considering her. She shot me a quick glance before looking at her mother, her expression carefully uninformative.

“Looking for something?” I asked.

She shook her head, her ponytail swishing behind her. “Just curious.” Her gaze flicked toward me and away again.

“Well,” her mother said, “you'll be able to look around the old place tomorrow. We'll be coming back to help Dana clean.”

For half a second there was a bright spark of rebellion in the girl's eyes. It was gone so quickly that if I hadn't already been looking at her, I would have missed it. An expression of indifference settled across her immature features.

“Whatever.”

Betty looked at her sharply, but there was nothing there to warrant a public scolding. After a few seconds, Betty looked at me, one corner of her mouth turned upward. “When would be a good time for us to come over?”

“Any time after eight-thirty should be fine.” It would probably be more than fine. My internal clock was still on Mediterranean time. As far as it was concerned, I was already up way too late, and no doubt I'd be up in the morning way earlier than I really wanted.

The corner of her mouth turned further up. “We'll probably be over some time after nine, then. She's a little hard to get out of bed on a Saturday morning.” She nodded toward the door, and Jennifer turned, her gaze jumping once more in a quick glance at the top of the stairs as she started to leave.

Interesting. There were several possible reasons I could think of for her quick capitulation. Either she thought she had a better chance at getting the coveted shoes if she didn't argue, or she was the young Juliet, and had a vested interest in clearing away the evidence of previous visits, before the maternal eye could discover them.

* * *

The spot I'd picked to set up my cot turned out to be drafty, since I'd forgotten to take into account the fact that there was no fire on the hearth, which meant there was a fairly steady flow of cold air coming down the chimney. I lay on the camping cot, wrapped tightly in my sleeping bag, regretting that I hadn't had a refrigerator to put the remains of the casserole in. By chance Betty had made one of my favorite baked pasta dishes, heavy on the tomato sauce and cheese, with a uniquely American twist to the ingredients I couldn't quite put my finger on. Some day, I was going to have to return the favor and prepare the dish the way I'd been taught in Italy.

It was dark when I went to sleep, and dark when I woke up again, and there was such a seamless transition from one state to the next that I wasn't certain I'd slept until I checked the luminous hands on my watch. Four o'clock. It was sunny now in the Mediterranean, and my body was convinced I had wildly overslept. I groaned. There was no chance I'd be going back to sleep any time soon.

Instead, I got up, dressed, and finished my tour of the house, going downstairs to check out the basement.

As I walked down the steep and narrow stairs, the air was uncomfortably chilly, which helped explain why the floor had been so cold when I'd walked barefoot to the bathroom that morning. The basement was floored in concrete. There was an ancient coal chute and bin from the early days, when the house had used a boiler for heat. The system currently in use was an oil furnace, though there appeared to be a liquid propane system as well, presumably a backup in case something happened to the other. The air was cold, except right around the furnace.

I folded my arms across my chest, studying the available space. It would be possible, I decided, to close in enough of it to make a small darkroom, without risk of being too close to the furnace.

A small electric heater would probably keep the photographic chemicals at a reasonable temperature, and I'd no doubt want to install some ventilation, but this would do nicely for what I needed. I would hunt around for a local contractor once I was settled in.

By the time Betty and Jennifer arrived, shortly after nine that morning, I'd moved my luggage and equipment cases into the den, stacking them neatly along one wall. The diary, still hidden behind one of the equipment cases, had tipped over to hit the floor with a loud bang once I'd dragged its support away. I'd picked it up, dropping it and the envelope with my contract on top of the sleeping bag.

Betty showed up dressed in jeans and a blue cotton blouse, and Jennifer wore something similar to last night's outfit, with only the name of the rock band and the color of the shirt any different. Betty came in carrying a small ice chest, which she lugged across the foyer toward the kitchen, smiling as she went.

"Cold soda pop," she said. "I noticed that you didn't have a refrigerator yet."

"Thank you."

Jennifer followed her in, stopping in the foyer. I closed the door before walking up to join her. The girl gave me a quick, disinterested look. I had earlier put the paint scraper in the back pocket of my jeans, and pulled it out, holding it up where she could see it.

"Why don't you go upstairs and scrape up that wax, before your mother sees it?"

She looked back at me quickly, her eyes widening. Pink flushed her skin. She snatched the scraper and started quickly across to the stairs. I followed Betty into the kitchen.

"So where do we start?" Betty asked.

"We could start here," I suggested. "The place mostly just needs to be swept and mopped, and the counters wiped down. I got the worst of it yesterday."

"All right." She set the ice chest down, turning back to look for her daughter. "Jenny?"

"I sent her upstairs. There was some gunk on the floor in one of the bedrooms that needed to be scraped up before we could sweep and mop. I figure she's young and flexible enough that she's not going to feel like an arthritic old lady after sitting on the floor for a while."

Betty's smile was quick and genuine. "Ah, yes. There are advantages to having kids around, aren't there?"

* * *

With their help, we had all of the first floor and most of the second cleaned before the moving company arrived at three that afternoon with my furniture. Betty excused herself and her

daughter, taking my thanks and the empty casserole dish with them as they went home. Jennifer had said nothing to me about the mess she and her boyfriend had left upstairs. As I directed traffic, and the moving crew tirelessly carried boxes and furniture into the living room, den, and the bedrooms, I put the matter out of my mind.

Our young Juliet, however, wasn't ready to believe that she was off the hook. She showed up around mid-afternoon the next day, her hands in the pockets of her jeans and her shoulders hunched inside her heavy denim jacket. She wore her dark hair loose. The breeze mussed it, threatening to tangle the ends. She looked up and met my gaze as the door opened, trying for a tough, unconcerned expression. The tightness around her eyes and the quick twitch at the corners of her mouth gave away her nervousness.

“Can I talk to you?” Her voice was flat. She jerked her head to one side, tossing her hair from her face.

I stepped back, opening the door for her. “Come in where it's warm.”

She moved past me, her gaze going to the foyer. Since she'd been here last, I'd added a couple of tables along the walls, a large mirror, and some framed enlargements of photos I'd taken over the years. She stopped not far from the door, obviously not willing to stray too far from her escape route.

“Are you going to tell my mother?” She shot me a sideways look. There was more than a hint of defiance in her eyes.

I closed the door. “How old are you, Jennifer?”

“Eighteen.”

“You're past the age of consent.”

Her eyes narrowed as she thought through my response. After a few seconds, she said, “So you're not going to tell her.”

“Just tell me how you got into the house to begin with. None of the doors or windows was unlocked.”

“The coal chute,” she said, as if it should have been obvious. “It's not locked. Billy would go in through the coal chute and open the back door for me. We always locked up when we left. Billy didn't want anyone else using our spot upstairs.” She paused, her cheeks turning pink as she thought about what she was admitting.

“Thank you. I'll have to do something about blocking the door to the coal chute.”

She glanced at me again, hesitated, and finally asked, “Did you find a diary in the den when you were cleaning up?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Do you think I could have it back? I borrowed it to read, and I really need to give it back.”

“What was it doing in here?”

She shrugged. “Sometimes I got here before Billy did. Gave me something to do while I waited.”

I nodded. “It's in here.”

I started toward the den. Jennifer followed. I went to the shelves to the left of the fireplace, where the diary sat with a number of trinkets I'd placed there as I'd unpacked. Jennifer stopped at my desk, a heavy, dark wood affair that was as much an artist's bench as a work station. When I turned back, book in hand, she was staring down at the framed photos on the desktop, which I hadn't found spots for on the wall yet.

“These are good,” she remarked.

I paused beside her, examining the photos. They were landscape shots, taken on a trip to Patagonia. “It was very windy the day I took those. In fact, that's one of the windiest places on earth.”

“You took these?” She glanced at me again, her eyes wide. “I wish I could take pictures like this.”

“Would you like to learn?” I made the offer without thinking. It was always a pleasure to find people who were interested in what I did.

She smiled, her blue eyes lighting up. “Yes!”

I thought for a few seconds. “Do you have a job?”

“I'm in college.”

“What are your Saturdays like?”

“It depends. I can make time, though.”

“Do you have a camera?”

“I can borrow my dad's.”

“Be over here around eight Saturday morning. We'll head out to the park or something and see if we can find things worth taking pictures of.” I held the diary out to her. She snatched it from my fingers as if sealing the deal, smiling with anticipated delight.

“I’ll be here. Thank you!” She turned and crossed to the door to the foyer, a decided bounce in her stride. I followed, reaching the foyer just as she opened the front door. She paused, looking back at me.

“You know,” she said, “you’re a lot cooler than I thought you’d be.”

I laughed. “Thanks, I think.”

“Bye!” She stepped outside, pulling the door shut behind her.

* * *

During the following week, I bought appliances, arranged for the phone line to be turned on, read, signed, and returned the contract, and began the process of sorting through the stacks of photographs I’d taken in the Mediterranean, eliminating the shots that just hadn’t worked as well as I’d liked. There were also some I’d taken with no intention of putting out for public viewing, which got sorted into their own stack. In the evenings, I sat down with my notes from the trip and began arranging them into a coherent order, planning out the new book chapter by chapter. The packets of photos were marked as to where I was when I took them, and I had a record of what each shot was, so when the time came, I could sort through them to decide which ones would best illustrate the manuscript.

I took the photos and notes with me to a Friday afternoon lunch with Carla, and returned home afterward to find two police cars, a dark-colored van, and scattered groups of my neighbors in my front yard. An officer stopped me before I could turn the red Ford rental up my driveway. I rolled my window down, and he ducked to look in at me.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but this is a crime scene. You can’t go in there.”

I looked toward the house. The front door was standing wide open. Yellow crime scene tape blocked off the driveway and stretched across the steps to the porch. My gut tightened. What had happened in my house? I turned back to the officer.

“I’m Dana Trent. I live here.”

He motioned to the side of the road. “Park there. The officer in charge will want to speak with you.”

I nodded and pulled forward, rolled up the window, and got out, locking the car behind me. The officer I’d spoken to was speaking with another, who gave a short, decisive nod and turned to stride toward me.

“Mrs. Trent?”

“Yes.”

“Come with me, please.”

I followed him across the dead grass and brown leaves, which crunched underfoot.

“What's going on? What's happened?”

“Do you live here alone?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Was there anyone who might have dropped by for a visit or have been waiting for you while you were gone?”

“I've only lived here a week. No. The only people I know here are my neighbors, the Carmichaels, because they helped me clean the house when I moved in, and my agent, and I just had lunch with her.”

“Nobody from out of town?”

“No. What's this about?”

He lifted the yellow tape so I could duck under it on my way up the stairs to the porch, and followed me toward the door.

There were three men in the foyer, two in uniform and one in a brown sports coat over tan slacks and brown shoes. The air smelled odd, unpleasant and metallic, and disturbingly familiar. The man in the sports coat looked up sharply as I came in, transferring his gaze quickly to the officer behind me.

“Mrs. Trent, sir,” the officer said, before the other could speak.

There was a flash of light from the den, and the sound of a camera winding forward. Before anyone could move to stop me, I crossed to the doorway and looked in.

“Mrs. Trent—” the man in plainclothes began, starting toward me.

There were people inside, gathering evidence. The room was a wreck. Everything had been pulled off the shelves and flung about the room. Breakables lay in shards of porcelain and glittering fragments of glass, in and around the rock fireplace. The glass on every framed photograph on the walls had been broken, and the photos damaged. The drawers in my desk had been pulled out and their contents dumped on the floor. My typewriter had been thrown across the room. The hard-sided travel case where I stored my 35mm was open, and the camera lay in twisted pieces on the hardwood floor.

Splashed haphazardly over the floor, the desk, the walls, was a thick red fluid. Shocked by the destruction, it took me a few seconds to connect it with the smell.

Blood. It was blood.

Fingers closed around my arm. The plainclothes officer pulled me away from the den.

“Mrs. Trent—”

My stomach rolled. I wrenched free of his grip, and barely made it to the bathroom before I rather noisily lost my lunch.

* * *

“I’m sorry,” I said. “The sight and smell of blood are not among my favorite things.”

The plainclothes officer, Detective Masterson, snorted softly. “Don’t worry. It’s a common reaction.”

I stirred the milk in the pan as it slowly warmed over the burner on the range top. Some people drank alcohol when they’d had a shock. My nerve-calmer had always been hot chocolate. Not the instant kind, but the kind with real, heated milk. The long warming time was part of the calming process. The detective sat patiently on a nearby bar stool, while another officer had taken a chair from the table and dragged it into the kitchen, and was trying to be unobtrusive in the corner, with notebook and pencil at the ready. Cold air stirred the curtain over the window on the kitchen door, which the intruder had apparently broken getting in. I would have to get someone out here to fix that before nightfall.

“So,” I said, my tone delicate, “was there a body?”

“No.” Masterson shifted on the stool, trying to find a more comfortable position. I looked at him sidelong, mechanically stirring the milk. He was dark-haired and blue-eyed, not lean or flabby, but somewhere comfortably in between. His face was clean-shaven, and bore little in the way of an expression. He had already asked me where I was while my den was being systematically destroyed, and the uniformed officer had taken down Carla’s contact information.

I suppressed a shiver. “There was an awful lot of blood.”

“Yes. More than one would expect from a single body. We won’t know for certain until we’ve had it tested, but it seems likely from the way it was splashed around and the large amount of it that it’s animal blood, probably brought here in a container.”

I studied him for a few seconds before turning back to the pan. “I don’t understand. Why would someone do something like this?”

“I was hoping you would have some ideas on that.”

I shook my head, grimacing. “I’ve only been here a week. I couldn’t possibly have ticked off someone that badly in that short a time.”

“Where were you before you came here?”

“In the Mediterranean, taking pictures. And no, I didn't tick anyone off there, either.”

“What about your husband, Mark? Might someone have intended this for him?”

I glanced at him again, surprised. “I'm sorry, I thought you'd done your homework already, since you knew I was married. Mark is a photojournalist. The last time I heard from him, he was somewhere in South America, meeting with some rebel faction or another to get their side of the story. I haven't seen him in five years, and I don't imagine any enemies of his would even know where I was, much less be able to track me down a week after I got back into the States.”

“You would be surprised.”

In his corner, the uniformed officer scratched away at his paper with the pencil. Steam rose lazily from the milk. I continued stirring, ignoring the growing heat against my hand.

“What do you do, Mrs. Trent?”

“I write books.”

“What kind of books?” There was a slight change in his voice, as if he imagined that I wrote the sort of incendiary tell-all books that might drive someone to violent displeasure, or that I might have done this myself, for publicity purposes. I smiled.

“Travel books, of sorts. The big, coffee-table type photographic books, with huge pictures of exotic places along with swatches of text describing what things were like. There are some of them in the living room, if you'd like to see.”

He considered that for a moment, finally switching tacks again.

“You say that you haven't seen your husband for five years. Does this seem like the sort of thing he might do?”

I looked at him. “Frankly, no. It's not his style.”

“Why did you separate? Was it on good terms?”

“He took me along with him on one of his South American trips, without telling me exactly where we were going. Seems he thought I would get as excited about his work as he was, and want to join him, if I could see what he was doing. We ended up on the edge of a battle between rebel and government forces. Not far from there, we discovered a massacre. A rebel group had attacked a native village and slaughtered them, every man, woman, and child, with machetes. It was indescribable. Mark took it in stride, and I couldn't. His assignments tended to be long and in faraway places, so after a while, we just drifted apart. He calls now and then, but not very often anymore.”

“You haven't divorced him?”

“No. He's almost never in the States when I am, so we've just never bothered.”

He nodded. “And you can't think of any other reason why someone might have done this? No enemies who might have been waiting for you to come back, or might have followed you from Europe?”

“If it was someone in Europe, they'd have done something there, instead of following me home to do it. But no, I can't think of anyone who might have wanted to do this.”

After a few seconds, he nodded again. “We'll need to seal the room until we're certain it's not human blood in there. After we release the scene, you'll be able to clean it.”

It was my turn to nod. “Can you recommend someone who's good at cleaning up blood?”

A slight smile quirked his mouth. “I know of a few people.”

* * *

After I had my hot chocolate, Masterson had me check through the rest of the house for anything that was damaged or missing. I was relieved to find that my large format cameras and darkroom equipment, which I'd stored in the basement, hadn't been touched. Although they were insured, I liked the equipment I had, and hadn't wanted to have to replace it. The rest of the house looked equally untouched. The sound of things breaking had attracted the attention of Betty Carmichael, who had called the police. I imagined that I had her to thank for the fact that the rest of the house wasn't in a similar state to the den. Masterson agreed that I could wait until the blood had been cleaned up in the den before I checked through the wreckage to see what was missing.

I would have been surprised if Betty hadn't shown up shortly after the police left, curiosity in her eyes. I answered her knock on the door, and let her in. She stepped over the threshold, her gaze sweeping the foyer for obvious signs of damage before settling on the sealed door to the den. She looked at me questioningly.

“What happened? The police weren't saying much.”

“Someone broke in through the back door and destroyed a lot of things in the den. It's a mess. Everything was dumped on the floor, and all the breakables were broken. The police said you were the one that heard the noise and called them. Thank you.”

She smiled, waving her hand as if to shoo away the thanks. “You'd have done the same. Is your back door broken?”

“A pane of glass is. I'll have to get someone out here to fix it, hopefully before it gets dark.”

She wrinkled her nose. “What's that smell?”

I grimaced. I'd smelled it for so long I hardly noticed it now, a fact that I found disturbing.

“Oh, the intruder slopped something all over the inside of the den. The police sealed the room up until they could figure out what it is.” I was in no hurry to tell her it was blood. In spite of her helpfulness, I couldn't imagine her keeping that one secret, and I had a feeling my reputation in the neighborhood would plummet to 'dangerous and untrustworthy,' because splashing blood around could hardly be anything other than personal, even if I couldn't imagine who would do it.

She made a sympathetic noise. “Hopefully whatever it is won't stain. Listen, I came because I wanted to invite you to dinner tonight. My husband, Tom, is out of town on business, so it'll be just us girls. Maybe we could watch a movie or play games or something. I thought it might help get your mind off the break-in.”

“That sounds wonderful. What time?”

“Say, sixish? That should give you time to get the glass on your door fixed.”

“Thank you. I don't think I'd mind one bit being out of here for a while.”

She smiled and sidled toward the front door, her gaze going for a few seconds to the den. Curiosity must have been killing her. I was suddenly glad for the heavier drapes I'd hung over the den window. They would keep people from peering in and seeing the blood and the mess. Her gaze turned back to me.

“I'll see you tonight, then.”

Once she was gone, I turned to get the phone book to look for someone to come out and replace the glass, and realized with a mental kick to the seat of my pants that it was in the den, out of reach and probably ruined. My jacket lay over the back of one of the chairs in the living room. I went to grab it and put it on, then stepped outside and tromped across the dead leaves in my yard, heading to the Carmichaels'.

The demarcation between my yard and the one next door was a low, trimmed hedge. On its other side, the Carmichaels' yard was virtually leaf free. I thought about seeing if I could hire someone to come out and rake the leaves in mine as I squeezed through a narrow gap in the hedge.

My knock on the front door was answered quickly—apparently Betty hadn't gotten out of the foyer yet. She opened the door, looking out at me with a questioning smile.

“I'm sorry, but could I borrow your phone book? Mine's locked up in the den.”

“Of course. Come in out of the cold while I fetch it.”

I stepped into the foyer, the first time I'd been in their house. The flooring was a beige tile, the walls an airy white. Stairs ran in a straight flight along the left-hand wall, disappearing into the

second level. Betty crossed the foyer, entering a hall that led to the back of the house. There was an open room to the right, where Jenny's voice could be heard.

“Yes. Yes! Why do you have to be such an idiot?” She walked past the doorway, a telephone receiver pressed to her right ear, her left hand on top of her head. She seemed oblivious to me. “No! I've got it. I said, I've got it! Don't be stupid—” She turned, heading back across the doorway, and spotted me. Abruptly, she turned away again. “Look, I've got to go. No! I told you—Goodbye!” She crossed the few steps to slam the receiver into the cradle, letting out an inarticulate groan of frustration.

“He is such an idiot!” Jenny rounded the edge of the door, frowning fiercely as she entered the foyer.

“Who?” I asked, amused by the display of teenage disgust.

“Billy! Why do boys have to be so stupid?”

“I thought I told you to stay away from that boy.” Betty's voice was mildly reproachful. She re-entered the foyer, carrying the phone book and eyeing her daughter with disapproval. Jenny ducked her head, her frown getting darker.

“I didn't call him, he called me. We don't have caller-ID in the den. How am I supposed to know who's calling until I pick up the phone and answer it?”

Betty crossed the foyer, holding out the book to me. “Don't worry about getting this back in a hurry. We've got several.”

“Thanks. I'll see you this evening.”

Jenny widened her eyes. “What's going on this evening?”

“Dana's coming over for dinner.” Betty set a hand on the girl's head and gently ruffled her hair. It was a gesture she no doubt meant lovingly, but it set her daughter to scowling even more fiercely. It also struck me as being a little inappropriate for a girl Jenny's age. “Why don't you go get your homework done, so you'll have time to visit tonight?”

“All right, all right.” Jenny twitched her head out from under her mother's hand. She stalked away across the foyer and took the stairs to the second floor two at a time. Betty let out a soft sigh.

“I don't know what to do with her sometimes. They think they know everything at that age.”

“Well, we survived that age,” I said prosaically. “More than likely she will too.”

Betty tossed me a look of mixed amusement and annoyance. “Do you have children, Dana?”

“No, but I've had to deal with my sister's kids on occasion. They do grow out of this.”

She hmped quietly, but let the topic go. “Do you have any movie preferences?”

“I love old mysteries and romantic comedies. If you've got anything along those lines, that would be great.”

She nodded. “I'll see what we've got. And you'd better get busy if you're going to get that window fixed today.”

I hefted the phone book, waggling it. “Yeah. Thanks for the loan.”

* * *

It took a little while to track down someone who was willing to come out on a Friday afternoon to replace the window pane. Once I had that arranged, I called around and found someone who would come out and install a security system for the house on Saturday. Did I understand it would cost more to have him do it on the weekend? Of course, I'd told him, but my house had been broken into that day and I didn't particularly want to wait until Monday to do it. He'd merely grunted and asked a number of questions about the house, and arranged to come out the following afternoon. With the glass replaced and all the doors locked, the house was as secure as I could make it before I left for the Carmichaels' that night. As secure as it had been before I'd gone out for lunch, before the break-in.

They went out of their way to keep me entertained and distracted that night. It was a pleasant enough evening—Betty fixed hamburgers, and we watched some movies from her collection of Cary Grant classics in front of the fireplace in the family room. She twice invited me to stay the night rather than go home alone to a house someone had already broken into once that day. It was tempting, but I thought I'd be better off just getting it over with rather than letting fear keep me out of my own house.

Jennifer, with the selective memory of the young, showed up at eight the next morning, equipped with her father's 35mm camera and ready for her photography lesson. I nearly pointed out to her that my house had been broken into the day before and that I'd spent most of the night listening to every little creak and pop for signs that the intruder had come back, but she looked so enthusiastic about the lesson that I pulled on my new, heavy winter coat and went with her to the park.

Winter was not necessarily the best time to look for photogenic trees and bushes, but we gave it a valiant attempt. We left my car in the parking lot and strolled along the walking path around the small lake, our hands in our pockets and the camera sheltering under Jenny's coat to keep it from getting too cold to work properly. The breeze near the water was chilly, and it smelled of wet, rotting leaves. Jenny's dark hair was pulled back in its usual ponytail. The ends fluttered as a strong gust went past. The breeze pushed at my hair, but the auburn strands were too short to get in my face. Short hair had been a blessing in the humid heat of the Mediterranean. Here, it meant I was going to need a hat to keep my head warm.

As we walked along, we talked about composition, the things that went into making an interesting picture. From time to time, Jenny spotted something that caught her attention, like the way a branch looked on a tree, or the way light played across the ripples of water in the lake, and we'd stop to find just the right angle for the shot. The camera was manual, with a built-in light meter, so I taught her the basics of how to use it to get the proper exposure.

We paused while she lined up a shot of the shoreline just ahead, which included a young couple walking slowly along the path, hand in hand and oblivious to the rest of the world.

“Have you ever had a boyfriend?” she asked, trying to sound casual.

I smiled. “Oh, a few.”

“Did you ever get serious with any of them?”

The camera clicked. The oblivious couple was now committed to film. I hoped for their sakes this wasn't some secret rendezvous they would regret having made.

“I'm married, actually,” I said.

Jennifer glanced back to where I stood not far behind and to her right, her blue eyes widening.

“Oh, really? I've never seen him. When's he supposed to be home?”

“He's on assignment somewhere overseas. I haven't seen him for a while.”

“Oh.” She turned her attention back to the camera, winding the film forward. “That must be lonely.”

There was a short, sharp stab in my chest, and the corners of my mouth twitched. Even after five years, it hurt that Mark had abandoned me because I couldn't take his lifestyle.

“Yeah. Sometimes. How about you?”

She half turned her head, giving me the benefit of her melancholy smile. “I had a few boyfriends in school. But once I met Billy, I knew he was the one. Mom doesn't approve, I'm sure you heard yesterday.”

“Any particular reason?”

“She thinks he's too wild. I think it's just because his family doesn't approve of me because we're not rich.” The breeze caught her hair and blew it across her face. She twitched her head to clear away the strands, and gave me a quick, bright, brittle smile. She wasn't thrilled with his parents' opinion of her.

“What does he think about it?”

“He doesn't think we should be letting our parents decide who we should be seeing.” She snapped the cap over the lens, and settled the camera back under her coat as she started along the walking path again.

“Does he go to the same school?”

“He used to. His parents sent him to Harvard. We pretty much only see each other on holidays and over the summer.” She smiled again, as if she felt we were companions in missing our men. I was reminded abruptly of Betty patting her on the head last night. Jenny sometimes came across as immature for her age. I wondered if Betty's tendency to treat her as younger than her age was holding her back.

“So he doesn't get home very often?”

“No.”

I let my breath out slowly. Though I wouldn't have admitted it to her, it had occurred to me, as an off chance, that her boyfriend might have objected to my buying the house and moving in, and he might have wrecked the den to make sure I knew he didn't like it. There had been something incredibly personal in the destruction of my camera, photographs, and the glass and porcelain figurines. If Billy didn't live here, though, that forced me to retreat to the random stranger as intruder.

“Who lived in my house before me?” I asked.

“The Petersons,” she replied promptly. “They had two teenage boys and a girl my age. We were close friends while they were here, but they didn't stay long. Before that, it was a rent house. No one stayed long in it, though.”

“Do you know if the Petersons had any enemies, someone who might have wanted to break in and smash things up?”

She glanced at me again, her eyes wide. “You think maybe that's what happened yesterday?”

“I don't know. I'm just trying to figure out why someone might have done it.”

Jenny shook her head slowly. “I don't think so. Not that I know of, anyway. Besides, they've been gone for two years. Surely anyone who wanted to break their things would have known by now that they were gone.”

“The house has been standing empty for two years?” I asked.

“Yeah. Why do you think we risked going in there? We thought no one was going to buy the place.”

I snorted. “I probably wouldn't have, except I was out of the country, and gave the real estate agent instructions about the type of house I wanted. She picked it out for me.”

Jenny giggled, apparently finding that immensely amusing. “I wish I could have seen your face when you first saw what you bought.” She paused, then added contritely, “I'm sorry that we made such a mess for you to clean up.”

“Didn't you ever worry what would happen if someone showed up to look at the house while you were there?”

“Of course, but that was half the fun. Billy said we could get up in the attic and hide before anyone could see us, though.”

“As long as you had enough warning.”

She grimaced. “Well, we won't be doing it any more, that's for sure.”

* * *

Detective Masterson called after lunch to tell me that the blood in the den was pig's blood, and that I could have the room cleaned now. He gave me the number of a cleaner who specialized in cleaning crime scenes, and I made arrangements with the cleaner to come out that afternoon. The crew from the alarm company arrived before the cleaner did. One look at the den was enough to tell them why I was in such a hurry to have the alarm installed.

That evening, I called my sister-in-law, Janette, and asked about Mark.

“I haven't heard from him in a while, hon,” she said, her warm Southern accent bringing back happier days. Mark and I had lived not far from her and her husband during the first few years of our marriage. “Last I heard, he was in Africa . Some country that starts with a ‘c’.”

That didn't sound promising. I let my breath out slowly. “You wouldn't know if he's picked up any new enemies recently, would you?”

“When hasn't he?” She laughed. “He hasn't said anything, and he usually does. Why?”

“Someone broke into my house yesterday while I was out. Whoever it was trashed a bunch of my stuff and threw pig's blood all over the den. The police wondered if maybe it was one of Mark's enemies aiming for a little revenge.”

There was a quick intake of breath on the other end. “Dana, are you all right?”

“Yeah. Like I said, I was out. The police were already at the house before I got back. One of the neighbors heard something going on and called them.”

“And you think this might have been one of Mark's enemies that did it?”

“I don't. But the police asked about him, so I thought I'd check.”

“If it was one of Mark's enemies, it probably would have been *your* blood all over the den. Frankly, I don't think he tells anyone he's married. It's one less piece of leverage for someone to use against him.”

Another quick stab in the chest. “Yeah, well, it's been so long that I'd be surprised if he cared anymore.”

“My brother's a rat. Dana, why don't you divorce him? You should get on with your life, find another man.”

“Someday, maybe. I'm just not all that interested in complicating my life with another man right now.”

“They're not all that bad. Really.”

She sounded like she was trying to entice a small child into sampling a new dish. I smiled in spite of myself.

“Someday.”

We chatted for a while about her family, and about the antics of numerous aunts and uncles and cousins. She had the warm, homebody type life that I'd imagined I'd wanted when I was younger, and there were times when I couldn't help feeling jealous. Once I'd discovered that I could be just as happy without it, though, I'd given up pining for something I was never going to have. There were too many other things in life to be worried about.

It was a little after ten o'clock when we hung up. After a week I was mostly caught up from the change in time zones, but I still tended to tire earlier in the evening than I was used to. I checked the alarm to make certain the system was on and armed, and went upstairs to bed.

* * *

Feeling safe behind the new defenses, I settled back into my normal working routine the next day. Using stacks of photos and my notes from the trip, I roughed out chapters for the new book, though I admit I did the work at a coffee table in the living room rather than at my desk in the den. The cleaner had done a great job removing the blood, but there was a faint, lingering odor of it in the air, making me reluctant to work in there. Besides, the empty shelves and the blank spots where the pictures had hung were too much of a reminder of the recent trauma.

During my second week back, I also purchased a used car, an older model blue Chevrolet sedan which I thought would probably be of little interest to car thieves, and turned in the expensive rental car. I also made arrangements with a contractor to come out the following week and build the darkroom in the basement. I toyed seriously with the idea of having the linoleum in the foyer and kitchen pulled up and replaced with ceramic tile, but decided it could wait.

I returned Friday afternoon from a trip to the post office and the grocery store to find Jenny waiting for me on the front steps. The day was unseasonably warm, and she was seated in the sunshine on the top stair, reading a book. She looked up and smiled as I pulled into the driveway. As I parked and shut off the engine, she closed the book and stood up, tucking it under her arm. I climbed out, reached back in to gather my shopping, and crossed the yard to join her.

“Dana, there you are,” she said eagerly. “I wasn't sure if you'd get back before we left.”

I paused for an instant, studying her. “Where are you off to?”

“We're spending the week in Maine with my grandparents. For Thanksgiving, you know. I won't be here for our lesson tomorrow, and I wanted to show you the pictures I took before we left.”

I sighed inwardly. I'd hoped to invite the Carmichaels over for dinner to repay their kindnesses over the past two weeks, and had shopped accordingly. I smiled to hide my disappointment.

“Sure. I'd love to see how they turned out.”

She smiled widely, turning to precede me up the stairs to the porch. I juggled the bags so I could insert the key that turned off the alarm.

“What's that?” Jenny asked.

“That arms the alarm system.”

“There's an alarm system?” Her eyes grew wide. I could imagine her wondering what would have happened if she and Billy had set off the alarm on one of their secret excursions into the house.

“There is now. I had it installed last weekend.” The key turned a quarter turn to the left, disarming the system. I pulled it back out.

“Oh.” She opened the storm door for me, and I inserted the house key into the lock, opening the front door.

“Take a seat in the living room. I've got to put away these groceries first.”

“All right.” She stepped inside, her gaze going toward the den. The door was open, and the room was neat and barer than the last time she'd seen it. She turned toward the living room, her ponytail swinging out behind her, and gave me a quick smile as she started past me.

I entered the living room a moment later to find she'd settled onto one end of the couch, and was flipping through a stack of the photos I'd taken over the summer. Her packet of photos and the book she'd been reading sat on the coffee table.

“These are gorgeous.” She flipped through a few more. “Where did you take them?”

I settled onto the couch beside her, looking at what was showing. “Those were taken on Crete.”

“You sure travel a lot. What do you do with all these pictures?”

“We can talk about that next time. You were worried that I wasn't going to get back in time?”

“Yeah!” She straightened out the stack of photos and leaned forward, snatching up the packet with her pictures and dropping the others in their place on top of the book. “We're supposed to leave pretty soon.”

The packet contained twenty-four five-by-seven inch prints, a nice size for what I'd intended to show her. I cleared the coffee table of my new typewriter, purchased to replace the damaged one, paper, and the book with my stack of pictures, setting them on the floor to one side so we could spread out Jenny's prints to get a good look at them. With them lined up in four rows of six across, we both leaned forward to look at them.

“Well?” she asked.

On the whole, they were pretty good for someone who'd had no training.

“They're not bad. Very nice, in fact.”

She wilted slightly, having obviously hoped for higher praise.

“You've got a nice eye for composition,” I said encouragingly. “Would you like me to show you how to make them even better?”

She nodded, only marginally consoled. I studied the photos, reaching out after a few seconds to pick up the shot she'd taken of the couple by the lake. The background was cluttered, showing a street with cars going by, and the parking lot, with its rail fence and lines of parked vehicles. Scooting a few other prints out of the way, I set it down again closer to us.

“This one is a very nice composition, but there are a few things that take away from the whole.” I picked up a couple of the other photos and turned them over, using them to mask out the distant parking lot and traffic on the street. “Do you see how much difference that makes?”

“Oh, wow. That looks a lot better.” She shifted forward to sit on the edge of the couch, leaning with her forearms on her jeans-clad thighs.

“This way, the focus is more clearly on the subject of the photograph. You always have to keep the background in mind when you take a picture. One way to do it is to be much closer to the subject, so that the subject fills the frame and there's little room for other things that might detract from it. Another, if you can't get close to the subject, is to use a telephoto lens. That makes the subject look much closer to you. Or if you have a picture like this, where there's only part of it that you really want, there are tricks you can do in the darkroom to print only that part of it.”

She looked up. "Do you have a darkroom?"

"Not yet. But I've got someone coming out to build one for me."

"Will you show me how to develop pictures and all?"

A car horn honked next door. Jenny jumped.

"Ooops! That's for me." She scooped the prints into a stack and shoved them back into the packet. "Thanks, Dana! I'll see you when we get back."

She popped off the couch and raced across the front room, reaching the door before I'd gotten halfway to the foyer. Fortunately, I hadn't switched on the alarm.

"Have a safe trip," I called after her.

"Thanks!" She jerked the door open and stepped out onto the porch, shoving the storm door open with the palm of her hand. "Bye!"

The door shut behind her with a bang. After a few seconds, the storm door swung shut. I looked out one of the windows, watching as she pushed through the narrow gap in the hedge and ran across her lawn to climb into the back seat of her father's car, a silver Mercedes sedan. The Mercedes backed out onto the road and pulled away.

I armed the alarm, then returned to the living room to put my work back on the coffee table. As I leaned down to pick up the typewriter, I noticed the book Jenny had brought, still under the stack of my photographs. I picked it up, carefully tipping the photos into my other hand, and by the moisture rings on the mahogany leather cover, recognized it as the diary that I'd found beneath all the trash on a shelf in the den. I smiled, amused. It seemed that the book couldn't stay away from here. I set it on a corner of the coffee table, arranged my typewriter and papers where they were easily in reach, and went back to work.

* * *

Sunday afternoon, it snowed.

I stood at the window at the front of the living room, sipping hot chocolate as I watched the flakes drift lazily earthward. Somewhere behind me on the coffee table, the typewriter stood empty. My notes, typed up from the original handwritten ones, were in a neat stack beside it, along with the chapter outlines and a much thinner collection of photos from the trip. Everything else had been neatly put away, and I was done working for the day.

The snow covered the yard in a thin, broken blanket. Dead brown blades of grass jutted up through the white. The road was still clear, warmed enough from the last few days of higher than normal temperatures that the snow melted too quickly to collect. A car went by, its tires making a hissing sound on the wet pavement. It was too bad Jenny wasn't home. Snow made for

wonderful pictures, especially when it was still pristine. There would still be time, though. Plenty of snow yet to come as winter really set in.

I took another sip from the cooling chocolate. There were water droplets on the window where steam from the mug had earlier condensed on the glass. I turned away, carrying the mug to the couch.

The television wasn't on, but I settled in front of it out of habit. I'd already checked to see what was on—two schmaltzy old movies, a televangelist wheedling money from his flock with religious blackmail, several sports shows, and a few holiday-themed programs, none of which interested me enough to have it on even as background noise. Out of a mixture of boredom and idle curiosity, I picked up the diary and opened it. If someone hadn't minded Jenny reading it, they probably wouldn't mind someone they'd never meet reading it, either.

The early entries were written in a large, careful hand, typical of an era when penmanship was still a valued skill and taught in schools. Most of the entries were mundane details of a childhood that had only peripherally been affected by the Great Depression. The diarist had a sibling, with whom he or she had regularly gotten into trouble, if entries such as *“Mom and Dad were furious with us today. He was at it again, hiding all of Dad's stuff. Boy did we get punished,”* were anything to go by.

One entry, dated January 30th, 1935, gave me a moment's pause:

“I was brave this time. Wouldn't admit who really tore Mommy's dress. Not sure if it really was us. Told them I thought someone else was in the house, but they didn't believe me.”

More than likely, it was an attempt to shift the blame for some adolescent roughhousing, but so soon after the break-in, it was enough to make the skin on the back of my neck crawl. I raised my head and glanced around uneasily.

Daylight was fading. I switched on the lamp beside the couch and tucked a piece of paper into the book to mark my place, closed it, and set it on the coffee table before getting up to go back to the window. The snow was coming down more heavily. Despite the coming night, there was a glow of reflected light off the thickening blanket of white. The road was covered, but I didn't think it would take long for it to melt off.

My stomach growled. I turned away and crossed the room to the kitchen door, picking up my empty mug on the way by.

I kept dinner simple, a can of Spaghettios and another mug of hot chocolate, and settled back onto the couch with the diary, savoring the tomato-sauce flavors that had been a staple of my childhood. Over the course of the entries, I'd come to the conclusion that the writer had been female, due to details about dress and etiquette, which she'd deeply resented. The rounded, careful handwriting had become individual and feminine, without the ridiculous hearts and flourishes some of my own classmates had decorated their words with. I ate while I read, pausing again when I reached an entry dated March 15th, 1940:

“Wish they would let us go out and play with the other kids.”

Judging by the earlier entries, she'd been around fifteen years old when she'd written that. What had been going on that had kept her parents from letting her and her brother go outside to play with the other kids? Had there been some sort of disease going around, like polio, their parents had been protecting them from? There were no clues in the diary entries, though. Apparently their parents hadn't chosen to give them a reason.

I read on, isolated in the pool of light from the lamp as the room darkened around me. Teenage troubles and anxieties filled many of the pages. It was amazing how little some things about growing up had changed over the years. Relationships between boys and girls were fraught with misunderstandings and unrequited affections. In 1943, her brother was drafted and went away for basic training, and had spent time at an Air Force base training to be a pilot, but never actually saw combat during World War II. He'd spent some time at an air base in Germany during the second half of the 1940s.

November 20th, 1949, brought the next entry that made me stop and wonder:

“I can't believe they didn't tell us the truth. How could they keep such a secret from us? After all, we're 24 now and deserved to have known beforehand.”

What secrets had been kept from them, and by whom? I wished I knew who the diary had belonged to. It would be interesting to actually talk to the person who had written it. There was so much that had been left unsaid.

The back window of the dining room shattered with a tremendous crash. The heavy, antique two-wheeled push mower from the back yard slammed onto the dining room table and slid off onto the hardwood floor, scattering shards of glass. I jumped, letting out a short, startled scream. Cold air rushed in through the opening. I stared, frozen in shock, as snow swirled in on the wind.

There was a scraping sound at the outside door to the kitchen, then the crack of breaking wood as the door was forced open. The alarm went off. I jumped up, the diary sliding off onto the floor. The volume of cold air coming in increased dramatically. I backed away toward the foyer, staring at the door into the kitchen, as adrenaline surged into my system.

The phone rang, the sound coming from both the kitchen and the den. I turned and raced across the foyer to the den, picking up the receiver.

“Hello?”

“Mrs. Trent? This is Charles from Alco Alarm Systems. We're showing that your alarm is going off. Do you need help?”

“Yes. Someone just threw a lawn mower through my window and broke open the back door.”

“We're sending the police immediately. Are you in a safe place?”

I looked behind me at the open door to the den. “Not really, no.”

“Try to get somewhere safe to wait for the police. The alarm itself will often scare away an intruder, but you can't always depend on that.”

“I can shut and lock the door to the room I'm in.”

“Good. Can you set the phone down without hanging up? Come back and tell me when you've got the door secure.”

“All right.” I set the receiver on the desk and crossed to the door, shutting it so quickly that it slammed against the doorjamb and made me jump. I locked it, turned back to the desk, and spotted the fireplace tools. There was no harm in being armed. I half ran across the room, grabbed the iron fire poker, and went back to the desk, picking up the receiver. “Okay, it's done.”

I stood by the desk with the phone pressed to my ear and the poker in my other hand, shaking and trying to keep it out of my voice. Unspent adrenaline wasn't helping. I was not a big woman—five foot six and one hundred thirty pounds—and while my husband had taught me a few dirty tricks to use if I ever found myself in a tight spot, I didn't fool myself that I could outmuscle someone who was big enough to hurl an antique push mower through my dining room window, or force my back door open. Charles from Alco kept up a steady stream of reassuring talk, which as I calmed down, I appreciated more than he was ever likely to know. By the time the police arrived, I was in a much less panicked frame of mind.

“The police are here,” I told him.

“Good. Go let them in. We'll be back in touch with you later.”

“Thank you,” I said, and meant it. We said goodbye, and I hung up and went to unlock the den door.

There was no one lurking on the other side. I stepped out into the foyer, unlocked the front door, and flung it open before switching off the alarm system. Two officers emerged from the patrol car, wearing heavy dark coats against a chill I was still too hopped up on adrenaline to feel. They walked through the swirling snowfall to the front porch and came inside.

* * *

They'd been prepared to believe that I'd somehow managed to set the alarm off myself, until I directed them into the living room and they saw the push mower and the broken window. Both had given me measuring looks before agreeing that it was unlikely I'd thrown it through the window myself. They'd checked the kitchen door, found that the doorjamb was splintered where the door had been forced, and then one of them had taken a flashlight and followed the rapidly filling footsteps the intruder had left in the snow, while the other took down my account of events. The trail had gone out through my backyard and through the yard of the folks behind me,

finally ending at the next street over. As the houses on either side of the trail were for sale, no one was home to admit to having seen a stranger run through the yard and hop into a waiting car.

After the police left, I wedged a chair firmly under the doorknob of the kitchen door, taped a heavy plastic drop cloth over the broken window with duct tape, gathered some clothes and some toiletries into an overnight bag, and headed off in the car to find a motel for the night. I set the alarm before I left, though with the broken window providing easy access, if the intruder had intended to come back, there was little keeping him from coming right in.

I arrived home again around ten the next morning, and found that I was the recipient of a number of surreptitious glances from behind curtains and window blinds at the houses across the street. I supposed it wasn't surprising, given that I'd only been here two weeks, and I'd had two visits by the police.

I grabbed my overnight bag and stepped out into the trampled snow beside the driveway. The footprints, some mine and some from the officers, were partially filled in from last night's snow, but still plainly footprints. The sky was clearing, and the sun was already making inroads in the melting blanket of white. I trudged through the wet flakes to the front steps, and was just starting up them when a car pulled into the driveway behind me.

I paused, looking back. After a moment, the driver's door opened and Detective Masterson climbed out. Not entirely unexpected. Especially now that there'd been a second break-in. I waited for him to catch up with me.

“Going somewhere, Mrs. Trent?” he asked, eyeing the overnight bag.

“Just getting back. Is there something I can do for you?”

“I wanted to check back with you and see if there was perhaps something new you'd remembered or thought of in regard to your case.”

“Come on in. I can't guarantee what shape the house will be in, though.” I led him up the stairs, pausing again to disarm the alarm before unlocking and opening the front door.

The air inside was barely warmer than the air outside. With a frown of anticipation, I dropped the overnight bag beside the door and crossed the foyer to step inside the living room. The plastic over the back window had been pulled down and folded as a drape over the windowsill. The furnace was valiantly trying to compete with the great outdoors, but the missing window was too great a disadvantage.

“He came back,” I said flatly.

“He?” Masterson had followed me into the living room, and stood studying the glittering fragments of the window and the ancient, rusty push mower on the hardwood floor. “Did you see who did this?”

“No, but whoever it was threw that mower through the window. I'm assuming it was a ‘he.’”

He grunted in acknowledgement. “Your back door was forced as well?”

“Yeah.” I started across the living room to the door to the kitchen. An unexpectedly bare patch on the coffee table brought me up short. All the papers and photographs that I'd left beside my typewriter were missing. My gut knotted. “My work's gone.”

Masterson stopped on the other side of the coffee table, looking down. “What was here?”

“Everything I'd done on the new book over the last two weeks. Notes, chapter outlines, the photos I'd picked to use. They were all sitting right there by the typewriter.”

“Perhaps you had better see what else is missing.”

We made a quick tour of the house. None of the things I would have expected a thief to take were missing—the television, the stereo, what little jewelry I had, were all in the places where I'd left them. There was, however, a large yellow stain in the middle of my white bedspread, accompanied by a strong smell of urine.

The contempt in the act was plain, and it made my stomach queasy. If there had been any doubt at all that the original break-in, and this one, had been aimed at me specifically, that destroyed it, as far as I was concerned. Masterson glanced at the mess and set a hand on my arm, directing me back toward the doorway.

“I'd like to have a team come collect evidence again,” he said. “It would be better if we left this room untouched.”

I allowed him to push me out into the hall without protest. “All right. There's a phone downstairs in the den.”

We trooped back downstairs, me in the lead, and crossed the foyer to the den. Masterson paused for an instant, staring at the flower arrangement on the half-round table next to the door. I gave it a quick glance just before passing through the door, but there was nothing wrong that I could see.

There was a stale smell of burnt paper in the air. My gaze jerked toward the fireplace. There was a lot of ash in the grating, ash that hadn't been there when I'd left last night.

“No!” I trotted across the room, leaning down to look closer. Not everything had burned completely, and what was left was enough to prove that it was the papers and photos from the living room. Two weeks worth of work on the new book. I smacked the mantelpiece with the palm of my hand, then turned and sat on the bricks in front of the hearth, cursing under my breath as I examined my now-bruised palm.

“Your new book?” Masterson asked from the doorway.

“Yes. He burned it.” I wrapped my arms around myself, looking up at him. “Why is someone doing this? I don't understand.”

He came further inside, stopping beside the desk. “Mrs. Trent, have you given any more thought to who might have reason to want to harm you?”

“If there's anyone in the publishing world that hates me this badly, they've never bothered to mention it to me. Beyond that—” I shrugged. “I really, honestly, have no idea. I even called my sister-in-law to ask if she'd heard anything, and she said Mark doesn't even tell people he's married. I doubt any of his enemies even know I exist.”

He studied me for a few seconds before nodding. “All right. Let's get that team in here to look for evidence. Maybe this person has left something we can use to identify him this time.”

* * *

He made the call using a handkerchief to carefully pick up and hold the receiver, and a pen from his own pocket to push the buttons. Afterward, we moved into the foyer to wait, since that was about the only place we could be fairly certain of not contaminating evidence. He kept us well away from the table with the flowers. The mirror on the wall behind the flowers had been decorated with the words “Leave Greenery” in something that looked like red lipstick. I was fairly certain it wasn't an appeal by a local druid for an offering to the nature gods. Masterson watched my reaction to seeing it. I wondered again if he suspected that I'd done all this myself.

It seemed like hours before Greenery's finest finished going over my house looking for evidence. Lots of photographs, lots of fingerprint dust. Masterson spent much of the time asking questions, sometimes over and over and in different ways, trying to jog a memory or an admission from me. All he got was a bunch of ‘I don't know's and my sister-in-law's phone number. I really had no clue why anyone would do this. The forensics team bore away my soiled bedding in a large sealed plastic bag, hopeful that the urine would have useful DNA mixed in it.

After they left, I called the glazier about getting the glass in the broken window replaced, and contacted the alarm company about upgrading my system, wanting to have sensors installed on all the ground floor windows. A third call went to the contractor who was coming out to build the darkroom. I asked him to add the repair of the doorjamb and the installation of two deadbolt locks to the agenda. The fourth call went to my agent, Carla, to explain why my manuscript would probably end up being a little late. She was suitably horrified. A fifth call went to my sister-in-law. She wasn't home, so I left a message on her answering machine warning her that Detective Masterson would probably be calling, and asked her to tell him anything she thought might be useful, especially if she had contact information for Mark.

The rest of the day was spent cleaning and returning the house to a semblance of order. My mind was constantly on what had happened. None of it made sense, especially since the only possible reason I was coming up with seemed so unlikely it was laughable. And yet, the actions bore the marks of an immature, aggressive young male—throwing the push mower through the window to frighten me before breaking in, the destruction of my property in the den, both last week's and

this week's, the act of urinating on my bed. Especially the last one seemed the act of a young man, maybe in his late teens or early twenties. Right around the age I imagined Jenny's boyfriend Billy to be. But why would he feel so strongly about me buying the house he and his girlfriend had made out in? Surely he wouldn't need to drive me away in order to find a private place to meet her.

With no reasonable excuse to accuse him of breaking and entering, and vandalism, I kept those speculations to myself.

The rest of the week passed quietly. Once the repairs had been done, the new locks were in the doors, and the new contact points had been installed on the windows to strengthen the alarm system, I was able to relax enough to set back to work on the book. Fortunately, my handwritten notes from the trip and the negatives for the photographs had been tucked safely away, so it was merely a matter of retyping the notes and getting new prints of the burned photos made. By the time the Carmichaels returned late Sunday, I had reworked the chapter outline. It was slightly different from the original, and I liked it more.

Jenny showed up on my doorstep Monday night, smiling, oblivious of the week I'd had while she was gone. Dressed in tee shirt and jeans, and wearing a dark blue coat of fluffy fake fur, she reminded me of a lot of the cheerleaders at the high school I'd attended. It was cold and dark, and she shivered as she stood on the porch.

“Hi Dana. I was wondering... You remember when I was over here last? I think I left that diary I was reading. Did you happen to find it?”

“Yeah. Come on in.” I stepped back, and she came in, turning toward the living room.

“Is it still in there?”

“Last time I saw it, it was.”

I shut the door, following her into the living room. She stopped by the coffee table. I'd moved all my stuff back into the den. With the smell of fresh wood smoke from a fire on the hearth, I'd managed to blot out the lingering hints of blood. Other than cleaning, I hadn't been in the living room much during the past week. The coffee table and the floor around it were bare, and the couch held neatly arranged pillows and a folded blanket, and nothing else.

“Where?” Her gaze turned to the rest of the room, checking the tops of tables and the book cases.

“It was on the coffee table. No, wait.” I narrowed my eyes, thinking. “I was looking at it, right before the back window broke. I think it fell on the floor.”

We both leaned down, checking under the coffee table and the couch. There was no book. I straightened up, pursing my lips.

“It's gone? How can it be gone?” Jenny's voice was tight. She straightened, swinging around to look at the rest of the room again. “Are you sure you didn't put it on a shelf or something?”

I leaned down, double checking, but the book still wasn't there. I straightened again. “I don't remember seeing it when I cleaned up on Monday. I wonder... Maybe he took it? Or maybe—”

I half turned, taking a step toward the foyer before remembering that I'd found nothing like a remnant of the diary in the ashes last Monday.

“What are you talking about?”

I turned back. Jenny was staring at me, alarm making her eyes wide.

“Someone broke into my house again last week. Jenny, who does the diary belong to? Would they have had any reason to believe you'd left it here?”

“No! It belongs to a school friend. They'd have had no way of knowing I'd left it here.” She frowned. “You're not accusing my friend of anything, are you?”

I took in a deep breath, and let it out again slowly. “No. I'm just trying to understand what's going on. Someone's broken into my house on several occasions. They've trashed my stuff and burned my pictures, and now the diary's missing. I'm just trying to figure out why anyone would do these things.”

“Burned your pictures.” She gasped, covering her mouth with her fingers. “Not the ones I was looking at before we left?”

I nodded.

“Oh, no! Those were so beautiful! Can you print them again?”

“I already have, but it's set me behind considerably. I really would like to know why this is happening, so if you do know anything, like if there was anyone but you and Billy who hung out here, I would appreciate it if you would tell me.”

“There wasn't anyone that I know of. We never saw any sign anyone else had been in here, anyway.” She glanced around the room once more, slowly moving away. “Well, if you're certain the diary's missing, I'll have to go tell my friend about it.” She glanced at me, as if hoping I'd tell her it was all a joke and magically produce the book from behind my back. When I didn't, she turned and headed for the foyer. I followed to let her out again.

“Oh, Dana, is it all right if I still come over on Saturday mornings? Mom said to make sure it wasn't a one-time thing.”

“Sure,” I replied. “Bring your camera and some black-and-white film, and we'll shoot some still lifes. The darkroom should be ready by then. We can develop and print them as well.”

“That would be great!” She tossed a grin at me over her shoulder.

“Jenny, tell your friend I'm sorry about the diary.”

The grin vanished. “I will. I wish I'd remembered to take it with me.”

She turned the knob. The door swung inward abruptly, catching her hard in the shoulder and half spinning her away. I jumped, gasping. She stumbled backward with a startled outcry.

A tall, muscular young man, dark haired, blue eyed, wearing dark clothes and a heavy dark coat, shoved through the opening. He spared Jenny a quick glance before turning away. His gaze found me in the doorway of the living room. His eyes were cold, and his face hard. I stared, my insides jerking tight, and knew who he was even before Jenny spoke.

“Billy, what are you—”

He took two long strides toward me, drawing his arm across his chest. I stepped backward, but not quickly enough. He swung his arm, backhanding me so hard that the world exploded.

* * *

The floor was the first thing I became aware of. It was cold and hard, and my right cheek was pressed against it. It also didn't smell particularly good. It was high time that it got mopped.

Somewhere nearby, someone was sobbing in short, stifled breaths.

“Billy, don't, please,” a female voice said. It took a few seconds for my addled brain to place it as Jenny's. It took a few more seconds for me to wonder what I was doing on the floor. I tried to move, only to discover that my wrists and ankles had been tied. Movement also triggered the headache I hadn't been feeling until that point. I sucked my breath in through my teeth. There was movement, a quick rustle of cloth, and footsteps. A hand grabbed my hair and jerked my head up.

“You thought you were clever putting in that alarm system, didn't you?” The voice was male, adult but without the deeper timbres of maturity. Billy, no doubt. Jenny gasped.

“Billy, no! She wasn't doing anything! She doesn't know anything! Leave her alone!”

“She was reading the diary.”

“What's that got to do with anything?” I asked. I was a good deal calmer than I would have expected under the circumstances, though I wasn't sure if it was from the blow to the head, or if it was from the fact that there was absolutely nothing I could do, and panicking seemed the wrong response. Billy leaned down to look me in the eye. His gaze was just as cold as when he'd come through the door.

“It's got everything to do with it.”

“Why?”

“Because of the treasure, of course. Do you think I want you finding it before I do?”

I blinked. “What treasure?”

“The treasure in the hidden room.”

“What hidden room?”

He narrowed his eyes. “The one in the diary. The one here in the house.”

“She didn't know the diary was from here! I told her I borrowed it!” Jenny's voice was high with fear. She wasn't afraid for herself. My gut tightened.

“There is no hidden room in this house,” I said. “I've been over the whole thing cleaning and fixing things.”

He jerked a little harder on my hair, derision filling his face. “Of course there is! The diary said there was someone else in the house that kept stealing and hiding things. If no one ever saw them, there has to be a secret room, and if there's a secret room, it's because someone had something valuable to keep, like jewelry or money. They lived here during the Great Depression. Nobody kept their valuables in banks, where they could lose them.”

It made logical sense, even if it was based on fantasy. Men had killed for less. I had the sudden feeling Billy would have no problems killing me to protect his fantasy treasure. The phone call I'd overheard at the Carmichaels' house suddenly made sense. He'd broken in the first time because he hadn't realized Jenny had already gotten the diary from me, and he'd destroyed things in a fit of rage when he hadn't been able to find it. Though, on second thought, he may have already intended to destroy things, given that he'd brought the pig's blood to throw around. The second time, he'd seen me reading it and had been prepared to stop me. If not for the alarm, he might easily have killed me that night.

“Billy, please—” Jenny began again. He turned on her, letting go of me so quickly that I had no time to brace myself before my head smacked against the floor. Fresh pain exploded in my head. I flinched my eyes shut, gasping.

“Shut up! I'm doing this for both of us!”

“She's my friend!”

“You were never supposed to be friends with her! You were only supposed to get the diary back! It's your own fault this is happening!”

It was a stunningly unfair accusation, and Jenny, too young and inexperienced to see through it, subsided with a squeak and another round of sobs.

“If there's a secret room, you're welcome to whatever's in it,” I said.

“Too late,” he replied coldly. “Do you think I'm stupid enough to believe you won't report this to the police?” He jerked my head back again, and stuffed a wadded cloth in my mouth with a rubber-gloved hand when I gasped at the pain. Before I could push it out with my tongue, he let go of my hair again so he could tie a strip of cloth over my mouth to hold the gag in place.

Panic welled up then, because I knew he was going to kill me, and that I couldn't even try to talk him out of it. I twisted my wrists in their bonds, looking for any way I could get myself loose. He laughed.

“You're going nowhere but where I want you,” he said.

There was a fresh burst of sobs from Jenny. “Billy—”

“Shut up! Just be here when I get back. And don't say a word about this to anyone!”

He stood up, leaned down to grab my arm, and jerked me off the floor, draping me over his shoulder. His shoulder dug into my stomach, combining with the headache to make me want to throw up. He turned, looking at Jenny.

“Be here,” he repeated, and turned away again. I caught a glance of her face. She had her hands pressed to her mouth, trying to stifle her sobs, and her eyes were huge with fear.

Billy switched off the light in the foyer and on the porch before opening the door. The cold winter air bit through my clothes and chilled bare skin. He pulled the door shut again, crossed the porch, and then the yard, stopping at my car. Keys jingled. He unlocked the driver's door, opened it, and reached in to unlock the back door. Two strides, and he stopped again to open the back door. With a quick shrug, he shifted me off his shoulder and dumped me onto the back seat. He grabbed my legs and shoved me further in, sliding me along the seat. I tried to kick him. He stepped back and grabbed the door to slam it shut, leaving it to me to pull my feet out of the way before they could get trapped.

I squirmed, fighting the bonds on my wrists. If I couldn't free myself, I was going to die. He got in the driver's seat and shut the door, plunging the inside of the car into darkness. The cold vinyl of the seat chilled my back and arms. Billy started the engine and backed out of the driveway.

“Yeah, you thought you were smart, didn't you?” He pulled forward, carefully instead of in a rush, as if giving the impression it was just me out for a drive and not a man on his way to commit murder. “You should have stayed away from my girlfriend, and away from this house. What did you need a house this size for to begin with? There's just you. What's with that? Are you queer or something? Is that what you wanted it for, you wanted room to invite your

girlfriends over?" He paused, as if waiting for me to answer, then laughed. "Oh, that's right. You're not talking, are you?"

I raised my head, looking toward the door at my feet. Was there any way I could get the door open? I tried wedging the toes of my shoes under the handle and pulling, but they wouldn't fit. I dropped my head back on the seat, thinking hard.

"She'll be better off when you're gone, and I won't have to listen to all that 'Dana did this,' and 'Dana did that.' You're all she talks about anymore. I'm sick of it."

He was jealous of the time she spent with me? Combining that with the imaginary treasure, he probably felt quite justified in killing me. Even if I hadn't been gagged, it was likely I couldn't have talked him out of this. How many other people were going to end up dead because he considered them a threat? Not to mention the harm he could do to Jenny herself if she decided she'd had enough of him and tried to break their relationship off.

He switched on the radio and fell silent, apparently having said all he intended to. I continued my silent struggle with my bonds. There was no room to squeeze my hand out. The air in the car warmed as the heater began working. Streetlights flashed past at regular intervals, blinding me one by one as they shown in through the passenger window. Then we were beyond the edge of town and headed into the country. The glow from the dash lights highlighted his cheekbones and brows, while throwing the rest of what I could see of him into silhouette.

"I bet you're wondering where we're going. I've got a nice, quiet little place picked out for you," he said. "No one ever goes there. I can just slide you into the water, and no one will know about it."

Oh, God. He was going to drown me. A bullet to the head would have been quick. Drowning would be quick, but I'd know I was dying. The gag muffled my protest. I struggled harder against the ropes. Billy laughed again.

"Don't like that much, do you? Too bad."

I looked at the back of his head. It was within reach. I scooted back a little along the seat, drew my legs up, and kicked him hard.

His head shot forward. The car swerved wildly. He cursed. Instead of hitting the breaks, he tromped hard on the gas pedal, making the car leap forward. He started to turn his head, a snarl twisting his face. I kicked him again, catching him with the heels of my shoes in the side of his face.

The car swerved again, bounced, and became briefly airborne. My stomach lurched. Then the Chevy slammed into something solid with a horrific screech of metal and shattering glass. Loose in the back seat, I was flung forward by my own inertia into the back of the front seats. My head smacked into something hard. There was a flash of pain, and then darkness.

* * *

Regaining consciousness wasn't what I'd expected. It came in layers and at intervals, sliding almost seamlessly back and forth across the boundary of unconsciousness so that for a long time I wasn't sure what was real and what was a dream. When I came out of it at last, I recognized the fuzzy way I felt as the result of a heavy-duty painkiller. Something nearby was beeping insistently. I opened my eyes. There was an IV drip attached to my arm. The machine holding the IV bag was doing the beeping, notifying the nursing staff that the bag was empty. The room was dimly lit with small florescent lights.

An older woman in hospital whites bustled in to check the machine. She noticed that my eyes were open and smiled.

“You're awake,” she remarked. “How do you feel?”

“Fuzzy.”

“That's the medication. I'll be back in a moment.” She bustled out again. When she returned, she'd brought a doctor. He came to the side of the bed, while she set to work on the other side, replacing the empty IV bag. The bag contained clear solution, not blood, I was relieved to see.

“Mrs. Trent,” the doctor said. It took a few seconds before it occurred to me that was my name. I looked at him. His name tag read ‘Dr. Humboldt.’ “How are you feeling?”

“Tired. Still a bit sleepy. What happened?”

“You were in a pretty serious car accident. You and the young man who was driving were both very lucky to have survived it.” He drew a penlight from one pocket and switched it on, leaning down to flash it in my eyes. I winced. The brightness hurt.

“What young man?”

He straightened, switching the penlight off and putting it away. “You've had a concussion. It's not unusual with an injury like this to have temporary amnesia. As your brain has time to recover, your memory should come back.”

I puzzled over that while he checked the readings on a monitor and made a notation on the chart at the foot of my bed. He paused to have a quiet discussion with the nurse, but the terms were technical, and my thoughts were fuzzy enough that the conversation washed right over me. The doctor left, and the nurse turned back to the IV.

“So what's wrong with me besides a concussion?” I asked.

She glanced back at me over her shoulder, smiling again. “Don't you worry about that. Just try to rest, and when you're ready, the doctor will be back to discuss it with you.”

She got the machine working again, and left. I tried to raise my head and check the rest of me, but pain stabbed through my right shoulder and a wave of dizziness hit that was so strong that I gave up before I'd gotten far. I closed my eyes, waiting for my head to stop spinning.

When I opened them again, it was obvious time had passed. Daylight filtered in through white blinds. A dark-haired man in a brown sports jacket, brown slacks, and a light blue shirt, open at the neck, sat in a chair next to the bed, watching me. After a few seconds, I recognized him. It was nice to know the doctor was right and my memory wasn't gone.

“Detective Masterson.”

“Mrs. Trent.”

“Call me Dana. I'm sure I'm hardly dressed to be formal.”

He quirked his mouth in a faint smile.

“I'm sorry to disturb you so soon, but there are some answers that we're in urgent need of. Your neighbor, Jennifer Carmichael, phoned 911 last night to say that her boyfriend, Billy Starkey, was trying to kill you. She was somewhat hysterical, but did manage to tell the operator where he was taking you and what he was driving. By the time the Sheriff's patrol found you, Starkey had smashed your car against a tree on the side of the road. Jennifer Carmichael has told us what she could. We need to know from you what happened, to verify her story.”

I thought for a moment. “I kicked him in the head.”

He lowered his eyebrows. “You kicked him in the head. Is that why he tried to kill you?”

“No. It's why we went off the road and hit a tree. He told me he was going to take me to the river and drown me. He thought it was very funny. I kicked him trying to stop him. That's why he lost control of the car.”

He narrowed his eyes. “I see. Can you tell me why he wanted to kill you?”

I thought again. “There's a diary, which I guess he found in my house before I bought it. He thinks the entries talk about a hidden room, and that there must be treasure in there. He thought I'd found out about the hidden room, and wanted to kill me so I wouldn't get to the treasure before he did.”

“And is there a hidden room?”

“Not that I know of.”

We talked for a while longer, until the nurse came and ran him off. He promised to return later. A doctor came in as the detective was leaving.

“Mrs. Trent, you're looking much more awake than when I saw you last.”

I looked at him, and didn't recognize him. His name tag read 'Dr. Colman.' Apparently there'd been a shift change.

“Yeah. I'm getting my memory back, too.”

“Good, good.” He looked at the chart. “How's your shoulder doing?”

“It hurts a bit. What happened?”

“You have a broken collar bone. Also, an assortment of bruises and abrasions. I'm told that you're quite fortunate you came out of the wreck with just that and the concussion.” He looked up at me, smiling. “We'd like to keep you in for one more night for observation, and then you can probably go home. Do you have anyone who can drive you around and help you out at home?”

My mind shied away from the thought of going back to the house. “No. I don't have anyone locally who could help me out.”

“The hospital can give you the names of several agencies where you can hire home help for a few days, if you find you need it. With that concussion and broken collar bone, you're not going to be doing a whole lot of work around your house.”

I nodded, and wondered if I would ever feel safe in that house again.

“What about Billy? Someone said he'd survived the wreck as well.”

He hesitated for a few seconds before deciding that I deserved an answer to that. “He's in traction. He's broken his neck, among other things. He's lucky to have gotten out of that car alive.”

“Thank you,” I said quietly.

He picked up the chart and made a notation. “The nurse will be in after a while to remove your catheter. After that, we'll want you to try carefully getting up and going to the bathroom. If it's too difficult, or you get too dizzy, just ask the nurse for a bedpan.”

Catheter. Fun. I'd be doing well if I didn't get a urinary tract infection out of that one.

* * *

Time passed. The bathroom visit went off without too many hitches, and the nurse left me with the admonition to push the call button when I needed to go again, since she didn't think I was quite steady enough to make it there and back on my own. After that, I was left alone to sleep and to think.

The more I thought about it, the more certain I was that I didn't want to remain in my new house. Billy was in traction for now, but if he ever regained his mobility, and when he eventually got out of jail, he might come back again, convinced the secret room and the hidden treasure really existed. If I was still there when that happened, he would likely try again to kill me. Once in a lifetime was more than enough.

That evening, there was a commotion in the hall, loud enough that it drew my attention away from the local news on the room's small television.

“Is she in here?”

A woman, her hair an impossible shade of orangey-red, stormed through my open door, her voice and her face filled with righteous fury. She was probably twenty years my senior. A man came in after her, hefty, with the air of a person who was used to throwing his weight around, physically and metaphorically. They were quickly followed by a uniformed police officer.

“You can't be in here,” the officer said.

“What did you do to my boy?” the woman demanded, her voice rising. “What did you do to him?”

She had to be Billy's mother.

“Your boy tried to kill me,” I returned. “He had me tied up in the back seat of my own car and was driving me to the river to drown me. All I did was try to stop him.”

“Liar!” she shouted.

“We'll sue you for libel!” the man added.

“It's only libel if it's not the truth.”

He turned dark red with fury, and his wife lunged forward as if to strike me for daring to accuse her darling of such villainy. The policeman managed to get around her and put himself in the way.

“Leave. You have no business being in here”

With the officer in the way, I couldn't see her, but her voice said pretty clearly she wanted to get her hands on me and make me pay for my accusation.

“You heard what she said. We have a right—”

He raised his voice. “Go back into the hall, unless you want to be arrested for trying to assault this woman.”

Something about his tone got through to her. Muttering curses at both of us, she turned back toward the door. Her husband glared at me before leaving. Nothing short of hearing the truth from their son's own lips was going to convince them of his guilt. I wasn't certain that even the DNA evidence he'd left on my bedspread would count for anything with them.

I sighed. No one ever said life was fair.

* * *

It took one night back in the house for me to make up my mind. The next day, I called the realtor and put the house back on the market.

A taxi had brought me home. Betty Carmichael had been outside her house, heading for the Mercedes, as we'd pulled up. I'd waved, but she'd looked right through me, turning away without response. It was likely she'd found out from Jenny that I'd known about her daughter and Billy and hadn't mentioned it to her.

The moving company arrived a few days later. Some of my things were still in boxes from when I'd moved in, and since I'd been unable to do any packing myself, they'd packed everything else for me, with the exception of the things I needed for the new book. Those went into a suitcase with some of my clothes. Everything else would go back into storage. I was going south to stay with my parents while my shoulder healed and I figured out what I was going to do next. The police had my parents' phone number and address, so they could contact me later if Billy ever recovered enough to stand trial.

On the final day, as I was giving the house a once over before leaving for good, Jenny tentatively knocked on the front door, then pushed it open, looking in at me. Her expression was a mix of uncertainty and unhappiness. Her gaze dropped to the strapping that held my collarbone in place and my right arm still.

“Does your mother know you're here?” I asked.

The unhappiness in her face deepened. “She's not very happy with either of us. But it doesn't matter. I wanted to come see you before you left.”

“Come on in. I was just checking to be sure I haven't forgotten anything.”

She stepped inside, looking around. The place had that empty, echoey feel to it, a house where no one lived. For her, it was probably not a strange feeling, since she and Billy had spent so much time here. The diary was tucked under her arm. Her gaze turned to me.

“Dana, I just wanted to say I'm sorry. I didn't know he was doing those things. I tried, but I couldn't stop him—” Her chin trembled, and tears welled up in her eyes. “I've never seen him like that before.”

She needed comfort, reassurance that I didn't blame her. "You did the right thing, calling the police," I told her. "We could have both died out there if we hadn't been found as quickly as we were."

"Maybe it would have been better if he'd died," she blurted out. She looked at me quickly, as if startled by her own words. "I never saw him like that before. He threatened to hit me when I tried to stop him from hurting you. He scares me, now." She seemed older somehow, as if the experience had forced her to grow up.

"Your mother's right," I said. "You need to stay away from him. He's going to hurt you someday if you don't."

She dropped her gaze. "I know." She looked down at the book, pulling it out from under her arm. One corner of her mouth turned up in a sad smile. "I guess I'd better put this back." Turning, she entered the den and walked straight to the shelf where I'd found the diary three weeks ago, laying it down flat.

"The police may want to see that."

"They can come here to get it, then." She turned away, crossing the room to rejoin me in the foyer. "Have you finished looking around?"

"I think so, yeah. Could you carry my suitcase out for me?"

"Yeah. Sure." She grabbed the handle and picked it up. It was heavy, making her lean to the other side to balance herself as she walked toward the front door. A taxi waited in the driveway. The driver came forward to take the suitcase from her, carrying it to the cab to put it in the trunk. I followed Jenny out, locking the door and pulling it shut behind me. The air was cold. I was just as happy to be heading south again, where it got cold but didn't leave me feeling chilled to the bone.

Jenny surprised me by giving me a hug. "I'm going to miss you."

I gave her a one-armed hug in return. "Me too."

"I wish we'd had more time to work on the pictures." She stepped back abruptly, suddenly uncertain what to do with herself. "Well, I guess this is goodbye."

"I guess it is. Take care of yourself, Jenny. And listen to your mother."

"I will."

I turned and walked to the taxi. The driver opened the door for me. Jenny stood on the front steps of the house, watching while the driver climbed in behind the wheel and backed the vehicle onto the road. She waved. I waved back.

Next door, Betty Carmichael had come out onto her porch, like her daughter watching as the taxi took me away. Expecting nothing in return, I waved. After a few seconds, she waved back. She was probably just as happy to see me go.

I turned forward as we moved out of her sight, and wished it was going to be as easy to put the memories behind me as it was to leave the house.