

All she has to do is ...

FOLLOW THE DOTTED LINE



INTRODUCING THE ANDREA BRAVOS MYSTERIES

BY NANCY HERSAGE

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Introducing the Andrea Bravos Mysteries

By Nancy Gilsenan Hersage

www.NancyHersage.com

Published by **Kindle Press**

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This is book is for:

My jet packing children, Tom, Molly, and Shannon

My sibs, great and gracious, Norma and Russ

My wonderful mom, Elnor, and my enigmatic dad, Walt

My friend and partner in screenwriting, Shirley

And the Lorna of my life, Barbara

A special thanks to my college roommates –

Sandy, who helped so much by proofing the manuscript and by sharing my ridiculous worldview, and Cathy, who helped me remember it's never too late to get that story down on paper.

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Prologue

Phone Tree

Mitch Kornacky stared, more than a little appalled, at the human ashes in the Styrofoam burger container. The young entrepreneur could not take his eyes off the box that his assistant had just brought into his office, set on his desk, and opened gingerly.

“Not the sandwich you were expecting. Right, boss?” asked Billy, the bearer of both the box and the bad news.

Mitch nodded in the affirmative, as the assistant then handed him a small, handwritten card that had arrived in the same package as the box of ashes.

The underling was feeling a touch squeamish. “I think I’m done opening your mail.”

“Thanks for your undying devotion, Billy,” hissed Mitch, still reeling from the delivery. “How did it come?”

“Regular mail.”

“God, she didn’t even have enough respect to send my poor father FedEx,” Mitch snorted, as he read the accompanying card.

“Your father’s wife? *She* sent this?” the assistant asked, feeling his duty now included closing the squeaky yellow box with as much reverence as possible.

“His fourth,” Mitch pointed out. “They’ve been married less than a year. Never met her.”

Mitch’s eyes wandered to the north-facing office window with a view of the Getty Center on the hills above. His father had never actually seen Mitch’s company in the fashionable Santa Monica office tower or met any of his nearly 50 employees.

“Did you get an eyeful of that note . . . accompanying the . . . *remains?*” Billy prompted.

Mitch looked down at the desk and read it for a second time.

Dear Mitchell,

Your father died recently. I had him cremated, so I could send him to you. So there's no need for any more annoying phone calls about your new house or your business. Just leave me alone or I'll put a hex on you.

Sincerely yours,

Tilda Trivette Kornacky

"My old man sure could pick 'em, couldn't he?" mused Mitch.

"How old was he?"

"Almost 60. She's, like, 32."

"Whoa. Is she serious about the hex thing?"

"He met her at a palm reading. That pretty much says it all," Mitch announced. "You wanna put him someplace? I gotta make a call."

"What place?" the assistant asked, warily.

"Ah, how 'bout the fridge?"

"Really?"

"Why not? In the freezer compartment. Just be sure to mark the container."

The underling mulled over the request for a moment.

"How do you want me . . ."

"Shit, Billy, I have no idea," Mitch said, with more emotion than he intended, probably because he was feeling more than he expected. "This is the part where you show me some initiative, okay?"

"Okay."

Billy walked solemnly out of the office, hoping to impress his superior, then glanced quickly from side to side, desperate to attract an audience with questions about what he was carrying; he was going to dine out on this one for a long time.

Mitch picked up his cell and dialed.

"Hey, Mitch. What's shakin' on the Left Coast?"

"Hey, Ian. Glad I caught you. I've got some sad news."

"What? What's wrong?"

"Dad's dead."

Ian missed a beat. In fact, he missed about four quarter notes, which was considerable for a man who made his living playing music. Then he said, "Dad? Our dad?"

"Um hum."

"The one in Texas?"

"You got another one?"

"Jeez, I'd forgotten he was alive."

"That's mean, Ian."

"I'm being serious. I literally haven't talked to him in ten years. What happened?"

"No clue. His latest life partner just sent me his ashes in the snail mail. With a little sidebar saying: 'Don't call me or I'll put a hex on you.'"

"Is this the palm reader?" Ian asked.

"And woman-of-curses, apparently. Dad was always into exotica."

"Double jeez!"

"God, Ian, you're starting to sound like a girl. You've got to find a different band."

"Not a chance. Making too much money, bro. Girl bands are very big in Nashville these days. Doing the Tonight Show next week and opening for the Chili Peppers in Atlanta the week after."

"Well, double jeez yourself, old buddy!"

"Thank you, thank you," Ian said and then realized this was probably not the time to brag about his career. He sucked in a deep breath and released a sigh of heavy responsibility. "Who's telling Mom?"

"Not me," Mitch said. "In fact, why don't you call Sam later tonight and then have her call Lilly in the morning. Let them figure it out."

"Good solution. What should I tell them?"

"Just say he arrived in a fast-food container this morning, and I'm doing everything I can."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm keeping him on ice."

"Really? Why do you have him on ice?"

"I'm not sure. It just seemed appropriate."

Ian nodded and thought for a moment about what, exactly, was appropriate at a time like this.

"Are you, you know, upset, Mitch? That he's dead, I mean," Ian asked.

"Too early to tell, I guess," replied his brother.

"Yeah," Ian sighed again. "What about a funeral?"

"No need to rush. Let's talk to the girls, and we can decide later. We can have it at my new house."

"Cool. I saw the pictures online. It's beautiful, Mitch."

"Thanks."

"Right. Sounds like a plan. Sad day, buddy."

"Sad day. Later, bro."

"Later."

Samantha Kornacky Bravos, who had changed her last name to satisfy her mother's political agenda and now kept it to satisfy her own, heard her cell ringing but was too out of breath to answer right away. She had just conquered the bridge spanning the Firth of Forth in a pair of truly outstanding cross trainers. Her watch announced it was a new personal best, which would put her among the top 115 women finishing this year's Scottish Bridge 10K.

"Yo," she wheezed, "Ian! I can't believe you called. What time is it there?"

"About 2:30 in the morning. I just finished a show," her younger brother said.

"I didn't think you even knew about today. And if you did, I didn't think you'd have the social skills to remember."

"Remember?" he said without thinking—and confirming that he didn't actually have the social skills to remember.

"My race," she prompted.

"Oh, yeah, your race," he said weakly, once again making it abundantly clear he had no idea what race she was talking about.

Okay, Sam thought, this phone call is evidently not about me. "Right," she said. "Just give me your congratulations, Ian, and we'll move on."

"Congratulations," Ian repeated, sounding as inept as he felt.

"Thanks," she answered. She was determined to be pleased with her running accomplishment, even if no one else noticed. "And congratulations to you and the Girls with Grits. I hear you're going to be on the Tonight Show."

Sam, he knew, had enough social skills for the both of them. While he paid no attention to her career teaching history at the University of Edinburgh, she remained one of his biggest fans. Samantha did everything well, including being a big sister. Still, this conversation would not go well, that was a given, even before he picked up the phone.

"I've got some news, Sam," he said. "About Dad."

She didn't respond, but he could feel the heat in her cheeks all the way across the Atlantic.

"Mitch got a letter from his latest wife. Tilda. He's dead."

"Oh." The word popped out involuntarily, and they both waited for the emotion to follow. Nothing came.

"Sam?"

"He didn't come to my wedding," she said, evenly.

"I know."

"Or do one thing to acknowledge the birth of Ella and Jake."

"I know."

"I haven't heard from him in 12 years."

"He was an alcoholic," Ian reminded her, trying not to sound too sympathetic.

"He was a narcissist," she spat, and now he could visualize the small puffs of steam accompanying her words.

"He did his best, Sam."

"I don't think so," she retorted, her voice cracking with bitterness. "He was a son of a bitch!"

"Okay," Ian agreed, hoping the worst was over. "That's a big ten-four. I haven't talked to him in a decade myself. But I thought I should call to let you know."

With that, his big sister retreated.

"Sorry, Ian," she said, mollified by the fact that he, too, hadn't stayed in contact with their old man. "Sorry about my attitude. And I certainly never wished him dead. So what happened?"

He filled her in on the burger box and ashes. Then he told her about the hex.

"She's the palm reader, right?"

"Mitch said Dad liked to call her a spiritualist."

"Yes, well, Dad was always one for inflating job titles, wasn't he?" She let her mind wander to the obvious thought. "Has anyone told Mom?"

"Not yet. I was hoping you'd call Lilly, and then maybe she could call Mom, . . . and then, also, maybe you two could kick around some funeral ideas . . ."

Sam took a moment to process everything he had packed into this last sentence. "I'm sensing a major burden shift here, Ian. From the boys to the girls."

"No. Not fair," he said, firmly. "Mitch has volunteered to work on the funeral or memorial service or whatever. He likes, you know, hosting and wants to have it at his new house. I think he just wants some input from you two."

"And you'd just like to run away and tune your guitar?"

He felt that familiar, toxic mix of shame and lame invading his guilt stream. "You know me, Sam. That's what I do."

"I know," she said. "Thank god you're one of *four* children, Ian. You would have made a very disappointing only child. Still, for all your social shortcomings, little brother, you do tune – and play – the guitar beautifully. Love you."

"Love you, too," he said, feeling the warmth of her forgiveness.

And they both hung up.

By the time the phone tree reached Meridian, Idaho, a sweet little suburb of Boise, Lilly Kornacky Bravos (who shared both the political views and last name of her mother and younger sister) was lying on the sofa nearly comatose. The four preschool boys she had been shepherding since 5:30 a.m. were at a two-hour baby gym class, and her husband was pouring sugarless mochas, while telling her about the fluctuating price of the rhinestones he had just ordered from Korea.

Lil and her husband, Joey, were living the American Dream. Not the current one, the one from the 1950s. They had left Silicon Valley – with its genuinely insane real estate prices, rotten traffic, and high-paying, high-tech jobs – for the new California suburbs, which were located anywhere between Sacramento and the Canadian border. Boise was full of expats, the houses were really affordable, and the public schools still worked. Joey had gone from life as an Internet traffic guru in Menlo Park to manufacturing rhinestone t-shirts out of his four-car garage in the potato state. And with the surprising success of sales to old ladies in Bunco clubs and teenage girls on cheerleading squads, along with the low cost of living, he was killing it. Dad, Mom, and their four little towheads were living like the Cleavers of Beaver fame in a house only a venture capitalist could afford in the Bay Area. And Lil was sublimely happy and painfully exhausted each and every day.

“Hi, Sam” Lil said, picking up the phone, as Joey handed her one of the early morning calorie-free caffeine cocktails.

“It finally happened.”

“What happened?”

“Dad’s dead.”

Lil shot up straight to a sitting position. “What?!” she said, as her drink collided with a hand grenade her four-year-old had created out of oversized Legos and left perched on the arm of the sofa. The whipped cream atop the coffee cascaded onto the carpet.

“Mitch got a letter today from Tilda the Magnificent.”

"Oh, god," Lil gasped. "That's terrible."

"Spare me."

"Come on, Sam. The man is — was our father." Lil did not adore Mark Kornacky. Or even like him all that much. But she had a sentimental attachment to the institution of parenthood and kept in contact. It was pretty much a one-way thoroughfare; she sent emails and photos and birthday cards, while he generally responded with indifference. In all honesty, she felt, indifference was his biggest failing. He was never a mean man or abusive. He was just, well, self-absorbed. And more than a little irresponsible about meeting his financial obligations. Still the four of them were his offspring. A platitude she now repeated for Sam's benefit.

"Whatever he was, he was our father, Sam."

"Yes, yes," Sam replied quickly, not wanting to argue the point. "I'm working on facing up to that issue. Sorry. Anyway, Mitch called Ian. Ian called me. I'm calling you. And you're calling —"

"— Mom," Lil pronounced, finishing her sister's sentence.

"You got it."

"Yes, I apparently have. Nice handoff. Thank you very much." She inhaled, as if she'd just received a felony conviction, and went on. "So what's the story?"

"The story is that Tilda sent Mitch a carton of ashes."

"Ashes? *Ashes*? That's creepy."

"And a note saying she'll put a hex on anyone who doesn't leave her alone."

"Even creepier. I wonder what that's about?"

"Jealousy is my guess," Sam ventured. "LOL because he never actually paid us any attention."

"Hmm," Lil reflected. "He told me she was a stunner."

"No surprise. The man had his priorities. What else do you know about her?"

"Not much. Brunette clairvoyant with a birth date in the neighborhood of mine."

"Now *that's* creepy."

"I think they were both Captain Morgan fans; he told me that's the reason they were paired on Match.com. I've only received one communiqué from him since they got married. A newspaper clipping of their nuptials, along with a free coupon on the same page for twenty percent off at Red Lobster. Don't know if that was an accident or some kind of gesture."

"Always the gentlemen," Sam said. "Mitch wants us to come up with some ideas for a memorial service. He wants to have it at his new house, and he'll be the emcee"

"And D.J., no doubt. Can't wait to get a look at his Dearly Departed mix."

"He does have great taste in music, Lil. So you got any ideas?"

"No. It will take all my creative energy to find a way to get Joey and the four boys in the car for the drive to California. How are Ella and Jake?"

"She has pinkeye from the nursery, and he's excitedly awaiting his turn."

"You're still coming to UCLA for the World War II Underground lecture series?" Lil asked, anxiously.

"Of course. And you're still coming to see me while I'm in LA?"

"Forty-eight hours is as long as I can get away from the boys," sighed Lil.

"That's with three shifts of babysitters and their first overnight at the in-laws. I'm still working out the last ten hours of day care."

"God, Lilly, what's Joey going to be doing all that time?"

"An order of rhinestone embossed sweatpants and jackets for the University of Alabama gymnastics team."

"You have chosen such a life of your own free will, you realize this?" said Sam.

Lil could feel her sister shaking her head in dismay. She rose to her own defense. "Well, at least I'm not married to a one-eyed golfer whose only claim to fame is a tie for third at the Scottish Open."

"He's not actually blind in that eye, Lilly; it's a misshapen cornea. And he hits a helluva fade!"

“Oh, my goodness,” said Lil, in a voice filled with mock triumph. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you defend your husband so vehemently, Samantha.”

“I’m hanging up now, Lil, with the satisfaction of knowing that *you* are the one calling Mom. Cheers.”

“Cheers.”

Chapter 1

Loss of Gravity

At 57, Andrea Bader Bravos felt herself slipping. Slowly, to be sure, but still slipping. She lived in a spacious but dated townhouse in Valencia, California. It was perched just 1000 feet above the San Fernando Valley – and about fifteen miles north of Hollywood, where she had once worked but didn't work very much anymore. She had spent most of her career writing treatments and, occasionally, scripts for mediocre TV movies-of-the-week. That business began imploding with the arrival of reality television; along with it had gone Andy's center of gravity.

Andy's four children had noticed her fumbling around for meaning the last few years, but they didn't really understand it. Even if they did, they were too busy to offer any solutions. Mostly, they kept suggesting she retire, as if that were a choice. People in Andy's business didn't retire, they were *retired* by the forces that eventually swept everyone in the entertainment business out to sea: an inability to keep up with the breathtaking speed of pop culture – and aging skin.

At several points in her life, Andy had considered herself an unusually relevant person, both a rebel and a crusader for justice. As a 16-year-old feminist pioneer, she was the first girl to work the cash register at the new McDonald's in Glendale, California. She had helped integrate the marching band at her small liberal arts college. And when she divorced 22 years ago, she had dropped the name Kornacky, as a sign she was no longer beholden to the patriarchy. Now Andy wondered about the value of those accomplishments. Especially the name change. She chose Bravos – telling her four children that it symbolized courage – and asked them to join her in making a political statement. Unfortunately, they were all under twelve at the time and had no idea what she was talking about. In the end, the kids split into their usual teams: girls on one side, boys on the other. Looking back, she thought her activism might have done more harm than good. After all, most of McDonald's underpaid employees were now women, not men.

Her liberal arts college had gone belly up. And her four adult children never missed an opportunity to rehash the name change episode every time they managed to gather for a holiday meal.

So it was that Andy Bravos, aging activist and unemployed writer, stood watering the drooping daisies on her patio that June day – feeling slightly irrelevant – when the call came about the death of her ex-husband.

“This is tragic! Just tragic,” Andy pronounced.

“Don’t sound so indignant, Mom. Or surprised,” said Lil, trying to keep things on an even keel. “He drank enough to inebriate a rugby team. And he never exercised.”

“But he wasn’t that old, for god’s sake! Sixty.”

“Lots of people die at 60, Mom. And since you are fueled almost exclusively by bean burritos and hominy grits and you walk four miles a day, you will probably not be one of them. Whether you like it or not, you’ll live until you’re 90.”

“This is not about me, Lil.”

“Yes, it is. We all know you are in the middle of a mortality crisis –”

“Midlife crisis –”

“*Mortality* crisis. As a consequence, Dad’s death comes at a bad time for you.”

“You make me sound pathetic, Lil.”

“That’s beside the point. The point is, given his lifestyle, this was bound to happen sooner rather than later.”

Andy shut up and thought about that. “Okay,” she admitted. “I guess that’s true.”

Lil had a rather painful knack for cutting to the chase in most things. Over the past few years, Andy had suckered her elder daughter into writing several spec movie scripts with her. Lil’s facility with words and instincts for a good story were remarkable. But with all those preschool boys around the house now,

Lil didn't have time anymore. Lately, it seemed her daughter was reduced to using her verbal karate skills on the phone with her mother.

"Okay," Andy repeated in a calmer voice. "So how did he die?"

"I don't know. Tilda didn't say."

"I mean, in the gutter? In his sleep? Watching the 49ers? Was there no color coverage at all?"

"Just the note about a hex if anybody bothered her."

Andy paced the patio, cell in hand. "How does she get away with that? Not even telling us the cause of death?"

"He's not your husband anymore, so what does it matter?"

"But he's your father. Don't you want to know? You deserve to."

Lil counted silently to three, then responded. "Let's try not to make a big deal out of this. All right? There is no principle at stake here. "

"You are his children. You have a right to know!"

"It's not that important. Really."

"She should have told us. Someone should ask her."

"Oh no, no, no!" Lil said, emphatically. "That's exactly what we are *not* going to do, Mom. Dad had a thing for crazy women." Lil heard the hiss on the other end of the line. "Present company excepted."

"Thank you."

"The older he got, the more he drank and the loopier his wives. Let's just keep our distance and get on with things. If you're really that concerned, why don't you get a copy of his death certificate?"

When Andy said nothing, Lil got a little worried. "Mom?"

"I am stunned by your good sense."

"What?"

"I'm going to do that."

"Okay," Lil said, skeptically. "Without actually making any contact with the grieving widow, right?"

"Right."

"That's good, Mom."

"Yes, it is." Andy replied, suddenly feeling herself become, well, a little more relevant. "I can't do anything about your dad's death. But I can at least find out what caused it. I'm sure, as his children, you'll all feel better knowing."

Lil decided it was easier to agree than to point out that the only person who seemed to want that piece of information was Andy. "Yes, I'm sure we will all feel better if you take on that little crusade."

"You're mocking me, Lil."

"I do it with love, Mother."

"I'm going to get that certificate anyway."

"I'm sure you will."

That settled, Andy moved on. "What about a funeral?" she asked.

"Mitch is taking charge of that."

"Oh, god, not another one of his music mixes," Andy said, thinking out loud. "Still, I suppose we all grieve in our own way."

Sensing her mother's mind wandering, Lil saw an opportunity to change the subject and jumped at it. "How's cousin Harley?" she asked.

Andy snapped to attention again. "He's driving me nuts. My sister sold me a real bill of goods when she sent him out here to stay this year."

"What do you mean? I thought he was going to school somewhere in Valencia."

"So did I. I figured it was either CalArts, up the road, or the local junior college across the street. But it's not."

"What else is there?"

"Something called Our Savior's Tabernacle University in Lancaster."

"What the hell is a Tabernacle University?"

"An oxymoron. And so is this kid. I had to buy him a car just so he could get there, for crying out loud. And he's so far behind academically that they made him come out for summer school before they'll let him start as a freshman in the fall."

“Can’t you send him back to Nebraska?”

“Apparently not. My sister has gotten herself into a job training program and can’t be distracted,” Andy said.

“Aunt Pam is in a job training program? But she’s older than you are!”

“She has no pension, so she’s starting a new career. In the bakery industry. With a concentration in cake decoration. In the meantime, I am babysitting her son.”

“Well, at least you have someone to keep you company. Right?”

“Harley is not company, Lil. He is an annoyance. And there is a real possibility I will kill him shortly.”

Lil knew immediately where this was going and tried to head it off. “I hear the sound of peeing, Mom, and it’s not in the toilet.”

Andy charged ahead, as if she hadn’t heard what Lil said. “Let’s do another script together, Lilly. We’ll have a great time. We can do it over the phone. On Skype. I’ll do all the typing.”

“Really. Mom. I don’t have the time.”

“I know I could get my mojo back if we just worked together –”

“Oh, there goes another jet stream. The boys have developed a herding instinct lately. I think I see the twins with diapers down behind the couch . . .”

“Lilly, I need –”

“Oops! Gotta run. Love you.”

Lil hung up, and Andy felt another little slap of futility hit her in the face. Her career really was over. Now her ex was dead and gone. And her leech of a nephew was upstairs in the guest bedroom glued to a novel about the End of Days.

Chapter 2

Israelites in LA

If Andy had been insensitive about giving her kids a new last name, her sister had been downright idiotic about giving hers a first one. After only one date with a long-distance truck driver named Phil Davidson, Pam announced she had found the love of her life and was going to marry him. By the third date, she felt they were destined to have a son, and he would be called – Harley. And so it came to pass, both the wedding and the birth. All this might have seemed a little less laughable had Harley been big and beefy and liked motorcycles. But he wasn't and he didn't. The Harley Davidson now sharing her domicile was short and doughy. In addition, he appeared to be as dumb as a two-by-four. Even more disturbing was his ambition to become a preacher and establish his own Christian denomination.

Andy knocked on the door of her former guestroom where the future Reverend Harley Davidson currently resided.

"Come on in," Harley said. He laid the paperback across his chest and smiled up at his aunt.

"How's the book?" she asked.

"Just tremendous!" he said. "It's the third one in the Left Behind series. I love it."

She looked down at the dramatic lettering on the cover of the book, *The Rise of Antichrist* and instantly felt an affinity with the title character. "Shouldn't you be reading the Bible or something?"

"This is better."

"No doubt."

"I mean, it's fiction, so they make it very exciting," he explained. "The real stuff, you know, like Exodus and Deuteronomy, is kind of boring."

"I see."

"In comparison, I mean."

Andy pondered this and thought it her duty to encourage him to pay more attention to his studies.

“Well, I can’t imagine the Bible’s that boring,” she offered. “I’ve worked with a lot of Israelites in the film business, and they’re generally pretty good storytellers.”

“No kidding? You know some real Israelites here in LA?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

He looked at her in amazement. “We don’t have that many back in Omaha,” he said.

“I suppose you’d have to go looking. But I’m sure they’re there. Anyway, you want some lunch?”

He hesitated, scrunching up his chubby cheeks.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I’m kinda tired of burritos.”

“Okay. Why don’t I take you to In ‘n Out Burger?”

“Gosh, I love that place, Aunt Andy.”

“I do, too,” she said. “And I need to get out of the house. Put your cowboy boots on and meet me in the car.”

Valencia was built as a New Town in the 1960s, completely planned to accommodate a Southern California suburban lifestyle. It was one of the few places in Los Angeles County with actual bike lanes and where you could still get a parking spot at the mall. Andy discovered the little gem of a community when she decided to take up golf ten years ago. The public course was cheap and seldom crowded, plus people rarely scoffed if you shanked your tee shot on the first hole. The town had been annexed a few years back and was now part of the City of Santa Clarita, famous for almost nothing except the Six Flags theme park on Magic Mountain Parkway.

Harley and Andy sat outside at a round table with a red and white striped umbrella, eating their animal-style Double Doubles. As the adult in the unlikely pairing, Andy made a feeble attempt to bond.

"You like it here?" Andy asked.

"It's only been three weeks," Harley said. "But, yeah, I think so."

"You miss your family?"

"Not really," he answered. "Not as much as you miss yours."

Andy looked at him suspiciously. "What are you talking about?"

"You call your kids all the time."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do. And if you don't call them, they call you. You people never leave each other alone."

This kid was a master at pushing her into a defensive position. "I guess we're big talkers," she said, begrudgingly.

"Tell me about it," said Harley. "It's like everything you're thinking comes right out your mouth."

"Really!" Andy snorted, nearly choking on her grilled onion. She tried to glare at him, but she couldn't get a bead on her target because he was slouched over a pool of ketchup, dipping his fries. "We're all extroverts," she finally said, by way of explanation. "Except Ian. He's more of an introvert."

"The guitar player in Nashville?"

"It's a steel pedal," Andy instructed him.

"He's coming to LA this weekend, right? I mean his band is."

"They're playing at the Wiltern."

"And he's getting us tickets?"

"Right. For you, me, and Mitch and his girlfriend."

The pudgy head bobbed up and down with approval. Then he observed solemnly, "I guess you can't talk all that much if you're supposed to be playing a guitar and singing. So maybe that's a good job for him. I don't think your other kids could, you know, restrain themselves that much."

Andy tried the glare again, but he was either naturally adept at avoiding eye contact or self-taught. Whichever the case, she'd had about as much conversation as she could stomach. She started to gather up the leftover napkins.

“So who died?” he asked.

She stopped short, crumpled the napkins with a vehemence she generally reserved for representatives of her current cable company and sat back down. “Have you been eavesdropping on my phone conversations, Harley?”

“Nobody has to eavesdrop, Aunt Andy. You get so worked up I can hear you in Dolby Stereo.”

It was not difficult to understand why her sister had exiled the boy to California; the family gene pool had finally produced an unbearable combination of its worst two alleles—cluelessness and cheek. “I’m sorry if my voice bothers you, Harley,” she said, diplomatically. “It is my house, however.”

“I get that,” he said, oblivious to her irritation. “No problem. I just wondered who died.”

“My ex-husband. Mark. You wouldn’t remember him. We were divorced before you were born.”

“Oh, yeah. He’s the dad, right? For all your kids?”

“Yes.”

He tilted his round face slightly to the left and opened his eyes so that she really saw them for the first time. Blue. Creamy blue. His best feature by a mile, she mused.

Now Harley rolled his thin lips inward, as if he were contemplating something. “That’s gotta hurt a little, huh? I mean, you probably loved him once.”

“What?” she asked.

“I said you must feel pretty bad.”

It was an uncomfortably perceptive statement from a kid Andy judged to be psychologically below grade level. Because the truth was, she *did* feel bad. After all, she had been married to Mark Kornacky for 14 years, and they weren’t all miserable. Many of them were damned exciting. He was a man with a big personality who loved to be the center of attention. A guy with good friends and better stories. He could cook. He could sing. He could drink. He could whip up a

party on a moment's notice. People loved him. She loved him. For a while, anyway.

The two had met when he was starting his own production company in Studio City. He was filming a series of exotic-animal cooking shows, a repulsive—but highly popular—niche concept. She was a struggling writer, and he underpaid her for helping with the scripts. They shared the same middle class upbringing, had similar politics, and fit together in a quirky sort of way, like Sonny and Cher or Bert and Ernie. She could never quite find the right simile for their marriage, and maybe that was the problem.

Whatever the attraction, the partnership worked. Until they had children. That Mark Kornacky would be such a spectacular failure as a parent never occurred to her. That it would take child number three for her to begin to notice was her own spectacular failure. By the time baby number four was born, Andy knew it was time to stop. Sadly for everyone concerned, it would take another seven years of his drinking, cheating, and self-indulgent spending for her to take the kids and get out. After that, her ex-husband was rarely seen in the vicinity of his offspring, and they began referring to him as their 'ex-father.'

"I *do* feel bad," Andy finally confessed to the corn-fed minister-in-waiting.

"And your kids must feel bad, too, right?" Harley suggested.

"I'm sure they do. But their dad was more of a myth than an actual presence, so it's always been hard to know how to feel about him."

Harley nodded, seeming a little less clueless than he usually looked. "Well, maybe they'll get a better feel for that when they see his will," he said.

"Huh?" Andy grunted, dimly.

"You know, his last will and testament. Often absent parents make up for their emotional negligence through their estate."

Emotional negligence? Where on earth did a mind like Harley Davidson's have to go to find that many syllables? She was tempted to ask to meet his ventriloquist but was afraid he wouldn't get the joke—and then was terrified he might.

"Aunt Andy?" he prompted.

"I'm thinking," she finally said.

"About what?"

"About why nobody thought to mention a will, especially Tilda."

"I thought to mention it," Harley pointed out.

"Yes, that's the other thing I'm thinking," she said, standing up and pulling the keys out of her purse. "Harley, I don't get you. I don't get you at all."

Chapter 3

Elvis Impersonators

Located on the corner of Wilshire Boulevard and Western Avenue, the Wiltern Theater passes for what is an historic building in the City of Angels. That is, it was built in the 1930s. Originally home to vaudeville acts, the Art Deco structure is named for what was once the busiest intersection in the world, just the kind of thing Angelinos would find it necessary to brag about. It seats nearly 2000 people, and Harley Davidson had never seen or imagined anything like it.

"Whoa," he murmured, prayer-like, as Andy, Mitch, and his girlfriend, Melissa – the family called her 'The Impresario' – all took their seats. "I guess Ian's pretty famous. I mean, if he plays here."

"The band's pretty famous," Andy told him. "Ian is just one of the musicians and back-up singers."

"You know it's a girl band," added The Impresario, who was dressed in elegant black spiderweb tights, a leather skirt, and cowboy boots. Harley knew cowboy boots, and he'd never seen a pair like hers in Omaha. "The critics are calling them the pioneers of a new genre."

"What's a genre?" Harley asked.

"A style. Or category," said Andy.

Harley gnawed on this for a moment. "Oh. You mean the 'Girls with Grits' style?"

"No, that's the name of the band," The Impresario corrected. "Their record label calls their style *Country Candy*."

"Oh," repeated Harley, very slowly. "I get it."

Mitch looked at his junior cousin and smirked. "No, you don't, Harley."

Harley looked back at the older man quizzically and opened his creamy blue eyes so they were fully visible. "Yes, I do. It's country music, only it's sweet, right?" Harley observed.

"Exactly," pronounced The Impresario. "Pay no attention to the jackass seated next to you." She elbowed Mitch, who winced.

“Okay, I’ll behave, I promise,” Mitch said, a little embarrassed. “I’m sorry, Harley. Melissa’s right, I shouldn’t have said that.”

This wasn’t the first time Andy had witnessed Melissa discipline the incredibly successful knucklehead into which her oldest child had grown. She liked this woman, despite the startling streak of white that ran through her jet-black hair and the studded, fingerless gloves that were, evidently, her signature apparel. The girl was gorgeous, Andy had to give her that. And she was accomplished, in a La-La Land sort of way. She was a talent agent for aspiring comics and, in her free time, she manufactured monogrammed leather steering wheel covers for the Aston Martin dealership in Beverly Hills. On any given day, Melissa de Toro was hustling enough money to afford a two-bedroom apartment near the beach in Santa Monica. For the majority of people in Los Angeles, it didn’t get any better than that.

The house lights in the expansive theater dimmed, and the crowd quieted. After the perfect dramatic pause, stage lights electrified, and the band swarmed out from stage left and stage right, taking their places. There was Ian, the shortest and undoubtedly the sweetest of Andy’s brood, wearing a western hat and tight jeans, seating himself at his pedal steel guitar and beaming, as if he had reached nirvana.

In the privacy of the theater’s darkness, Andy smiled to herself. Her son looked so happy. In fact, both of her sons looked happy tonight, she thought. It occurred to her that all four of her children were currently happier than she had any right to expect, given their unsteady upbringing. She had done so much wrong, and yet they’d each turned out so right – so right for themselves and, therefore, so right for her. God, I wonder what I could do to mess up all this bliss, she thought with the predictable panic that always showed up when things were going too smoothly between herself and her children. Then she metaphorically gave herself a sharp slap to obliterate her stinking thinking and willed herself to slide gratefully into the warm, soapy music.

It was an “epic” concert, according to Harley, as the applause finally flamed out and the audience made its way out of the theater, elbow to elbow.

“Where are we meeting Ian?” Andy asked.

“The Tofu Cafe on Western,” Mitch told her.

Harley looked up at his aunt.

“It’s Korean food,” she said.

His lingering excitement seemed to drain away suddenly. “What’s tofu?” he wanted to know.

Andy and Mitch both turned to Melissa to handle this one.

“Anything you want it to be,” she said, putting her hand on Harley’s shoulder. “Kind of like polenta or bean curd.”

Harley’s eyebrows shot skyward.

“You’re only feeding his anxiety,” Mitch pointed out.

“Oh, don’t be scared,” she said, taking the teenager’s hand and smiling seductively. “Stick with me,” Melissa whispered. “I shall lead you to a garden of earthly delights.” His spongy fingers melted into her touch.

“Oh, my god,” quipped Mitch, turning to his mother. “Look at the poor kid’s face.”

“I think he’s just discovered a whole new meaning for the ‘rapture,’” Andy suggested.

They watched the boy walk off with The Impresario, hand-in-hand.

Mitch wrinkled his brow, admiring the awesome power of the woman he was dating. “Uh huh, and she’s probably just committed some kind of statutory offence in the process.”

Besides the exotic Asian food, Harley was treated to one of Koreatown’s finest traditions: Elvis impersonators. Throughout the meal, four different men, three Koreans, and some Anglo in a wig, jumped on stage and did their best to imitate The King, accompanied by a karaoke machine. Andy noticed that her nephew was so absorbed in the entertainment that he plowed through the food without once asking her to identify any of the ingredients.

Andy assumed the conversation between her sons would inevitably turn to the passing of their father, but Ian spent most of the meal filling his older brother in on some financial hiccup the band was experiencing.

“Avocados,” explained Ian, so distraught that he didn’t seem to care his mother could hear every word. “Somewhere out of the country. Puerto Rico, maybe, I wasn’t really paying attention.”

“And who recommended these avocado orchards?” Mitch asked.

“I don’t know. Some investment guy our manager knows. All I know is that avocados were supposed to be very big.”

“Really, Ian? *Really?*” Mitch said, with an edge of skepticism that clearly cut through Ian’s thin skin.

Melissa was on it like a hawk. “We’re not all CEOs, Mitch,” she shot back. “And you’ve made a few mistakes of your own with the IRS.”

“Honest mistakes,” Mitch said, defensively.

“This was an honest mistake!” Ian nearly shouted. “We were all told it was a legitimate tax shelter.”

Andy could tell her youngest child was dazed and confused by how to handle the situation and would like nothing better than go in his room, close the door and practice, over and over, the fingering to ‘Black Bird.’ But the days of running away from the chaos surrounding him had long passed. She began to mull over what she might say to comfort Ian, but what the hell did she know about avocados?

Then Mitch, who was never one to mull over anything, said something that amazed even his mother. “Well, congratulations, bro. You’ve made it!”

Everyone, including Harley, looked at her eldest, who had finished his dinner and was rolling an unlit cigar in his fingers.

“What do you mean, I’ve made it?” Ian asked, perturbed.

“Unless you’re a poor starving artist or a drug dealer, being audited is part of the American experience,” Mitch pointed out. “You’re grown up now, Ian.

Even Uncle Sam thinks you're important. It's part of life. Part of a successful business life. Be proud of yourself."

Ian considered this, as Mitch continued to roll his cigar. "It's only money, little bro," Mitch concluded. "I doubt they'll put you in jail."

Melissa, whose hand had been resting on Mitch's arm, dug her black enameled nails into his skin. "No one is going to jail, Mitchell!" she hissed. "It's an IRS audit, for god's sake."

The waiter arrived unannounced with the bill and glanced subtly around the table. "That goes to *him*," the Impresario instructed, taking the bill and handing it to Mitch. "Because paying the bill means never having to say you're sorry."

Chapter 4

Smoking Cubans

The party of four adjourned to Mitch's new house in the Gillette Regent Square neighborhood of Santa Monica. The tony housing tract, situated in the midst of what was arguably some of the finest weather on earth, had been developed by the guy who made it big in razor blades and who then went into real estate. Mitch had worked 15 intense years to afford to live on one of the tree-lined streets. He was beyond proud of himself and swore up and down he would never need to move again in his life.

More than anyone else in the family, Mitch Kornacky was his father's son. Like Mark, Mitch lived life to the hilt. He collected friends as easily as kids collect Matchbox cars, and he loved to surround himself with a bunch of them and hold court. He could keep up his end of any conversation and everybody else's, if necessary. High energy and high risk, Mitch was the consummate salesman; he loved nothing better than telling people what they really wanted and then making them buy it.

Mitch also inherited his father's love of indulgence. He threw himself into work. He threw himself into vacation. He lived for fun and excitement. And he worshipped food. But unlike the father, the son had a sense of proportion. He stayed trim and fit by running nearly 20 miles a week to keep all the calories he consumed from accumulating. He went home every day from the office at seven o'clock to stay sane. And he never touched alcohol or cigarettes. Those were the rules. He did, however, smoke cigars, about eight each week. And when he did, he always talked as many dupes as he could into joining him. Tonight Andy and Ian sat puffing away with him on the patio beside the pool. Harley was in the TV room playing video games with The Impresario.

"So let's talk about this funeral," Mitch suggested, after exhaling smoke from one of his newly arrived Cubans, bought not-so-legally via the Internet. "When is Sam coming to LA for the lecture series?" he asked Andy.

"Next week."

“But I’ll be in Cleveland next week,” Ian said.

Mitch thought for a moment. “No, that’s too soon, anyway. I don’t think I could pull it all together by then.”

“Please, Mitch, let’s not overdo it,” Ian said with a slight wince. “Just something simple. What about getting together at the end of the month?”

“I’m in Amsterdam the last week,” Mitch said.

“And whatever we do, we need to give Lilly some notice,” Andy reminded them. “Especially if she’s going to bring the whole family.”

The complexity of gathering them all together at one time took the life out of the discussion. Andy savored the Swisher Sweet smoke in her mouth and waited to see what else the boys had to say on the subject of their father. When the discussion seemed on the verge of petering out, she decided to wade into the waters that had been troubling her.

“Did Tilda really say nothing about how your dad died?” she asked Mitch.

“Nope. I guess she thought we wouldn’t care how it happened. “

“Well, do you?” Andy asked.

Mitch shrugged. “Heart disease. Liver failure. Does it make a difference?”

“Maybe not,” admitted Andy. “But I, for one, would like to know.”

“Okay, point taken,” Mitch agreed.

“And what about a will?” she asked. “Did he have one?”

Mitch shrugged again. “Look, the woman’s a sorceress or something. She thinks his children are heathens, and all we care about is money.”

“I don’t care that much about money,” Ian protested.

“Right. You care about your art. But we all know that money is my drug of choice. So I sure as hell am not calling her to ask about a will,” he said. And then, as an afterthought, “Don’t we have to be notified if there’s a will?”

Andy considered this. She’d never inherited anything or been involved in any probate and wasn’t sure. “I suppose,” she said. “But it would be foolish of us not to at least find out if he made a will, no matter what’s in it, don’t you think?”

"I don't know," Mitch said. "Frankly, this whole thing makes me feel a little foolish. The guy's my dad, but I only talked to him a couple of times a year. I've never met his wife, and I know nada about his health issues. Now I'm the one left holding a carton of his ashes. Makes you question your value as a son, you know."

Oh, let the guilt begin, Andy said to herself. How was it that Mark had walked out the door one day, never to return or place a phone call to any of his children, and *they* were the ones grappling with feeling guilty?

"You've done more than anyone else to stay in touch with your dad, Mitch. You have no reason to feel bad about your relationship," Andy said. "I thought he used to ask you about investment ideas."

"He did. Whenever I'd call. We haven't talked that much since he got married this last time."

"But he had assets," she said, more as a statement than a question. "Don't you suppose he left you all something?"

Ian laughed. "Hey, maybe I could use my inheritance to pay off the IRS."

"Maybe you could," she said, trying to illustrate the importance of her question about a will.

Mitch smiled. "Look, the man never gave any of us money when he was alive, and none of us expects money from him now that he's dead, whatever he was worth."

"Okay, but you know what they say," Andy found herself parroting, "absent parents sometimes make up for their emotional negligence through their estate."

The two boys stared at their mother, as if they'd just witnessed the first sign of dementia.

"Really? I've never heard that before," squinted Ian.

Mitch erupted in an irritated laugh. "That's horseshit, Mom, and you know it. Negligent parents are just negligent. And Dad was what he was."

She pressed on. "Yes, but maybe we'll feel differently about him if he left you all something in his will —"

“Will you quit trying to defend him?” Mitch suddenly shot back. “He’s not going to make any of us feel better about our family, no matter what’s in his will.”

Andy halted instantly. She knew Mitch was right. Nothing was going to redeem their father this late in the day. And nothing was going to redeem her from having married him, either. She leaned back in her chair, put the cigar to her lips and retreated.

Ian wondered if Mitch had any idea how hurtful he could be, even when he didn’t intend it. Their mother was just doing what mothers do: trying to make a bad situation better. She wanted to fill in the blanks. Find a little closure. Frankly, so did he.

“You know,” Ian began, as forcefully as he could, “I think we *should* find out about the cause of death. And if there’s a will.” He looked pointedly at Mitch, indicating his big brother’s remarks had gone too far.

“Do you, Ian?” Mitch sighed, backpedaling for at least the third time this evening.

“Absolutely. Only, I haven’t really got the time. Have you?”

Mitch picked up his cue. “No. Unfortunately not.”

“And the girls work even harder than we do,” Ian continued.

“No, they don’t—”

“Yes, they do,” Ian countered. “So they can’t do it, either. But maybe Mom could.”

The boys both turned to look at Andy, who knew they were trying to placate her. Still, she appreciated their attempt to make her feel useful. “Well, getting a death certificate and a copy of the will should be fairly straightforward,” she said. “I’m sure I could find the time.”

“You’re not too busy?” asked Ian.

Her youngest had always been so sweetly co-dependent, Andy reminded herself, reflexively ferreting out people’s feelings and then trying to rescue them from the pain. Even as a little boy of seven, Ian knew Andy felt bad about the

way Mark had disappeared from their lives. Now he sensed his dad's death was bringing all that excess of regret to the surface, and he was working furiously to bail her out.

"You're sure you wouldn't mind?" he repeated.

"No. Really. I'd like to find out," she said.

Mitch felt the volley was his. "Well, if it helps," he offered, "I'd say Dad had a couple hundred thousand in assets. So he *should* have had a will. But that's the kind of thing normal people do, so he probably didn't."

"I'll keep that in mind," said Andy. "Where are the ashes, by the way?"

"I brought them home. They're in the freezer," Mitch answered. Nobody seemed impressed by his answer. "What do you do with ashes?"

"I don't think they need refrigeration."

Mitch shrugged. "Sorry. I don't really like having them — *him* here in the house. Can you take him, Mom? Until the memorial service."

Wow, thought Andy. Even in death, Mark was the family hot potato.

With that, the three fell silent. Mitch smiled, turned his face upward to the night sky and began blowing smoke rings until the other two couldn't resist the challenge and joined in.

Chapter 5

What Goes on in Texas

Tucked up against the Rio Grande just north of the Mexican border is McAllen, Texas; not the sort of place Andy expected Mark Kornacky to put down roots. He had been an LA boy, born and bred. But after the divorce, he headed to Texas to stay with an old college buddy and never returned. It was there he had worked at his lucrative, if unsteady, occupation as a salesman for several car dealerships, a medical supplier, a pesticide manufacturer, and half a dozen cell phone companies.

Texas was also where Mark had married his next three wives. His first new wife, post-Andy, was named Kathy, and the relationship lasted five years before she had enough. Andy suspected that his next choice, Renatta, was likely a keeper because the couple stayed together nearly 15 years. She developed cancer late in the marriage, and Mark reportedly remained at her side until the end. Tilda, on the other hand, was just getting fired up.

It had been a whirlwind romance, according to Mitch, who periodically filled his mother in on the basics. In the few short months they'd been together, Mark and his young wife had been to New Age conventions in New York, New Orleans and Chicago, where Tilda performed tarot card readings, while Mark sold ambience oils and scented candles. They had also taken up salsa dancing and gone on several short cruises south of the border to learn new steps. And in a move that impressed even Andy, Mark and his latest love had both been cast as members of the chorus in a community theater production of *Les Miserables* at the McAllen Center for the Performing Arts. It was as if her ex-husband was determined to get the party started again after Renatta's long, drawn-out illness. No matter how Mark had actually died, Andy felt fairly confident that he was likely having a blast at the time.

By Andy's calculation, following their divorce her ex had never remained single for more than ten months at a stretch. He also never had any more children. Putting it all in perspective, she could see now that Mark Kornacky was

a man who desperately needed someone by his side and absolutely wanted no one tagging along behind. Oddly, Andy discovered just the opposite about her own desires after the split; she loved living alone, and there was nothing better in the world than the four ducklings who once followed her every move. The more Andy faced the fact that she and Mark had never been a good match, the more she felt she might someday be able to forgive him – and maybe herself.

Andy looked at her watch. She had been dialing various numbers all morning to find out exactly who to contact about getting the death certificate: the McAllen City Secretary of Vital Statistics, the Hidalgo County Clerk or the Texas Department of State Health Services. When she started her search three hours ago, she naively thought that she would be able to complete an online form, enter her Visa card number, and order a copy by email. However, the digital request forms all stated that only the spouse or children of the deceased could use the form. In addition, the form required the date and location of Mark's death, neither of which had been divulged by Tilda in her note.

After another ten minutes of listening to a continuous loop of Mozart's Magic Flute, she hung up and reconsidered her options. Maybe she should begin again by checking the obituaries for the preceding two weeks in the local paper to see if she could find Mark's date of death. She searched 'McAllen newspaper' and quickly found a website for a daily called *The Monitor*, with a tab for obituaries on the homepage. She clicked the tab. There she found a list of dates. She clicked on a date and found a list of names. Each name led to its own obituary. She steeled herself to read down the first list, then the next, moving back in time. She looked back two weeks, but Mark's name wasn't there. It was possible he'd died three weeks, or even a month before, but why would Tilda wait that long to contact Mitch?

Next, she searched for funeral homes, thinking she might get lucky and find where Mark had been cremated. She could find the date of death that way and maybe get one of the staff to make a simple photocopy of the death certificate,

which she assumed was required before cremation. Her first search returned just three mortuaries with a McAllen address. She dialed the first number.

"Calderon Funeral Home," the male voice answered.

"Do you do cremations?" Andy asked.

"We can arrange for that, if you'd like."

"Yes, well, I'm actually trying to find out when and where my – a friend of mine was cremated recently."

"And you think we arranged the cremation?"

"I'm not sure, but I wondered if you could check."

"How recently?" the man on the other end asked.

"Well, within the last two or three weeks."

"Which is it, ma'am, the last two or the last three weeks?"

"Three weeks. Could you check the last three weeks?"

"What's the name?"

She could hear the sound of keystrokes. "Kornacky. Mark Kornacky. K-o-r-n-a-c-k-y," she spelled out, as her pulse picked up its pace. Finally, warm-blooded assistance. So much better than meandering around online in the digital darkness.

"Kornacky. Kornacky," he repeated and lapsed into silence.

Not much of a talker, she realized. Still, he had a pulse. Another two minutes and he said, mechanically, "Still checking."

Okay, even Siri had more personality, she admitted.

Finally, the verdict was in. "No, no Kornacky. Sorry."

"You checked back three weeks?"

"That's right."

After so much failure this morning, Andy's endorphins finally took a dive; she slumped back in her chair. "Oh, well, thank you. I appreciate it," she managed. Then, loathed to let go of an asset who was both sentient and local, she asked, "Ah, and before I hang up, can you tell me who else in the area handles cremations?"

"Almost any funeral home can provide the service, ma'am. And Mr. Kornacky could have been cremated in a nearby town like Pharr. Or Mission."

"Oh." Andy contemplated the prospect of adding another column of names to the list of potential human incinerators in the Lone Star state.

"And then, of course, there's always Reynosa," he said, in a tone that was anything but robotic.

"Reynosa?"

"Across the border."

"People go to Mexico for cremations?"

"People go to Mexico for almost anything, ma'am. You know what it's like there."

Time to stop with the questions, Andy determined, because she didn't know what it was like in Mexico. Right now it was hard enough figuring out what it was like in Texas. "Okay, well, thank you," she said, adding, "I mean it. You've been really helpful."

The voice perked up.

"I have?"

"You have. So thank you."

"Ah, shucks," he said. "You're welcome."

She realized it was the only time she'd smiled all morning. She hung up the phone and ruminated on how to say cremation in Spanish. Cremacion?

"I just finished the *Antichrist*. You want to read it?" Harley was hovering over her, having wandered into her loft office from his bedroom down the hall.

"No, thanks. I'm more the Bhagavad-Gita type," she answered, putting down the phone and surrendering to the invasion.

"Huh?"

"Never mind. It was a joke."

"If you say so," he said, as if he knew what funny was and that wasn't it. "So what are you doing?"

"I thought I'd try to get a copy of my former husband's death certificate. You know, to find out the cause of death."

Harley sat down on the small sofa near her desk and looked dangerously close to settling in for a chat. "You mean, the medical examiner's report."

He'd forgotten to put it in the form of a question. Or worse, he hadn't meant to. "I do?"

"I don't think a death certificate would be as helpful."

"Really? How do you know this, Harley?"

"I watch a lot of TV."

"Hmm," she replied. "I guess that explains it." The real question, of course, was 'how did *she not* know this?' After all, she watched a lot of TV, too. Hell, she wrote a lot of TV. The truth was she *did* know this; she just hadn't made the distinction. Why did it take the Nebraska Numbskull to point it out to her?

"Oh, yeah. I guess you're right," she said. "I'd forgotten that. But if he died of natural causes, there would be no need for a medical examiner, right?" Immediately she regretted having added 'right?' to her statement. As if she needed his confirmation.

"Right," he confirmed.

It was getting harder and harder to decide who she was more annoyed with these days, the kid or the old lady.

Reclining into the sofa, he rested his chubby fingers on his adolescent midriff. "Okay. So let's back up here," he began. "What do you really want to know exactly?"

With some difficulty, she sublimated the urge to wring his plump neck, ultimately giving in to his perfectly practical question. "I want to know what Mark died from and whether or not he had a will."

"Two simple questions," he decreed.

"Yes. Two simple questions."

"What, therefore, is the simplest answer?"

Were they teaching the Socratic method in Sunday school now? "Okay, what's the simplest answer?"

"Call his widow," Harley told her, matter-of-factly.

"Ahhhh," she said. Of course, that was the answer, if you were not the kind of person who made stupid promises to your children. "I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"The hex thing." Oh my god, she cringed, I'm making Harley Davidson sound like the grown-up in the room.

He touched the tips of his fingers together and let his hands drop slowly forward, until his body language was aiming right at her. "Hexes are contrary to God's will, Aunt Andy. The dark arts are the work of the Devil. This is exactly why I would like you to read more about the Antichrist."

She felt a familiar disquietude worming its way back into her life, the kind of agitation she hadn't felt since her youngest exited the nest. Patience, she reminded herself; pubescent testosterone requires patience.

"I don't believe in the Antichrist, Harley. And, if I did, I doubt that Tilda would even get a Top Ten nomination. However, she is eccentric. No doubt about that. More to the point, she could be crazy. So I have promised my children that I would have no direct contact with her. Ever."

"They don't want you to call her?"

"No."

"Okay. No problem," he replied. "I'll do it."

"You?"

"Why not?"

Another remarkably astute question, she conceded, imagining the possibility. It would be like Pat Robertson calling the Wicked Witch of the West.

"What a great idea," she agreed, swiveling back toward her computer screen. "I'll look up the number for her palm reading business in McAllen." She pointed to the screen. "Here it is."

Swiveling back again, she handed him the cordless phone. "Okay. You're on. What are you going to say?"

"Don't worry. I won't tell her I'm related to the family," he said.

"That's good. But what are you going to say?"

Without deigning to respond, he punched in the numbers and closed his eyes. His index finger dangled perilously over the 'call' button.

OMG, he's praying, she thought. Is he thinking about speaking to her in tongues?

Finally, he opened his eyes and confided, "The Lord fortifies those who trust in His Name, Aunt Andy. I'm totally ready." Then he pushed the green button.

Along with her nephew, she could hear the ringing on the other end of the line. A woman's voice answered. Andy closed her own eyes to steel herself, while she waited for Harley to open his mouth. But the moment the voice stopped, he pushed down the red button and put the phone back in its cradle.

She couldn't believe he chickened out. "Harley!"

"The number is no longer in service," he explained.

"Oh. Sorry," she muttered. "Not your fault. I guess I just wasn't expecting she'd be gone."

"It's okay. Our Lord knew."

"What?"

"I'm just saying you shouldn't be disappointed. God has a plan."

Her mouth opened, but nothing came out.

"I mean, He was probably just saving Tilda from His wrath."

It took Andy a minute to glean his meaning. "You were going to deliver the wrath of God?" she asked, incredulous.

"That was my likely purpose," he said, as if he were only the messenger. "But now we'll never know because He obviously didn't want her to hear what I had to say. The important thing is that God is working on a plan for you and Tilda."

"We have a *joint plan*?" she winced. "Are you kidding me?"

The pudgy hands came together in one of those prayer-like gestures that portend a lesson for the listener. Andy's hand shot up in front of her like a protective shield.

"Enough, Harley!" she erupted. She counted to three. Then added an extra three before going on. "Thank you. But enough." She turned her chair back toward the computer.

Undeterred, the future preacher went on. "The Lord works in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform, Aunt Andy."

Evidently, Tabernacle U had a class in Christian clichés, and Harley was acing it.

"Well, He doesn't seem to be working all that much, if you ask me," Andy quipped, opening her email. "I'd say it's time to take those wonders to the next level, because I'm pretty much back to square one."

To her surprise, he said nothing. It was the first time the boy had actually taken sarcasm for an answer. She waited, and still he was silent. Finally, she glanced over to see if she'd caused any permanent psychological damage.

His body was slouched forward, elbows on knees, hands folded, head tilted, and laconic eyelids drooped in reptilian sadness. "I don't understand why you hate God so much, Aunt Andy," he said.

"I don't hate God, Harley," she replied, dreading where this was headed. "I'm just not all that interested in God."

"You don't mean that."

"I do."

"But you *do* believe in God, don't you?"

There it was, the question she'd been dodging since his arrival and the hobgoblin of Harley Davidson's little mind. Resigning herself to the discussion, she vowed to make it as short as possible.

"It's not so much that I don't believe in God. It's more that I don't care. Think of it as a kind of divine neglect."

He tilted his head the other direction and let his lids close. She waited.

The lids opened again. "I don't think I understand. How can you neglect the Almighty?"

"Never mind. It doesn't matter."

But she could see it did.

He continued to ponder. Finally, he tried another approach. "Well, if you're not interested in God, what *are* you interested in?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I'm not really a joiner, Harley." She knew she needed lunch because her combative impulses were waning. "Maybe that's why I became a writer. I kind of like sitting on the sidelines."

"What sidelines?"

She searched for an answer that was honest but probably outside the teenager's immediate sphere of interest. "Well. Politics, I guess. That's probably my favorite spectator sport."

The way he nodded made her nervous.

"Politics," he repeated. "That means you must believe in the Constitution then, right?"

She groaned regretfully. "Please, Harley, I need to eat some lunch."

"Like the Second Amendment?"

Don't go down this path, Andrea, she told herself. Stop now.

"You have an opinion on the Second Amendment, Harley?" she sneered, without even a hint of impulse control.

"Not yet," he said, sitting up, eyelids perking. "We don't really cover 'concealed carry' until our sophomore year at Our Savior's."

She gasped. "You actually talk about this stuff in class?"

He was transformed by her interest. "We sure do," he agreed. "It's all laid out for us. So we can understand everything. The Constitution. Politics. Science. History. Even America itself. We see it all as it was meant to be seen."

Predictably, she grabbed the bait. "And how's that?"

“Through the Biblical lens, Aunt Andy. My professors say that by the time I graduate, I will be one of the few people on earth looking directly through God’s glasses.”

She stood up. “I really have to stop now.”

“Stop what?”

“Talking to you, Harley. It’s making me crazy.”

“Okay,” he said, sounding more disappointed than apologetic. “I upset you, right?”

She nodded.

“I shouldn’t have mentioned the glasses. Is that it?”

She nodded again.

“I’m sorry. My professor says some truths are very hard to hear. I’m sorry.”

It was as if he just couldn’t help running his mouth across her mental chalkboard. “I’m going downstairs to eat,” she said firmly and headed for the steps.

“Aunt Andy?”

“Please, Harley.” She didn’t bother looking back.

“I just wanted to say one more thing. About Uncle Mark.”

“Let’s talk about it later.”

“I mean, there’s something you keep forgetting. That might get you off, you know, square one.”

She inhaled through clenched teeth and reluctantly halted. “Okay. What did I forget?”

“Well, you know how you keep looking for things you don’t have?”

“This is not a conversation, Harley. Get to the point,” she ordered, refusing to turn around.

“I mean, all those documents. Death certificate. Coroner’s report.”

“Harley—”

“All I’m saying is, why don’t you just start with the one thing you *do* have?”

Against her better judgment, she pivoted back toward the office.

“Okay. I’m listening. What do you think I have?”

“The ashes.”

The ashes. True enough. She certainly had the burger box. She made her way back up the stairs. “And what would I do with the ashes?”

“You could have them tested for DNA.”

She returned to her office, where Harley had stretched himself across the length of the sofa like a beached seal. Could you really get DNA from ashes, she wondered?

“And you know this about DNA because?”

“I watch a lot of—”

Andy’s hand shot up to stem the flow. “Got it. Let’s move on,” she said, reaching down to remove his feet from her furniture. Once again engaged against her will, she dropped onto the sofa next to him. “Why would I have them tested for DNA?”

“Well, the only reason you think your husband, former husband, is dead is because a Daughter of Beelzebub says he’s dead. So the question is, why would you trust someone like that?”

Andy felt a tingling along the nape of her neck, along with a wave of intellectual nausea. Where did Harley Davidson come up with this stuff? And it damn well better not be some creepy little plan by you-know-who.

“Harley,” she finally said. “I’m not sure how to put this without offending you. But if you are to remain living in my house, I need to say it.”

She thought he might be squirming, but with his current body build it was hard to tell.

“Say what, Aunt Andy?”

“I am beginning to believe you are smarter than you look.”

“That’s a good thing, right?”

“It is,” she admitted. “However, almost everything you know appears to come from only two sources: either the Bible or television.” She gave him a chance to contest her assertion, but he apparently agreed. “Therefore, whenever

you are talking to me, I want you to concentrate on the latter. Not the former. Do you understand?"

He nodded.

"Good. Now talk to me about what you think we should do with these ashes."

Chapter 6

Such a Lovely Face

Sunset Boulevard wends its way through great commercial and residential real estate, from the notorious strip in Hollywood to the mansions of Pacific Palisades. On its way west along the Santa Monica Mountain foothills to the Pacific Ocean, the Boulevard also passes right by UCLA, one of the largest and most prestigious college campuses in the country. It was a place Harley had not yet visited, and Andy thought it was time her nephew skipped his classes at Our Savior's Tabernacle University for the afternoon and got a glimpse of what the rest of the kids his age were up to.

"Why is Samantha coming all the way from Scotland to give a talk in California?" Harley wanted to know.

"It's not a talk," Andy explained. "It's a lecture. And that's what history professors do – give lectures."

Harley rolled his eyes.

"Relax," Andy said. "You'll love it."

"What's it about?"

"Spies during World War II."

The truth was Samantha Bravos was more than a lecturer; she'd become the academic storyteller-in-chief for the Scottish university system. Both the head of the history department and the administration at Edinburgh Uni loved to send her on globe-hopping tours to create interest in and attract students to their school. The university had discovered that this growing market of international students not only brought diversity to a campus full of pale-skinned gingers, but it brought a huge influx of tuition, as well. The fact that the university's biggest recruiter was an American, born and raised in Hollywood, was not lost on the Scots. They were a practical people; if Tinseltown could make stars of Bravehearted William Wallace and Sean-007-Connery, then why not let a California beach-blonde make the pitch for their college degrees?

The lecture hall was packed, as Andy knew it would be. Sam had flown into LAX that morning and was giving her lecture in the afternoon, so she came to campus directly from the airport. Andy had not yet seen her daughter, but they were scheduled to meet up after the lecture. Andy stole a look at Harley as they settled into their reserved seats, and the expectant energy in the room began to mushroom into palpable excitement. His blue eyes hung open, as did his mouth.

Sam sat in the well of the lecture hall, while the chair of the UCLA history department introduced her. She was dressed in grey, pinstriped pants and a matching jacket that exposed a dramatic chartreuse cowl-neck sweater. Her long hair was pulled up in a twist, and she smiled when she saw her mother in the audience. Samantha had always been Andy's most conventionally ambitious child, meaning she managed to make it out of adolescence and into a family and career without Ian's dope smoking, Mitch's rebellions, and Lilly's indecision. Sam had known what she wanted and how to get it from the time she was in high school.

As a child, Sam had been the family rule-follower. Her siblings had dubbed her 'The Strawberry', derived from the insipidly sweet Strawberry Shortcake character that everyone in the family loved to hate. Sam's good behavior, she often reminded her mother, had earned her the derogatory nickname and not much else. That's because parental attention in the Kornacky family always went to the worst behaved person in the room, she said, making Mitch the chronically-lamented prodigal son to her faithful-but-forgotten daughter.

Still, Sam's impeccable conduct and ability to function within a system, as well as deftly manipulate it, had earned her a PhD by the time she was twenty-six and a position at Edinburgh shortly thereafter. Her work since her faculty appointment had never been characterized as brilliant, which she liked to observe was not a system requirement. Rather, reviewers called her academic papers 'intensely interesting' and 'almost irresistible,' attracting a readership far beyond the university. And that, Sam once confided to Andy, was just the sort of thing that would make any system proud.

Sam stood at the podium and winked at Harley. He could barely contain himself.

“What we do for love,” the young Professor Bravos began, “can be remarkable. It can also be the stuff of history. Desire. Heartache. Courage. And betrayal. That’s a lot for one life. But during wartime, as you may know, there are people who seem to live life more than others. I discovered someone like this recently, an historic figure, who I think will interest you. And teach you about the vagaries of human behavior and the intimacy of geopolitical conflict. It’s a true story about a young woman once married to an Austrian baron – and the amazing and ultimately tragic things she did for love.”

The room was entranced. Harley had nearly stopped breathing. As Andy listened, she remembered Sam telling her that she had stumbled onto the woman’s story while reading the unpublished autobiography of an English mechanical engineer. During World War II, the man joined the British military to design innovative ways to camouflage Ally tanks and aircraft fighting in North Africa. In his manuscript, the engineer described meeting the young woman at the British Intelligence office in Cairo. Her name was Emma Linde. Only twenty-four, she was already a legend among her peers. According to both the legend and the engineer, Emma was strikingly beautiful. She had been married at age twenty to a young Austrian baron. Two years after the wedding, her new husband had been captured and killed by the Germans. Emma was fluent in three languages. And by the time the mechanical engineer met her, she had survived seven separate missions into Germany as a spy for the Allies. Here, Sam told Andy, was where the real story began. Unfortunately, this was also where Sam was due at a faculty meeting, so Andy never heard the rest. As a consequence, she now found herself as invested in Sam’s lecture as everyone else.

In the lecture hall, Sam arrived at the point in her narrative where Emma was taking her eighth, and what would become her penultimate, assignment. The young spy was sent undercover to work as a barmaid at a tavern in a small

town in Bavaria, where she would help smuggle Jewish refugees out of the country.

“This Emma does for six months with enormous success,” Sam explained to her audience. “And then she makes a mistake. A critical mistake that not only affects her mission but the rest of her life. She lets the two small children, who she has been hiding in her room over the bar, look out the window. For only a moment, but it’s long enough for a neighbor to see them. Because Emma never mentioned having children, the villager immediately suspects they must be Jewish, and he reports both the barmaid and the children to German authorities. Suspicion spreads, and Emma knows she must move and move fast. She grabs the children and literally rides out of town on the back of a beer wagon, leaving everything behind – including her identification papers.”

In screenwriting parlance, this was the twenty-minute plot point. Andy couldn’t help but admire her daughter’s pacing. She watched as Sam paused, just long enough for the fade into the next transition.

“I won’t keep you in suspense,” Sam resumed. “Emma successfully gets the two children to safety in Sweden. Then, she returns to her handlers in Cairo. And all of this she manages without her passport, which you will remember is now in German hands. So although Emma has made it back safely, the enemy has learned her identity. For the first time, her photo begins to appear on wanted posters throughout Germany and across the occupied countries.”

Sam freed herself from the podium and her notes, stepping nearer to her listeners. “If history teaches us anything,” she said, reminding them why they were there, “it’s that life is often the result of coincidence, the confluence of two unrelated phenomena. And so it is with Emma’s story. The first occurrence is the dissemination of Emma’s passport photo by the Nazi regime. That event now makes it impossible for her to return to Germany. Her career working as an undercover agent in the field is over.” Sam let the idea linger momentarily so that her students could examine it more closely. “The second is equally life changing. Because at almost the same time, British authorities learn that Emma’s

husband, the Baron, is *not* dead but being held in a prison camp in southern Germany.

“For Emma the news is not only thrilling, it’s unsettling. Her husband is alive. What’s more, he could be a valuable asset to the Allies if he could escape. Ironically, no one in British intelligence is better suited to navigate the labyrinth of war-torn Germany and attempt to free him than Emma herself. But everyone in the agency agrees that sending Emma back into Germany is out of the question.”

Sam perused the room, as if she were looking for someone to call on. Her eyes finally settled on Harley. But instead of asking a question, she spoke as if she were telling him a secret. “And this is where we reach the really interesting part.”

End Act I, thought Andy. That’s my girl.

“War, as you know, fulfills a great many human agendas,” Sam said, returning to her academic voice to establish the setting for the next part of the story. “Political. Economic. Philosophical. Professional. But most often, in my opinion, personal. Leaders go to war to make a name for themselves. Or exact some kind of revenge against an enemy who has slighted their self-image or insulted their family. Or simply because it makes them feel powerful. And war gives lesser players opportunities to fulfill their ambitions, as well. Men who thrive on violence get their hands on guns. Engineers and physicists are invited to explore science by creating new weapons of death. And entrepreneurs can suddenly make money in ways that, in times of peace, are thought to be morally corrupt. War is pretty much a free-for-all.

“So when Emma Linde pleads with her superiors that she simply *must* return to Germany, no matter what the cost, British Intelligence sees an opportunity to go where no one has gone before.”

It was hard to guess exactly which direction the professor was headed, Andy thought with admiration, and along with almost everybody else in the room, she leaned forward, waiting for the action of Act II to begin.

“With Emma’s consent, the men in Cairo call in a team of surgeons from London,” Sam explained. “These men spend the next five months making what was once such a lovely face – unrecognizable. In fact, Emma’s handlers willingly use her desire to go back undercover as an excuse to test every reconstructive surgical technique they have ever imagined.

“Here in 21st century California, we consider taking a knife to the face a routine, if expensive, act of vanity,” Sam observed, soberly. “But in Emma’s case, this is no act of vanity, and there is nothing routine about it. It is experimental and dangerous. Yet, in all my research, I did not find one indication that she ever objects to any of this butchery.

“Why, you may ask. Because, like everyone else in this war, she has her own personal agenda. So when she emerges from the hospital months later, ready to return to the field, Emma Linde is fully aware of what she has let them do to her. She is no longer naïve. Nor is she beautiful. In fact, I have seen correspondence in which those who know her describe her appearance as ‘ghastly.’ But Emma doesn’t seem to care. She is a woman on a mission.”

Sam glanced at her watch, setting off a ripple of anxiety across the room. That’s it, Andy nodded, make them beg for Act III.

“Let me just say,” Sam continued, picking up her narrative ever so slightly, “that the overlords in London are delighted by the results of their young agent’s transformation. And they are very eager for her to return to the belly of the beast to see if their experiment works. So Emma returns to Germany with a new face and new papers and a new purpose. This time it’s personal.

“Emma begins by embedding herself in the small community near the camp where the Baron is being held. She manages to get a job delivering potatoes to the camp, at one point walking by a wall in the prison with a wanted poster displaying her picture. Not a spark of recognition by anyone. This certainly seems like a good omen.

“Over time, several weeks, she manages to locate where in the camp the Allied officers are being held. Next, she smuggles a message to the Baron.

Something innocuous and vague, indicating only that help has arrived. They rendezvous on a day when she makes a food delivery.

"The man Emma meets is gaunt and fearful. His hair is gray; his eyes are yellow. And yet she knows him instantly –

'Can you get me out?' he asks, anxiously.

She nods. But that doesn't satisfy him.

Again he asks, 'Can you get me out?'

She thinks for a moment his desperation must be blinding him.

'I can,' she says, hoping he will recognize her voice.

For the first time he really looks at her.

'I am putting my life in your hands,' he says.

She is looking at him now, too. 'I know.'

And then he asks the question they have all asked, everyone she has ever helped escape, 'How do I know I can trust you?'

"She waits, wanting to believe he will see the answer. But, of course, he can't. He's staring at a stranger."

Sam walked back to the podium for the denouement. Her mother could not have been prouder.

"We can only speculate about how Emma feels at this moment. And there are no eyewitness accounts of what she does next, of course, except we know she does her job. With the same expertise and iron resolve that helped her smuggle hundreds of refugees out of Germany, she gets the Baron out, too. He is free and in one piece. It is a remarkable accomplishment by any measure. And it is the last time Emma works as an agent.

"Records indicate that after the escape, the couple travels together to Egypt to be debriefed by intelligence officials. By her own admission, Emma does not tell the Baron that she is his wife until they are safely on the train to Cairo. When she does, he is not so much surprised or shocked, as he is incredulous. He simply doesn't believe her. Given her appearance, perhaps he doesn't want to. Whatever his motives, he will not be convinced until he meets with the men who have

made her transformation possible. And when the truth finally hits him, he announces that what they have done is 'appalling' and leaves the room without saying another word."

The young listeners stirred in their seats, as people often do during that moment before the final moment in any narrative, the moment where you hope for a happy ending but aren't sure how the story will get there. And Andy knew from Sam that history rarely provides the destination you desire.

"The war ends, of course," the teacher told her students. "But both Emma and the Baron live on. According to friends, they eventually return home to the Austrian castle where the Baron first brought his bride to live after their marriage. However, the war profoundly changes things, as wars always do. And love – an often-fragile emotion – is no match for its destruction.

"Emma has sacrificed her beauty to save the Baron's life, and in the end, he finds it nearly impossible to look at her again. And that makes it impossible for him to love her again. He knows this, and no doubt, so does she.

"The local gossip, still remembered by friends of the family, is that the Baron begins having a series of affairs. He drinks. He rages. He fails in business.

"Of Emma, however, we know almost nothing." Sam held up a plastic folder with what looked like a paper clipping inside. "Except this: a short news article that appears in the local Austrian paper on December 1, 1948. The reporter describes how the Baron's car, despite good weather and driving conditions, bursts through a guardrail on the edge of an Alpine road at incredible speed one morning and plunges headlong into the abyss beyond. According to police, two bodies are eventually pulled from the wreckage: the Baron and his wife."

Sam ran her fingers over the folder in her hand. "I know this article is just an artifact," she said. "Probably the most mundane piece of evidence I found in all my research; a single piece to the puzzle of one woman's life. If you have a moment, stop and take a look at it before you leave today."

Sam put the folder down and drew the eyes of the audience into her own. There was nothing contrived about this moment, Andy realized. Her carefully controlled daughter was as exposed as Andy had ever seen her.

“You’ll discover that the article tells us nothing about this young woman’s classified work for the British government,” Sam said, with tangible sadness. “Nor is there anything about how the war changed her – both inside and out. And yet, even this small piece of paper is a clue to Emma Linde’s history. Because the one thing it does tell us is that *she* was the one driving the car.”

Out to black, thought Andy. Well done, Sam.

Chapter 7

No Rescue from the Inevitable

It took nearly an hour before the last of Sam's fans left the hall and her daughter was free to join Andy and Harley for the ride home to Valencia. They left right away in order to avoid the late afternoon congestion along the 405 north over the Sepulveda pass and through the San Fernando Valley. Still, the drive took nearly an hour.

"Did you enjoy the lecture?" Sam finally asked Harley, who was in the backseat and had remained silent, while the two women in front caught up on family events.

He rose from his slouch and smiled. "Really amazing," he answered. "So much stuff I never knew."

"It was a big war," replied Sam. "There's a great deal to know."

"Tell me about the Jewish kids," he said, unexpectedly.

"Sorry?"

"Those two kids in the story. The Nazis didn't like them because they were Jewish, right?"

"Right."

"My pastor says that's wrong."

This kid should have come with a warning label, Andy thought, incensed. She tried to head off any engagement between preacher and victim at the pass. "Harley would like to be a pastor someday, Sam," she said, widening her eyes for subtext. "He's thinking of starting his own denomination."

"Hmm," said Sam, who was paying more attention to the passing palm trees than she was to her cousin. "Well, I agree that the way the Nazis treated the Jews, and a great many other people, was certainly immoral. And indefensible."

Andy winced at the opening her daughter had inadvertently given Harley.

He took it. "You see, according to Scripture, we ignore the Jews at our peril."

"Remember, what I said, Harley!" Andy cut in. "You can't talk about that. Not in my house."

“But we’re in your *car*, Aunt Andy. And this is important. My professors always say that secular historians like Sam don’t really understand why we need the Jewish people.”

He had Sam’s attention now. “Secular historians? I’m not sure I know that term. What professors are you talking about?”

“At Our Savior’s Tabernacle U,” he told her, sitting up like a fisherman who just felt a pull on his line.

“And why do your professors at—”

“OSTU.”

“OSTU say we *need* the Jewish people?” Sam asked. She pivoted in her seat and trained her curious eyes on him.

Harley smiled, clearly happy to be the one to fill her in on something she didn’t know. “It’s simple,” he said. “We need them for the Second Coming.”

There it is, fumed Andy. He’s like a homing pigeon; no matter where we go, he always ends up back at the same place.

“You know what, Harley?” Andy asked, feigning calm. “We’re going to make a rule against discussing *anything* about the ‘End of Days.’ Have you got that? *Any* time. *Anywhere*. Okay?”

“But you can’t survive without knowing these things, Aunt Andy,” he declared, gravely serious. “The return of Israel and the fight for Jerusalem are the first two signs of the End Times.”

She dug her fingernails into the steering wheel. “Har-ley,” she hissed.

“Okay, okay,” he said, quickly.

They drove in a strained silence for a minute or two, just long enough for Andy to loosen her grip on the wheel. She glanced at Sam, who looked back at her, shell-shocked.

After another minute, a timid voice from the rear of the car ventured, “Aunt Andy? Can I say one more thing?”

When Andy didn’t respond, Sam felt compelled to fill the uncomfortably empty space.

"What is it, Harley?" Sam offered.

"I just wanted you both to know that, when I get my calling and start my own church, I'll be sure to ask God for a personal revelation about plastic surgery."

Sam looked at Andy, who growled, "Do not engage, Samantha."

Evidently, her daughter was too weak to resist. "What do you mean, a 'personal revelation', Harley?"

"You know, where God speaks to me and then I tell my people."

"Oh," Sam smiled. "You mean, like Moses?"

"Exactly, Sam."

"Okay. Well, do you have any idea what God's going to say about what happened to Emma?"

"Oh, the Bible's against facelifts," he said. "Everybody knows that. That's why I'm going to ask for a revelation. Because, when we get to the end of —," he indicated the back of his aunt's head and said conspiratorially, "When we get to J-Day and the Almighty actually *hears* that poor lady's story, I'd like to be able to tell my people, you know, that He's going to cut her some slack."

Samantha leaned over the armrest and whispered in her mother's ear. "This child can't possibly be related to us, can he?"

In order to avoid the temptation of mentioning his faith and, thereby provoking his aunt, Harley stayed in his room for most of the next twenty-four hours, meals excepted. But the animated arrival of Lilly Bravos the next afternoon was enough to lure even the wariest groundhog from his hole.

"Annnnndy!" Lilly yelled, rushing to hug her mother, as she blew in the door after Sam had fetched her from the airport.

"I can't believe you actually came without the kids," Andy said, wrapping her arms around the tornado. "How does it feel to be without them?"

"Like I am missing two arms and two legs. And it feels great!"

"How are the twins?" Andy asked.

“Cuter than the first two. No doubt about it; I get better with age.”

Harley loitered in the background, reluctant to make an entrance. Lil opened her arms and motioned the terrified teenager forward.

“Come on, Harley. I’m your cousin, not your executioner. I’m giving you a hug. It won’t hurt. And I promise not to do it again for at least two hours.”

Head down, hands sweating, Harley walked into the embrace. Lil pulled him to her, squeezed, and then held him at arm’s length. He felt like a small moon in the pull of a giant planet. At 5’ 10’, she was two inches taller than he was, and her exuberant red hair made her look even bigger. And, although she was nearly 15 years older, she had a youthfulness he’d already discarded. As with all his cousins, Harley felt he was no match for the person or the personality.

“Well, Harley, I hear you are studying to be a minister and have ambitions to start your own church, is that right?”

He kept his insecure eyes lidded.

“I’m not supposed to talk about that in the house,” he said, softly. “Or the car, either.”

“Ah,” Lil observed. “I see my mother is no longer a defender of religious freedom.”

“I am, too,” Andy said, curtly. “Just not in my backyard. Is anyone going to make salsa?”

Lil smiled sympathetically at Harley, pulled him to her for another squeeze and finally freed him.

“You’re damned right I am,” Lil announced. “Sam and I stopped at the store and got the tomatillos and jalapeños.”

Andy watched her daughters cook together, just as they had from the time they could stand on chairs next to the counter. Only a year apart, the girls had always been close. Now they mixed margaritas, mashed avocados, and minced garlic without ever discussing who was to do what. Instead, they chatted about their children and their attendant varicose veins. Andy sat on the sidelines, sipping her drink and remembering the pleasures of having raised her four

babies; pleasures she missed but had no desire to recreate. Those were the most exhilarating and exhausting days of her life, and she was both glad and sad they were over.

From the unfolding conversation, it was clear that Lilly was busy getting ready to return to a career as soon as her youngest started school. She was telling her sister that she wanted to start a high-end, high-tech matchmaking business in Boise, a fast growing metropolitan area with lots of professional singles moving in. Not a bad choice, thought Andy, as she listened. Lil imbibed and deconstructed relationships the way a sommelier does wine. And she was good at it. Andy suspected busy men with demanding careers would pay big bucks to have Lil help them find the right woman. But Andy wanted her daughter to be a writer, and she wanted Lil to write with *her*.

Ever since Sam's lecture, Andy had been mulling over the possibility of writing a spec script based on the story of Emma Linde. The problem was that she wanted Lil to do it with her. Andy was desperate to introduce the topic but wasn't sure how. It was, after all, a completely self-serving plan, no matter how brilliant it was. And it was brilliant. Still, she knew Lilly would see through it and say she didn't have time. Or worse. She would remind her mother of that nagging little truth; Andy's career was fast coming to a close, and it was not Lil's job to rescue her from the inevitable. A sudden burst of laughter from the two cooks drew Andy's conniving mind back to the girls, who were now each admitting they could see the value in those reprehensible 'kiddie leashes.' Andy decided to wait for a more opportune moment.

The moment did not come until the day Lil was scheduled to leave. Samantha and Harley were at the dining room table playing Go Fish (because the future reverend believed that Andy's deck of Bicycle cards had been inspired by pagans), while Lil helped Andy hang a new mirror in the downstairs bathroom.

"Hope you weren't expecting time to just laze in the southern California sun and do nothing," Andy told her daughter, as she put the last screw in the wallboard over the basin.

"I'd rather do this anyway," Lil said. "What a great frame. It'll look super in here."

"Thanks for helping me pick it out. Okay, let's hoist it."

The two women hung the mirror and stepped back to take a look. Lil wrapped her long arms around Andy's shoulders, as they enjoyed their reflection.

"See, Mom? Makes both you and the house look less dated."

"Gee, thanks, Lil," Andy grumbled. "Did you and Sam get enough time to catch up on things?"

"Never enough time," said Lil. "But it's amazing how much more we can cover when the kids aren't around. We stayed up until three this morning."

"Ouch. That's gonna hurt when you get home to the boys."

"I know."

"You two okay about your dad?"

Lil shrugged, an uncharacteristically apathetic response from Andy's most opinionated child.

"Pretty good. He's been AWOL for so long it doesn't make much difference. We realized he's never actually seen any of his grandkids—except for Berkeley." Berkeley was Mitch's daughter from a relationship he had 14 years ago. Mitch and Berkeley's mother, Christine, hadn't married but remained good friends, even though they lived in different states. "Hard to know what to feel: sad, angry or just indifferent. I think Sam and I are both settling into the latter."

Indifference had its virtues, Andy agreed, preferable to anger or regret in so many ways. "Let's get something to drink," she suggested.

As the Go Fish tournament inside continued, Andy and Lil took glasses of white sangria out to the patio.

"So did Sam tell you about her lecture at UCLA?"

A leading question, if ever Lilly had heard one. She took a leisurely sip of her wine and reclined in her lounge chair.

"You think it would make a great movie, right?" she asked, evenly.

Andy knew that Lil knew what she wanted. "I do. And you?"

Lil smiled an unreadable smile. "So do I."

"Oh, my god, Lil! Do you think we could –"

"Mom," Lil interrupted. "It is a fabulous story. But I want you to think about what you're asking. You know how impossible it is for me to do anything other than make it across the finish line every day with the kids still breathing."

"I know. But –"

"I can hardly find my way to the bedroom at night."

"I know, honey. But . . ."

Lil was about to interrupt again, when the doorbell beat her to it. This time there was no mistaking the meaning of Lil's satisfied grin.

"Don't say it," Andy sniped.

"Don't say what?"

"Saved by the bell." And with that, she got up to answer the door.

Harley, however, was already on his way.

"You expecting someone, Mom?" Sam asked, as Andy passed through the dining room.

"I don't think so," Andy answered.

"FedEx," Harley called from the entry.

Lil stepped in from the patio, a drink in both hands. "What'd you order?"

Andy couldn't remember and was too embarrassed to admit it.

The three women waited for Harley to return. He did, cradling a small package in his palms. He eyed his aunt, as if she should tell him what to do next.

"What is it?" Andy asked, without thinking. But she remembered the minute he opened his mouth.

"It's the DNA," he said.

She glanced at her daughters, who were not about to skip the question begged by Harley's unexpected answer. Talk about bad timing.

"DNA?" Sam asked, the first to beg.

Andy tried shrugging it off. "DNA," she repeated, without explanation.

Lil turned immediately to Harley, who would be far easier prey. "DNA?" Still caught in the powerful orbit of his older cousin, he caved without even bothering to look at his aunt.

"Uncle Mark's ashes," he whispered. "We had them tested."

"You had them *tested*?" Lil exploded.

"Um. Yeah," he whimpered. "At one of those places, you know?"

But it was already obvious they didn't know, so he ducked for cover. "I just assumed Aunt Andy told you."

Well played, she thought, as the girls turned their focus on her.

"No," said Sam, deliberately. "She did not. But I think that little discussion just arrived at the top of her to-do list."

Simultaneously, the sisters crossed their arms and waited. Not for the first time, Andy felt the parent-child relationship, right along with the sands of time, shifting beneath her.

"I would like another margarita," she declared, just to remind them she was still old enough to drink. "Then, and only then, will I tell you about the cremains."

Chapter 8

Cremains of the Day

“What the hell are cremains?” asked Lilly.

“It’s the industry term for ashes,” Andy said, after she got up and refilled the margarita glass herself. “Cremated remains. Cre-mains. Get it?” She waited, but the girls weren’t going to be sidetracked. “Okay. Okay. Here’s what happened. I just wanted to get some basic information. The cause of death. Did your dad have a will? Stuff like that. But getting that information is harder than you think without knowing just where and when he died and without, you know, technically being related to him anymore.”

“Oh, my god,” said an alarmed Lil, “you didn’t try calling Tilda, did you?”

“Me? Call Tilda? Absolutely not.” Andy shot optic daggers at Harley, who had no doubt about keeping his mouth shut this time. “All I had were the ashes, so I just went from there.”

“From there – to where, Mom?” Sam asked.

“Well, to at least confirming that he’s dead,” said Andy. “And that is what’s in the box. The DNA results from the cremains.”

All eyes now returned to Harley, who was still holding the FedEx package.

“They can get DNA from ashes?” Lil asked, skeptically.

“No,” Sam informed them. “It’s almost impossible to get DNA after cremation. Don’t you people know anything about science?”

“But this company we found online said they could test for DNA,” said Harley. “And we had to fill out a Cremains Acknowledgement Form and everything. And they promised we’d get most of the ashes back. For burial. Or whatever.”

“To be accurate, they said there was a 50/50 chance they could get DNA from their testing,” said Andy, trying not to look as ridiculous as she was feeling. “I thought it was worth a try.”

“We’ll that sounds like a scam, Mother. So I’m not even going to ask you what you paid,” said Sam. “Your bad. Now open the package.”

Harley tried to hand the box to Andy, but she waved him off. You do it, genius, she thought to herself, then said, "Would you mind?"

He dutifully slit the clear plastic wrap covering the cardboard with his fingernail and took out the paper envelope addressed to Andy. She waved her hand again, and he opened the letter.

"Read it," she said, draining her glass.

"Dear Ms. Bravos," Harley read. "Please find enclosed the laboratory results for the cremains testing performed by our company on the samples you sent us recently."

"Wait a minute," Sam interrupted. "Didn't you have to send them a sample of Dad's DNA for comparison?"

"Yeah," was all Andy felt compelled to answer.

"So how did you get Dad's DNA?"

"I, ah, had some," Andy replied. "From a while ago."

"You had some? Really? From a while ago? Care to enlighten us?" said Sam.

"Not really. But if I do, there will be no laughter, is that clear?" She could see Sam biting her lip in anticipation. "I mean it." Both girls nodded agreement. "I have a lock of your father's hair," Andy said. "From when we were dating."

Sam couldn't help herself. A guffaw, if ever Andy heard one! She scowled back.

Lil put her hand on her mother's and smiled affectionately. "I think that's sweet."

"Shut up," said Andy. "Let's get this over with."

Harley continued. "The specifics of the test results are contained on page two of this letter. However, a summary of our findings indicates the following. Number one, the sample cremains were not suitable to extract for a DNA profile."

"Bingo!" Sam said.

Having slipped from defensive to defeated in record time, Andy sighed audibly. "Would you mind, Sam? Let's not make me feel like a bigger fool than necessary."

Sam relented immediately. "Right. I'm sorry, Mom."

"Want me to read number two?" Harley asked.

"Number two?" said Andy.

"Of the summary. Number two says, 'The sample cremains show no signs of organic material and therefore do not, in all likelihood, include human tissue.'" Harley looked up, awaiting further instruction.

"Let me see the letter," Sam said, taking the paper from Harley. She looked first at page one and then at page two. "It means the ashes are probably fake," she said.

"Probably?" Lil wanted to know.

Sam grabbed the invoice. "The test cost \$99, Lil. I doubt these folks can tell the difference between a corpse and cat litter."

"But if there's no organic material present," Andy reiterated, reading the results for herself, "that means Tilda sent us dust."

It took a few moments for the implications to sink in. And the one that sank in fastest was the bizarre behavior of the widow-in-chief.

"Why on earth would Tilda send fake ashes?" asked Sam.

"Maybe she just wanted to keep his real ashes for herself," Lilly theorized. "We all agree she's weird."

"Or maybe it's her way of flipping us off," Sam offered.

"Or maybe he's not dead," said Andy, trying to squeeze herself back into the conversation. It worked.

"Why would she *pretend* he's dead?" asked Sam, genuinely confused.

"Who knows?" mused Andy. "She hated it every time Mitch tried to call your dad. She was jealous. Some women are like that. Especially women who marry a guy with children and don't have any of their own. So she decided to tell

us he was dead to get us out of their, you know, busy and satisfying lives," Andy concluded, with what she thought was just the perfect touch of contempt.

"And you think a fake cremation would be okay with Dad?" Lil wanted to know.

Andy considered this and said, "I don't know. I don't know what to think."

"Well," Sam pointed out, "Dad still could be dead. These just aren't his ashes. Whatever's going on, this test doesn't actually get us anywhere, Mom."

The kid holding the faux remains raised his hand slightly, as if he were waiting to be called on before he spoke.

"What is it, Harley?" Andy asked.

"Why don't you just call Uncle Mark? You know. On his cell. See if he picks up."

Out of the mouth of boobs, Andy thought.

Sam picked up her phone and dialed.

"Hi, Samantha," boomed the voice on the other end of the line. "What's up?"

"Hi, Mitch. Sorry to call in the middle of work."

"No problem."

"Listen, I want you to call Dad."

"Call him? How do I do that?"

"You have his cell number, right?"

"Yeah. But he's dead, Sam. Remember?"

"I know. Just call the number."

"Call the number? I don't want to call the number."

"Just do it, will you?"

"Why?"

"Mom had the ashes tested. They're questionable. We want to know if he's still taking calls."

"Those weren't his ashes?!"

"It turns out there's room for doubt."

“Well, that certainly creeps me out, Samantha. Why have I been nominated to make the call?”

“Because you’re a big boy, Mitch. Just do it.”

A long beat, as Mitch considered his responsibilities. “Okay. Hold on.” He clicked off, and the little review committee waited in silence. He was back on the line a minute later.

“Sam?”

“Did you get him?”

“No. The number’s no longer in service,” Mitch told her. “What does that mean?”

“Damned if I know,” said Sam. “I’ll get back to you.” And she hung up.

The possibility that Tilda Trivette might have been screwing with Mark Kornacky’s remains seemed to jettison his children into action in a way that the man’s reported death had not. In the two hours before Lilly had to leave for the airport to catch her plane back to Idaho, Team Kornacky came together in a rare show of unity.

With remarkably little prompting from their mother, the siblings decided that inquires had to be made in Texas to determine if their father was deceased or not. And if he was, determine how and when he died. All of this needed to be accomplished as delicately as possible, preferably without any personal contact with Tilda. As the phone calls flew back and forth between Mitch and Sam and Lilly and Ian, Andy paced the patio trying to stay out of the way. It was another occasion, among an increasing number of occasions, when she felt slightly irrelevant.

The sun, along with Andy’s patience, began sinking slowly in the west, as all four children continued to caucus via speakerphone in the dining room. She fantasized marching in and volunteering for duty, but they had already made it clear that this was their business, not hers.

“Mom?” Sam was at the screen door, motioning to her.

As Andy stepped inside, Lilly pointed to the handset on the table. "Both the boys are on. We've talked all this out, and Mitch wants to say something."

Her ducklings had a pecking order, Andy knew, that evidenced itself whenever there was a crisis. Ian was on the bottom because he hated asserting himself in any situation where he might hurt someone's feelings. Sam was perfectly capable of hurting someone's feelings but only when absolutely necessary. Lil figured everybody was responsible for his or her own feelings, so she never hesitated to speak her mind. But Mitch was almost always the one who did the talking because he usually forgot other people *had* feelings or, for that matter, ideas. And, besides, the rest of them couldn't shut him up.

"Mom," Mitch bellowed through the speaker. "Can you hear me?!"

"Yes. You can bring it down a few decibels, honey. Thanks."

"Okay. Anyway, you know about these ashes being tested, right?"

Andy took a deep breath. "Yes, Mitch. I was the one who had them tested, remember?"

"Yeah. Right. So this brings up a lot of unanswered questions."

"Uh huh," said Andy, evenly.

"Like the cause of death, if there is a death. And whether Dad had a will or not. Stuff like that. Things we never really considered when we first got the burger box."

"Ah," she replied, surrendering to the futility of pointing out that those were precisely the questions she'd been asking. "Yes. All very good questions."

"Thank you. Now we feel, as Dad's children, that in order to answer these questions, we need a presence in Texas."

"What do you mean by 'presence,' Mitch?"

"Somebody who knows their way around. A local."

"Oh," said Andy. "I hadn't thought of that." What she had thought about was going to Texas herself. Still, it was hard to argue with getting someone local, she thought. "Okay. That's probably a good idea."

"I know. That's why I'm suggesting we hire a lawyer."

"A lawyer?" Another smart move that made her unnecessary.

"It seems the best way to proceed. You agree?"

"I guess."

"Good. I knew you would. I'll find somebody and foot the bill. Any objections?"

"No, not really."

"You sound hesitant," Mitch observed. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Really. A lawyer makes sense."

"Excellent."

Andy felt oddly deflated. Had she really been relying on Mark's death to give her meandering life some direction?

"So do you mind going down to work with him?" belted out the voice on the phone.

"What?"

"Somebody's gotta go to Texas and do a little legwork. Check out the house. Talk to the lawyer. We need boots on the ground, Mom. Do you have the time?"

"Me?"

"Well, you know more about Dad than any of us do."

"That's true," she said, trying not to sound as pleased as she felt.

"Meaning you can go?"

"Sure. Why not?" Suddenly, she was behaving like a teenager: *whatever, who cares, doesn't matter to me.*

"That's great, Mom. Just great."

She liked this; the more blasé she appeared, the more of a cheerleader Mitch became.

"Sam's gonna get the tickets. And you two can leave ASAP."

"Sam's coming with me?" Andy asked, surprised.

"No. Sam's buying the tickets. We want Harley to go with you."

"What?" Andy was back in adult mode.

"Harley's coming with you."

“Oh, no, he’s not, Mitchell.” Her pernicious nephew was sitting on a bar stool stooped over his phone playing a video game, pretending he wasn’t listening to the conversation.

“We have no idea what’s going on down there, Mom,” Mitch went on. “Tilda appears to be something of a loose cannon. We don’t want to send you by yourself.”

“But I’ll be perfectly fine by myself!”

Andy turned her head from one daughter to the other, pleading for mercy. They clearly weren’t offering any. She picked up the phone, put it to her ear, and walked into the nearby living room.

“You know what this kid is like, Mitch,” she said, trying vainly to hush her voice. “The only assistance he’s qualified to offer is his unintelligible rendition of the Lord’s Prayer. Please, Mitch.”

“Mom, we’re insisting you take him.”

“Have you asked him if he wants to go?” she tried.

“No problem, Aunt Andy,” Harley called from his perch in the dining room. “I’ve never been to Texas.”

“Mitch!”

“It’s non-negotiable, Mom. Just think of it as having Jesus as your co-pilot.”

Andy pounded her thumb into the off button and wondered when, precisely, she had lost control of *almost everything!*

Chapter 9

Unrepressed Memories

For someone who had written an editorial for her college newspaper nearly 40 years ago demanding the legalization of pot and whose only current religious belief was in universal healthcare, a trip to the Lone Star state was not on Andy's bucket list. The minute the plane lifted off the tarmac at LAX headed for Harlingen, she began to feel herself slipping down a rabbit hole and wondering just how deep and dark this adventure might become. Harley, on the other hand, couldn't get enough of the free, honey-roasted peanuts.

"So the Rio Grande. That's got to be a pretty big river, huh?" Harley said.

"I've never seen it. But if 'grand' is any indication, that's right," said Andy, not really in the mood to discover how little her nephew knew about yet another academic subject. "It's a large share of the border between the United States and Mexico."

"Hey, I didn't know that."

"Really? So maybe this trip will make up for the two days of classes you're missing."

"Oh, don't worry about that. It's okay if I don't learn anything on this trip, Aunt Andy. Sometimes you need to do things just for your own pleasure, right?"

Andy decided this bit of wisdom really didn't deserve any affirmation. Besides, she wanted him to stop talking. If wishes were horses

"I like your kids," he announced, with absolutely no provocation. "But they're kinda different."

"Different?"

"You know, from most of the relatives I've met so far."

"Have you met a lot of your relatives?"

"Um, no. Not really. I guess they're different from most of the people I've met so far. In life."

"Hmm," said Andy. "Okay. So how are they different?"

“They’re all sort of hyper, you know. Like they’re wearing jetpacks or something. I guess Ian can be mellow sometimes. But to be honest, Aunt Andy, your kids can be a little scary. For a guy like me anyway.”

She looked at the growing pile of empty peanut bags on his tray table and considered the limited number of people, no, the limited *variety* of people Harley Davidson had met in his young life. And yet, she mused, there was something profoundly accurate in his ‘jetpack’ analysis of her children. The level of energy that filled a room when they were all together was a little scary for her, too. Especially because she often became the focus of their verbal one-upmanship.

Andy was reminded of one particularly effervescent holiday meal three years ago, when all four kids were present and accounted for and the conversation had veered onto the always-popular subject of her parenting defects. The defect in question was Andy’s uncanny ability to tune her children out completely, while she was at work in her home office and they were doing—well, anything they wanted. According to their unrepressed memories, one afternoon she was working on a treatment for Sony Studios, and her elementary-aged children were running wild. As they remembered it, Ian was making an escape by climbing out a second-story window, Lilly was shaving the cat with hair clippers, Samantha was in front of the TV eating a package of refrigerated cookie dough, and Mitch was on the back porch trying to ignite a box of matchsticks with a magnifying glass. It was, what Lil liked to call, parenting by chaotic design. When Andy tried to defend herself, the four of them piled on like bad comics at a celebrity roast. The fact that Ian broke his arm that afternoon and Mitch burned down the rose trellis made her protests a little hollow. All in all, nothing she could do or say at that moment would shut them up.

After that holiday meal, Andy vowed never again to be with all of her children in the same room simultaneously because nothing good ever came of it. Now she realized that axiom was true even if they were only together over a speakerphone. As individuals, they were each wonderful. And taken together in smaller doses, they made her feel like a million bucks. But when they were

together in one place, something about their sibling synergy transformed them into the four horsemen of the apocalypse.

Oh my god, she lamented, I've been infected with Biblical allusions.

The boy beside her put down his latest bag of nuts. "What are we doing first when we get there?" he asked.

"Getting a car and checking in at the motel," she answered.

"And then?"

"Going to see the lawyer."

"Awesome."

"Going to see a lawyer is never awesome, Harley. Sometimes it's necessary, but it always stinks."

Harley ultimately discovered the delights of the small television screen attached to the seat in front of him, and Andy found peace. An hour later, it was wheels down in Harlingen, Texas, a city boasting the largest airport in the Rio Grande Valley, as well as the lowest cost of living in the entire country. Two statistics Andy somehow found mildly depressing. She and her nephew deplaned, picked up their Toyota rental car, and headed for McAllen, a distance of about 35 miles.

The Rio Grande Valley is not really a valley but a flood plain that stretches for seemingly endless flat miles. In the summer months, it's hot. Hotter than southern California and more forbidding. But then unfamiliar territory is always a little forbidding, Andy thought, and she reckoned she ought to give Texas a break and at least let it introduce itself to her before committing to hating it.

McAllen was one of those small towns now growing fast and trying desperately not to look too far behind the curve. The city was full of palm trees, bike lanes, irrigated grass, and an excess of blazing solar rays. You needed sunglasses to protect your eyes from the beams bouncing off the white concrete. The downtown reminded Andy of a cross between some main street in the 1950s Midwest and the Alamo. The commercial area was full of cars and pickups parked diagonally curbside facing dated storefronts. The place had been

redeveloped with fancy street lamps and faux brick crosswalks, but the revitalization already needed an update. It bustled with the descendants of longtime and recent Mexican immigrants mixed together with refugee retirees from Minnesota and the Dakotas. There was money here, as well as poverty. There was the façade of a bigger, more prosperous future to come, which was fronting an underbelly of the usual border-town vices. It was definitely not Los Angeles, yet it was oddly an echo of the desert town Andy called home. She hated it but not all that much.

The offices of Tony Pescaras, Esquire were located on North 6th Street near the County Clerk's Office in a two-story building with a mission motif. Andy climbed the steps to the second floor, Harley in tow. They were shown into the lawyer's office right away, and each took a seat opposite a small man with incredibly gorgeous curly dark hair and a small mustache. He looked like a professional salsa dancer.

"Mrs. Kornacky," he began.

"Actually, my name is Bravos, and it's Ms.," Andy said. "Just call me Andy. Please. And this is my nephew, Harley. I know my son Mitch Kornacky paid you a \$5,000 retainer, and I'm here to find out what he got for his money."

The lawyer sat up a bit straighter and forced a smile. She had pissed him off already, she could tell. How was it that she managed to turn every discussion with a lawyer or a car mechanic into a fight over money? Mitch would have started this conversation with a handshake and small talk and a bit of bonding, but she felt the money meter ticking and resented spending even a penny on niceties.

"Well, yes," said the attorney. "Your son did hire me and asked me to look into a few matters regarding the death of his father. And I have done that."

"Great," she said, hoping to sound more amiable than she felt. "What did you find?"

Pescaras opened the red folder on his desk and fingered two pieces of paper inside. Apparently not very much, Andy thought.

"All right," he said, deliberately. "I began with a records search at the Hildago County Clerk's Office."

She nodded and grinned, hoping to speed him along.

"There is no record of the death of any Mark Kornacky in this county. At any time."

She looked surprised. She *was* surprised.

"He may have died in another county," the lawyer said.

"Another county?" she asked.

"Well, the Valley is made up of four counties. We're in Hildago. But if he died in say, Harlingen, that would be Cameron County."

"Oh. Did you check those counties?"

"No, but if you'd like me to —"

"Hold on. Let's see what else you've got first," she said, cutting him off.

He grimaced, tight-lipped and irritated.

"Fine. I checked with the Hildago county coroner, as well. No records, either. And no unidentified bodies fitting your late husband's description."

"My ex-husband."

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing," said Andy, not wanting to waste time on a description of her current non-relationship with the elusive deceased. "Did you check with the police to see if they have any records —"

"I did. And they don't," he said, narrowing his eyes to indicate he could be as brief as she wanted.

"And what about a will?" Andy wanted to know.

"I checked with the court. Mr. Kornacky had no attorney of record, and there is no will in probate."

"Wow," said Andy, truly perplexed.

“Mr. Kornacky did – does, however, have a bank account. Several, in fact. At Texas Fidelity on North 10th Street.”

Andy flinched. “How much money does he have?” she blurted out.

“No clue, Mrs. – Ms. Bravos. I just found records indicating he has several accounts.”

Andy sat for a moment, taking all this in. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Harley lean forward, as if he were going to speak. “Don’t you dare,” she hissed. “These guys charge by the nanosecond.” He leaned back.

“What about the house? Did you go by his address?” she asked.

“I don’t go by addresses,” he said. “If you’d like me to hire a private investigator –”

“No, no. I’ll go by the address. So that’s it?”

“Yes,” he said, with open disdain. “That’s it. Now, would you like me to check the other three counties for information?”

“Have you got enough money left in the kitty?”

“Pardon me?”

“What’s left of Mitch’s retainer?”

“Nothing. I will need another –”

“That’s okay. Really,” she announced, standing up and motioning Harley to do the same. “Let me take it from here. We’ll get back to you if we need you.”

He nodded without saying anything.

Andy looked at her watch. “That was less than fifteen minutes,” she said, making the point that she, too, knew about billable hours.

“Yes, it was,” the lawyer agreed. “Well done.”

He crossed the room, held open the door and made a sweeping motion with his hand. “However, you have to cross the threshold before I stop the clock,” he said, almost enjoying himself now.

She did him the honor of smiling at the joke.

As Andy passed by him, she turned back. “I’m not a lawyer, Mr. Pescaras, but I wrote one on TV.”

"I saw that particular movie-of-the-week, Ms. Bravos."

"You did?" she said, both astonished and flattered.

"Know Thy Client," he said. "I would like to tell you what I thought of it, but . . ." He took her hand, shook it and then grinned slyly. "I would need another retainer. Goodbye. I'll be here if you need me."

"Goodbye," she said, both pleased and a little embarrassed by her behavior.

Chapter 10

Eye of Newt

"What are you going to do when you get there?" Harley asked.

At the moment, Andy was completely occupied with finding the address and hadn't thought too much beyond that.

"Hackberry," she mumbled.

"Huh?"

"The address is on Hackberry. Here we go."

She turned right and drove slowly along a tree-lined street in a residential neighborhood near downtown. The yards were relatively big and very bushy, with lots of palms, a few oaks, and scruffy patches of dry grass. This section of the city was definitely not as tony as the suburban tracts of new-builds they passed on the way into town. Those were filled with ranch and two-story brick homes designed for families with young children and dogs. This was an older neighborhood with more traditional wood frame and adobe structures. It had a little character but not much else, Andy thought, and wondered why her ex-husband would live here. Then she saw the glow of a blue-neon hand in the arched window of a mission-style house with a dirty red clay tile roof. Zoning, she realized. Tilda had her business here at home, and they needed to be someplace where you could hang a 'palm reader' sign in the window without your neighbors going ballistic. She pulled the car to the curb and parked.

Harley stirred in his seat. "I mean it, Aunt Andy. What are you going to do now?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," she answered, truthfully. "Maybe nobody's home."

"But what if she is? What are you going to say?"

"Um, I'm not sure," said Andy. "I could ask her about why she sent fake ashes."

"Okay."

"And then I could demand to know where the real ashes are."

"Do you really think she'll tell you?"

Andy considered this. Tilda did not strike her as the kind of person who would care to answer either of these questions. Or anything else Andy wanted to ask. Instead, she struck Andy as the type who would just try to scare the hell out of her. "I think she'll say something like, 'Double, double toil and trouble; Fire burn and caldron bubble.'"

Harley's jaw descended slowly. "Is that a curse?"

"It's Shakespeare, Harley," she said, mentally rolling her eyes. "I was making a joke. You have to relax. She's not a witch."

Now that they were in Texas, and there was a real possibility of confronting the daughter of Beelzebub in person, Harley seemed to have lost a little of his moral bravado.

"This is not a joke," Harley reminded her. "There really are people who consort with the Devil," he said, earnestly.

He was out there dangling his hook again.

"You don't believe in the Devil, either. Do you, Aunt Andy?"

It was hard to tell which of her non-beliefs disturbed him more.

"I don't. No."

"Because he doesn't interest you?"

"No. He's the villain, and villains are inherently more interesting," she said, wishing he had saved this discussion for another time. "I don't believe in him because I don't *want* to believe in him."

He looked more mystified than troubled. "Why?"

"Well, it's not that I don't think there's evil in the world. I prefer to account for it in a different way. Without the whole hell and damnation scenario."

"I don't think you can do that, Aunt Andy," he said, fumbling to find his footing. Then he apparently remembered something from class. "When it comes to eternal life, we can't just pick and choose."

Andy looked back at the house, thinking someone must be home or the neon sign would be turned off. She needed to end this conversation.

“Neither of us is living an eternal life yet, Harley,” she pointed out. “And the one we’re in has a ticking clock. So let’s get moving, because I don’t intend to waste another moment of it worrying about the Devil.”

As she moved to get out of the car, Harley clutched her arm.

“What if she doesn’t answer the door?” he asked.

“What?”

“What if she doesn’t answer the door?”

Andy was confused now. “I thought that’s what you’re were hoping for – that she wouldn’t be home.”

“I mean, what if she *is* home, and she doesn’t answer the door?”

“That makes no sense,” Andy said, as he continued to hold her back with his outstretched arm. “Why wouldn’t she answer the door?”

She could feel his fingers pressing down on her skin. His words tumbled out in a weird mixture of caution and excitement. “I mean, what if *he* opens the door?”

Andy flinched and laughed at the same time. “You think the Devil is going answer the door?” she asked, incredulous.

“Not the Devil, Aunt Andy!” he said. “Don’t be ridiculous. I mean Uncle Mark. What are you going to say if *he* answers the door?”

“Oh, god,” she muttered. “That possibility never occurred to me.” Even though, after what the lawyer had said, it was perfectly plausible. “You’re right. What am I going to say if he’s not actually dead?”

“And if it turns out *he’s* the one who sent the fake ashes?” Harley added.

The intellectual tortoise from Omaha had beaten her to the obvious one more time. What if Mark opened the door? What if he had, indeed, sent the ashes? Rebounding with mental agility that surprised even her, Andy slapped her nephew’s knee. “I’m not going to say anything,” she declared, “no matter who opens the door.”

“You’re not?”

“No. You are.”

“What?”

She leaned over and opened the door on his side of the car. “Tilda has no idea who you are. And Mark will probably have even less. So let’s just avoid a scene and send you up to the door.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. Pretend you’re selling Girl Scout cookies or something.”

“I’m not a scout. I’m not even a girl,” he said. “You’re only making me do this because you don’t want to do it yourself.”

“You’re right. I don’t. But a man of the cloth has to learn to think on his feet. Here’s your chance.”

“But I don’t want to—”

“Harley,” she declared, “it was not my idea to bring you on this trip. I couldn’t imagine a single thing you could do to be helpful. I just found one. Go up to that door and knock.”

Reluctantly, Harley rolled out of the car and got to his feet, where he stood, looking a little paralytic. Suddenly, a woman pushing a baby stroller rammed him head on.

“Oh, man!” he yelped, clutching his left shin.

“I’m so sorry,” said the young mother propelling the buggy. “I didn’t expect you to just stand there. I expected you to keep moving.”

“Oh. Right,” he said, looking nervously toward the house. “I was just going to see the, ah, lady there.” He nodded toward the house.

“Tilda?” she asked.

Andy popped out of the driver’s side of the car and stepped right into the conversation.

“Yes. Yes, Tilda Trivette. Do you know her?” Andy asked.

“A little. They haven’t lived here long.”

“They?”

"She and her husband. Mark, I think, is his name. She's some kind of spiritualist. The radiating hand in the window has been sort of an issue on the block. And since they rent, we've been trying to contact the landlord."

"I bet," said Andy, hoping to keep her informant talking. But the young mother didn't seem to need much encouragement.

"We're zoned residential. I mean you can have a home business, I guess. But signage is a problem."

"Right," Andy agreed.

"Property values, you know."

"So the palm reader is a problem," Andy prompted.

"She was. But it's sort of a moot point now."

"Oh, really. Why's that?"

"Tilda moved out last week. Sold all the furniture. Everything. Then left that stupid sign in the window. Just to annoy us, I think. We're trying to get someone to turn it off."

"She moved?" Andy needed to hear it again.

"Uh huh," said the woman. "Last Monday."

Well after the arrival of the burger box of ashes in California, Andy calculated. "Did her husband go with her?"

"Yeah. I think so," said the woman. "At least he helped with the yard sale on Sunday to get rid of the furniture."

"So you saw him – Mark – last weekend?"

"Yes."

"Tall? Graying hair? Late 50s, early 60s?"

"Yeah. Way older than she is. Real salesman. He got rid of everything by noon."

Andy looked at Harley, and it was another race to the obvious.

"He's alive," Harley said, getting there first.

"Why? Isn't he supposed to be?" the woman asked.

"We've been getting mixed signals," Andy told her. "Do you have any idea where they went?"

"No."

"Does anybody else?"

"I don't think so."

"Did they have friends, do you know?"

"They weren't here very long," she reminded Andy. "I don't think so. Not in the neighborhood, anyway. And they were gone quite a bit. On cruises, I think. Are you an investigator or something?"

Andy hesitated just long enough for Harley to fill the void. "His ex-wife," he announced.

The woman looked mildly uncomfortable with the answer.

"The mother of his children," Andy appended. "And several weeks ago Tilda sent them a note saying Mark was dead."

"Whoa," said woman. "How strange is that!"

For someone who rarely needed validation for her feelings, Andy found she was damned glad to have it.

The two returned to their hotel, washed off the grit they had accumulated in the Texas humidity and headed to dinner at a small Mexican restaurant across the street.

"Does this mean we're going home tomorrow?" Harley asked, as Andy sat down in the booth across from him after a trip to the salsa bar.

"Yes."

"So you think Tilda was just joking around with the ashes – to keep Mitch and your other kids away from their dad?"

"That's what it looks like."

"I don't get it."

Neither did Andy. "Jealous women do things like that. As I say, maybe she just wants him all to herself. It's mean, and it's petty, but it's not all that sinister."

Harley poked at the green slices decorating the food in front of him. "What are these again?"

"Avocados."

"I didn't eat much Mexican food in Oklahoma."

"They're like a fruit."

"Not spicy?"

"No. Give 'em a try. They're pretty benign. Except as an investment," Andy said.

"What?"

"Nothing. Turns out Ian got into trouble with the IRS over some avocado orchards. They're not a good place to put your money, but they're perfectly safe to eat."

Despite her assurances, he nudged the slices to the side of his plate. "Are we going to the bank before we leave tomorrow?"

"The bank?"

"You know, where the lawyer said Uncle Mark has his accounts."

"I doubt people at the bank would tell us much."

"I think we should go anyway."

The boy seemed psychologically incapable of agreeing with her. She speared the slices of avocado from his plate and put them on her own.

"You are beginning to sound like one of my children," she told him.

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are. Whatever I say, you insist on offering your own opinion."

"This really isn't my opinion, Aunt Andy. It's one of those things I learned on television." He took two of the avocado slices back. "I thought you said I could talk about those things."

Even as she glowered at him, she ran through the only database they both shared.

"So on television they always say –"

"Stop right there, Harley."

“Why?”

This time she was going to fend off the usual humiliation before he had a chance to deliver it. “Because I already know what they always say on television.”

But ignorance of your elder’s insecurities is bliss, so he charged right on. “They always say *follow the money*.”

“Damn it, Harley.”

“What? What’d I do wrong now?”

The Texas Fidelity branch where Mark had his bank account was located in a strip mall, wedged between a homeopathic chiropractor and a do-it-yourself ceramic shop. Because their flight left at 2:00 p.m., Andy and Harley were parked outside when the bank opened at 10:00 a.m. A very young man in pressed pants, wearing a short sleeve shirt and tie, held open the door as they walked inside. As soon as he repositioned himself behind the teller cage, Andy stepped up and asked to see the manager.

“Can I ask why?” The newly minted teller looked as if her request might mean the end of his job.

“I want to ask about an account.” Andy said, flashing her I’m-okay-you’re-okay smile.

“You mean, you have an account with us?”

“Well, no. Not my account.” This was the hard part, and she knew it wouldn’t go down well. “An account belonging to Mark Kornacky.”

“Mr. Kornacky,” he said, as if he knew the name. “Oh. Okay. I guess. Sure. Let me get the manager.”

Sandra Berry, executive officer, was a slip of a woman in her 40s with dark framed glasses and stupendous auburn hair that gyrated up and down every time she took a step. She led Andy and Harley into her office and directed them to take the chairs directly in front of her desk, which were upholstered in a pattern that featured longhorns, cactus flowers, and the logo for the FDIC.

"You want to know about Mr. Kornacky's accounts, is that right?" she began.

"We do," Andy answered, a little surprised the woman hadn't turned them away in the lobby. Even Texas had laws governing privacy, she assumed.

"Are you Mr. Kornacky's former wife?"

Sandra Berry asked the question, as if she already knew the answer. Andy's resolve disappeared, replaced by mild panic. No one had yet demanded identification. And how did the woman know Mark had a 'former' wife?

"Ah," she stammered. "Yes, actually, I am."

"I've been expecting you."

Could you be arrested for simply asking about another person's accounts? Had that teller pushed some kind of silent alarm?

"Really?" she managed.

"Damn right. Somebody ought to be in here asking questions."

Nodding slowly, Andy reached down deep for an appropriate response and came up with another, "Really?"

"Well, I'll tell you this much," the manager said, gravely, "that man has certainly grabbed himself a handful this time."

Another nod. "He has? And by that you mean—?"

"The Trivette woman," snapped Sandra. "Talk about a piece of work."

Andy leaned forward. Harley followed suit. She put her hand on his knee and pinched him just below the patella. He shot back in the chair.

"Can you, you know, talk about that particular piece of work?" Andy prodded. "Without violating some rule?"

"I don't know why not. All the Kornacky accounts have been closed. So I don't know whose privacy we'd be protecting. That woman walked out of here with a certified check made out to herself for nearly \$300,000 last Monday."

"She did what?"

"She drained the accounts. Just like that."

Harley was back on the edge of his seat.

“Did Mr. Kornacky come with her on Monday?” he said, before Andy had a chance to muzzle him.

The executive officer shook her head. “Nope. He put the money in our bank years ago. His life savings, he said. Seemed completely happy with our services. Then he added her name to the account after they got married. Next thing you know, she’s taking it all out.”

Andy was still trying to get past the idea that Mark had so much money and that Tilda was the one walking around with it, when Harley followed up. “Did you talk to him about the withdrawal?”

“I tried,” Sandy said. “But have you called his cell lately? It’s out of service. The whole thing gave me the heebie-jeebies.”

“Did you call the police?” Andy pressed.

“About what?” she snapped, irritated by her own powerlessness. “It was a joint account. The withdrawal was perfectly legal. Nothing I could do. Honestly, I’ve just been waiting around for someone, anyone from the family, to come into the bank and ask me what happened. Just so I could get it off my chest.”

The trio sat in a group stupor pondering the implications.

“It could all be totally innocent,” Andy suggested, half-heartedly. “The neighbors say Mark and Tilda moved last week.”

“People move all the time,” the executive pointed out. “When people have that much money and decide to leave the area, they ordinarily have the funds transferred to another bank. Who gets a certified check and then walks out the door with her husband’s entire life savings?”

It was an excellent question, Andy agreed. “You think Tilda’s up to something?”

“Have you met her?” Sandra asked.

“No,” said Andy.

“Had any communication with her?”

Andy wasn’t sure how to phrase this. “She sent my children a gift box.”

“Oh, really? Eye of newt?”

Andy snorted with laughter. "Pretty much." It was another punch on her validation ticket; Tilda made other people's skin crawl, too.

"Well, I don't know exactly who Tilda Trivette is or what she's up to," the diminutive banker concluded, "but whatever you're worried about – I'd keep worrying."

Chapter 11

Cheaper than Polyester

Andy was a bogey golfer who drove 220 yards and insisted on playing from the men's tees because it made most of the guys she played with uncomfortable. Except Ted, who was almost never uncomfortable with anything or anybody. Ted Leery and Andy played together once or twice a week at one of the four municipal courses in the San Fernando Valley. Ted had a nine-stroke handicap and had spent his career directing commercials and a few not-quite memorable TV series. He was pushing 60, handsome, uncomplicated, and happily married; a perfect golfing partner, who made small talk better than anyone she'd ever met and let anything that floated through his head come out his mouth.

"So what did Mitch think about your trip to Texas?" Ted asked.

They were playing at Hansen Dam Municipal, a sprawling course situated on the flood plain of a large concrete barricade that had been built by the Army Corps of Engineers in the 1940s. The green fees were cheap and the course was flat enough for Andy and Ted to walk 18 holes without huffing and puffing.

"The reviews were not good," she answered, as they ambled off the eighth tee. "All four of my kids seem more annoyed than anything else. First, they think their dad has died. Then they find out his remains were sketchy, if not all together counterfeit. And now, well, he may not actually be dead. And, whether he is or not, his wife seems to have absconded with his money."

"Maybe she hasn't absconded at all. Maybe they're together, making a break for it."

"A break from what?" Andy asked.

"Beats me," Ted said, as Andy set up for her fairway shot. He stood quietly for a moment, just long enough for her to swing the club. "Well done," he noted, watching the line drive careen forward. "So how much do you really know about this woman?"

"Almost nothing," she told him.

One of the two young Korean men in their foursome hit next. Early-thirties, the pair could have been mistaken for businessmen who just stepped off the plane from Seoul – until they opened their mouths. The Valley Girl accents screamed second generation Angelinos. Andy wondered why they were out on the course in the middle of a weekday.

“Did you ask these guys what they do for a living?” she said to Ted.

“Gamblers.”

“What?”

“Online blackjack,” Ted whispered, as the second man now took his shot. “Their mothers think they work as investment brokers. Anyway, they make enough to spend their days golfing. One of them said they’re entered in a tournament that begins at five, so they’re leaving the course at the turn.”

Andy nodded. That meant she and Ted would have the back nine to themselves. They didn’t return to the subject of Andy’s trip until they’d stopped at the clubhouse for a dog and soda and then teed off on the tenth hole.

“Got a next step?” Ted resumed, as they walked toward the fairway.

“I don’t know,” she sighed. “The kids are pretty disgusted by the whole thing. Mitch thinks we’ve wasted enough money trying to track Mark down. And if he was stupid enough to sign his life savings over to Tilda, then he deserves whatever he’s getting from all this.”

“They think you should just drop it?”

“They’re all occupied with other things. They don’t want the drama.”

“And you?”

“I’m a writer. I love drama,” she shrugged. “And I’d feel better knowing what happened to Mark.”

“I get the impression everybody thinks this Tilda person is very sinister.”

“I think that’s what she wants us to think.”

“Hmm,” Ted ruminated. “I’d say the lady’s got her hooks into you.”

“Oh, my god, you don’t think I’m jealous, do you?”

"Hardly," he laughed. "I've never met anyone who's as happily divorced as you. I don't think you're jealous, Andy. I think you're bored."

"Jeez, is it that obvious?"

"I've seen your TV movies, Andy. Understated you ain't."

"Thank you for that review, Ted. I'll cherish it always."

They each chipped onto the green.

"Well, if I wanted to pursue this, I know what I'd do," Ted proffered, as he lined up his putt. "I'd hire a P.I." He let the club sway back and then forward, draining a ten-footer.

"A detective? For what?"

"To check out Tilda, for one thing."

"What could a P.I. find?"

"You'd be surprised."

Andy putted and missed. "You're upsetting my rhythm," she said.

"Good. Does that mean you want to hire a P.I.?"

He replaced the flag in the cup.

"I don't think I can afford it."

"You're not answering the question."

"Okay. Yes. I would."

"Good, because the guy you want is meeting us for a beer in the clubhouse when we finish."

"You called someone?"

"While you were downing your dog at the turn."

"Ted—"

"He's my brother-in-law, Andy. Just talk to him."

Larry O'Dowd was a retired FBI agent living in Topanga Canyon, drawing an enviable pension, and watching college sports on ESPN. He also enriched himself by tailing the wealthy husbands of suspicious wives living on either side of the Santa Monica Mountains. At the height of his tracking powers, Larry had been the LA Bureau's best field agent, usually assigned to follow Soviet

operatives who, it turned out, made most of their drops in the public lockers at Disneyland.

“I always kept a battery-powered TV in my car,” Larry reminisced over a plate of hot wings and fries, “along with a wig and a bunch of old clothes. My whole job was hours of sit-on-your-butt monotony interrupted by some half-ass moment of disguise. I once followed this insider trading guy into a formal dinner dressed in a tuxedo and flip flops because I didn’t have time to change my shoes.”

“Your skillset sounds a little out of my league, Larry,” Andy laughed.

“What? You don’t want me to use my wig?” he teased.

“No. Nothing like that. I just want to know a little bit more about the woman married to my ex-husband.”

Larry’s eyebrows levitated knowingly. “Ah, that age-old curiosity. What kind of things do you want to know?”

“Who she is. Where she came from. Background stuff.”

“Sounds simple enough.”

“And where she is right now. If you can locate her.”

“Possible,” he indicated. “I can do all of that from my office. No problem.” He guided a wing into the side of ranch dressing. “Anything else you want to know?”

“Well, I guess, the thing I’d really like to know is what she did with my ex-husband.”

The P.I. tipped his head down and looked at her over the top of his aviator glasses. “Did she lose him?”

“Not exactly. She told us he was dead.”

“And he’s not?”

“There’s no record of it.”

“Plus the neighbors saw him,” Ted added. “After he supposedly bought the farm.”

Larry gnawed on the chicken bones and nodded, approvingly. "Sounds interesting."

"I knew you'd like it," Ted beamed, jabbing a French fry at his brother-in-law. "I knew it the minute I heard it."

"Let me see what I can do," Larry said, by way of sealing the deal. "Don't you want anything to eat, Andy?"

She declined. Unlike almost everyone else in Hollywood, Andy found she couldn't do business and chew food at the same time. She lost her appetite whenever money was at stake.

"Before I commit to this," she began, "how much do you think it will cost?"

Larry pursed his lips and wiped his hands on a napkin. "Hard to say. Ted tells me you're cheaper than polyester."

Andy flushed and gave Ted the evil eye.

"I just said you had money issues," he clarified.

"I do *not* have money issues. I just don't like to spend what I don't have."

"Well, it doesn't matter," Larry announced, derailing the discussion. "Teddy here is giving me his old set of Pings, and that should just about get you everything you asked for."

Caught off guard, Andy said, "*You're* paying for this, Ted?"

"I am," he beamed again, as he waved another French fry.

"With those Pings?" She sounded dumbfounded. "The ones you've been hoarding in your garage?"

He looked confused. "I wouldn't call it hoarding."

"I thought we talked about those Pings."

"No. We never talked about those Pings."

"I thought you were giving those to me."

"Andy," he said, sternly. "Those are men's clubs. You're a woman. I'm not giving those clubs to you."

"You're not?"

"No. Now do you want to use this guy or not?"

Andy knew she was being irrational, but there were times when she couldn't help herself. Ted was right. Those clubs weren't remotely suited to her. And yet she kept imagining that better golf clubs could transform her game, make her into the player she'd always wanted to be. But, of course, they couldn't—any more than better software would have improved her writing career. She had pretty much reached the apex of her golf game in the way she'd reached the apex of everything else lately. She needed to focus on other things, and the only thing in her field of vision right now was Tilda Trivette.

"Yes, Ted, I'd like to hire Larry."

"And may I pay for it with my Pings?"

"Of course."

"Then how about a 'thank you, Ted.'"

"Thank you, Ted."

"You're very welcome. And you owe me five bucks for the skins game."

Andy arrived home that evening to a blessedly empty house because Harley was still on campus. After their trip to Texas, he had returned to Tabernacle U with renewed enthusiasm that included a newfound interest in after-school activities. With a minimum of prying, she had managed to learn that her socially awkward nephew had joined his first student organization. When she asked the purpose of the club, he pointed out it was not a 'club' but a movement, that its purpose would be of *no interest* to her, and that, in order to maintain his personal anonymity, he would only refer to it as SRT.

Naturally, she did an online search at the first opportunity. According to the school website, the group met once a week in the afternoons, but the real action went down on weekends when SRT sponsored a host of events, including rock concerts and nightclub-style dances, complete with strobe lights and music videos. The letters were an acronym for Silver Ring Thing.

Andy was having trouble reconciling an edgy promotional poster the group recently posted for a dance called 'Forty Funky Nights in the Desert' with

Tabernacle U's draconian code of conduct, when she did a Google search and landed on the relevant Wikipedia page. Then she suddenly saw it all through a glass darkly. Harley was now a member of an organization ready to 'speak honesty to him about God's plan for sex.' All he had to do to join was take a virginity pledge, promising to remain abstinent until marriage. Members not only earned the right to party together, but they received silver purity rings to wear on the third finger of their left hand, inscribed with Bible verses reminding them that sex before marriage was a sin.

Pouring herself a rum and Diet Coke, Andy sat down, kicked off her shoes and smiled, secure in the knowledge that no matter where Harley was at the moment, he was sporting a shiny new chastity ring on his finger and a carrying a faith-based condom in his heart. Whatever happened, her nephew was not going to become a baby daddy on her watch!

She was thinking about opening a box of Cheez-Its before heating up a burrito in the microwave, when the phone rang.

"Mom?"

"Lil?"

"What are you up to?" Her daughter's voice was taut. Few things ever constrained Lil's expansive personality, and Andy was immediately on the alert.

"Mom?" Lil repeated when Andy didn't answer.

"Ah, nothing. I swear."

"Good. Because we have to talk."

This sounded serious. Had Lil learned her mother was hiring a private investigator? But how could that be possible?

"Um. All right. Why do we have to talk?"

"I need you."

Andy put down the Cheez-Its. This couldn't be about the P.I. It had to be worse. Lil-the-unstoppable never needed anybody.

"You need me, Lilly?"

"Yes. Here in Idaho. Now. We've got a problem."

"You and Joey?"

"Of course, me and Joey. Who else lives in Idaho, Mom?"

"Okay, honey. Okay." Andy had rarely heard her daughter so rattled.

"If you two had an argument . . ." Andy tested, knowing the couple rarely argued about anything and hoping Lil would talk about it.

"There's no argument about this, Mother."

What on earth had come between them? "Joey's not moving out, is he?"

"No, but I will, if this goes on much longer."

"Lil?"

"I can't believe this is happening."

Andy could hear stifled sniffing.

"*What* is happening?"

"The boys – every last one of them – have the chickenpox. And I haven't slept in two days." Sniffles evolved into outright sobs. "Mom, can you come help me, please?"

Chickenpox. Of course. Andy nearly wept with relief. Why did her imagination always insist on making a beeline for the worst disaster?

Chickenpox? Big deal. And a helluva lot easier to cope with than divorce.

"Sure. Absolutely," mother assured daughter. "It's no problem, Lilly."

"And you promise not to tell me I should have gotten the vaccinations?"

"I promise."

"They don't even vaccinate for chickenpox in the U.K. You know that? Right, Mom?"

"I know."

Lil was second-guessing herself, Andy realized. That's what was prompting the tears. Like a lot of other mothers, the thirty-something had read enough to make her question the wisdom of packing so many toxic chemicals at one time into infant vaccinations, so she and Joey had found a pediatrician who would administer them in separate doses over a longer period of time. Lil had opted to skip the chickenpox vaccine altogether.

"It's gonna be fine, Lil. You all had chickenpox when you were little. Both Sam's kids have had them."

"I know. I know."

"And everybody thinks breaking up those multi-vaccines is a good idea."

"I know." Lil was breathing deeper now. Sighing. Feeling better. "I think I'm just exhausted."

"Sure you are."

"And I want my Mommy," she whimpered, playfully.

"Good. I'll book a flight tonight."

"I already did." There was that familiar voice, the one with the twinkle in it. "I emailed you the ticket."

Andy decided it was safe enough to show a little mock indignation. "You could have let me check my schedule first, Lilly."

"You don't have a schedule, Mom," Lil countered, fully recovered and sounding like her old self.

"And yet, it would be nice of you to pretend."

"Maybe next time. For now, I'll meet you at baggage claim. Love you."

"Love you, too."

"Bye."

"Bye."

The flight, it turned out, left at seven in the morning, so Andy spent the remainder of the evening packing and getting things organized for her departure. The one impediment she hadn't counted on was Harley. Foolishly, she'd assumed he'd love the idea of flying solo for a while. But when he arrived home at ten that evening, he wasn't all that enthused.

"How long will you be gone?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. A few days, maybe a week."

"You won't get the chickenpox?"

"I had them. Years ago. Don't worry," she said, in an attempt to soothe his evident anxiety. "So you know to put the garbage out on Friday morning?"

"Yeah. Okay."

"You're not afraid to stay in the house by yourself, are you?"

"I don't think so."

For someone who aspired to become a professional shepherd, he was being annoyingly sheepish about her leaving.

"You want to ask a friend to stay with you?"

This idea appeared to alarm him more than being home alone.

"Oh, I don't think so," he said.

Aware she was losing both patience and valuable sleep, Andy vowed to give it one last try. "Maybe you could have a group of friends over for a party or something," she ventured, eyeing the silver ring thing on his left hand. After all, how dangerous could the Abstinents really be?

"I don't think so," he said automatically. But after a moment's consideration, he added, "Maybe I'll have a prayer meeting, though."

"Sounds like a great idea," she lied. "Can't wait to hear all about it."

Chapter 12

Superior Color Commentary

For people who delight in the adoration of small children, and Andy was one of them, being a grandparent provided unparalleled opportunities for experiencing her version of the Divine. Until about age six, she knew, kids literally worshipped the ground their grandparents walked on; you had to be either stupid or downright cruel to drive them away. After first grade, however, it was more of a crapshoot. The Catholic Church used to call it the Age of Reason. But Andy called it the Age of Choice. Because this was when children began to make their own friends – and their own judgments. Once a kid reached age seven, a grandparent had to begin to earn it.

Lil's four boys were not yet old enough to be either reasonable or judgmental. They were still in the honeymoon phase. Almost anything Andy did pleased them. Which was why Lil had called Andy off the bench and was putting her in the game. The truth was, her grandsons desperately needed someone to play with. While the worst of the illness was over, they remained in quarantine. Not because they were sick but because the pox on their house was still clearly visible, and the tiny brothers looked like a team of baby zombies.

"You don't have to nurse them, Mom. I've already done that," Lil said, laying out the plan as they drove home from the airport. "Your job is strictly entertainment."

"How fitting," Andy observed. "Will I be getting residuals?"

For the first day or two, Grandma Andy's programming involved kickboxing matches between her grandsons and imaginary opponents with evil intentions. Her role was to provide a play-by-play of the action, describing the prowess of each boy's moves and his final victory over the enemy. This was particularly challenging for the twins, who were now 18 months and had a tough time kicking anything, imaginary or not. After each fictional match, it was her job to award medals, hanging them around the boys' necks as they stood in their pajamas on cardboard boxes of varying heights, while she hummed the theme

from NBC's Olympic coverage. The boys loved the game because it made them feel invincible. She loved it because she believed her color commentary was far superior to that of most network sportscasters.

Following the kickboxing matches, they switched to a game called Hotel McCall, in which the gang of four crawled into a king-sized bed with her and pretended they were all staying at an Idaho resort. This enabled them to lie back on big pillows, get their next dose of medication, and rest. More importantly, it enabled them to call Lil on a pretend telephone and order room service. There really were few things more sublime than eating in bed with your grandchildren.

It was on the third day of Andy's visit, during one of these fanciful trips to the Hotel McCall, that Lil arrived from the kitchen with a plate of warm nachos and planted herself next to her mother on the bed.

"Are you dead yet?" she asked Andy, as the boys grabbed for the chips.

"I think I am in the throes."

"You put the grand back in grandmother. Thank you, Mom."

"I do it all for the jalapeños," Andy quipped, trying to keep the cheese off the bedspread.

"Joey and I are thinking of rewarding you with a cocktail party."

"You're kidding."

"Nope. We're itching to have some adult company, so we thought we'd invite a few of the neighbors over Friday night after the boys are in bed."

"I thought all your neighbors were Mormon."

"Not all of them," Lil said. "And half of those say they're in recovery."

"Which means they drink?"

"As a form of therapy, they tell me."

Everything Andy knew about the Book of Mormon she had learned from the Broadway musical. "Can I ask them about their religion?"

"I wish you wouldn't," Lil said. "You have no respect for religion, as cousin Harley knows by now."

"Pretty please."

“Perhaps you weren’t listening, Mother. I said, absolutely not.”

Meridian, Idaho, the Boise suburb of Joey and Lil’s choosing, was filled with a surprising mixture of mechanics, doctors, firefighters, and lawyers. The cost of housing made five-bedroom homes affordable, even to couples bereft of college educations or retirement funds. It was a potpourri of people that one would almost never find among the five-bedroom dwellers in the greater Los Angeles area. Andy found it disturbingly refreshing.

However, it did not take long to conclude that the little cocktail crowd in Lil’s kitchen had been carefully culled from among the neighbors. The majority of guests were clearly the white-faced descendants of Celts and Saxons. There were, indeed, Mormons among them: both practicing and self-exiled, who drank and wore nothing more complicated than boxers under their jeans. The twenty-five or so partygoers also included two Latino couples, a Chinese American cardiologist and her Indian husband, and a UPS driver who’d been born in Nigeria. What made them eligible for Lil’s guest list, it turned out, was their attitude towards firearms.

If Lil had a line in the sand, it was guns. As a native of California, she’d seen few guns and rarely thought about the dangers. But Idaho was full of them. People used them for hunting. They used them for target shooting. They used them for home décor. There were families on her block, kind people with good intentions, who actually bragged about their stockpile of semi-automatic weapons. In the end, Lil had simply divided the neighborhood by her own prejudice: households that were armed and those that were not. Her friends might occasionally drink too much, but at least they wouldn’t shoot one another.

Which was probably why the main topic of conversation around the sangria pitcher was a new bill before the Idaho legislature that would allow students at Boise State University, a campus of more than 20,000 aspiring scholars, to carry concealed weapons.

“That’s what we need,” Joey was saying, “more frat boys with pistols.”

“What about Bronco Stadium?” the cardiologist asked. “How long before kids start bringing guns to football games?”

“You know what bothers me,” the UPS driver said, “that the students did not want this law. No one affiliated with the campus thinks this is a good idea. Who are these gun nuts?”

“Our neighbors,” Lil called from across the room, where she was refilling a fondue pot with cheese dip. “Do you know the first question I ask when one of the boys is invited over for a play date? ‘Do you have guns in the house?’ And do you know what my fear is? That many women say ‘no,’ when the answer is ‘yes.’ They don’t even remember their husbands have them. Or where they are, if they do. Or if they are locked up. So I have to keep pressing them. It’s embarrassing, and it’s stupid. Sometimes it’s just easier to keep the boys at home.”

Andy listened to the discussion, marveling at the human capacity for self-inflicted tragedy. She’d inflicted a great deal of it on herself during her adulthood. And had there been guns in her house, she was exactly the kind of emotional idiot who might have picked one up and used it. She shuddered at the thought and then jumped when someone tapped her on the shoulder.

“Andy?” She looked up to see a good-looking thirty-something standing over her. He put out his hand. “Mike Anderson. We live across the street. Four houses down.” He sat down on the sofa next to her. “Lil talks about you all the time.”

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“Hey, the cocktails tonight are in your honor. That can’t be too bad, can it?”

Andy smiled.

“I hear you and Lil write together.”

“Well, we do. When she has time. Which means not much lately.”

“Yeah, she says you’re a worse pest than the boys.”

“Gosh, that’s pretty high praise!” Andy said.

“Anyway, she told me about the World War II spy story. She thinks it would make a great screenplay.”

Andy felt a rush of satisfaction and responded, "Really? I'm glad to hear it." It meant that Lil was actually ruminating on the idea, which meant she might actually commit to working on it.

"Anyway, Lil knows I have kind of a personal interest in World War II. And we started talking one day about history and about you and about me. One thing lead to another, and I began to think that you and I might have a mutual interest."

Andy sipped her drink and wondered where this was leading.

"You see, I'm Mormon," he said.

Oh, god, this is forbidden territory, Andy reminded herself. But she hadn't asked. He was the one bringing up the subject.

"At least I was raised Mormon," he told her.

"But you left?"

"I did. Almost ten years ago. Over the Baptism of the Dead tenet. Do you know what that is?"

Andy wasn't following, but she wanted to. Lil was right about her mother's antipathy toward religion, and yet Andy had always been fascinated by it. Andy had studied world religions in college and was a minor expert on Deism, the theology favored by some writers of the Constitution. She also knew more about the European Reformation than most American fundamentalists. She looked over her shoulder to see her daughter still fully engaged in the gun battle near the kitchen counter. The coast was clear, so she plunged in.

"No. I don't know. But I'd love to be enlightened. You baptize dead people?" she prompted.

"Well, my church—my former church—likes to baptize non-Mormons after they die in hopes they will choose to be Mormon in the next life."

Andy had no idea what he was talking about and wondered why the subject had not been fully covered in the Broadway musical.

"It's kind of a postmortem proselytizing scheme. If you can't get them in this life, try to get them in the next."

“You’re serious?”

“Very. It’s called a proxy baptism. A living Mormon, in this case – me, is fully immersed in a baptismal font as a stand-in for the dead person.”

She stared at him in amazement.

“I know. It would be funny if it weren’t so, well, *not funny*,” he continued. “Especially when you consider who we’ve been trying to convert in the afterlife.”

There was an unrelated explosion of laughter from the other end of the room. They both looked to see Joey flying a toy helicopter around the chip bowl with a remote control. Andy leaned in closer to Mike; he had her undivided attention now.

“Who were you trying to convert?” she asked.

Mike leaned closer, as well, as if he had no desire to broadcast the conversation. “Jews from the holocaust,” he said.

“I’m sorry. Did you say . . .”

“I said, we used the names of people who died in concentration camps. As far as I know, the Church probably still uses those names.”

He saw her look of disbelief and pushed forward. “I know it sounds surreal, but it made complete sense to me at the time. In fact, I felt good about it. Exalted. I was barely twenty and imagined myself gathering in all these souls for the Lord. I convinced myself that I had ‘saved’ eight people from the fires of hell.”

Andy strained to wrap her mind around the theology here; somebody somewhere deserved an Oscar for Best Adaptation of a Sacrament.

“So what happened?” she asked. “Why did you change your mind about the baptisms?”

“Well, one day I woke up and realized that all these people we were trying to save had already been through the fires of hell. And it was all because they were Jews. What we were doing, the whole point of our proxy baptisms, was to take their Jewishness away from them all over again.” He stumbled for an instant, and she could tell he was choking a little on the words as he tried to get them out. “I couldn’t believe how arrogant we were. How arrogant I’d been.”

The pain was seeping from his eyes. She searched for something comforting to say.

“I don’t believe the Mormon Church has a corner on arrogance, Mike.”

“No. But I felt this enormous sense of . . . shame. You know?”

She nodded, thinking what an oddly courageous moment she was witnessing, particularly for a cocktail party.

“And after that I quit,” he said. “And I’ve never returned.”

He sank back into the sofa, not looking all that satisfied with what he’d said. She waited to see if there was more, and – when there wasn’t – all she could think to say was, “Would you like another beer?”

But he apparently didn’t want her to give him a way out. Instead, he forced himself to get to the point. “What I wanted to tell you,” Mike finally said, “was that I actually remember the names of all eight of the holocaust victims I was the – the, ah, proxy for.”

“Oh,” Andy said.

“I find them very hard to forget. One of them was a man who died at a camp near Bessarabia on the Black Sea in the Ukraine. Do you know Bessarabia?”

“I do,” said Andy. A little chill inched up her spine. “My family is from there.”

“His name was Emanuel Bader.”

“Bader,” she repeated.

“Lil once told me that’s your mother’s maiden name.”

The tingling sensation now seized her entire body, but she wasn’t exactly sure why. Was it the serendipity of the young man’s story colliding with her own or the fact that she might have a history she hadn’t imagined?

“Yes,” she said, slowly. “Bader. I use it as my middle name. They sailed from Odessa. But no one ever said – I mean, I don’t think we were Jewish.”

“Maybe not,” he agreed. “But lots of people don’t think they were Jewish.” He finished his thought with one of those impish grins that said, ‘because lots of people don’t want to admit we’re all drinking from the same gene pool.’

Andy returned the grin. It was true. Most people in the U.S. knew almost nothing about their family history and might be upset by it if they did. Because a great many families intentionally cut their histories short the minute they boarded the boat for the New World. Coming to America had always been an opportunity to discard any baggage weighing you down, Andy had to admit, like a criminal record or a bad marriage or a god who upsets your neighbors.

“Anyway, I just thought it was interesting,” he said.

“It is,” she said. “I’ve never really thought about it.”

“And, of course, there’s Ruth Bader Ginsburg,” he teased. “She’s pretty Jewish. Maybe you’re related to her.”

Andy pondered the possibility of adding a Supreme Court Justice to her unadorned family tree. Not bad. And talk about a woman who knows how to stay relevant.

“I could find out more information, if you’d like me to,” Mike offered. “You know how we Mormons are about genealogy. Do you know much about your family history?”

“Not really. But I know someone who does. At least she knows as much as anybody.”

“Lil’s sister, Samantha, right? The historian who lives in Scotland?”

“I’ll give you her email. Thank you, Mike. For . . . you know . . . bringing all this to my attention.”

He sank back into the sofa again. This time his anxiety had completely dissipated. “I’ll take that beer now,” he said.

Andy fetched them each a drink and returned to sit down next to him.

“I’m glad you took this so well, Andy.”

“Were you really that worried?”

“You never know.”

He was such a nice human being. Guileless in a way she, or any of the children she raised, could never be. Maybe that’s why she couldn’t help herself.

“Yeah, well, I’m always a sucker for a good joke.”

He was about to sip his beer but stopped. He looked genuinely flustered. "A joke?"

She put a reassuring hand on his knee. "It's unavoidable, Mike, given the situation."

This seemed to confuse him even more. His pale skin reddened. "What situation?" he asked, alarmed.

"You know, the one where a Mormon walks into a cocktail party and turns some unsuspecting gentile into a Jew."

She watched him for a long moment, wondering if he were so earnest he might actually miss the funny part. Then a slow, rich smile dawned, and he raised his glass in salute.

God, she sighed in disgust, I really am shameless.

Chapter 13

Cheeky Bastard

She returned to her southern California townhouse late Sunday evening, after nearly a week with the wild ones, carrying an emotionally mixed bag. There was something exhilarating about the unfettered energy of the boys. Kids made it easy to feel needed. And even easier to feel loved. But it was also exhausting. And mind-numbing. Especially for someone like Andy, who lived so much of her existence inside her head.

Most people have a narrative voice that accompanies them throughout their day. Andy had a chorus of them: cheering her on, pointing out her faults, offering up competing opinions on everything from how much she ate to how little she mattered. They were interesting voices, to be sure, sometimes illuminating and, just as often, partly cloudy. With age she had learned to control them, or maybe her maturing hormones had simply toned them down. Whatever the reason, she had made a satisfying peace with them and, in the quiet of her condo, enjoyed living with them in a way she never did in her youth. The boys had the power to drown them out, and now she couldn't wait to catch up on what they had to say.

Andy pulled into the garage, parked the car, and opened the door to a warm pool of midafternoon sun spreading across the kitchen floor. The southern exposure of her two-story plate glass windows made the entire downstairs feel like a gigantic, welcoming bath. She was imagining a wine spritzer in the wicker chair on the patio, when she stopped mid-step. Something was polluting the moment. She froze and surveyed a landfill of unwanted debris. Open beer bottles on the counter, smelling of sour yeast. Bags of chips stuffed into the trash, filling the air with *eau de Dorrito*. Encrusted bowls of salsa on the table. Pizza boxes carpeting the floors. Melted chocolate, shriveled olives, globs of gum, dried and discarded pots of cheese fondue. And hovering over it all, a pungent cloud of sweetness that was unmistakable to anyone raised in the '60s.

As she stood staring at the aftermath of a truly epic party, she knew she should feel violated. She did. But more than that, she was wickedly curious. Could this possibly be Harley's doing? She had seen his Jekyll. Was she now witnessing the consequences of his Hyde?

"Harley!" she called out. Only an eerie silence answered.

Bravely, she ran the gauntlet of garbage, including what appeared to be abandoned paper plates of food, all the way through the living room and up the stairs. She stood at the closed door to Harley's room, put her ear to the wood, and listened for the sound of breathing.

"Harley?" she whispered. No answer. She opened the door.

Her catatonic nephew lay on his bed, looking like a teddy bear with rigor mortis.

She moved closer and tried again, "Harley?"

He opened his languid eyes and turned them slowly upward. She had never seen such wonderfully pathetic pupils.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Andy," he blubbered.

"That's a start," she said, evenly.

"You saw the kitchen?"

"And the living room and the family room –"

"I have been betrayed," he said, cutting her off.

To be fair, Andy had been relishing his explanation; it only seemed fair that he should come up with a killer. 'I have been betrayed' was not really what she'd been hoping for.

"What happened?" she asked.

"The prayer meeting."

He made a feeble attempt to sit up but evidently couldn't hold the position under the weight of all he had suffered.

"I'm going to need more than that," she said, plopping down next to him.

"You better tell me what's going on."

"I put up some flyers on campus. I called it A Midsummer Night's Liaison with the Lord."

"Catchy."

"Thank you. That means a lot to me."

"Just go on, Harley."

"Well, the flyer was supposed to be sort of an open invitation for Friday night. I posted the address and said I would take donations at the door."

"Donations?"

"You know, to share the burden. Of the refreshments. It's what people in a community of believers do."

"Yes, I noticed that many of those donations are currently ground into my carpet."

"I'm sorry."

"Go on, please."

"Okay," he said, getting up on one elbow to indicate how hard he was focusing on the task at hand. "So a lot of people showed up. I mean, a lot. Kids I didn't really know. I think they thought it was a party or something."

"Friday night. Hard to imagine. Tell me how many."

"I think maybe a 100 people showed up."

"A *hundred* people?!"

"I said, I was sorry!" he bellowed defensively. A lagoon of liquid began to fill his eyes.

"Okay. Okay. Just go on."

He swallowed back the tremble in his voice. "They kept coming in the door. I couldn't stop them. They brought liquor, you know. Bottles of it. And other things—"

"Other things?"

"Marijuana. I think."

"You *think*?"

He covered his head with his hands. "I didn't inhale any of the smoke. I swear."

From peons to presidents, Andy thought, it's still the defense of choice. "Whatever," she said, shaking her head. "Sit up, Harley."

He obeyed to the best of his ability.

"Now tell me what happened next."

He shrugged his droopy shoulders and looked away. "You know what happened next."

"Oddly, I don't, Harley. And you damn well better tell me."

"I called the police."

"You what?" she barked, grabbing his face and forcing him to look at her.

"I dialed 9-1-1." He was flushed, confused by her sudden attack. "I figured if I didn't, one of the neighbors was going to," he explained.

"The police were at my house?" she seethed. "The Valencia police?"

"Actually, the city doesn't have its own force," he rattled on. "They use the County Sheriff's Department for domestic calls."

"Really? I had no idea," she mocked. "Probably because I have never had a patrol car at my condo before!"

Harley struggled to understand what he had done wrong. "But the police were great, Aunt Andy. Really great," he said, forcing a smile.

"Police are never great," she pronounced.

"But these guys were," he countered. "I explained about the prayer meeting. I mean, about the poster on campus and the open invitation. And they understood. Everything."

"No, they didn't."

"Yes, they did! They really did. I told them how it got out of hand. And they understood me. In fact, they *thanked* me. And then they came in and helped me clear all the people out."

Andy's worry lines and crow's feet swelled with indignation. "You let the police into my house?!" she yelled. "Did you learn nothing from watching all those crime dramas on television? You let the police in my house?!"

Harley held up his hands to deflect her onslaught. "But they didn't arrest me. In fact, they didn't arrest anybody. I swear! They just sent everybody home."

"And that was that?" she demanded. When Harley didn't answer, she instinctively waited for the other shoe to drop kick her in the ass.

"Har-ley?"

Something new had come over him. His lips were trembling.

"What else did the police do?"

"Nothing."

"Harley!"

"It's not the police, Aunt Andy. It's not the police."

"Well, then, what is it?"

"I told you," he said, as his entire body began to shake, "I've been betrayed."

"Betrayed? What are you talking about?"

"I am talking about Our Savior's Tabernacle University. This is not a good school, Aunt Andy. These are not righteous people!" he declared. A single tear ambled down his chubby cheek. Followed by a second.

"Speak to me, Harley," she said, suppressing her impatience.

"These people – the ones at the party – have not been faithful to our beliefs." Andy had never seen him this agitated. "It's not so much the music and the dancing," he explained with some difficulty.

"Okay. Keep going."

"Or even the beer and marijuana."

"Okay. Okay. No comment. Now out with it."

"I can't, Aunt Andy."

"Har-ley."

"I don't want to talk about it."

“Oh, yes, you do,” she said, pointedly. “Believe me, whatever happened, you’re screaming to talk about it.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes. You are, Harley. And do you know how I know you’ve got something important to tell me?”

He wrinkled his traumatized brow. “How?”

“Because you haven’t cleaned up the mess downstairs.”

“What?”

Andy hadn’t spent all those years as the mother of teenagers without learning that kids either cover their tracks or they don’t. And when they don’t, they’re desperate for you to follow in their foolish footsteps until you find them cowering in some corner and force them into a full confession. “My house is a disaster, Harley, and you’re squirreled away up here in your room like you can’t move.”

More tears began seeping from his lashes and onto his boyish cheeks.

“You knew I’d be angry if you didn’t clean up, right?”

He nodded.

“You knew I’d want to know what happened?”

He nodded again.

“Then tell me.”

The squinty blue eyes bubbled open and shut. His nose was leaking badly.

“Speak, Harley,” she said. “I’m listening.”

He drew a sleeve across his soggy face.

Andy ripped off a pillowcase and handed it to him. “Blow,” she commanded.

He blew.

“Now talk.”

“After everybody left, I heard noises in your closet,” he began. “In the master bedroom.”

Ah, yes, she thought, nodding knowingly, as it all came together in a familiar gestalt; Andy suddenly knew exactly where this was headed.

“What kind of noises, Harley?”

“People. I mean, I heard laughing and stuff. I wanted everyone out, so I opened the door.”

“And what did you find?”

“I found two people in there.”

“Um hum.”

“With their clothes off.”

“Listen, Harley. That kind of stuff just happens . . .”

“Aunt Andy,” he sobbed, “they were completely naked, you know, and doing it on the floor.”

Damn it, she grumbled silently. Now I’m going to have to fumigate. Haven’t I suffered enough? Then without thinking, she quipped, “Boys? Girls? One of each?”

“What?” he screeched.

“Nothing. Nothing,” she said, quickly.

But the damage was already done. “A boy and a girl,” he howled, as if anything else would have turned him into a pillar of salt. “A boy and a girl!”

Then in a perfect storm of insecurity and self-loathing, he threw himself face down on the bed again.

“Okay,” she said, rubbing his back and cursing the lack of over-the-counter tranquilizers. “It’s all right, Harley. It’s all okay.” Then reluctantly, she added, “Come on, let’s have a hug.”

As she opened her arms, he raised himself up from the mattress like a struggling jellyfish. Finally, he collapsed headlong into her maternal embrace, gushing his regret. As Andy sat there dutifully holding him like one of her own, she wondered, not for the first time, what this child was doing in her house.

The pair spent the better part of the next three days restoring the house to its original condition. This required replacing a bathroom door, repainting the

baseboards in the living room, and renting a carpet cleaner from the local supermarket. Andy soaped and vacuumed the violated closet twice. As curious as she was about how all those campus crusaders managed to wreak so much havoc, she decided not to ask. Harley, for his part, volunteered nothing. Still, he worked like a dog, and she found it harder and harder to be mad at him. She also decided to say nothing about the fact that, even though it was Wednesday afternoon, he had not yet returned to class.

Home and hearth restored, Andy finally got around to mixing herself that long-intended wine spritzer, a concoction of cheap Sauvignon Blanc, grapefruit soda, and blended fruit. Glass in hand, she fell onto the living room sofa and jokingly told her assistant he should get himself one of the leftover beers. To her astonishment, Harley walked into the kitchen and returned with a brown bottle. Holy metamorphosis, she thought.

“Well, it’s all cleaned up,” she said.

“All cleaned up,” he repeated.

“Feeling better?”

He nodded and took a sip from the bottle.

“Mitch asked me to dinner tonight. Would you like to come along?”

Harley hadn’t been out of the house since that fateful Friday night, and she felt compelled to ask him along.

He sipped again. “Will Melissa be there?”

“Probably.”

This time he took a swig. “Sure. That would be great.”

He downed what was left in the bottle and announced he was off to take a shower – something else he hadn’t done in five days. Such was the power of The Impresario, she thought, and realized it was a good time to ask one of the hard questions they’d been avoiding. “Harley,” she called out, as he approached the stairs, “I was wondering, when are you going back to school?”

“School?”

“You know, OSTU?”

But before he could answer, the house phone rang.

"I'll get it," he said, jumping on his exit opportunity. "Don't get up." He pivoted, headed to the kitchen, and grabbed the phone. When he returned to the living room, he was holding the handset.

"It's somebody named Larry O'Dowd."

"Okay," she said, reaching for the phone.

He took a step back and put his hand over the mouthpiece. "Who's Larry O'Dowd?"

"None of your business."

"Seriously, Aunt Andy. He sounds gravelly."

"I don't care how he sounds, Harley. Give me the phone."

He smiled for the first time since she'd returned from Idaho. "Come on, Aunt Andy. *Please.*"

She stuck out her hand for the phone once again.

He waited.

She relented. "My private investigator."

"No kidding!"

"No kidding. Now hand it over, you cheeky bastard."

The smile broadened. He gave her what she wanted and then came as close as Harley Davidson could to bounding up the staircase.

"Larry?" Andy said, when he was out of earshot.

"I got some info for you, Andy."

"Really? Anything interesting?"

"Most definitely the start of something interesting."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I've done just about everything the Pings will pay for. You're going to have to do the rest."

"Okay. What did you find?"

"It's all in the files. I'll overnight them to you."

"Are you going to tell me what you found?" she asked again.

“No. I want you to read the files first. You can call me with questions. I’ve got a surveillance job starting in the morning, so I want to get these off my desk.”

“Any idea where she – they might be?”

“No. I’m still working on that. But you’ll find everything else in the files.”

Chapter 14

Worst Behaved Person in the Room

Mitch made tortellini with a cream sauce. By the time they finished eating, Andy felt her arteries scream for mercy. She was sitting with Mitch, Melissa, and Harley at a long wooden table in her son's Spanish-style dining room designed with arched windows, a red tile floor, and a ceiling with cross beams adorned by vines of hand-painted flowers.

"I don't want dessert," Andy said.

"What is it?" Harley asked.

Simultaneously, Melissa and Andy answered, "Bananas flambé."

Mitch spread his hands in his signature it's-what-I-do gesture.

"And it's not good for any of us. At least not for another thirty minutes," Andy pronounced.

"Let's do the dishes first then," said Melissa, rising to the task.

Before Andy could offer to assist, Harley was on his feet. "I'll help," he said.

"Good," said Mitch. "Because I need to have a serious discussion with your aunt." He eyed his mother. "On the patio, please. I'll stop at the humididor on my way."

They met at the lounge chairs next to the pool. Mitch handed his mother a Swisher Sweet and lit up something more exotic – and expensive – for himself.

"Do you think it's a mistake to leave Harley alone in the kitchen with Melissa?" he asked before taking a seat.

"He does seem besotted, doesn't he?"

"Besotted? Are you writing for the BBC now?"

"No. But it's a word that doesn't get enough exercise. I sort of like saying it."

He leaned down, lit her cigar, and then took the chair next to hers.

"Is he as much of a dweeb as he appears to be?"

"Funny. Another underused, highly applicable word. And I'm not sure."

"Do you like him?"

"Even that's still pending," she ruminated. "I'm trying."

"He seems pretty naïve." Mitch adjusted the chair so that he reclined slightly. "What about sex?"

Andy grimaced. "Excuse me?"

"Has he had much experience?"

She took a drag on her pencil of a cigar and, like Mitch, leaned back into the plush lounge cushion behind her. "I can say, with some degree of confidence, that he knows it when he sees it. And that's about all he knows."

"He actually told you this?" Mitch asked in disbelief.

"In so many words."

The adult son eyed his mother with renewed respect. "I see you haven't lost any of your interrogation techniques."

"Some things you never forget, Mitchell. Does this conversation have an intention?"

He contemplated the question, which she found refreshing. As a consequence, his answer was exceptionally tactful. "I just don't want him getting hurt. That's all."

"Hurt?"

"This crush. On Melissa. Should we do something about it before *she* has to?" he asked.

Andy puffed again and let the biting sweetness of the smoke wash around her mouth. Harley was so different from her own children; after only two months, she'd already reached her level of incompetence. "I don't know," she mused. "At the moment, Melissa appears to be one of the few things that make him happy. And he's unbearable to live with when he's unhappy. So I say we leave it up to her. At least for the time being." Andy took Mitch's silence as tacit agreement with her strategy. "Is that why you asked me to dinner? To talk about Harley?"

"No," he said, flatly.

"But you did have a reason?"

"I did. I do." He snuggled deeper into the plush cushion, stogie dangling from his lips and eyelids in repose.

"Are you going to tell me what it is?"

Deliberately, he wagged his head from side to side.

Andy knew her children enjoyed being obtuse in exactly the same way she did, and it drove her crazy.

"Spit it out," she grouched. "Come on."

"I invited you here to make a point. Part of my point is that you should be able to guess my purpose."

"Is that a joke, Mitchell?"

He opened his eyes and cocked them acerbically in her direction. "This is important, Mom."

She sat up. "Something I've done?"

"A crime of omission."

She could tell he wasn't teasing; something significant was bothering him.

"Okay, then tell me the point, and maybe I can guess the purpose."

"The point is your tendency to give your attention to the worst behaved person in the room."

She'd heard this charge before. It was known in the family as Mom's Prodigal Son Syndrome; take care of the bad actors, and the good actors will take care of themselves.

"The worst behaved person in the room was most often you, Mitch, if memory serves," she said, sounding unnecessarily prickly.

"Touché. And while I was getting that attention, you were neglecting your other children."

This time she nearly rose to her feet. "I can't believe you just said that!"

"Don't over dramatize this, Mom. Please."

"But you just accused me of being negligent."

"Okay, maybe not negligent. Let's just say you were distracted."

"Where are you going with this? I'm starting to bleed a little on the inside."

He waved away her maternal insecurity with his Cuban. "Take it easy. Hear me out. I was a pain in the ass as a kid. I admit it. Everybody in the family knows it. But that doesn't mean that you and I can forget the fact that the other three got the shaft."

"The shaft? Did you just say I gave the girls and Ian the *shaft*?"

"What I mean to say is, they probably didn't get as much of you as they deserved. Because of me. I'm responsible, too. That I turned out so well," he added with another wave of the cigar, "only shows that your time was not wasted. Still, the others probably didn't get what they needed."

Andy was neither amused nor mollified. "You are still a piece of work, Mitch," she said. "And this conversation is a perfect illustration."

"Will you let me finish?"

She restrained herself from diving into the family arsenal of cheap shots.

Mitch nodded his appreciation and continued. "I'm just saying that over the past few years I've tried to make up for sucking so much oxygen out of the room as a kid. And a big part of that effort has been keeping in touch with Ian."

"Oh," Andy said, surprised at his newfound sibling sensitivity. Then embarrassed that she hadn't noticed.

"You know how he is," Mitch told her. "He doesn't upset the apple cart. He doesn't complain. He just plays music. The way he did growing up."

Admittedly, Ian was the sole, underappreciated introvert in a family of extroverts. She couldn't argue with Mitch's contention that Ian's personal drama inevitably took a backseat to everyone else's.

"And because he doesn't ask your advice, the way the girls do. Or talk your ear off about work, the way I do. Well, you don't talk to him, Mom. In fact, you rarely call."

Her teetering jaw dropped. Nothing came out. She picked it up again without a word.

Mitch took her total silence as surrender and marched onward. "That's why I thought I should have you over tonight. Because – and I know you're not doing this intentionally – but because you've been completely ignoring the avocados."

"The avocados?" she mumbled.

"The avocados," he repeated.

She looked up through the hovering tobacco haze toward the star-speckled sky and tried to figure out what in the hell he was talking about.

"Remember what happened with the avocados, Mom?"

"I do remember them," she managed, lamely. "Kind of – not precisely," she admitted.

"And there you have it!" Mitch observed, this time circling his cigar to demonstrate her all-around cluelessness. "Ian is suffering, I mean, really suffering over this IRS audit, and you haven't even called him about it."

"Oh, my god, I haven't!" she gulped. "I haven't! When is it?"

"Next week."

"How serious do you think it is?"

"Once again, you're missing the point. Ian's never even had a parking ticket, so naturally he would find any brush with the law terrifying. I've told him it's not a big deal, but he calls me every day for reassurance. I just think it's time he had a few words of encouragement from, you know, his mother."

If this reprimand had come from one of the girls, Andy thought, it would be hurtful. But from the prodigal himself, it was downright humiliating.

"Right. You're right, Mitch. Absolutely right. I'll call him. First thing tomorrow."

"That's all I wanted to hear," he said, extinguishing the fire between his fingers and getting to his feet. "And now I think we should go into the kitchen and tear that teenager away from my girlfriend."

Andy followed suit. She felt a little wobbly emotionally as she stood up. Mitch took her hand and squeezed it.

“I may not have deserved all that attention,” he said, with artful wickedness, “but I enjoyed it immensely. And we all love you, you know that.”

“Thanks, Mitch. And just so you know, I intend to ignore you completely from now on . . . so that I have enough time for the others.”

It was nearly eleven by the time they finished eating Mitch’s burning fruit sensation and nearly midnight by the time Andy and Harley got back to Valencia. A little battle scarred, Andy picked up the phone the moment Harley went to bed and dialed her youngest. Despite the hour, she knew Ian would be up, probably rehearsing. She was relieved when he didn’t answer.

“Ian, it’s Mom,” she said to the recorder. “I know your audit is coming up soon, and I wanted to ask you how things were going. You know, see if you want me to come to Nashville. Or . . . anyway, give me a call.”

The offer to come to Nashville was probably as transparent as it was disingenuous. She knew her son was beyond wanting or needing his mother holding his hand, even for a federal government cross-examination. Still, Andy had convinced herself that it might draw attention away from the fact that she had completely forgotten to call Ian and see how things were going.

By the next morning, the-writer-formerly-known-as-Andy-Bravos had decided to put her parental failings and functions behind her and see if she could spec out an outline for the Emma Linde story that might provide the bones for a treatment. As she did, Andy tried valiantly to ignore the obvious: Harley had, once again, neglected to get up and go to school. She managed to pass his door several times without knocking, reminding herself that he was an adult, that she was not his mother, and that being anybody’s mother right now was a big pain in the ass.

She was deep into a computer search of British Intelligence activities during World War II, when the doorbell rang. Pulling herself out of the previous century and about to descend the staircase to see who was at the door, Andy nearly collided with her unshaven, semi-unconscious nephew, who was trundling down the steps in front of her.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"It's UPS," he said.

"How do you know?"

"I heard the truck outside my window."

"Are you expecting something?" she called, as she let him take the lead.

"No, but I figure you must be," he called back.

She stopped mid-flight and shouted, "You can't answer the door looking so slovenly."

"What?"

But she gave up because he had already rounded the corner to the entry and was opening the door.

"It's from your P.I.," he announced, climbing back up the stairs and clutching an envelope with the anticipation of an addict awaiting his next fix.

"This is the stuff about Uncle Mark, right?"

"About his wife," Andy said.

"Can I open it?"

"No. Aren't you supposed to be in school?"

"I'm taking the day off."

"Why?"

"I told you. Because I'm deeply disappointed."

"I don't think that qualifies as an excuse."

"This is college. I don't need to bring an excuse. Can I see what he found, Aunt Andy?"

"You're still in your boxers."

"Promise you won't open it until I get back."

"I don't make those kinds of promises."

"Please."

"You are pissing me off, Harley."

"I'll be right back. Just try to wait. Please!"

He tore up the steps to his room. She followed him, headed for her office, determined to open the package without him. There was a principle involved here, even if she couldn't think what it was. She plopped down into her desk chair and prepared to rip open the mailer. The phone rang. She grabbed the receiver with one hand and the package tab with the other.

"Hello?"

"Mom?"

She stopped mid-pull.

"Hi, Ian! I'm so glad you got my message."

"Yeah. I was kind of surprised. You don't call much."

"Right. Sorry, honey. I just wanted to see how you were doing."

"I'm doing fine, Mom."

"With the IRS audit, I mean. It's when?"

"Next Monday. Downtown on Broadway."

"Are you going alone?"

"Alone?"

"I mean, is your CPA going with you?"

"Nah. He's already talked to the IRS agent. We definitely made a mistake about that avocado orchard investment. I have to go myself. To find out about the fine and to draw up a payment schedule."

"Are you okay with that?"

"Well, I guess. I mean, I don't really have much choice."

"Okay, but you don't mind going in alone? Do you want me to come?"

"No. Really. I don't want you to come, Mom."

She waited for a ridiculous moment, hoping he might thank her for her offer to fly out and stand by him, all the time knowing full well she had never intended to do it. God, she really needed therapy.

When he said nothing, she dove back into the utter silence. "Okay. I was just checking in, you know."

"Yeah. Okay. I'm fine."

Andy searched for what to say next. With Mitch and the girls, the conversations were always bursting at the seams. With Ian, they often just dried up for lack of content.

"Well, maybe you could call me when it's over," she suggested. "Just to let me know how it went."

"Okay. Sure," he said. "Was that all? Because we're rehearsing . . ."

"No. That's it, Ian. Just checking in."

"Well, thanks, Mom."

"Love you, honey."

"You, too, Mom."

She hung up, feeling as if she had just compounded her initial failure.

"Holy shit!" Harley shouted.

Andy jumped and swiveled her chair around. She wasn't sure whether she was more surprised he had sneaked into the room or that he'd just uttered his first 'shit.'

Harley was sitting on the floor directly behind her, looking like a puddle of flesh that had been poured into a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, his bare feet protruding from the denim. The papers from the envelope he had appropriated without her noticing were scattered across the carpet around him.

Eyelids pulled straight up and pupils open for business, he stared at her. "You should see this, Aunt Andy. That woman, Tilda, she's just like Uncle Mark."

"What does that mean?"

"She's been married four times, too."

That hardly seemed possible. "I thought she was only thirty-five."

"Thirty-eight. But here's the weird thing. In this report, your guy, Larry O'Dowd, says there's no record she was ever divorced."

"From her last husband?"

"No. From any of them."

Chapter 15

An Obvious Observation

When you put the marriages together, Harley calculated as he shuffled through the papers, she could have called herself Tilda Trivette Levin Pacheco Andropoulos Kornacky.

"It's like one of those all-you-can-eat places," he said.

"A matrimonial smorgasbord," Andy agreed. "Who in the hell is this woman?"

Larry O'Dowd's research showed that the apparently polygamous Tilda Trivette had been born in Oklahoma and married there twice before the age of thirty. Then she moved to Texas, where she married twice more. Each marriage certificate contained only her maiden name, Trivette, as well as an identical social security number. Andy wondered why neither state had noticed the double marriages. Larry surmised there were no children from these marriages because he had run checks on live births in the two states using Tilda's singular SSN. Besides the marriages, there were records of Tilda's driver's licenses and a speeding ticket in Texas. More interesting were the results of title searches Larry O'Dowd made in each state. Evidently, Tilda owned both property and automobiles with her three previous husbands, and all of these had been sold—in chronological order.

Andy sat on the floor beside Harley, sorting through the papers and oddly grateful to have someone with whom to share the P.I.'s pile of incongruities.

"Did you notice the age thing, Andy?"

Her nephew had suddenly dropped the customary 'aunt', with the same ease he had added the uncustomary 'shit.' Were these omens that she and Harley were reaching a new frontier in their relationship? Andy wasn't all that sure she wanted to go there.

"The age thing?"

"On the marriage certificates. All of these guys are over sixty. See?"

"Hmm." Andy hadn't noticed. Score one for the doughboy.

“She definitely has a type,” he said.

Her ex-husband fit Tilda’s type to a T.

“Okay. If they were all over sixty, maybe they died, and that would explain why she never got divorced,” Andy posited. “Maybe Larry didn’t look at death certificates.”

“But he did! He mentions it in the summary. There are no death certificates in either state for any of these guys.”

“Let me see the summary,” she said.

He reached for a piece of paper he was holding in place with his big toe.

Unheralded, the word ‘fungus’ suddenly crossed her cranial landscape. Andy suppressed the accompanying image and grabbed the paper. “And you either get yourself a pedicure or put on a pair of shoes. Now!”

Reluctantly, Harley pulled himself off the floor and went to do something about his naked feet.

The P.I.’s summary was succinct and a little depressing: Tilda, not unlike Mark, was a serial spouse. The palm reader had made it her habit to marry older men, jointly hold their property, and avoid having children or at least any record of them. But, unlike Mark, Tilda Trivette had never bothered with divorce before making her next trip down the aisle. It was, as they say in Siam, a puzzlement.

When Harley returned in a pair of Converse – no socks – he cut right to the conundrum. “This makes no sense, Andy,” he said with irksome collegiality. “What would it take to get Larry to follow up on some of this stuff?”

“Either another set of Pings or a trip to Augusta National,” she speculated. “In either case, I can’t afford it.”

“I guess he didn’t find any record of where Tilda and Mark are now, huh?”

He had decided to drop the ‘uncle’, as well, she noted. “I guess not. He said he was going to try to get a friend to run her credit card statements, but maybe he couldn’t make that happen. Anyway, he doesn’t mention it in his report.”

“Well, maybe I can find something.”

“What do you mean?” Andy asked.

"I don't know. We have the names of her husbands. Maybe I can try to look them up. Find their numbers and addresses."

Not a bad idea, Andy thought. "Don't you have some school work to do?"

"In my spare time."

"What about attending school in your spare time?"

"I'll think about that. I promise. But I think I should get on this ASAP, don't you, Andy?"

Another touch of *esprit de corps*. Why did he keep talking as if they had some kind of working relationship? She was considering how to nip this little notion in the bud, when her computer rang.

Sam. Skyping. Andy had completely forgotten. She pressed the green phone icon, and the living room of a three-bedroom flat in the heart of Edinburgh popped onto the screen, accompanied by the lilting screech of a two-year-old.

"Put the club down, Jake," Sam was yelling, as the image on Andy's screen bobbed up and down.

"Sam?"

"Just a minute, Mom. Jake's got a 9-iron."

Andy watched from 5,000 miles away as Sam dashed into the center of the room and grabbed the weapon, then put it back into a golf bag that was propped up in a window alcove. Next, she hoisted the toddler under her arm and returned to sit down at the computer.

"I don't know why I can't convince Graham to keep his clubs in the closet. He insists on leaving at least one set on public display. It's insane," Sam said, nearly out of breath. "Anyway, how are you?"

"I'm fine, honey," Andy smiled. "The question is, how are you?"

"Frazzled."

"Hi, Samantha!" Harley's voice wormed its way in from behind Andy.

"Harley?" asked Sam.

His visage dipped into the picture like a loosely tethered balloon. "Just wanted to say 'hi,'" he chirped.

"And then 'good-bye,'" Andy prompted.

"Good-bye," Harley said, waving and floating away as commanded.

Andy watched him pick up the papers from Larry O'Dowd's report, giving the distinct impression that they now belonged to *him*, and walk purposefully toward his bedroom, as if his lolling Converse had suddenly morphed into wingtips.

"Why isn't he in school?" Sam asked.

"Don't ask. Don't tell," Andy replied. "I truly do not want to know."

Jake managed to wriggle out of his mother's clutch and jet across the room onto the sofa.

"Just a sec," Sam sighed. "Let me put on a video." She searched for and found a remote, then played with the keys until an episode of *In the Night Garden* appeared on the television screen.

"Igglepiggle?" Andy said, derisively. "Is that really the best you can do?"

"I know you think it's insipid. But Jake and Ella love it."

"It *is* insipid. The British should be ashamed of themselves."

"The *English* should be ashamed of themselves," Sam corrected. "I refuse to believe any full-blooded Scot had anything to do with either the writing or development of this show."

"Well, I don't want my grandchildren exposed to it."

"I don't want your grandchildren exposed to it either. But there are things in this life that we didn't cause, can't control, and will never cure. And this is one of them. Now what's the temperature there?"

"A sunny 78."

"It's 55 and raining here. Which means I am suffering enough. So let's move on, shall we?"

"Absolutely. Where's Graham?"

"He's teaching a putting clinic at Glen Eagles this week."

"Cool. That should be lucrative."

"It is. But it makes the childcare arrangements a nightmare. He's supposed to be home in an hour so that I can teach my night class."

"And how's school?"

"Good. That's actually why I wanted to chat. I've been in touch with Lil's neighbor – Mike Anderson."

"The recovering Mormon?"

"Right. We've been working on the Bader genealogy. It's very interesting."

"Have you found anything so far?"

"Quite a bit, actually. But nothing definitive. However, as luck would have it, I'm going to Kiev next week for a lecture, and Mike helped me set up a meeting with a researcher there who specializes in Bessarabia, where your mom's family came from."

"Bessarabia," Andy repeated, as she recalled the ringing of the same bell in the conversation with Mike Anderson.

"The area around Odessa, on the Black Sea. That's where the Baders sailed from."

"Right. I think I knew that. But that's about all I know," Andy said, treading the waters of her own ignorance. She had been remarkably incurious about her family's background, she realized. "I hope this isn't eating up too much of your time."

"Not at all. I'd really like to find out. Some Baders from that area were German Protestants. Others were Jews. And this researcher should be able to tell us which tribe we belonged to. I've always been a little suspicious we might be Jewish. Haven't you?"

"Not really," Andy answered, truthfully. "It never occurred to me."

"That's because you're a reactionary," Samantha said, knowing it might be a mistake.

"I am not!" erupted Mount Andy.

"You see? It's so easy to pull your chain, Mom. You always react before you think things through."

Andy had been called many things in her life; reactionary had never been one of them.

When her mother didn't say anything more, Sam recanted her word choice. "I'm sorry, Mom. I didn't mean to sound so accusatory. I meant to say that you've been so busy running away from your family's religion all your life that you never considered that they might have been running away from their family's religion, too."

Andy blinked. Then blinked again. She sat up and stared intensely into Sam's rather obvious observation. "Oh," she said. "I never thought about that." She put the possibility in perspective, trying to reimagine her family history. "You think they weren't just coming to Nebraska to homestead? You think they might have been trying to escape persecution?"

"Well, there were definitely pogroms in that part of the country around the time the family emigrated."

"Pogroms?"

"Bessarabia has a nasty history in that respect."

"Right," Andy said. "I guess I didn't know that, either." The waters of what she didn't know were getting deeper and deeper. "You're saying they were some kind of religious refugees?"

"I don't know. But it could be," Sam offered, allowing Andy a little silence in which to struggle with the idea. It went on for nearly a minute. "Mom?" she finally asked.

"I'm thinking," Andy said. "I'm thinking that if what you say is true, that they fled the Ukraine because they were Jewish, then it might explain why they became so non-Jewish when they got here."

"And why they always seemed to be making up their own religious ideas," Sam added. "Because they had to make them up."

Was this the change in perspective that Alice had experienced when stepping through the looking glass, Andy wondered. "Well, it certainly explains some of their holier-than-thou behavior!" she announced.

“And maybe some of your *unholier-than-thou* behavior, Mom,” Sam suggested.

It was a barb well placed, and it stung like hell.

“Mom?”

“Hmm?”

“Would it really make a difference, if all this turns out to be true?”

“You’re damned right it would!”

“Why?” Sam wondered.

“Because I’d have to be a helluva lot more forgiving, that’s why. And where’s the fun in that?”

Where ignorance is bliss, ‘tis folly to be wise, Andy wanted to remind her daughter, but Sam hated ignorance. Still, Andy thought, having to learn to understand her relatives at this stage in her life seemed grossly unfair.

“Well, at least it would help explain why everyone in our family seems to enjoy arguing all the time,” said Sam. “About absolutely nothing. It could be that old Talmudic tradition.”

“You think we argue all the time because we’re descended from Rabbis?”

“I certainly hope so,” Sam laughed. “Otherwise, we’re just unbearably annoying people.”

To the rear of the computer screen, Andy caught a momentary glint of light bouncing off titanium as it collided with the goldfish bowl on the bookshelf behind Sam’s head. Andy actually saw the impact before Sam heard the sound of shattering glass. As her daughter whirled around, Andy yelled, “Go! Save your Shel Silverstein collection. And don’t be mad at my grandson. I’m the one who keeps telling him to take a full backswing.”

Sam turned momentarily back to the screen and snarled. “I hope to hell this is the only thing we have hiding in our family background. Because I’m also beginning to suspect my son may be descended from Vlad the Impaler.” She dashed across the room and again snatched up her ginger-haired boy.

“Bye, Sam,” Andy called.

"Bye, Mom. Love you."

"You, too."

Andy sighed, pressed the button, and life in Scotland faded to black.

"What's hiding in our family background?"

The voice she had dismissed earlier was back behind her chair.

"What?"

"What does Sam think is hiding in our family background?" Harley repeated.

"Oh. Sam's doing some research on the Baders," Andy said, thinking if she didn't turn around he might go away. Engaging with him on this particular subject would not end well.

"Grandma's family?"

"Right."

"What's wrong with them?"

"Nothing's wrong with them, Harley. We just want to know more about them."

"Like what?"

Andy had avoided mentioning that Sam was rummaging around in their family closet because she was afraid it might upset Harley's theological equilibrium. He'd begin to worry all over again about which team she would be supporting when it came time for Armageddon. Now she considered her options: tell the truth, equivocate, or outright lie.

"Come on, Andy. I'm a big boy. I can take it."

Again with the just plain 'Andy,' she noted, as if he'd launched himself onto a new, loftier plane. It grated, like Edward Scissorhands's nails on a chalkboard. In the end, Andy decided to turn around, give him her best smile, and opt for spite.

"Okay," Andy said, pleasantly. "How do you feel about being Jewish?"

God, she thought, enjoying the contorted look on the boy's face, I'm worse than a reactionary. I'm actually a sadist.

Chapter 16

Animal House Remake

Harley took the news of his possible Semite roots with surprising calm and in ominous silence. In fact, in the ensuing days he avoided the topic like a Biblical plague. Andy sensed he was searching for some way to inoculate himself against his potential Jewishness. The behavior that resulted confirmed her favorite dictum: what does not destroy us often makes us more obnoxious.

Without further provocation, he pulled himself together and returned to school. He attended classes. He read textbooks. He wrote papers. Well, at least one paper. And he prayed, before and after every meal. He was the very model of a modern major general in the Army of the Lord. To the faculty at Tabernacle U, the rededicated Harley Davidson must have been something of a revelation; he certainly was to Andy. For the first time, he demonstrated laser-like focus, hard work, and a hint of humility. More importantly, her born-again-born-again nephew stopped speaking to his aunt entirely; he merely shared the same house. It was all a little weird.

For her part, Andy was certain there was some kind of emotional eruption coming, and she didn't want to be around when his primal pain hit the fan. Her strategy was to spend as much time away from home as possible. She did a lot of grocery shopping. Had the car washed. Returned a miter board and saw she'd borrowed from a neighbor. Made three trips to her credit union. And considered feeding the poor and visiting a few shut-ins.

Mostly, she played golf with Ted. She'd talked him into three games in one week. They played the first two at Balboa, a Los Angeles city course just off the 101 in Encino. Today they were back at Hansen Dam, pushing their carts down the meandering fairways below an artificial lake that helped feed and water the surrounding population. LA was pocked with these gigantic reservoir preserves that included fake lakes, miles of walking trails, and more nature than most Angelinos expected or cared about. Andy's favorite edifice was only a few miles from her condo at Castaic Lake. The Castaic dam and surrounding trails were

spectacular, and she walked there nearly every week. The recreation area's only failing was that no one had bothered to build a golf course for her convenience. Hence, she was routinely forced to drive to the San Fernando Valley for her good-walk-spoiled. Since Harley's recent transformation, however, she didn't mind killing time, even on the freeway.

"So did Larry call you last night?" Ted asked, as they approached the 13th tee.

"No," Andy said. "Was he trying to?"

"We went out for a burger at Barney's. He said he might."

"Why?"

"I think he got a bead on your Lady of the Ashes."

"Tilda?"

"I guess she's been on the move."

"Where?"

"I don't know. He's still trying to track her credit card receipts or something. He just said he owed you a call."

"Did he find any evidence of Mark?"

Ted shrugged. "Beats me."

"I'm gonna call him," she said, pulling out her cell phone.

"He won't answer. He's on a stakeout."

"A stakeout?" she said.

"For one of the studios. They've got a flasher on the lot who keeps popping up in the women's bathrooms." Ted stuck his tee in the grass and set up to swing. "Larry thinks it's one of the gaffers on the Animal House remake they're shooting."

He whipped his club back, then brought it down like a pendulum, impacting the ball at the base of the arc. His Pro V1 took off like a shot, traveling about three feet off the ground for several yards, then launching high into the air.

"I don't think I can hit a ball better than that," he announced.

Andy nodded her admiration, as the ball drew slightly to the left and landed just over 300 yards out.

"They're shooting a remake of Animal House?" she tut-tutted, making her way to the tee. "That's ridiculous!"

"Exactly what I said! How can you remake a classic?"

She bent over, put the tee in the ground, and looked up at him in not-so-mock horror. "A *classic*? Are you joking, Ted?"

"No. Why would I? Some things are just perfect the way they are. Like the Wizard of Oz. Would you remake the Wizard of Oz?"

Feeling his comparison of the two movies did not merit a response, she swung, slamming the ball 225 yards down the middle. Credible. But not *incredible*. A little surge of jealousy invaded her endocrine system. The unruly hormones made her long to be a man and hit the ball exactly like Ted did. And then just as quickly, the surge subsided, and reason returned. Every man Andy had ever golfed with believed Animal House was a classic, she realized; this kind of stupidity was biological, and men just couldn't help it. Estrogen had its physical drawbacks, no doubt about it. But testosterone exacted its own terrible price, particularly in the arts.

"Nice hit," Ted said, as he always did, even though her ball was 75 yards short of his.

"I'll take it," she replied, smiling contentedly. "Because I am a woman, Ted. And therefore free to hate Animal House."

On the way home from the course, Andy tried calling Larry O'Dowd. The call went immediately to voice mail, as Ted predicted, so she left a message saying he could call her any time. As she drove into the garage, it occurred to her that Harley had never returned the P.I.'s report to her desk and that it must still be in his room. She decided she needed to look through it again before the call, just in case she had any questions she wanted to ask. She got out of the car, hampered by a humiliating stiffness that screamed 'old person,' and opened the

door into the family room. Blessed silence. Harley was still at school. Now all she had to do was nip upstairs.

By the fifth step, she was acutely aware that 'nipping' was no longer an option and was forced to slow down. She reached his door and, without thinking to knock, pushed it open. She stopped dead in her tracks. Harley, or some other very marshmallow-like being in a fetal position, lay on the bed, covers pulled over his head. Either the fuel that had been feeding his current fervor had run out, or he'd crashed headlong into another psychological obstacle tantamount to the naked coupling he had witnessed in her closet. Whatever had traumatized him this time, she didn't want to hear about it.

Andy spotted the envelope from Larry on the dresser, tiptoed into the curtained room, and grabbed it. Mute and stealthy, she turned to make her escape. She was near the door when she caught sight of something shimmering at the foot of his bed, along with her first inkling of his latest identity crisis. There on the bed bench, draped over the silver-toed cowboy boots that were his pride and joy, was a long, silky scarf with elegant tassels. Her nephew was either cross-dressing, or he had managed to find himself a prayer shawl.

She closed her eyes and tried like hell not to conjecture. She pressed on toward the door, determined to escape the room without saying anything that could be mistaken as the least bit sympathetic. But as she reached the threshold, guilt got the best of her. "I'll be downstairs making dinner if you want to talk," she whispered very, very softly. Does an act of kindness still count if the person can't quite hear it?

In the kitchen Andy assembled her store of ingredients for making chili. One of her skinny friends once said that chili was the perfect combination of carbs and proteins. Andy preferred to think of chili as the perfect combination of tin cans and frozen hamburger. Mindlessly, she went through the ritual that was her version of cooking, greatly relieved that Harley remained quiet and upstairs. After half an hour, she sat down at the dining room table with her bowl full of perfection and once again opened the file Larry had sent. Between spoonfuls, she

fingered through the papers hoping something new would jump out at her, but nothing did. She remembered that her nephew had promised to Google the names of Tilda's other three husbands, but there was nothing to indicate he had. So Andy returned to the stove for a second helping, and on the way back to the table, she grabbed her laptop off the counter.

She began with a rudimentary search of each man's name in combination with the state where he had married Tilda. This produced just enough information for her to begin searching various sites where one or more of them might be listed. After an hour, she had uncovered tidbits of information about all three former hubbies. It was what she didn't find, however, that piqued her interest; absence makes the brain go crazy. None of the men were on Facebook or Twitter or LinkedIn or any of the common sites people use to flaunt their accomplishments and connections. Granted, they were probably too old to want or need to provide information about themselves on the Internet. Still, it seemed odd not to find any sign of any of them anywhere in the online social sphere.

What she did find was limited, but it gave her a sense of direction. Two of the three men had been married and divorced before they married Tilda, she discovered. And one of them, Gus Andropoulos, had once been some kind of dog breeder whose ten-year-old ad for cocker spaniel puppies had never been expunged from Craigslist in Eagle Pass, Texas.

Using these data scraps, Andy began searching the local newspapers in the towns where some of her hits indicated the men might have lived with Tilda. Remarkably, many of these small papers had online archives that went back a decade or two and permitted name searches. She gave each search a start date that began the year their marriages with Tilda began, and she searched until the next marriage began. It took three hours, but by 9:00 p.m. Andy knew how each of Tilda's marriages had ended, and the information made her skin crawl.

"Aunt Andy?"

Andy flinched, then girded her mental loins for the crisis ahead. The term of respect was back in Harley's vocabulary, along with the sound of palpitating anxiety in his voice.

"What is it, Harley?" she asked as sweetly as possible, still staring at the disturbing news on the computer screen. "Are you all right?"

"I can't do this any more."

"Do what, honey?"

"Be a Christian."

She sighed, the heavy sigh of the condemned, and turned to face him.

"Come sit down," she said, gesturing toward a seat at the table and surrendering to the conversation he was begging her to engage in. "Why can't you be a Christian?"

"I've tried. I really have. In fact, I've given it my all. Especially this week."

"You gave it your all this week?"

"That's right. For the first time this summer, I attended every class on my schedule. I did all of my homework. I even did some extra credit. But no matter how hard I tried, I just didn't seem to fit in at Tabernacle U anymore."

"*Anymore?*" she said with emphasis, in an effort to point out that he must have fit in at one time.

"Well, I guess I fooled myself into thinking I fit in. But now I realize I don't. How can I," he asked, plaintively, "now that we're Jewish?"

Andy had seen this train wreck coming ever since Mike Anderson had suggested her family might be Jewish. That's why she had not told Harley until he'd eavesdropped it out of her. She knew he wouldn't take the news lightly. Sure enough, here he was, barreling down the tracks at top speed, heading toward a come-to-Jesus-moment that any oxymoron could see didn't involve Jesus anymore.

"Harley," she began with all the patience she could muster, which wasn't that much. "We are not Jewish. At least, we don't know that for certain. And even if some of our long-dead relatives were, we aren't now."

"I did the math, Aunt Andy. And I was born of a Jewish mother."

"Math?"

"Let me explain. Most gentiles are not aware that to really be Jewish, you have to be born of a Jewish mother. And if grandma was Jewish, that means you and my mother are Jewish. Ergo, I am Jewish."

"Did you really just use the word 'ergo?'"

"It means —"

"I know what it means, Harley. And I also know that not everyone believes having a Jewish mother makes you a Jew. It's just one tradition. There are lots of ways to define being a Jew. Anyway, you don't have to be Jewish, even if it turns out your ancestors were. You know that, right?"

"I know what I know," he said gravely.

"This is silly," Andy countered. "None of this matters. The point is —" She rummaged around for a point that might satisfy him; she herself didn't give a flying fig what her ancestors were. "The point is, this is America, and you are free to be who and what you want to be." Then, just for good measure — and because she knew her relatives in Nebraska liked to say it — she threw in, "It's in the Constitution."

His puffy face grew sober, like a former cult member who'd lost his taste for Kool-Aid. "Jesus did not write the Constitution, no matter what people say."

"I did *not* say Jesus wrote the —"

"I know what you said. You said we are free to choose who we want to be. But that's a lie. Life is Destiny. And Destiny is not that easy to ignore," Harley shot back with both barrels. "And unlike many people in this family, Aunt Andy, I take my Judaism very seriously."

Oh, my god, she thought, he's giving me heartburn. "Why don't you just give this whole thing a little more time?"

"You can't change your Destiny."

"That's a little negative, don't you think?"

"It is what it is."

"You said that before, Harley. Just where, exactly, are you going with all of this?"

He raised his face to look her squarely in the eye. However, she glared back with such ferociousness, he quickly aborted the gesture. Instead, he closed his lids and let his head drop into his hands. "I had no choice but to withdraw from Our Savior's Tabernacle University today," he confessed.

There it was, Andy thought. The only conclusion any good Jewish boy could come to. The train and the wreckage had arrived.

"You can't quit school," she said, tersely. "Your mother will never forgive me."

"I told you, I have no choice."

"What if it turns out that we're not Jewish after all?"

"We are. I feel it in my blood."

"Harley, you have got to go back to school. Quitting is not up for discussion." She was contemplating a run for the bathroom to grab Tums when inspiration struck. "What about Jews for Jesus, Harley? That way you could go to school and be both Jewish and a Christian."

He tilted his head slowly upward, as if he had been struggling with this very dilemma for years. "Don't you think I thought about that?"

"Okay! Good. And?"

"Those sorts of Jews have betrayed their birthright, Aunt Andy. They have turned their backs on God's Chosen People."

It was like arguing with a frigging Jesuit. The kid had a frigging answer for everything. She decided it was time to go for the jugular. "Well, what about the End of Days, Harley?" It came out sounding a little churlish, but she didn't care. "If you drop out of Tabernacle U, what happens when Armageddon arrives?"

For the first time since moving into her house and her life, Harley Davidson sat up straight. Andy was stupefied. All this time she assumed he had been born without posture.

"Are you alright, Harley?"

He opened his mouth, and in an equally groundbreaking moment, nothing came out.

She had staggered him, no doubt. But her relationship with her sister Pam was on the line here, and she had to find a way to get him back in school. "Take your time," Andy said, purposely nudging him further into his misery. "This is exactly the kind of thing you need to consider before making any big life change."

If her nephew wanted to get himself into heaven, he would have to reverse course and return to school, Andy reasoned. She thought it only fair to point out the risks of suddenly turning your back on the Book of Revelation.

But when he finally began to speak, something inside Harley Davidson had changed. He sat up even straighter. "Because I am Jewish," he began, now looking as if some rabbi had just put a pole up his back, "I don't believe Jesus is the Messiah. And if Jesus is not the Messiah, then God's Son has not actually arrived yet." He paused briefly, apparently needing another moment before completely throwing Jesus under the bus. "And if the Messiah hasn't actually arrived yet, then He can't possibly be coming again. Ergo, the Last Days are not really a problem for me anymore." He smiled, a little condescendingly Andy thought, and then added, "Or you, either, Aunt Andy."

She studied his spongy cheeks and creamy blue eyes and wondered if she should mention that the Last Days had honestly never been a problem for her. Instead, she resigned herself to the fact that Harley was now as committed to his new team as he had been to his previous one. So she gave up.

"Would you like some chili? I made a pot while you were upstairs converting," she said. "It's pretty good."

"Sure," he said, cheerfully. "I'm really, really hungry."

Thinking she would wait a while before calling Pam with the news, Andy walked to the stove and ladled a scoop of chili into a bowl. She set it down in front of Harley and was about to excuse herself to take a shower, hoping to wash

off some of the bullpucky from this latest discussion, when her cell rang. She looked at the screen. Larry O'Freaking Dowd, she thought. About time.

Chapter 17

The Queen of Hearts

"Hi, Larry."

"Andy? I've been meaning to give you a ring, but I've been pretty busy."

"The Animal House flasher?"

"You got it. We haven't quite nailed him yet, but we're closing in," Larry told her. "God, this is the most disorganized shoot I've ever worked on. The director is a moron. Serves them right for trying to remake a classic."

"Couldn't agree more," said Andy, with a voice so devoid of sarcasm she actually lifted her hand and patted herself on the back. "Any news?"

"Did Ted give you a heads up?"

"He just said you were able to track some of Tilda's credit card receipts."

"Right. Appears she took a road trip shortly after she sent your son the carton of ashes."

"Really?"

"Charged all her gas from Texas to California."

"California?" Andy said, uneasily. "She's headed for California?"

"From the looks of it, she's living here. At least her credit cards show she appears to be settling in."

"Settling in? What does that mean?"

"She's stopped moving."

"And where, exactly, did she stop moving?"

"Up in the San Bernardino Mountains. Big Bear Lake. You know much about it?"

Andy felt a tingling sensation, as the hair on her arms stood at attention.

"We used to own a family cabin there. Summer home. Mark got it in the divorce."

"Your ex?"

“Uh huh. In fact, I think he still owns it.” She stopped. Then corrected herself. “Owned it.” Now she wondered if she should correct herself again. “Did you find any evidence Mark is with her? Any of his credit cards?”

“Just hers. No trace of him anywhere,” Larry answered, then had an afterthought. “Sorry, Andy. He really does appear to be off the grid, so to speak.”

Off the grid, she repeated in her mind. What could that mean? Dead? Disappeared? Hiding? Hostage? Just henpecked and letting her take charge of his life completely? Mark had, in many ways, done precisely that with Andy. He had let her become responsible for the kids, the bills, the house. For the final five years of their marriage, he had pretty much let her do everything but the partying and drinking.

“Any idea what she’s doing in Big Bear?”

“None. And I’ve called in all my favors with the guy who traced Tilda’s cards. So I’m afraid that’s all I can tell you. Or will be able to tell you.”

“Thanks, Larry,” she offered, still distracted by the question of why Tilda was in Big Bear.

Larry was on to other things. “Aren’t you going to ask me if all this was worth it?”

Andy was hardly listening. “Sorry?”

“If I feel I was adequately compensated for all the work I did?”

She turned her attention back to Larry. “Compensated?”

“The Pings. Were Ted’s Pings worth all my time and calling in all those favors?”

“I wanted those Pings, Larry. They’re a great set of clubs.”

“I know it. But don’t you want to know if they were worth it?”

“Okay. Sure. Were they worth it?”

“Fucking A, they were.”

“I’m glad,” she said, begrudgingly. “And not a bit surprised. Thanks.”

“Thank Ted,” he said.

She could tell the P.I. was about to sign off, and she wasn't ready. "I will," she said and added quickly, "Just one more thing." Andy could imagine him rolling his eyes on the other end of the line. "A piece of advice, Larry. Your take on something. That's all."

"Sure," he sighed.

"I found out what happened to Tilda's other three husbands."

"What?" He was instantly back on the case.

"I said I know what happened to her other husbands."

"You found something I didn't?"

"Uh huh. In the local papers where they lived."

"What do you mean? What could you find in the local papers?"

"Obituaries."

"No shit, Sherlock!" he blurted out, with unabashed admiration. "They're all dead? All three of them?"

"All three of them."

The whistle of air through his teeth was so loud that Andy pulled the phone from her ear. She took it as an ominous sign.

"What do you think?" she asked him.

"I think it's damned weird. And I don't get why I never found any death certificates." His unexpected silence on the other end indicated just how seriously he was mulling things over. "Did the obituaries include funeral announcements?" he asked at last.

"No. No funerals. And they were all cremated." Just like Mark, she reminded herself.

"I don't get it," he reiterated.

"I don't get it, either," Andy agreed. "Advice?"

"I'd stay the hell away from her. That's my advice."

"Right. But do you think I should try taking all this to the police?"

"Take what, Andy? And to which police department?" said the voice of experience. "Hell, you can't even have the bodies exhumed."

“What if she’s some kind of killer?”

“What if she isn’t? The real question is, can you prove anything? Do you have evidence of anything? And the answer is ‘no.’ Your Tilda is either damned clever or damned lucky – presuming these guys had any money. And in either case, you don’t want to get close enough to find out.”

“No, I don’t,” she said, thoughtfully. “But why do you think she’s in California?”

“Asked and answered,” he said, firmly. “Don’t know. Don’t want to. Let it go.”

“But don’t you think it’s suspicious—”

“Cha-ching,” he said sharply, cutting her off. “Or, in your case, cha-Ping. Job’s over and paid for. Let it go.”

Andy would have admired the pun if she weren’t so unnerved by the whole situation.

“Okay, Larry. And thanks again.”

“No problem. Maybe I’ll see you on the course sometime.”

“And we will know him by his Pings,” she quipped.

He laughed, which made her feel good for an instant. Then he hung up, which made her feel very, very conflicted.

Larry was absolutely right; she should let it go. She had no evidence Mark’s latest wife had done anything wrong. The woman could be completely innocent. And yet Andy loathed her. And it wasn’t a healthy loathing, either. It was an indignant, self-righteous contempt that made Andy feel superior to any woman who read palms for a living. Whatever the truth about her, Tilda Trivette brought out the worst in Andy, and Andy hated her for that, too.

Later that night, Andy found herself trying to remember something Mark used to say, one of the barbs he liked to throw at her when they were arguing. It always grabbed her like a flying fish hook, and she knew why. Deep down inside her emotional armor, she suspected it might be true.

“It’s hard to imagine,” he would observe with uncommon calmness and usually while nursing a Sam Adams, “just how wrong *somebody like you* can be, Andrea.”

It was the ‘somebody like you’ that really tore at her innards. What he meant was that Andy was judgmental and prejudiced and arrogant. Worse, she was all those things while claiming to be open-minded. “You’re just a Hollywood hypocrite,” he would sneer, “because you think you’re better than everybody else.”

For these reasons, it was nearly impossible for Andy to fall asleep that night. She rolled from side to side for more than an hour, trying to sort through her motives and convince herself that finding out what happened to Mark was none of her business. This whole thing just wasn’t her responsibility.

Finally, she got up and downed three melatonin. It took another hour, but the hormone did its job because she eventually found herself standing in one of those large wooden courtroom docks where criminals are confronted by their crimes. The place was packed.

On the witness stand was a young woman Andy had never seen before. Earnest, self-assured and utterly baffled, the elegant girl was telling the jury that it was all the result of a failure to communicate. If the defendant now standing in the dock had only made an effort to meet her, had only taken the time to get to know her, had bothered to ask her for the simple answers to the questions she had about her, then this could all have been avoided. Instead, Andrea Bravos had flown to Texas to harass her former neighbors, hired a private detective to pry into her personal accounts, violated her privacy, slandered her good name, and then – *then* she had the gall to call the police and accuse her of murder.

Andy couldn’t remember having called the police but wasn’t sure exactly how to object to the testimony.

“I don’t understand you, Andy,” said the young woman, verging on tears. “What have I ever done to you? How have I hurt you?”

Andy considered getting up to say something in her own defense but instantly forgot what she was going to say.

“And what did my other husbands ever do to deserve your anger?” the witness continued. “I loved those men. I cared for them. Just like I cared for —”

“Mark!” Andy shouted from the dock, as she jumped to her feet. That’s what she wanted to say. The point was that Mark was missing. “I did those things because I can’t find my husband!” she pleaded.

The courtroom let out a collective groan, as if they had heard the defendant excuse her offensive behavior by making this claim before.

“You mean your *ex*-husband, don’t you?” the young goddess reminded the gallery, as she scanned them with shimmering, innocent eyes.

The courtroom laughed, silencing Andy and mentally pushing her back down into her seat.

“Because Mark is my husband now, not yours,” the witness said. “But then maybe this isn’t really about Mark. Maybe this is really about you. Because you’re getting old, Andy. Doesn’t she look old, ladies and gentlemen of the jury?”

A murmur of agreement made its way through the jury box. The witness went on. “Perhaps this is a case of simple jealousy.”

Andy tried to stand again to object, but she was now tethered to the seat.

“After all, I *am* young enough to be your daughter.”

This set off another titter of amusement among the onlookers.

Andy pulled helplessly against the restraints and then roared in frustration. “I’m not jealous! And I’m not old!” she bellowed. “Why won’t you answer my question, you New Age charlatan?!”

The witness gasped, as if she’d taken a palm to the cheek. The courtroom recoiled in film noir horror.

“I’m sorry, Andy,” winced the woman in the witness box, struggling to recover from the undeserved blow. “Really. I didn’t mean to make you so angry. Now, what was your question again?”

The room sat in awed silence, marveling at the grace of such youth and beauty under fire.

The woman's performance was pure melodrama, Andy knew, but the idiots in the jury box and gallery were eating it up. She had to muster some self-control if she wanted to save herself. "Please," Andy said, miming respect and forcing a smile, "just tell the court where Mark is."

All eyes focused on the witness, who blinked demurely. Hand to her trembling heart, she cleared her throat and then opened her sultry lips, as if she were about to bite into a French confection. "Why, he's right there," she said, raising a manicured finger and pointing to the judge's bench.

Along with everyone else, Andy looked up, mystified. The entire courtroom erupted in satisfied applause.

There he was, alive and well, Mark Kornacky, looking down at them like Houdini in his *voila* moment, dressed in a black robe and wearing a Cheshire grin.

"Isn't she just the hottest little witness you've ever seen?" the judge beamed. "And she's my wife!" He turned a disdainful gaze on Andy. "And she knows exactly where I am." Then he leaned over and whispered conspiratorially to the witness, "What do you think, Tilda, my dear?"

Andy's thoughts were growing more and more muddled. Mark was right here; had been here all the time. And he was the judge in this proceeding. It seemed odd for a judge to solicit advice from a witness, but then Andy remembered that Tilda probably did most of the work in their relationship, except for the partying and drinking.

Andy looked back at the witness stand, where Tilda had now morphed into the Queen of Hearts, which didn't seem the least bit surprising.

"I think it's time," she told the judge.

"Your verdict?" he asked, eagerly.

The Queen lowered her voice so that only Andy could overhear. "Off with her head," she instructed.

“Off with her head!” Mark bellowed to the courtroom and slammed his gavel down with the finality of a guillotine.

All at once, the floor of the dock shifted violently beneath Andy’s feet, throwing her forward against the wooden rail. She struggled for balance but couldn’t right herself. The courtroom lurched again, throwing her backwards this time. Then, just as suddenly, the entire scene began to liquefy, with everyone and everything melting into a vast ocean. Without warning or explanation, Andy was caught up in the rolling waves, struggling to stay afloat. But each time she pulled herself to the surface, an icy current reached up and dragged her down again.

“Aunt Andy?” said a voice.

“I’m going under,” she said, gulping for air. “I can’t breathe.”

She felt herself shake and realized her head was bobbing up and down, not in the water but into something soft and cloud-like.

“Aunt Andy, wake up!” Harley barked. He continued to push her back and forth into her pillow until she suddenly careened into consciousness, panting like a runner.

“Are you okay?” he asked, clearly concerned.

She wasn’t sure. “Bad dream. Really bad dream,” she said between swallows of oxygen.

“No kidding. I thought you were being attacked.”

“I was.”

“Would you like to tell me about it?”

She hoisted herself up to a sitting position and began to inhale slowly, waiting for her heart to resume its normal rhythm. “Not particularly,” she rasped, her mouth acid dry. She rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hands and tried to smooth out her wrinkled brain.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“Just past five.”

“In the morning?”

“Uh huh. It’s morning.”

The light seeping in through the shutters drew her back to consciousness. She loved the sun. Daydreams. Nightmares. All her mind’s truly crappy creativity came out under cover of darkness.

“Can I get you something?” Harley asked.

Andy shook her head, drained by the frustration of Tilda’s testimony in tonight’s Rocky Horror Picture Show. She should try to go back to sleep. But what if it turned out to be a double feature?

“Okay,” she said, changing her mind. “Can you go downstairs and slice up an apple and put it on a plate with a scoop of peanut butter?”

“You want peanut butter at five in the morning?”

“Crunchy. Please.”

“Okay,” he said. “Crunchy it is.”

Harley turned and headed out of the room. Still a little dazed, Andy looked up as she heard his bare feet shuffling across the carpet. Through the ambient light, she followed the hairless, spindly legs upward toward his torso, disturbed to discover that Harley Davidson was completely naked, except for a pair of striped boxer shorts and that damned prayer shawl.

Chapter 18

Life Imitates Movies of the Week

Andy's friends were an eclectic contrast of talkers and listeners. Many of them were bright and quirky and witty and never shut up. Others were more thoughtful. They made Andy feel as if she were the bright and witty one. And they made no attempt to compete with or disparage anything that came out of her mouth. They were, in short, free therapists.

Lorna Drexel was one of the latter. In fact, she was a master listener and had a swarm of friends who, like Andy, seemed to need her and were, therefore, never very far away. As a result, you almost had to make an appointment to see Lorna. Which is precisely what Andy did.

At present the two women were having lunch at a small café on Ventura Boulevard, down the street from Lorna's office in Sherman Oaks. Besides being a good listener, Lorna was also a CPA. She had been Mark's accountant when he first started his production company and had dissuaded him from some of his dumber business moves. Not all, Lorna liked to point out but a few. After Mark and Andy married, she kept their household accounts, as well. That's when Andy and Lorna began to notice they were often on the same side when it came to the family's monetary policy: Lorna and Andy usually played John Maynard Keynes to Mark's Ayn Rand.

Andy was fond of saying that, besides primary custody of the children, Lorna was the best thing she got in her divorce. The pair had known each other for decades and had been close for twenty years. Lorna was not just Andy's confessor, there were any number of other people in whom she could confide; Lorna was more of a co-conspirator. It turned out that the CPA's cautious, analytic personality when it came to economics had an anti-twin when it came to emotion. Whatever Andy was feeling when she told her friend a story, Lorna felt, also. In fact, she usually felt it exponentially.

"You found obituaries for all three of her former husbands!" Lorna repeated, with a bit more punch than Andy had used to deliver the information. "I'd think that would be proof enough for the police."

"Larry doesn't," Andy said. "And he was with the FBI for most of his career."

"I hate this woman."

"You've never met her, but I'm glad you hate her anyway," Andy said, admiring her friend's team spirit.

"So what are you thinking, Andy?"

"That we should go up to Big Bear. For the weekend."

"Hmmm."

Lorna also had a cabin in Big Bear. In a neighborhood called Alpine Woods Estates, just a few rambling streets away from the cabin Mark got in the settlement agreement when the Kornacky-Bravos marriage dissolved.

Andy could see her friend calculating the risk and reward.

"You think Tilda is staying in your old cabin?" Lorna asked.

"I don't think Mark sold it. We could ask the neighbors."

"Or just check the title with the county assessor's office."

"Right," said Andy.

"For all you know, Mark may be there, too," Lorna said. "Alive and well."

Alive and well, Andy thought, reminded of her late-night courtroom drama. But the dream presented a quagmire of insecurities she was too embarrassed to mention, even to her unpaid analyst. "I guess I hadn't thought about that possibility," she said. At least not consciously, she thought.

"Really?"

"Well, I mean, I hadn't thought about what I would do if he's at the cabin."

"Okay. So think about it. What will you do if he's there?"

I'd like to take a swing at the Cheshire grin, she said to herself. But revenge was not really the dish she was interested in; the truth was she just wanted to

know he was okay. "Breathe easier," she quipped. "Feel a little foolish, I guess. But definitely breathe easier."

"Would you tell him about the other three husbands?"

Another scenario Andy had not envisioned. "I don't know. In fact, I'm not sure I even want to see him. But I would like to know he's alright."

Lorna brushed her thick, luxurious hair from her eyes. She was nearing retirement, and her features remained remarkably intact: smooth skin, slim nose, dark eyes. It was a countenance that made Lorna look ten years younger than she was, and Andy envied the fact that men still flirted with her.

"Let me ask you something, Andy. Just so I know. Because when we go to Big Bear this weekend, and we *will* go, I want to be clear. What's your motive here?"

Andy was not surprised by the question or the least bit put off. Because whatever her answer, Lorna would take it for the genius or the failing it was.

"Well, I guess I think looking into this could be important," Andy said. That wasn't entirely honest. She needed to get her verbs in order. "No. That's not really it, Lorna. I don't *think* – I *want* it to be important. I want finding Mark to be a highly significant moment in my life."

"Hmm." Her friend looked downright wistful. "Still ambitious, are we?" Lorna asked rhetorically and without a hint of sarcasm. "I hear you, Andy. You're out to find your children's father. Maybe save his life."

Leave it to Lorna to make her motive sound much better than it was. "Well, maybe just account for his whereabouts."

"Fair enough. Still, I'm sensing more here," Lorna proffered, as she began to dig deeper into Andy's psychological dermis. "This is about feeling better – about yourself?"

"It could be," admitted Andy.

"No work lately?"

"Not much."

"Kids pretty busy?"

“Completely ocupado.”

“And you’re feeling unimportant.”

“I’m feeling, well—,” Andy knew exactly how she was feeling. “Slightly irrelevant.”

Lorna’s sculpted eyebrows lifted in quiet confirmation. “Got it,” Lorna said, nodding.

“Really?”

“Losing your place. Transitioning to who-the-hell knows what. Who could blame you, Andy? Or me.”

“You?”

“Oh, yeah. It’s happening to me, too. And probably everybody we know who’s our—”

“Generation?”

“Age, Andy. Our age. I’m preparing to close my business and retire in six months, and I’m already feeling irrelevant.” Lorna looked at her watch and motioned to the waiter to bring the bill. “By this time next year, I may be totally forgotten.” She said this without levity or self-pity. It was a simple calculation that, as far as her work life was concerned, added up to zero. Unlike Andy, Lorna had already seen the future enemy, and it was herself. “I’m not waiting around until next year to find something interesting to occupy my underutilized gray matter,” she asserted. “So let’s go find Tilda this weekend.”

“Thanks, Lorna.”

“And bring what’s-his-name. Your nephew.”

“Harley? You’re kidding. Why in god’s name should we bring Harley?”

“Because he’s in transition, Andy. Just like we are. From boy to man. From Christian to Jew. From sucker to seeker. Who the hell cares? It sounds like he could use the company. And, frankly, so could we.”

Andy was tempted to debate the issue, as she walked Lorna back to her office in the Scotty building on Ventura near Hazeltine, but her reasons for wanting to ditch Harley would sound a tad narcissistic now that Lorna had

issued the same diagnosis for all three of them. As the two women strolled past faux European furniture stores, medicinal weed dispensaries, and an all-natural dog-food store, they decided they would leave for the mountains at around 9:00 a.m. on Saturday morning, taking Lorna's new car so she could try out the 4-wheel drive.

They said their good-byes at the glass doors leading to the lobby, and Andy headed for her car parked at a meter on the street. Just as she unlocked the driver's side door, her cell rang. She pulled the phone from her purse and saw that it was the-child-who-never-called. Tapping the screen, she slid behind the wheel of the car, rolled down the window for air, and answered with a question.

"Is everything all right, Ian?"

"Mom?"

"Don't beat around the bush. You call me even less than I call you. What's the matter?"

"My IRS audit. Remember? You *told* me to call."

"Oh my god, yes. Yes, I did. So sorry, Ian. In fact, I was just wondering how it went." The lie slipped out so effortlessly, it made her cringe. Worse, it was a totally useless assertion. He didn't care if Andy had been thinking about him. *She's* the one who wished she'd been thinking about him and hadn't bothered to get around to it. Mitch was right; she didn't pay enough attention to her youngest. "Anyway, how was it?"

"Not what I expected. That's why I'm calling, actually."

Okay, she thought calmly, willing herself to be fully present in the conversation. He's in trouble with the feds, and he's calling his mother to discuss it. This is my chance to heed his pain, even before he has a chance to articulate it. Because Ian probably can't articulate it; that's just who he is. "How much do you need, honey?"

"What?"

"Don't be embarrassed. It's only money. I can take it from my savings."

Go with the silence, she instructed herself. Give him a chance to find the words. She waited. He didn't find any.

"Ian? Are you there?"

"Um. Yeah. Sure. Right here."

"Okay. We'll take it slowly. How much did the auditor say they wanted?"

"About what I expected."

"About what you expected. Okay." He was being vague. Another thing he often did. She focused on getting to the feeling beneath the statement. "All right. Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

"Neither. I guess." As she quickly searched for hidden meaning, he added, "We worked out a payment schedule."

"A payment schedule?"

"Yup."

"Okay. Well, is it something you can live with?"

"I think so. Um hum."

Now she was exasperated. All this rhetorical bobbing and weaving, while he just kept standing there. "Then, this is good news, right?" she nearly snapped. "Is that what you're trying to tell me, Ian?"

"I wouldn't say it was good, Mom. Just no big surprise. That's all."

"Okay," she finally murmured, because that's all she had left in her arsenal of neutral-but-supportive responses. Evidently, the call was just to fill her in. Keep her apprised. Exactly as she had requested. She had to give him credit; it was more than she did for him. Just be grateful, she told herself. That's all he requires. "Well, then I'm glad to hear it. Thanks for letting me know. For calling. That's nice."

"Oh. Sure. No problem."

She waited for him to close the conversation. He didn't. She wondered if he wanted her to do it. But that might be cutting him off. Damn it, she thought, why can't he ramble on mindlessly like the other three?

"Ian? Is anything else wrong?"

"No. Not really."

She went again with the, "Okay."

"Except—I sort of wanted your advice on something."

"Really?" This was novel. Her kids rarely wanted her advice and never directly asked for it if they did. "About the audit?" she assumed.

"About the auditor."

"The auditor? Was there something wrong with him? Do you think he treated you unfairly, Ian?" she said, jumping right in to ferret out the problem.

"No. No. She was fine, Mom. Really."

"You had a woman? How refreshingly progressive."

"Yup. So I just wondered if you think it's okay for me to ask her out?"

"Did you say, 'ask her out?'"

"Uh huh."

Andy tried to tamp down her amazement. "You want to *date* your auditor?"

"No, no. Just ask her out. One time. You know what I mean?"

"Um, sure. Of course, I know what you mean. I guess."

"Do you think that might be a . . . a problem?"

"A problem?"

"Ethically. Sort of a conflict of interest?"

Ian was so circumspect about confiding his dating life to anyone, especially to her, that Andy had no idea who he dated or how much.

"Mom?"

"Hold on. I'm thinking."

She suspected he dated few women and not very often. She couldn't be sure, but she felt this might be an important answer, and she didn't want to get it wrong. One thing she did know was that her son was easily embarrassed. He was asking her advice because he wanted to avoid potential humiliation.

"Why don't you ask her and then ask her again?" she finally recommended.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, ask her if she thinks it's appropriate for you to ask her out, and if she says 'yes,' then pull the trigger."

"Oh."

"That way if she says, 'no, it's not appropriate,' you're covered because you haven't asked her out. But if she says 'yes,' you'll know it's fine *and* that she wants you to ask her . . . or she would have just said 'no.'"

"Uh huh."

"You understand what I'm saying?"

"I guess."

"It's like hedging your bets."

"Oh, right. I see."

More silence. She tried wallowing in it long enough for him to come up with more to say. When he didn't, she gave up and said, "Does that help you, Ian?"

"Sure."

"Anything else you want to say?"

"Um, thanks, Mom. I appreciate it."

"My pleasure."

They stalled again. She considered abandoning ship for both their sakes, but Mitch's indictment was still ringing in her ears. She threw herself once more into the breach.

"Ian, maybe I could ask *your* advice on something."

"My advice?"

"About all this stuff with your dad."

"Um. Sure. Sure. Anything you want me to help you with, Mom."

Andy noted a newfound perkiness in his voice. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to confide a little of what she'd learned. She'd been holding back ever since her findings in Texas had garnered such bad reviews. But she should tell one of her children, and Ian had always been voted least-likely-to-explode.

"I've done some research on Tilda's three former husbands. I haven't actually mentioned this to your brother or sisters. I'm not sure if I should. They

may think I'm a little, you know, paranoid. Or obsessive. And I know you're the kind of person who tries not to be critical." She was probably laying it on a little thick, but if she knew Ian, he'd forgive that, too. "Anyway, I found out that the reason Tilda never divorced any of them is that they all died."

"Died?! No kidding. How?"

"That's even stranger. There are no death certificates for any of them, and the obituaries I read said they had been cremated. So I guess there's no way of knowing."

"Whoa. Kinda ghoulish, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe you should call the police."

"I asked an FBI agent I know –"

"You know an FBI agent?"

"Long story," she said quickly, not wanting to explain she'd hired a P.I. without permission. "The important thing is, he says nobody will take me seriously because I don't have any evidence of crimes."

"Oh."

She could hear him thinking this over. A better mother would have waited for him to formulate a comment, but now that she was spilling the beans, she couldn't dish them out fast enough.

"Anyway, despite what the police might think, I find this whole thing very worrisome."

"You mean, you think she might have killed them?"

"Maybe."

"And killed Dad?"

"Does that sound crazy?"

To her astonishment, he had his answer ready and waiting "No. No, it really doesn't. It sounds pretty plausible. You think she might be doing this for the money?"

“Well, that’s usually why people do most things. And Mitch thinks your dad had a couple hundred thousand.”

Ian exhaled through the receiver, making a trilling noise with his lips.

“So what are you thinking of doing about it?” he asked.

“Finding evidence, I guess. What else *is* there to do?”

Unlike most people, Ian didn’t bother fumbling for an answer he didn’t have, so once again he said nothing.

Andy resumed, “I guess I’m trying to figure out if I have a role here. I mean, do you think I should just let it go?”

“Is that a question, Mom?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, even if you should let it go, could you?”

Well done, she thought. Very perceptive. “Probably not. Do you think I’m being obsessive?”

“No. Not really. You’re just doing what you always do.”

“What I always do?”

“Yeah. You’re just being you.”

She wasn’t sure what he meant. But because he was the only person in the family bereft of an arsenal of sarcasm, she knew he was being serious. “Can you be more specific, Ian?”

“You’re doing that thing you did when we were kids. Living inside your head. In a parallel universe, you know. Trying to turn everything into some kind of story.”

She opened her mouth to object, but all that came out was hot air. Curiously, he filled the empty space.

“This whole thing with Dad is uber odd: the lady and the ashes and the hex. It’s kind of like one of your screenplays.”

It was. It was exactly like the hyperbolic pitches she threw at the network in her former life. Oh, how sharper than a serpent’s tooth it was to have an honest child.

"No wonder you can't drop it," he continued. "It's right up your alley."

His insight rendered her speechless, while making him downright chatty.

"It just goes to show that life doesn't imitate art, Mom, it imitates movies-of-the-week. The point is, you've got the time. And you clearly care about it . . . I mean, him. And no matter what Mitch or the girls say, you'd be doing us all a favor by finding out whether Dad's actually dead or not."

"You think so?" she managed, still processing his analysis.

"Of course you would. So the only question left is, what's the hesitation?"

She was stupefied. Ian had distilled the situation perfectly. Now he wanted her to own up to the essence.

"Tilda," she acknowledged.

"Exactly," he ratified. "And she *should* make you hesitate. If what you suspect is true, then she's dangerous."

"I know."

"Have you located her yet?"

"No, not exactly," Andy equivocated.

"Well then, since you're asking my advice, I will say one thing. No matter where you go with this story, stay away from her."

"That's good advice, Ian."

"Yes, it is," he said, firmly. It was as assertive as he'd ever been with her. The sheer effort of it suddenly stemmed his unprecedented flow. "I think I should hang up now," he announced.

"Do you have to?" she wondered, with genuine regret.

"Um. I think so."

"All right. But at least tell me first if you're going to ask the IRS auditor out?"

He laughed. "If I get up the guts."

"Get up the guts!" she cheered. "Make it a good weekend."

"Okay, I will," he promised.

She paused to let him be the first to say good-bye.

"Have a good weekend yourself," he said, sweetly.

The uncharacteristic gesture made her smile. "Okay. I'll try."

"Doing anything special?"

"Um, I don't know. I'm thinking about going up to Big Bear with Lorna."

"Good," he said, mimicking her cheeriness, then deciding he'd gone about as far as he could go. "Well, bye, Mom."

"Bye, Ian."

"Have fun in Big Bear."

"I will."

If I get up the guts, she thought.

Chapter 19

Free of Pink Flamingos

As soon as they were in Lorna's car headed for the San Bernardino Mountains on mid-Saturday morning, Andy began to deeply regret having asked Harley along for the ride. For one thing, he was now wearing a skullcap. Not a game changer but a constant irritation – a bit like poison oak. She spent most of the trip wanting to rip it off his head to make it go away. In addition, he talked nonstop and with a bravado that made him sound like he was auditioning to host one of those all-brains-barred radio talk shows.

"We don't really have mountains in Nebraska," he was explaining to Lorna from his observation deck in the back seat. "That wouldn't work with the corn we grow. You need flatter land. And mountains tend to be very hilly. And have a lot of trees. Just like you see here."

"Cornhuskers. Isn't that the team name for the university?" the CPA asked.

Andy understood that Lorna was trying to be polite, which was dangerously close to indulgence, which Harley habitually interpreted as encouragement. No matter how laudable the motive, conversation of any length with him was a slippery slope, and they had been sliding rapidly downward for more than an hour.

"Why don't we stop for lunch before we go to the house?" Andy asked Lorna, thinking it might staunch the flow of his mindless chatter.

"House?" Harley interjected, stuffing his head between the two front seats and darting his eyes from one woman to the other. "I thought Lorna had a cabin."

"I call it a cabin, but there are actually four bedrooms and three baths," Lorna said.

"Wow. We don't have cabins like that in Nebraska."

"Big Bear Lake is a ski area," Lorna explained. "I rent the place out to groups of skiers in the winter."

"Will there be snow when we get there?"

“Just in the winter and spring. This time of year it’s fairly warm and very dry.”

“I’ve never been skiing . . .”

The conversation droned on without Andy, and she gave up trying to sabotage it. She started to ask herself why she felt it necessary to mute her nephew, particularly in the presence of others, but soon gave up on that exercise, too. She sat back in the new leather car seat and gathered in the forested scenery. The car was slaloming its way up highway 330, maneuvering from left to right around deep curves. They were passing through Running Springs, a slip of a town not far from their destination. They would arrive in a few minutes.

Lorna’s ‘cabin’ was indeed a house and quite a lovely one, Andy mused. Her friend had bought the property years ago, when she was a young single mom living in the San Fernando Valley, and the southern California housing market took a wicked tumble. Lorna had been saving her money, ready and waiting to invest in real estate when the right moment arrived. The sound of the 1992 crash reverberated all the way up into the mountains, and that’s where Lorna bought. She prompted Mark and Andy to do the same, and they did.

Over the two decades that followed, Lorna had enlarged and enhanced her investment. It was now one of the nicest homes in Alpine Woods, with a honey-colored log exterior covering a two-story A-frame. The wall of windows on the front of the cabin was aproned by a porch that provided a panoramic view of the neighborhood. From the street, passersby could look into the kitchen and just make out the trunk and branches of a once-living tree that soared from the cabin’s foundation to the interior roofline – right through the countertop. The tree had been Lorna’s idea and the *piece de resistance* of a rarely mentioned struggle to claw her way out of an impoverished, abusive upbringing in Bakersfield and build a life for herself and her daughter in the big city.

The Kornacky-Bravos cabin was less a tribute to any personal triumph, as it was a symbol of the misdirection of the couple’s ruptured marriage and chaotic family life. They, too, had bought an A-frame, a smaller but utilitarian house,

with three bedrooms and two baths. Built in the late 1970s, the cabin had what Andy called good bones, but the Kornacky household had neither the time nor inclination to do much with them. They had painted a bit but never updated much. Instead, the house became a means of escape from the increasing battles between Mom and Dad over money and fidelity.

On some weekends, Andy brought the kids up here to get away from the silence of their house in Los Angeles – the one Mark was busy getting away from to avoid his wife and kids. On other weekends, Mark used the house for middle-aged trysts. When the competition for escape from the relationship became unbearably hurtful and then downright embarrassing, they finally ended it with a divorce. Mark got the cabin in the property settlement, along with most of their mutual funds. Andy got the kids and the house in LA.

Even without any substantial improvements, the property was worth more than \$400,000 according to Zillow, largely because it was located in one of the resort area's posher enclaves. Andy had no idea what her ex-husband had done with it since then. Zillow indicated it had not been sold, but Zillow was not as accurate as the county recorder, and Andy hadn't had a chance to check there. He could have sold it. Or remodeled it. Or abandoned it altogether. She didn't have a clue. But she was curious about its fate and about what it might tell her about Mark's.

The car was approaching the lake now, a large basin of water nestled in a huge canyon between meagerly forested mountaintops. The lake was another California artifice, like the lake at Hansen where she golfed or Castaic where she hiked. Created by damming the springtime snow run-off from the mountains, this one had been designed for industry and habitation. The shoreline ebbed and flowed with the commands of government officials and engineers, helping to water and feed one of the world's largest desert populations. Angelinos rarely acknowledged their truly desperate dependence on the magical liquid, and almost none of them knew that no desert civilization had ever survived for all

that long in human history. Andy was certain the city was on the 'decline and fall' side of its life cycle.

"Get the Burger?" she asked.

Lorna nodded and soon pulled into the sloping, pocked asphalt parking lot of a scruffy looking, but scrumptious smelling, restaurant of that name on the corner of Fox Farm Road and Big Bear Boulevard. The menu offered various burgers named after enviable roles in the movie industry like Leading Lady and Child Star with Cheese, along with fries and shakes. It was a glorified, self-aggrandizing drive-in, and the two women knew Harley would love it as much as they did.

"Well, I feel like we're the Three Musketeers," announced Lorna, as they sat down with their respective Directors: two quarter-pound patties, cheese, grilled onions, lettuce, tomato, and the ubiquitous 'special' sauce.

"Why are we the Mouseketeers?" asked Harley.

"Musketeers," Lorna corrected. "They're from a story by Alexandre Dumas –"

"Don't!" Andy snapped. "Please. Just let that one go. I beg you."

Lorna smiled and nodded. "A little nauseated by the car ride?"

"Exactly," Andy replied, knowing they both meant 'annoyed by the conversation.'

"Sorry," Lorna smiled, sheepishly. "Couldn't help myself."

"You'll learn soon enough," Andy said. "Take my word for it."

"Will try to restrain myself," Lorna promised. "Moving on to the business at hand. What's the plan, Andy?"

"Let's go to your place, dump our duffle bags, and then drive by my old cabin to see if Tilda or anyone else is there?"

"How will we know?" Harley chimed in.

"I'm not sure," Andy said. "Let's have a look first, then we'll make a plan."

After lunch they got back in the car for the short drive to Lorna's. They made their way through a small neighborhood of sophisticated vacation homes set on

half-acre lots covered by scattered nests of dry pine needles and craggy volcanic rock. Lorna had one of the larger homes on the block, but there was plenty of 'pride of ownership' in Alpine Woods Estates. It really was a wonderful place, Andy thought wistfully, as they pulled into Lorna's driveway.

In the back seat, Harley had his nose pressed up against the glass. "Whoa, this is like a mansion," he said.

Lorna smiled. "Thank you, Harley."

In the entry hall Harley dropped his bag and gaped at the towering ceiling. Andy had not been here in several years, and Lorna had obviously continued to make improvements to the décor and the furnishings. The place was a stunner.

"Didn't know I had it in me, did you?" Lorna prompted.

"I don't think I know anybody who has this in them, Lorna. Incredible. When did you go all *Sunset* on me?" Andy asked, referring to the magazine that set the bar for all things tastefully Californian. "Wait until you see her tree," she said to Harley.

"Yeah, I'm waiting for *Sunset* to write about that," Lorna joked.

The tree was in the middle of the cabin's kitchen. Harley could just make it out from where they were standing. He rushed inside to get a better look, and the women followed.

"This is so totally cool," he said, gawking at the twenty-foot trunk that stretched from floor to the peak of the A-frame. A dozen branches fanned out four to six feet on either side. "Is it real?"

"At one time" Lorna confirmed. "It was on property a few houses down. Hit by lightning. See the charred mark on that side there?" She pointed to a splash of black on the nearly white flesh of the tree. "I asked if I could have it, then cut it down, stripped the bark, put a polyurethane finish on the wood, and trimmed it to fit in this space." The statuesque tree arched above them, casting dramatic shadows across the kitchen and adjacent dining and living rooms.

"You could hang ball caps or even cowboy hats on those branches," Harley observed excitedly.

"I could," Lorna replied, without additional comment.

"But she won't," said Andy, making the comment for her. "Now before Harley decides to climb it, is there a bellhop to show us to our rooms?"

"Just me." Lorna bowed and gestured toward the upstairs bedrooms. "Right this way."

A bit after 1:00 p.m. the members of the little reconnaissance committee got back in the car and snaked their way through Alpine Woods Estates. Streets like Edelweiss Avenue and Tannenbaum Drive were lined with large log cabins, quaint German gingerbread houses, and even a few mini-Tudor castles. This was a landscape free of pink flamingos and barely tolerant of garden gnomes. The only acceptable kitsch for such an upper-class wilderness was hand-carved statuary of brown bears loping through the trees.

Andy grew uncomfortably conscious of her labored breathing, as they turned onto Hauptstrasse, the street she knew best. The real estate on this block was less pricey than on Lorna's, but it was far more familiar. There was the house, *her* former house, standing quietly where it had always stood, weatherworn and dusty in a slightly disheveled yard. But it was not abandoned or unoccupied. Not by a long shot. Because in the center of the front picture window glowed a blue neon hand, the mark of the palm reader.

"Whew," whistled Lorna, as she eased the car to the side of the road. "There goes the neighborhood."

"Can't believe the homeowners association hasn't tried to burn her at the stake," Andy thought aloud.

Lorna shook her head slowly. "If they haven't thought of it, I'll be sure to suggest it at the next meeting. There's no car in the driveway. Maybe she's not home."

"The sign's on. She probably parked her car in the garage. I can't believe she might actually be in there," Andy whispered, with a mixture of horror and thrill.

"Let's go see her," Harley piped up.

"Oh, god, I don't think I'm ready," Andy admitted. "I wonder what she looks like."

Harley reached for the door handle. "I'll find out."

"Wait a minute!" Andy demanded. This was a distinctly different Harley from the one she'd push out of the car in Texas. "Where are you going?"

"To knock on the door."

"Where's your stage fright?"

"Huh?"

"You were scared out of your boxers to go up to Tilda's door in Harlingen. What's happened?"

"Um, I don't know, Aunt Andy," he said, crinkling his skull-capped brow. "I guess now that I've found myself, you know, that's kind of made me a new man."

Lorna turned to the backseat to say something, and Andy grabbed her forearm. "We're not exploring this, Lorna. Now or ever. Move on, quickly."

The CPA nodded a silent apology for giving into the temptation and said, "You can't just knock on the door, Harley. We need a plan first."

"We do?"

"Yes, we do," Andy reiterated. "Maybe one of us should say we want a reading."

"A reading?" Harley asked.

"She's a palm reader. One of us could pretend we want a reading," Lorna explained. "Ask her something we want to know about the future."

"I don't have to pretend," Harley bubbled like a new man. "I'll do it for real!"

"Stop," Andy barked. "Let's think this through. I like the strategy, Lorna. The question is, who should go?"

"I should go!" Harley shouted.

Andy hushed him with the scowl she reserved for yapping dogs. "By rights, I should go," she reckoned. "But there's a chance Tilda's seen a picture of me, so I don't think I can do it."

"True. And you know me; I can't keep a straight face. I'm bound to crack up the minute she pulls out the crystal ball."

"She's got a crystal ball?" Harley asked, excitedly. The man-child was now chomping at the bit. "Let it be me, Aunt Andy. Please!"

The women looked at one another in silent consternation. There really was no other alternative.

"He'll need some money," Lorna noted, giving in to the inevitable.

"And some question to ask," Andy added, as she pulled out her wallet.

Harley leaned forward, practically catapulting himself into the front seat. He put his hand out and took the two twenty-dollar bills. "I already have my question!" he said, twisting his contorted body back toward the rear door and propelling it open.

"What question?" Andy wanted to know.

"The one I'm going to ask her to answer with her, you know, crystal ball. Isn't that the way it works?"

The women's eyes met once more in mutual dismay. Neither had ever been to a palm reader.

Lorna smiled supportively. "What's the question, Harley?"

"I'm going to ask her if I'm really Jewish!"

Beaming like a tourist eager to test his language skills, he closed the door and began to march resolutely toward the cabin.

"Stop!" Andy called in a stage whisper. "Harley!"

He halted and turned, obedient but befuddled. "What?"

"Take off the skullcap."

"Huh?"

"Take off the skullcap," Andy repeated. "She may be a scam artist, but she's surely not an idiot. At least give her a chance to conjure up an answer *before* she figures out what you want her to say."

"Oh," he nodded. "But I like my yarmulke, Aunt Andy. It gives me strength."

"Take it off."

Reluctantly, he tossed the beanie back into the car.

"And keep your eyes open," she warned.

He stared at this last instruction, as if he wasn't sure what she meant. Finally, he lifted his eyelashes until she could see the curvature of his eyeball.

"Okay, I'll try to keep them open," he said, looking grave, then he turned toward the blue neon palm and trotted off in a lilting gait his aunt had never before witnessed.

The soon-to-be-retired accountant and the soon-to-be-forgotten writer sat in the car biting their respective nails. They watched Harley spring onto the front deck and knock with uncharacteristic aplomb. The door opened slowly like a dark, gaping mouth, shielding its answerer in shadow. The women strained to see the face of the figure inside, but only a misty outline was visible. Then they watched, as Harley stepped into the deep throat of the enemy's lair.

With maternal intensity, the two waited as time ticked on. Ten minutes. Fifteen. Thirty.

"How much future do you think forty bucks will get him?" Lorna wondered.

Andy had bigger worries. "I just hope he doesn't spill his guts."

"Meaning?"

"I hope he's not telling her he's Mark's nephew. And that we're sitting out here in the car."

"Has it occurred to you that Harley could be in there telling *Mark* who he is?" Lorna said.

Just as in Texas, the thought had managed to elude her. Andy unfurled a familiar grimace, conceding the point.

“Why do you keep assuming he’s dead, Andrea? Tilda may be clairvoyant, but I doubt that you are.”

The possibility of Mark’s return to the living freed Andy to relax a bit. “You’re right. You’re right. The ashes could just be a ruse. But why send them to Mitch if Mark isn’t dead?”

Neither one of them had an answer for what, at this point, had become a recurrent and rhetorical question. They continued their wait in silence.

At minute forty-two, the cabin door yawned open, and Andy’s nephew stepped out of the darkness and back into the glare of the temporal world. This time the silhouette of a conspicuously proportioned woman paused momentarily in the doorframe before disappearing into the cabin.

“I think I saw her,” Andy cooed.

“Me, too.” Lorna echoed, excitedly. She turned her attention to the boy. “Harley appears to have survived. Although he looks a little deflated.”

Lorna was right. The get-up in Harley’s gait was gone. He looked zombiesque, as he moved mindlessly toward the car, opened the rear door, and climbed in.

“How’d it go?” Andy prompted.

“I am in the Aura,” he mumbled.

“In the Aura?” Lorna asked. “What does that mean?”

“Her Aura,” he replied. “Tilda is a very powerful, beautiful Spirit. She smells like roses. Her voice is wise and kind. She told me she has been a Medium for many lives.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” Lorna said.

Andy studied his normally languid facial features, which looked even more inert than usual. “You’re not blinking,” she said. “I want you to blink, Harley.”

He didn’t. “I’m in the Aura,” he chanted again.

“Oh, my god, you’re not making any sense.”

A fervent hand descended meaningfully over Andy's arm, signaling the need for calm. "What happened in there, Harley?" Lorna tried again. "Just tell us."

He answered with trance-like understanding. "A reading is a very deep experience. Very primal."

"Primal?" Andy scoffed.

"It is a link between this world and the other star systems."

Andy's impatience rumbled; Lorna squeezed harder. "Harley," the CPA smiled, "tell us more about what Tilda said."

"She told me things I didn't know. Important things. I am the Page of Pentacles," he revealed with obvious pleasure.

"Really?" Lorna crooned quickly, in counterpoint to the volcanic activity emanating from the woman next to her. "And what is the Page of Pentacles?"

"A child of new beginnings. Standing on the edge of great adventure."

Containment failed, as Andy broke the bonds of Lorna's grip. "What unmitigated bullshit!" she croaked. "Now blink your goddamned eyes!"

Doubtless in the clutches of a power greater than his aunt, Harley Davidson did not flinch. "I am like a newborn soul, searching for my place in the universe," he intoned. "I am stumbling, trying to find my way. I am without direction. Groping for Truth. Seeking the Shining Light of my existence." Here, he faltered for a moment, evidently dazzled by the Shining Light. Finally, he found his emotional footing again. Focusing his unimpeded pupils on his aunt, the young man shared the palm reader's prognostication, "And I have always been and will always be – Jewish."

With that, Harley slumped back into his seat, unfurled his lids, and closed his eyes.

Not sure the mini-séance was concluded, the two women waited in bewildered silence for a minute.

"Are you okay?" Lorna finally ventured.

He grinned contentedly but didn't speak.

“Did you see Uncle Mark?” Andy demanded, refusing to tiptoe around his spiritual sensitivity.

“I didn’t ‘see’ anything. I *experienced* it, Aunt Andy,” he said, eyes still blissfully shut.

“Well, did you *experience* your Uncle Mark anywhere while you were in there?” she snarled.

There was a detectable crack in his beatitude. “Um, no,” he answered.

“What was the one thing I asked you to do, Harley? The one thing!”

Slowly, his lashes rose, and his pupils made their reentry into the real world.

“I told you to keep your eyes open!” she bellowed.

“I did!” he said, reflexively. “They were open the whole time.”

“In some kind of hypnotic state!”

“No. No. I was conscious. The whole time. I swear.”

“So what did you notice in there?”

“Notice?”

“What did you *observe*, Harley?”

He stared blankly, as a little gestalt made its way through the underdeveloped network of his adolescent synapses. When it did, he realized for the first time that the trip to the fortuneteller was not supposed to be about him; it was supposed to be about the whereabouts of Uncle Mark. “Oh, right,” he stammered. “What did I notice?”

“Yes! What did you notice?”

Lorna moved in quickly to mediate. “Think, Harley. Just try to remember anything that might be important.”

He squirmed against the slick, buttery leather upholstery, as if he were trying to burrow his way out of the car. His audience waited with bated breath, as he strained to recall anything that might satisfy the demands of his elders.

“Um. There *was* one thing I noticed.”

“Something helpful?” Andy demanded.

“I don’t know.” His pleading eyes sought out Lorna.

"It's okay, Harley," the CPA comforted. "Right now we're not sure what's important and what's not. Anything could be helpful. Tell us what you noticed."

"Well, I noticed that Tilda doesn't actually use a crystal ball." He waited to see if this seemed very helpful. The facial feedback from the front seat was hard to read. Still, neither woman made any attempt to stop him, which he took as a good sign. "She told me she did use one when she was an *amateur*, but now that she's a *professional* . . ." Again, he scanned for any flicker of support. Lorna touched the tips of her fingers to her lips. His aunt's cheeks began to glow. He decided this was something they definitely wanted to know. "Now that she's a *professional*," he continued, confidently, "she uses a scrying stone."

With that, Harley Davidson nodded, folding his spindly arms with satisfaction and inadvertently flexing two barely visible, yet budding, biceps.

Chapter 20

The Lull before the Brainstorm

"I can't believe we came all this way, and we've got bumpkus," Andy snorted, trying hard not to look at the pubescent object of her ire, the one she intended to send home to Omaha as soon as possible. Harley wasn't looking at her, either. He had been counting on the scrying stone to redeem him, and he still couldn't quite understand why it hadn't.

The Three Stooges, as Andy had just renamed the trio, were supposed to be debriefing one another on their mission thus far. Unfortunately, nobody had much to say. They were seated at a picnic table in a tiny public park in Fawnskin, one of the little towns lolling unpretentiously on the shore of Big Bear Lake.

Although it boasted fewer than 7,000 residents on any given day, Fawnskin had managed to wangle a bit of wreckage from the 9/11 World Trade Center disaster. The small piece of steel girder from one of the Twin Towers now made up a memorial display in the center of the park, which was in the center of town. The half-acre park had been created by the comedian Marty Ingels and his actress wife, Shirley Jones, who were living out their retirement nearby. The two former Hollywood stars had imported the New York City artifact in order to make the park, as they told the press, 'The Ground Zero of the West Coast.'

Notwithstanding the glaring lack of both skyscrapers and terrorist attacks in and around the lake, local residents now felt a common and enduring bond with the Big Apple.

Andy stared mindlessly at the hunk of metal and marveled at the human capacity for making such monumentally stupid gestures – including her own. Why in the hell had she wasted her time coming up to Big Bear Lake?

"I don't think you're giving us enough credit," Lorna said.

Andy stirred halfheartedly. "Huh? Not giving who credit?"

"Us. Our investigative team. After all, we've had some success, Andy. We have established that Tilda is here. That she is living in your old cabin. That she

is staying long enough to set up her business. And that she appears to be living alone.”

“Actually, we don’t know that last fact for certain, Lorna, because *somebody* didn’t keep his eyes open.” Andy snatched up the blended latte on the table in front of her and took a long, dramatic draw. “Damn it!” she wheezed. “Brain freeze.” She sat paralyzed for a moment, waiting for the pain to pass.

Harley started to laugh, then cut it short when his aunt glowered at him. He averted his eyes and tried to imagine some other way to redeem himself by being helpful. “Maybe we could wait until Tilda leaves the house and then go in and take a look around,” he suggested.

Lorna shook her head. “We can’t break into someone’s house. It’s a felony, and I’d probably lose my CPA license.”

“Oh. Right,” said Harley. He’d finished his latte, but he sucked on the straw anyway, just to have something to do. The cup gave a gut-wrenching rattle, as he vacuumed up the remaining ice chips.

“Cut that out!” Andy cringed. “I’m trying to think!”

With that, the conversation stopped cold. Even the slight breeze blowing along the lakeshore took a break. Slowly, the needles of ice in Andy’s head began to dissolve. It turned out to be the lull before the brainstorm.

“We don’t have to break in,” she realized, excitedly. “I have a key!”

“What?” Lorna asked.

“A key. There’s a key. Under the bear-cub carving on the deck. I’ll bet it’s still there.”

“Well,” Lorna began, weighing the possible jail time, “I guess that wouldn’t be ‘breaking,’ per se, but wouldn’t it still be ‘entering?’”

“Not if we’re not caught,” Andy said,

“And if we are?” Lorna wanted to know.

Andy waved the possibility off and busied herself with a very slow sip of latte, hoping for another brainstorm. When it wasn’t forthcoming, Harley jumped in.

"Early onset Alzheimer's," he volunteered.

The two women looked at each other and simultaneously decided not to go there. As was his practice, Harley took their silence as a signal to elaborate.

"Some old guy who used to live next to us in Omaha had it," he explained. "They moved him to a nursing home, but he used to wander off and make his way back to our neighborhood. Even though his house had been sold, he walked right in anyway because he still thought he lived there. The owners called the cops a couple of times, but nobody ever arrested him. Not once."

Personally, Lorna agreed the idea had merit but wanted clarification. "And you're thinking exactly what?" she asked.

"I'll tell you exactly what he's thinking," Andy sneered. "If we get caught, he wants me to feign dementia."

"Okay," Lorna said, noncommittally. "And how do you feel about feigning dementia, if push comes to shove?"

Andy considered the plotline for a long moment. "It might work," she grudgingly admitted. "I guess I'd be willing to take the mental fall."

"Well, this is your call, Andy. You know that. But I'm game if you are," Lorna announced, with surprising enthusiasm.

"Okay," Andy ventured. "If that's what it takes, I'll do it." She raised her latte. "All for one!"

Lorna raised hers, as well. "And one for all!"

Harley looked perplexed.

"It's something the Three Musketeers always say," Lorna told him.

"No kidding!" Harley grinned. "So do the Three Stooges! You were right, Aunt Andy. That *is* a good name for us!"

"So much irony," Andy sighed, "so little time."

But Lorna decided the boy's heart was in the right place, even if his brain was still struggling to get into position. She clinked her cup to his.

Harley beamed, then turned uncertainly to his aunt. Andy shook her head, knowing it was time to cave to the demand for solidarity. She tepidly lifted her cup to him.

"I'm sorry I didn't get the information you wanted," he said.

"It's okay. I always expect too much. Just ask my children."

"Maybe next time," he said, weakly.

"Maybe next time."

They touched glasses, and Harley flushed with relief.

Lorna moved quickly to brighten the mood. "Now all we have to do is find a way to get Tilda out of the house this weekend," she announced.

"Do we have to get her out?" Harley asked, not quite following.

"If we want to get in, we have to get her out," Lorna said.

"I know. What I mean is, couldn't we just wait until she leaves for the Saturday Night Séance she's holding at the Book Nook tonight?"

In unison, the two women set their cups on the table and balled their hands into white-knuckle fists. Lorna spoke because they both knew Andy shouldn't.

"Really? Tilda is holding a séance tonight? That sounds interesting, Harley. Important even. Tell us more."

He lit up brighter than a neon sign. For once he was saying something that was useful. "Well, Tilda asked me herself. Gave me a personal invitation. Maybe because . . . well, I think she kinda liked me." He looked down at his feet, humbled by his unexpected powers over women. "She offered me half off the regular price."

Andy unleashed her fuming fingers and slapped her palms down on the picnic table, putting a full stop on his last sentence and signaling she'd heard enough.

"Are we going?" he asked.

She stood up, taking a final and fortifying gulp of what was left at the bottom of her drink. "Yes, we're going."

"Why?"

“Because you annoy the hell out of me, Harley.”

Picking up her purse, the international female sign for ‘the end,’ Andy signaled Lorna to do the same.

“Why?” he asked. “Did I do something wrong?”

He hadn’t, of course. Not really. He’d just been, well, unbearably *Harley*: bewitched, bothered, and bewildered. And she was tired of it.

“No, Harley, you did nothing wrong,” said Andy, her agitated molars suddenly crushing the mouthful of residual ice to smithereens.

“So we’re going into Tilda’s house tonight?”

“That’s the plan,” she said, continuing to grind.

“And was I, you know, very helpful?”

Her jaw sought vainly for something more to pulverize, but the ice was gone. “You were,” she said, smiling through very, very clenched teeth. “Despite the odds and due to no fault of your own, you’ve been very helpful.”

He glowed.

She couldn’t stand it. “Don’t do that!” she snapped.

“Do what?”

“Look so self-satisfied. It drives me crazy.”

“I’m sorry,” he told her, utterly clueless about what he’d done. Then he inadvertently glowed again.

Sensing another eruption, Lorna suddenly grabbed Mount Andy by the elbow and led her away to psychological safety.

Three tension-filled hours later, which included trips to a hardware store, a Goodwill, and a place that sold medical supplies, the trio sat parked in Lorna’s car under a juniper tree on Feldstrasse, one block from the Kornacky cabin on Hauptstrasse. There had been several heated exchanges about who would actually enter the house, how they would search it, and what time they needed to make their exit. In the end, they had agreed that they would all go inside: Harley would stand watch at the window, Lorna would look for any interesting papers

lying around, and Andy would search for what she referred to as 'proof-of-life,' specifically her ex-husband's.

Lorna called the bookstore and learned that the Saturday Night Séance was scheduled for 9:00 p.m. So they arrived at their lookout spot early – 6:30 p.m. – calculating that Tilda would leave for the bookstore sometime between then and 8:45 p.m., depending on whether or not she stopped for dinner on the way. The burglars-in-waiting themselves chose Subway sandwiches for their last meal before becoming first-time offenders. At 8:36 p.m., they could just make out the palm reader, as she exited the house and stepped into the dwindling daylight.

"You see what a beautiful spirit she is," Harley whispered.

"Not at this distance," Andy fired back. "And I don't care what she smells like, either. Now hush up."

Tilda locked the door and walked away, leaving the house in total darkness.

"Nobody else home," Andy noted.

They watched, as the psychic got into her car, backed out of the driveway, and rolled silently down the secluded street, brushing past them like an apparition.

"Broom-Tilda has left the building," Lorna announced.

"Very funny," quipped Andy.

Harley leaned forward from the rear seat and nestled in between them. "I don't get it."

"Old lady code," Andy said, pushing him away. "Finish your barbecue chips. We're going in."

Lorna started the car and, without turning on her lights, maneuvered the vehicle onto Hauptstrasse and drove past the cabin about 30 yards. She parked where the block-long street dead-ended into the craggy hillside. The plan was for Andy to mosey down the road under cover of darkness, walk up the driveway, and stroll onto the deck, where she would check under the butt of the bear cub for the key. If all went well, she would open the door, close the curtains, and signal the other two with her flashlight.

Without the urban curse of streetlights, the neighborhood was now covered in a pitch blanket, obscuring almost everything but the faintest outlines of trees and the yellow haze from interior lamps. Andy was nearly invisible in her black sweatshirt and pants, as she moved toward her destination. Less than a minute after she hit the deck, the blinking of her flashlight cut through the crisp mountain air like a gleaming knife.

"We're on," Lorna murmured, as she reached for the door handle. By the time she stepped out of the car, Harley was on the pavement, panting with anticipation.

"Okay. Are you set to go?"

He nodded.

"Then let's skulk."

"What's skulking?" he rasped.

"Hell if I know," Lorna said. "I think we keep our heads down and our hoodies up."

Noiselessly, they moved toward the house, arriving at the front door just as Andy cracked it open to let them in. "Put your surgical gloves on," she instructed, as they stepped inside. "And take your positions."

Harley moved quickly to the front window and held the drape open with his neoprene-clad fingertips, while Lorna tried to orient herself to the layout.

"Geez," Andy shuttered, waving her flashlight around the room. "I don't think Mark's moved a thing in this place since the divorce. I wonder how much he came up here." She pointed the beam toward the staircase leading to the second-story loft. "There's a desk over there, Lorna. Under the steps. We kept all our papers in there."

"On it," said the accountant.

While Lorna searched the desk, Andy made her way toward the first of the two downstairs bedrooms, the one that had belonged to the girls. Judging from the luxuriating layers of dust on the dresser and headboards, no one had touched anything here in a very long time. As a grade schooler, Samantha had insisted on

painting the room purple and stenciling yellow flowers across the back wall. Andy felt a warm surge of distant happiness, as she scanned the imaginary garden with her flashlight. The kids had never had a chance to say a proper good-bye to the place because it had abruptly disappeared – along with her marriage and their dad – from their lives one day in the divorce settlement. Andy's eye caught something shiny on one of the twin beds. She zeroed in. It was the plastic green nose of Lil's well-loved Good Luck Bear poking out from under the comforter. Sweet and immutable, it was like seeing her daughter's childhood in repose.

The boys' room was equally untended. Andy's eyes toured the little museum. Ian had loved John Lennon's music from the time his three-year-old vocal cords could carry a tune. The Yellow Submarine poster she'd given him for his fifth birthday still clung to the closet door on three pieces of browning tape. Mitch, on the other hand, had loved The A-Team and spent most of his childhood destroying anything in his path, particularly anything built from Legos. Dozens of them still lay scattered across the matted shag carpet, a defeated army no one had bothered to pick up. The warm surge of memory dissolved into a dull sadness – another era over and never coming back.

Andy turned back into the hallway and braced for the master bedroom upstairs. She wasn't sure what she expected to find there, but she felt sure *that* room, at least, had gotten some use. As she mounted the steps, she could hear the quiet shuffle of papers where Lorna worked below. She turned to look at the front living room window. Harley was on the job. So far, so good, she thought.

She reached the upstairs landing and stopped short. The master bedroom was awash in yellow moonlight from a skylight near the peak of the cabin roof. She remembered this particular glow and the contentment it evoked whenever they came to Big Bear in the summer. She often sat in the wooden rocker near the window after the kids had gone to bed and watched the nightlife in the pine trees. Squirrels and birds and surprisingly agile raccoons rustled the branches and jostled for territory. The rocker, she saw, was still in its place, as was the

large captain's bed and matching bed tables. Everything as she remembered it, except for the two suitcases perched on the bench at the foot of the bed.

Girding herself for the task at hand, she stepped across the threshold and peered into first one piece of luggage and then the other. All women's clothing. No doubt about that. She moved quickly into the bathroom and surveyed the vanity: liquid soap, a tube of toothpaste and one toothbrush. She opened the medicine cabinet. No shaving cream or razor. Tilda was definitely flying solo.

Pivoting both mentally and physically, she retraced her steps to the suitcases, wondering what she could learn from the contents. She stooped down beside the larger of the two bags and prepared to exhume the articles of clothing one by one, vowing to keep them folded and in order. Downstairs the phone rang. Her gloved fingers froze, hovering tenuously above a pile of Tilda's thongs, as she remained in place, balanced on the balls of her feet. She considered standing up but stopped when the phone rang a second time. The ring was familiar. Not a cell but the old house phone.

Not surprisingly, no one spoke. Andy looked at her trembling hands and wondered if Lorna and Harley were shaking as badly as she was. A third ring pierced the silence. It was followed by an unheralded, but familiar click, as the dated answering machine on the kitchen counter did what answering machines used to do: turned on a recording tape and prepared to broadcast the message of the caller. Poor Harley, Andy thought, he's probably going to wet himself.

"Ah, hello? Tilda? You there, honey?" a musty voice began.

A smoker, Andy surmised, who definitely has low self-esteem. And he's not all that bright, either, she told herself. Because even in the midst of a misdemeanor, she couldn't help passing judgment on Tilda Trivette's gentlemen callers.

When no one picked up, the voice stumbled onward. "Anywho, Tilda, it's me leaving this message," he said, straining to project his version of boyish charm. "I, ah, told you I'd call. Remember?" He paused awkwardly, as if expecting an answer. "Anyway, I really enjoyed meeting you. At the Elks Lodge.

Prettiest girl in the bar. That's what I said. Remember?" Another pause. Followed by more awkward charm. "I warned you I'd call and ask you out. So how about dinner? Tomorrow? At the Lodge?" By now he seemed to understand the answer he wanted wasn't coming and, without another word, he hung up.

Still eye level with the suitcase, Andy quickly leaned forward on the balls of her feet in order to stand up. Something she could have done easily ten years ago. Tonight it was too much too fast for at least one out of the four quad muscles in her left thigh. Without warning, she lost the battle with gravity and fell face-first into Tilda's lingerie.

Toggling wildly between revulsion and humiliation, she heaved herself backwards, propelling her upper torso out of the luggage and forcing her legs into the air. She landed, as nature intended, on her well-bumpered ass.

"Damn it!"

"Andy?" Lorna whispered. "You all right?"

The phone rang again. Once more Andy froze in place; the place being the floor. Her left hip was killing her.

"Fuck," she fumed.

They all waited for the machine to do its antiquated thing again. Mercifully, it only took two rings.

"I forgot to say – this is Bernie," the voice explained. "And you can always reach me at the Lodge." Having corrected his first faux pas, Bernie then went on to repeat his second; once again he hung up without remembering to say good-bye.

Andy had enough. Her heart craved a sedative, she'd scratched her cheek on the zipper of Tilda's suitcase, and the burgeoning bruise on her left leg demanded an ice pack. The stress of breaking the law was more than her aging biology could tolerate; criminality was clearly for the young of heart and thigh. She needed a medicinal margarita.

“Time to exit,” she called out, righting her wronged body. “Before we all end up in orange jump suits.” She stood, swooned ever-so-slightly, and limped back across the loft.

“But we haven’t got anything,” Harley objected, as his aunt delicately descended the steps.

“I can confirm that Mark is definitely not staying in this house,” Andy said, making her way toward the door. “And from the sound of the Elk on the phone, Mark’s no longer in the marriage. Whatever that might mean. So we’ve got something.” She reached for the door handle and turned back. “Come on, Lorna. Let’s blow this pop stand.”

“I’m busy,” the CPA said, unmoved by Andy’s sudden retreat.

“This isn’t worth it. Please. Let’s go.”

Sighing, Lorna closed a ledger she had been perusing and placed it carefully back in the desk drawer. “I disagree, Andy. If Mark is really a victim of some sort, it’s important we find out as much as we can about what exactly this woman is doing here.”

The throb in Andy’s leg pulsed in sync with the light on the answering machine. “Being in the house is creeping me out, Lorna,” she said in a stage whisper. “Harley, step away from that window. We’re leaving.” She turned back to Lorna. “Just forget it. I don’t care about finding anything else right now.”

Lorna resigned herself to a tactical withdrawal and returned all the remaining papers to the drawer, as well. “You should care, Andy. I know I certainly do.” Pulling a cloth from the pocket of her hoodie, she wiped down the desktop surface.

“What are you doing?”

“Making sure I put everything back the way I found it.”

“This is no time to be so anal retentive!” Andy barked.

“It’s exactly the time.” The CPA stepped back from the desk, snapped the dirty cloth in the air to shake out any loose dust, and nodded affirmatively at the job she had just done. “Okay. I don’t think she’ll even know we’ve been here.”

“Does that mean you’re ready to go?” Andy hissed.

Lorna’s eyes circumnavigated the cabin’s interior. “Yup. I think I have everything we need.” Joining her co-conspirators at the door, she wiped down the handle.

“What do you mean ‘everything we need?’” Andy wanted to know.

“Okay. Maybe not *everything*,” Lorna said, unexpectedly pushing the muscles on the right side of her face together in an awkward grimace.

“Did you just try to wink?” Andy asked, staring at her friend.

Lorna’s face immediately resumed not-winking. “Forget that,” the CPA blanched, taking her cell phone out of her hoodie and holding it up like an Olympic gold medal. “The point is, I got far more than I expected.”

Chapter 21

What's an Elks Lodge?

"What's an Elks Lodge?" asked Harley Davidson.

They had just been seated at the Honey Bear Restaurant on Pine Tree Boulevard after a successful getaway during which Lorna proved herself an uncommonly competent wheelman, reaching speeds that left the other two scared speechless and unable to ask any questions about what the accountant had discovered among Tilda's papers.

"It's a drinking club for old guys," said Andy, still recovering from the drive.

Lorna removed her gloves with an air of accomplishment that rivaled any cardiologist wrapping up a heart transplant and picked up a laminated menu. "The Elks are also a service organization," she explained. "They do a lot of charity stuff."

"When they're not drinking," Andy reiterated. "Now, what should we order?" She motioned a young waitress over to the Formica-covered table in a booth that had not been reupholstered in 50 years.

"What can I get you?" asked the bouncy brunette.

"I want the peach cobbler," Lorna said, boldly.

"Make that two, and I'll have mine a la mode," Andy said, upping the ante.

"What about you, Harley?"

"Think I could have a hot fudge sundae?"

"No problem," said Andy. "And we'll each have a decaf coffee."

The teenager nodded approvingly.

"Oh, and could you bring me a bag of ice?"

"Ice?"

"Yeah. Just put it in a sandwich bag. And add it to the bill," Andy instructed.

Unfazed, the girl bounced back through the maze of wilderness kitsch adorning the aging restaurant toward the order window.

"Why would Tilda go to a club for old guys?" asked Harley.

“Little pitchers have big ears,” said Andy, winking meaningfully at Lorna and illustrating precisely how winking should be done.

“Don’t mock me, Andrea,” Lorna warned. “Not everyone is a winker.”

“Huh?” Harley articulated.

“You’re sidetracking us, Harley. Let’s leave the Elks until later. Right now I want to know what my CPA knows. Lorna?”

Lorna pulled out her cell and ruminated – a bit dramatically, in Andy’s opinion, about where to begin. She appeared to be scrolling through something.

“You took photos of the stuff you found in the desk?” Andy prompted.

“I did.”

“Papers?”

“Yes.”

“You’re taking your time, Lorna.”

“We need to approach this methodically, if we want to make sense of it. And glean as much as we can.”

“I don’t have the patience to be methodical.”

“I’ve noticed. On many occasions.” The CPA kept scrolling. “To begin with, the woman keeps very good records.”

Andy snorted.

“Don’t do that, Andrea. It’s unseemly, and it gets us nowhere. We should be thankful she keeps good records. It tells us a lot; it might tell us everything.”

Not the least bit chastened, Andy said, “Out with it, Lorna.”

“Well, let me begin with the reason that Ms. Trivette is here in California and in San Bernardino County, in particular.”

“You actually know?” asked Andy.

“I do.”

Their effervescent server suddenly interrupted Lorna’s analysis with the mother lode of sugar and three cups of coffee, which she set before them on the table. “Anyone want cream with their coffee?” she asked.

"We're all good," said Andy, waving her away. "For god's sake, Lorna, tell us!"

The waitress dangled a baggy of cubes in Andy's face. "Don't you want your ice?" she asked.

Andy grabbed at the ice. "Oh, great. Thanks. Now go away. We're in the middle of something here."

"If we can't be patient, Andrea, we can at least be polite," Lorna said, turning pointedly toward the victimized youth. "This looks wonderful. Tell me about it." The accountant picked up a fork and tested the cobbler with a slight press of the dough. Andy sensed this was payback for the winking fiasco. She tucked the baggy under her throbbing thigh.

"It's the house specialty," said the girl. "People drive for miles just to order our peach cobbler."

"I've never had it." Lorna sliced the fork into the crusty fruit and began to carve out her first bite. "Is it actually made from fresh peaches?"

Andy could tell the eager beaver server was about to cross from small talk into big talk, so she put her hand on the girl's arm, smiled sadly, and whispered, "My friend here has type 2 diabetes and gets overly excited about dessert. We never like to encourage her. She could lapse into a coma just from talking about it."

The marginally comprehending waitress stared, clearly flummoxed.

"Really?" She looked from Lorna to Andy, then back to Lorna. "A coma. Oh my god," she managed. "I am so sorry." Then she whirled round and vanished into the plastic forest primeval.

"That was completely out of line, Andrea. I've never been diabetic a day in my life."

"You're trying to make me crazy, Lorna."

"A little. Mostly, I'm still processing."

"Processing what?"

"This." Lorna took a luxurious bite of her cobbler and handed Andy the cell phone. "Take a look at that."

As Andy studied the screen, Harley leaned over to take a peek. "What is it?" he asked.

"Some document," said Andy.

"Not just any document. That's a joint tenancy grant deed," explained Lorna. "And from the date stamp, Tilda filed it with the county recorder a few weeks ago. That's why she came here."

"O-kay," Andy nodded robotically. As usual, her accountant's assessment was miles ahead of her own. Lorna was clearly in view of some significant implications, while Andy's mind remained a lagging indicator. "Okay," she repeated. "You mean, Tilda came to California to put her name on the deed to the cabin?"

"That's right. As a joint tenant. And that tells us a lot."

"What's a joint tenant?" Harley wanted to know.

So did Andy; she knew the term but could never recall exactly what it meant.

Lorna enlightened her eager audience. "When two people hold a deed as joint tenants, it means that when one person dies the property passes directly to the other person."

"She's trying to get her hands on Uncle Mark's property," Harley concluded, just before Andy got there.

"Yes, it definitely tells us that. But it tells us a few other things, as well."

Lorna took her cell back from Andy and looked at her friend's untouched dessert. "Eat your cobbler," she ordered. "The ice cream is melting."

"I can't. I'm trying to focus."

"Suit yourself," Lorna said, enlarging the photo by spreading her thumb and finger across the screen. "Look at the signatures at the bottom of the page here."

"Tilda's and Mark's," Andy said.

"Uncle Mark signed the paper?" Harley asked.

Lorna tapped a perfectly manicured nail on the screen. "That's a notary's signature and seal. A notary in Texas. Mark Kornacky had to be present with a picture ID to sign this. Now look at the date. It's *after* Mitch received the so-called cremains and *after* you and Harley visited Texas."

"Mark was still alive? Mark *is* still alive?" Andy stammered, not sure what to think.

"Well, he was. That's for certain. Whether he is now remains an open question." Lorna took another bite of cobbler. "You see why this takes a little time to process?"

Andy tried to sift through the perverse possibilities, but her mind kept sticking on the binary thought that Mark was either dead or alive. "So he might be alive. But he might be dead. What does all this mean? I don't get it."

"If he's dead and the cabin is solely in his name, then it would have to go through probate. And that would be a problem for Tilda. But if she files this joint tenancy grant deed *before* he dies, then the property would pass directly to her, without a court proceeding. So she needs to file this if she wants the property."

"That means he must still be alive? Right?" Andy said.

As a tax consultant, Lorna had a reputation for pointing out worst-case scenarios to her clients. It protected people from the pain of unrealistic expectations. "Not necessarily. Tilda could, theoretically, file it even if Mark were dead. The recorder has no way of knowing. The important thing is that Mark's signature on the document pre-dates his death."

"And how does this recorder person know when he died?" asked Harley.

"From an official death certificate."

"You mean, it's possible he signed the document one day, and she killed him the next?" Andy ventured.

"Exactly. And she's living here in Big Bear until she receives an official death certificate and she can file it with the county."

"So there could be a death certificate, and we just don't know it yet?"

Lorna nodded, then added. "Or not. We just don't know for sure."

Harley had completely exhausted his sundae and looked as if he might ask for another. Instead, he said, "But there are no death certificates for Tilda's husbands. The only reason we know they're dead is that Aunt Andy found their obituaries in the paper."

"And therein lies the rub," pronounced Lorna.

"The what?"

"Never mind," said Andy. "The point is, every time one of Tilda's husbands dies, there's never a body to be exhumed or a death certificate to be tracked."

"Which is why this grant deed is so significant," Lorna said.

"What do you mean?" Andy demanded, growing tired of eating Lorna's dust.

"Well, it's fairly easy for Tilda to take a man's money if it's in a bank," explained the CPA. "She simply gets her name on his accounts. But if he owns property, well, that's a bigger challenge. She not only has to get her name on the deed, but she has to prove he's dead before she can get her hands on the house. And that always takes a death certificate. You see?"

"I'd like to see, Lorna, but I don't. I can wink, but I damn well can't *see*. What in the hell are you trying to tell me?"

"That if any of Tilda's former husbands owned property, she had to present a death certificate in order to get her hands on it."

"So we what?"

Harley nearly rocketed out of his seat. "I know," he said, raising his hand.

"What? What do you know?" Andy asked, feeling as if the dumb were leading the blind.

"We find a relative of one of the husbands, and we ask, right?" he said to Lorna. She nodded, so he sailed onward. "We ask if he owned property. And if he did, we contact one of these recording studios and find out what happened to it. Simple."

"Simple," Lorna agreed. "Very good, Harley. A downright elegant deduction."

It was, Andy had to admit, and still she was annoyed with him. "It's not a recording studio," she instructed her nephew. "It's a recorder's office. And how do we find these relatives?"

"Online," said Lorna. "It's worth a try, Andy. It might help explain what this woman is up to. Or . . ." She decided to abandon the thought.

"Or what?" Andy wanted to know.

"I'm not sure I should say it."

"Say what, Lorna? What have you already thought of that won't occur to me until next week?"

"Well, there's one other way to find out what Tilda has in mind."

"Which is?"

"We could just wait."

Andy tried to look ahead and see the implications of that strategy. She couldn't. "Fill in the blanks, Lorna. Please. I clearly can't keep up with you."

"If Tilda really is after Mark's cabin, then she's only half way there. We could just wait until she takes the next step."

"The next step?" Andy asked, unconsciously squinting her eyes.

Harley leaned excitedly into the conversation, like a man with X-ray vision. "You mean, we could wait until she files Mark's death certificate, don't you?" he nearly squealed, "because if she does *that*, then we'll know for really, truly certain that he's dead!"

Dawn finally arrived, and Andy saw the horizon. They could keep chasing Tilda's backstory and see what more they could learn about the grant deeds of Mark's predecessors. Or they could let whatever was happening between Tilda and her former husband play itself out until the bad news arrived at the recorder's office in the form of a death certificate.

"So we shouldn't wait around. We should keep investigating?" Andy asked.

"That's up to you," Lorna replied.

"But this woman is truly wicked. We're sure of that now. I'm not crazy?"

"You're not crazy, Andrea. You're absolutely right."

Andy looked down at the lake of melted ice cream that now swamped her uneaten cobbler. Maybe it was time to walk away from all this saturated evil before it caught up with her.

"Andy?" Lorna asked.

"I'm thinking."

"About the cobbler?"

"Metaphorically."

"Hmm." Lorna looked down at Andy's plate. "You're wondering if you should finish the mess sitting in front of you?"

"Uh huh. Or if I should just get up right now and leave it behind."

"That *is* the healthy option."

"Probably." But Tilda, like sucrose, was physically addicting; everything about the woman energized Andy. The rush was irresistible, even though she sensed, somewhere, there was going to be a crash. "What would you do, Lorna?"

A question the account had undoubtedly heard a million times. "Not really my choice, is it? This one is entirely up to you."

Andy smirked. "Always the consummate professional. I hate it when people let me make my own decisions."

"So?" Lorna wondered.

"So," Andy said, picking up a soup spoon and diving into the creamy quagmire before her, "let's hear what else you found at the cabin, my friend."

Without uttering a word – or winking – Lorna managed to convey her approval. She returned her eyes to her phone screen and began scrolling.

"Bank statements." she said. "I'll print these out and show them to you when we get home. Not long ago Mark liquidated all of his assets. I suspect at Tilda's urging. These were hefty accounts, and her name was on each one of them. She didn't need him alive to drain these. She could have done that all by herself."

Harley, who had been curious about the cobbler all evening, unconsciously picked up a spoon of his own and reached for a bite without asking.

Damn it, thought Andy. Now *there's* a metaphor.

"And her passport," Lorna added to the list of her 'finds.'

"She has a passport?" Andy asked. She tried to imagine if someone could be clairvoyant in other countries – and which ones. "Did you get a look at it?"

Lorna arched her pencil-perfect brow. "Someone was in a rush to leave," she observed, wryly.

"You mean Aunt Andy, right?" Harley asked, now fully committed to the cobbler and eager to point out that their early departure was definitely not his fault.

"Okay, musketeers," Andy sighed. "*Mea culpa*. Anything else?"

"That about does it," Lorna said.

"You're amazing, Lorna. Forget those cigar-smoking P.I.s. Give me a CPA with a good manicure and perfectly plucked brows any day."

The well-worn vinyl behind Andy creaked, as she leaned back in the booth and conceded the leftovers to her nephew. The ice cubes under her leg had melted, and water was dripping through the plastic. "I think it's time to go back to your cabin, Lorna."

"Amen to that," said Lorna. "We could all use a good night's sleep."

They wound their way back to the large log house through a noiseless neighborhood on the brink of tucking itself in. Exhausted and thoughtful, the trio said little. Still, there was a feeling of triumph among them, as well as an unspoken agreement that it would be bad form to gloat over the success of what was, after all, a break in.

"I think we should go home in the morning," Andy said, as the car rolled into Lorna's driveway. "We've probably learned everything we can here."

"What about the Elks Lodge?" Harley asked.

Lorna turned off the engine, and both women looked quizzically into the depths of the backseat, where Harley reclined across the entire spread of new leather.

"The Elks Lodge?" asked Lorna.

Pleased by the attention, he hoisted himself onto an elbow. "We could hang out there tomorrow and find out who Bernie is."

"I don't really want to know," Andy said, tuckered out by the mere idea of additional surveillance.

"And if Tilda shows up to meet him, she might recognize either you or Andy," Lorna posited. "And that would tip her off to what we're doing."

"Oh," said Harley, unable to hide his disappointment. "I guess. It's just that—I like what we're doing. What we've been doing so far. It's kind of fun, you know. And exciting. Truth is, I don't actually want to go home. All that much."

Andy sighed with the weariness of someone who had only one obstacle left between misery and a good night's sleep. "You don't want to go home all that much, Harley, because you don't have all that much to do once you get there. Spreading the Good News used to pretty much fill up your dance card. Now all you've got is that yarmulke."

"What's a dance card?" he asked, blankly.

"Never mind. Listen to me. You can't rely on women of a certain age to provide you with high quality entertainment 24/7. You're going to have to get a life. And as soon as you do, we're going to call your mother and explain what it is. Until then, I'm putting you to bed whenever I want. Which is now. And I'm going, too. So let's get moving."

Moments after they walked through the door, Andy collapsed into bed. Not surprisingly, home invasion was a highly effective sedative. About midnight her phone chimed with a text message from Edinburgh, which went unheard and unread until the next morning. She woke reasonably rejuvenated, tapped on her messages, and received the news she had been hoping to avoid for the rest of Harley Davidson's life.

Yo. Just home from the motherland. Lecture went great. Met with local researcher. Found records of the relatives. We're definitely part of the Chosen People. What was God thinking?

Of course we are, Andy thought, mindlessly rolling over on her battered thigh. "Jesus H. Yaweh!" she hissed, taking the name of both her old and new God in vain. She carefully repositioned her body so that she was aimed toward the bathroom, then rocked off the mattress onto the floor. As she put one foot in front of the other, she found herself speculating on how long it would take Harley to talk her into buying him a ticket to Israel.

When she finally arrived in the kitchen, Andy's fellow gang members were seated at the breakfast table playing Scrabble.

"Sorry. We ate without you," Lorna smiled. "Eggs and bacon are in the frying pan."

"Wanna play, Aunt Andy?"

She limped toward the stove, picking up a plate en route.

"No thanks, Harley. I'm afraid I am the bearer of some good news this morning," Andy said with resignation. Eyeing the contents of the pan, she pinched a slice of bacon from the surrounding grease and wrapped it in a paper towel, then extracted it, holding it up for examination. "I got a text from Sam this morning."

The game made an unscheduled stop.

Lorna watched her friend wave the strip of pork back and forth like a flag of surrender. "Oy vey," she muttered.

"Oy vey," Andy confirmed. "Let me make two points," she continued, turning her gaze squarely on her only relative in the room and biting into the bacon at the same time. "First, I will *never* keep a kosher kitchen—"

Harley's body began to contract in anticipation.

"—and, yes, we are definitely Jewish."

"I knew it!" he erupted. "I just knew it!"

She graciously gave her nephew his moment of jubilation.

"Do you have any idea what this means?" he trilled.

"I do not," she said with faux curiosity, as she walked toward the coffeemaker, trying not to imagine the deep well of stupidity from which he would draw his answer. Dutifully, she took the bait. "Please, Harley. Tell me."

"It means Tilda's powers are for real!"

"Tilda's powers?" She'd forgotten all about the question he'd asked at his psychic reading. Great, now even our genealogy is tainted by the she-devil, she thought.

"And so is that scrying stone," he whispered, shocked and awed.

"Ah, yes, the scrying stone," she repeated. "That does give one pause, doesn't it?"

She turned to Lorna for a little tacit pity; the accountant was too busy enjoying the show.

Andy filled her cup with liquid comfort and felt the familiar chafe of enamel on enamel, as her molars began their predictable grind.

Chapter 22

The Attitudes of Entomologists

"That's because the scientists who study spiders are generally male," Lil hypothesized. "Only men would come up with a term like *sexual cannibalism*."

"Still, the truth is, black widows eat their partners, right?" Andy argued.

"Yes. But insects are not people. And the problem is that people, male people, like to foist their sexist vocabulary onto arachnids. It probably sells more textbooks."

Without mentioning the weekend trip to Big Bear, Andy had not-so-nimply gotten herself into a discussion with her eldest daughter about the chances of Tilda Trivette being a man-eater. They had been talking, uninterrupted by munchkins, for nearly twelve minutes, and Andy feared the end was statistically very near. She tore headlong into the topic.

"All I'm saying is that when a woman under forty has four husbands and each one of them dies intestate, it sounds a little anthropomorphic, don't you think?"

"No," Lil corrected. "That would be giving the spider Tilda's characteristics. You're doing the opposite, Mother. You're making this whole thing sound *animalistic*. In fact, you're trying to make it sound downright insecticidal. But Tilda is not a spider, and whatever she's up to, you can't explain it using the mating habits of another genus and species. If she really is killing other Homo sapiens, somebody's gotta prove it. And I'm not sure that responsibility falls to you. Which, of course, begs the obvious question."

"I'm not sure I'm following your logic, Lil," said Andy, who was, of course, following it precisely.

So Lil brought her train of thought into the station. "You're not doing anything dangerous, are you?"

"No!" Andy heard herself protest, with just the right touch of indignation. It was amazing how easy Tilda had made it for her to lie to her children. "Scout's honor."

“Good. And have you managed to find out where Tilda is?”

“Still working on that.”

“Okay. But you absolutely promise you won’t go near her, wherever she is?”

“I promise,” Andy pledged, without hesitation. “Right now, I’m trying to learn more about Tilda’s other three husbands.”

“That’s a little out of your purview, isn’t it? I mean, I thought you were supposed to be finding out what happened to Dad.”

“I’m looking for a pattern from which to extrapolate, Lil.”

“The black widow pattern,” Lil said, with a little more condescension than Andy thought necessary.

“Well, the truth is, I have no idea at this point what’s happened to your dad. So I thought I’d work on his predecessors for a while.”

“Good luck with that.”

“Thank you.”

“I was being disingenuous, Mom.”

“I wouldn’t have you any other way, Lilly.” Feeling she had fulfilled her obligation to keep her offspring apprised of her current activities, Andy decided to move to higher, safer ground. “How are my Boise Boys?” she asked.

“We are going to a cape party next weekend. They’re very excited.”

“What’s a cape party?”

“You dress as your favorite superhero. The boys like seeing themselves in capes. I kind of get off on seeing them all in tights.”

“You’re dressing the twins in tights?”

“Oh, yes! Little matching Batmen. It’s the closest I’m ever going to get to having girls.”

In the background, Andy heard the battery-powered cacophony of light sabers and knew the end was near.

“I have to go,” Lil announced, unnecessarily.

“Right.”

“Oh, I wanted to ask you a favor.”

“Out with it,” Andy said, trying not to hold up the conversation.

“If I send you a bag of clothes, will you take it to Scotland with you next week?”

“How many clothes?”

“Jeans. Some shirts. Two jackets. A few sweaters . . .”

“Lil . . .”

“You can make room, Mom. I know you can. And Sam really needs them for Jake.”

“Okay. Okay.”

“I’ll send them UPS, so you’ll have plenty of time to pack. Thanks. Love you.”

“Love you, too, honey.”

Traveling to Edinburgh had grown from routine to ritual for Andy in the decade since Samantha and Graham had met and married. She often went twice a year, always preferring August, when the days are as warm as they ever get in the neighborhood of the North Sea and when the city’s arts festival turns pub crawling into an aesthetic experience.

She had made real friends in Edinburgh: Sam’s in-laws, who were Scottish nationalists and spent Saturdays at the lawn bowling club; a young social worker from Belfast who introduced Andy to late-night kabobs and deep fried Mars bars; and a fiddle player from Aberdeen with a degree in math from St. Andrews who made his living writing equations for Ladbrokes, the British gambling consortium. She loved the politics and Georgian architecture and rowdy hen parties wandering up and down Princes Street. Mostly, though, she loved the golf and the Scottish golfer her daughter had the good sense to marry – because Graham was, above all else, a democrat and a gentlemen, and he never failed to take her with him when he went to the course.

Lil’s package of used boy clothing arrived near the end of the week, and Andy set it next to her large and, as yet, unpacked suitcase at the end of her bed. Her travel preparations had become so mechanical that she rarely got around to

serious packing until the day before she left. Besides, since her return from the break-in at Tilda's cabin, she had been preoccupied with ferreting out the phone number of anyone related to one of Tilda's former life partners. After five days of highly creative and totally nonproductive Googling, Andy concluded the assignment might be above her pay grade. But on this Friday morning she was seized by a stroke of genius that would have put Nicola Tesla to shame. Digging out a copy of the defunct dogs-for-sale ad of husband number three, Gus Andropoulos, Andy entered 'cocker spaniel puppies eagle pass texas' into the search engine. The link popped up to the ten-year-old listing on Craigslist with its useless phone number. And right under it was a link to a website called The Del Rio Puppy Palace – Home of the Valley's Canine Royalty. Del Rio, she could see from Google Maps, was just up the Rio Grande from Eagle Pass. If Gus-the-Third had actually been a dog breeder in the area, maybe he had known the folks at the home of canine royalty, Andy speculated. More importantly, maybe there was still somebody at the Puppy Palace who had known Gus.

His name, it turned out, was Billy Michaelides, and he was Gus's second cousin once removed. A generation younger than Gus, Billy had bought puppies from 'the old man' on an ad hoc basis and had run into him occasionally at a few of those Big Fat Greek weddings.

"Did you know his last wife?" Andy asked.

"Last wife?"

"Tilda."

"Only wife. Gus was never married in his life. Except at the end."

"The end?"

"Just a year or two before he died," explained Billy. "Kind of a curmudgeon. She was pretty hot, though. Surprised the hell out of everybody when he told us he got married."

"They skipped the conventional nuptials?"

"Yup. He didn't hang out with the rest of us much. He said they eloped."

"Rest of us? You mean the family?"

“Right.”

The conversation was flowing like ice-melt now, coursing down from a remote glacier of information Andy never thought she’d find. Why in the hell hadn’t she written down the questions she wanted to ask?

“How’d he die?” Just keep winging it, she told herself.

“Damned if I know.”

“Oh,” said Andy.

“His sister in Ohio just got his ashes one day in the mail.”

Andy sat up in order to give her heart more room in which to pound. “No kidding,” she said. “Did you ever have the ashes tested?”

“What?” he grunted. “Why would we do that?”

Keep it on the straight and narrow, she chided herself, don’t wander off into the sinister. “No reason.”

“Why did you say you were interested in Gus?” Billy suddenly inquired, evidently trying to make up for the fact that he had neglected to ask until now.

“Well, I knew about his puppy business,” she stammered, dumbly. “We, ah, have a mutual acquaintance. In a Kevin-Bacon-sort-of-way. You know, degrees of separation.”

She stopped talking long enough to see if he had given up on trying to understand her convoluted connection.

“Un huh,” he hummed, having done just that.

“And I knew he died. But I didn’t know why. And, well, to be honest, I was just curious.”

“Okay,” he sighed. “So is there anything else?”

“Well, sure. If you don’t mind.” She decided she better get to what she really wanted to know before he hung up on her. “Tell me, Billy, just out of curiosity, did Gus own a house?” It was a completely inappropriate question for the circumstance, but she needed an address in order to see if Tilda had filed a grant deed and, with it, a death certificate.

“I’m not sure what you’re getting at,” he said, growing restless.

“What I mean is, because I’m just trying to understand the kind of man he was, did he leave anybody in the family a legacy? You know, like a house or —”

“No.” The man from the Puppy Palace sounded as if he’d sliced off the word with a razor. “His wife got the house. I assume she got everything.” The invisible blade in Billy Michaelides’s voice cut right through the phone line. “Why did you really call me?”

She was so close. All she wanted was an address. And now she was going to blow it. Time to wander off the beaten path and into the forest prime-evil.

“Billy,” she said, “I think there’s a chance Gus was murdered.”

“*What?* What’s this about? Are you a cop?” he demanded.

“No. I’m an investigator. And I need the address of the house Gus owned when he died.

“An investigator?”

“We have reason to believe Tilda Trivette may be a black widow.” She heard him inhale air and information in one gulp. “Do you know what a black widow is, Billy?”

“Man-eaters, right?” he said, with the reverence of a male entomologist.

“Right. Billy. Can you help me out here?”

Ten minutes later she was hanging up with the information she needed and without having explained precisely who she was. It was the kind of success that made customarily honest people want to take a shower; Andy couldn’t get into the bathroom fast enough.

Cleansed, head to soul, Andy emerged twenty minutes later to the command of her cell phone. She crossed her office loft and looked down on her desk to see that her youngest child was calling for the second time in a week. The oddity of it induced a hot flash.

“Ian?”

“Hi, Mom!” he said.

She actually blinked from the brightness in his voice. “Well, hi. How are you?”

“Good. I’m really good. I just called to tell you it went great!” The words practically glowed.

“Well, that’s wonderful,” she said, trying to match his uncharacteristic enthusiasm, while she recollected what might have turned out wonderful. The date! “You went out with the IRS agent?”

“Twice.”

“And you like her?”

“Lots. She can talk, you know. An easy talker. I love that because, you know, I’m not.”

“You’re a good talker, Ian.”

“No, Mom. I make a better listener.”

He already knew himself better than she did. “So it seems like a good match.”

“Hope so.”

“I do, too, honey.”

Determined not to fill in all the available silences, she waited.

“I, um, wanted to ask your advice again.”

More evidence that every time she kept her mouth shut, he opened his. “Sure,” she said.

“Annabelle, that’s her name, she tells such great stories, you know. Mostly about her family. They crack me up.”

“Right.”

“So I thought maybe I should tell a few about my family. You know?”

“Okay. That sounds like a good idea.”

“Anyway. I was just wondering. Do you mind . . . do you think it’s all right, if I tell her about Dad?”

“Dad?”

“You know. The ashes and the hex and Tilda.”

“You want to tell her about Tilda?”

“I mean, it’s a pretty good story, don’t you think?”

"Yes, I think we agreed on that," she said, harkening back to their last conversation. "In fact, I vaguely remember you accusing me of living in a TV movie."

"Oh. Right. Sorry. I didn't mean anything bad by that."

"I know."

"Anyway, that's kind of my point. I need a story, and this one is a real whopper, right?"

She had to smile at how the witch was weaseling her way into everything, including Ian's love life. "Yup. One of the biggest whoppers ever."

"That's what I think, too," he agreed, a splash of pride in his voice. "But I thought I should ask your permission first."

It seemed like such an unnecessary request. The kind her other children would never bother making. "Why would you need my permission, honey?"

"Um, well," he said, haltingly, "I guess because he's our dad. And because you're our mom and you once loved him. You know?"

She did know, actually; he didn't want to hurt her feelings. "It's okay, Ian. Tell Annabelle the story. It is what it is. Tell her we can't help ourselves."

"You're sure you don't mind?"

"No, I don't mind. Really."

"Mom?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm glad you haven't given up on finding Dad. Even if this whole thing seems so bizarre."

"No, I haven't given up."

"Thanks, Mom. I love you."

"Right back at you, Ian."

Chapter 23

Witty Transgressions and Buried Futures

As personal statements, beards are among the most in-your-face declarations a man can make. They turn sweet countenances severe and often camouflage what would otherwise be thin-skinned weaknesses. Of all human hairs, Andy had long ago concluded that facial hair was the most symbolic. Revolutionaries wore beards. Reactionaries wore beards. Anarchists wore them, and so did artists. Not shaving could be as much a sign of disrespect as it could be a sign of true devotion. Whatever the meaning, whiskers always meant *something*. Even on Harley Davidson.

"Where are you off to?" Andy asked, as her bristling nephew passed through the dining room into the kitchen, touching base at the refrigerator, where he grabbed a cold soda and dropped it in his backpack before turning toward the front door.

"Chabad," he answered.

"You know, you could try the reform Temple. They have a great youth program, I hear."

"I'm not a youth," he said, unconsciously scraping his fingers along the grain of the stubble foresting his lower cheeks.

"Itch much?" she asked.

"I'm going to Torah study," he said, ignoring her tease and moving toward a quick exit. "And then I'm staying for the adult Hebrew class." Harley reached for the door handle but then pulled back and turned to face her, struck by a grave inspiration. He put his fingers together, as if he were forming a steeple of wisdom. "Aunt Andy, why don't you come with me?"

"Sorry?"

"I'd like you to come with me."

"You would?"

"Why not? You're retired, right? So you don't really have anything to do anymore . . ."

Instinctively, she put up her hand to stem the flow of his predictably galling logic. "Stop right there," she warned him.

He didn't. Instead he just rounded the corner. "This could be a new spiritual beginning for you. Like it is for me. Be all you can be, Aunt Andy. Be part of the Hasidim!"

For the first time in her life as a writer, she truly grasped the meaning of 'gobsmacked.' "Did you make that up?!" she gagged.

He beamed, totally unrepentant. "It just came out of me."

If social scientists ever wondered how long it took to run from one end of the theological spectrum to the other, Andy could now tell them. Just over five weeks, including brief stops for eating and sleeping. Even for the spectators, making change at this pace was exhausting.

"Harley," she said, responding to his improvised proselytizing pitch, "I'm still a little hazy about how to be a good person. There's no way I would ever be a good Jew. More importantly, it's my understanding that orthodox women do not play golf. And as you well know, that's a deal breaker for me."

Harley danced around for a moment, trying to come up with a counterpunch.

Andy didn't bother waiting. She went right for the upper cut. "I think it's time we call your mother about all this," she said.

He hadn't seen it coming. "What?" he said, swaying slightly.

She swung again. "We need to call your mother about your conversion."

He tried to redirect. "I'm not converting to anything," he protested. "I am realizing my heritage."

And again. "We need to call your mother."

His creamy blues began to glisten, as he unconsciously drew his hands into his stomach. "I can't."

"Harley—"

"Please, Aunt Andy," he said, pleading. "I'm not ready. I need time to assimilate."

At least Judaism was increasing his vocabulary, Andy observed. “Maybe she does, too, Harley,” Andy pointed out. “This whole thing might go down easier if your sideburns aren’t in tresses by the time we Skype her.”

“She won’t get it.”

“Give her a chance.”

Andy sympathized with the fear in his gut, but his parents deserved to know what was going on. The phone call had to be made – for both of their sakes. Still, it didn’t have to be done today.

“Go to temple,” she said, dismissing him. “But we are definitely making a full disclosure before the high holy days.”

By four o’clock that afternoon, the light from the southern California sun was crawling slowly westward across the townhouse patio on its way over the mountains to the Pacific Ocean. Andy, who had taken to hanging some of her laundry out to dry across the back of her Adirondack chairs, collected an armful of heavy towels and glanced over the brick retaining wall separating her unit from the next, making sure none of her neighbors were watching. No one in Los Angeles hung washing out to dry, even though it was, unquestionably, the most suitable climate on earth for a clothesline. Homeowner associations, including her own, prohibited the behavior. If she were caught, the Board would slap her with a hefty fine.

As she gathered up a set of polka-dot pillowcases, Andy began fantasizing writing a sketch about a group of female eco-terrorists devoted to stringing illegal clotheslines across the barren backyards of suburban America. Moms by day, they would transform themselves into Pimpernels by night in order to save the planet. She was just working up a head of satirical steam, when she looked at her watch and realized she was might be late to meet Lorna. They had reservations to see a taping of *Real Time* with Bill Maher at seven, and she needed to get moving.

One of the great pleasures of living in Los Angeles is that everybody knows somebody who knows somebody who can get tickets to see the taping of a talk

show. Lorna Drexel was the kind of somebody who knew somebody who could get a free parking pass, a VIP escort, and reserved seats. The excitement of watching live television, combined with the pleasure of waltzing into the audience 15 minutes before showtime and parading past the waiting plebeians to the front row, never got old, and the two women did it as often as possible.

By five o'clock, Andy was in her car, coasting 1,000 feet down the mountain from Valencia towards Sherman Oaks, where she and Lorna were scheduled to meet up, grab a quick tostada on Ventura Boulevard, and then drive over Laurel Canyon to the TV studio in Hollywood. Tonight's HBO food fight featured a lineup of guests that was too culturally toxic for the networks and even more left leaning than Bill's usual panel of political celebrities. The pot-smoking comedian was hosting atheist Richard Dawkins, Rolling Stone's Matt Taibbi, and feminist folk hero Janeane Garofalo. To counterbalance this trifecta of radical liberalism, Henry Kissinger had inexplicably consented to an interview with Maher about his latest book. Taken together, Andy decided that it would be okay if she died tonight, as long as she got to see the show first.

Traffic was light going south on the 405, and Andy made it to her friend's Dickens Street condo right on schedule. Lorna was curbside and ready, as Andy pulled over to swoop her up. They were placing their twin tostada orders by five thirty-two.

"I thought you were going to ask Harley to come along," Lorna said, as she and Andy made their way to the salsa bar after prepaying at the counter.

"I did. But I made him read the jacket cover of *The God Delusion* before he gave me his answer," said Andy.

"Ouch. I take it he had never heard of Dawkins or the book."

"You take it correctly. He couldn't even make it as far as the back flap before hyperventilating."

"I think you're awfully hard on that boy, Andrea."

“Not nearly as hard as he is on me,” Andy said, ladling out a scoop of salsa verde from the refrigerated table. Weary and resigned, she turned to her friend. “He’s growing a beard.”

“A beard,” Lorna said, softly. She shook her head with sympathetic foreboding. “I’m sorry, Andy,” she whispered into the glass food shield, as she reached for a spoonful of the wood-fire red. “Say no more.”

By 6:30 p.m. they were approaching the guard station at the studio, located on the fringe of the Miracle Mile district near the Farmer’s Market. With the practiced precision of synchronized swimmers in pairs competition, the two women pushed open their car doors the minute the key was out of the ignition and walked confidently, stride for stride, toward the red-jacketed usher, who promptly waved the dynamic duo through. They were seated and ready for business by six forty-three. As the second hand on the studio clock neared seven, the stage manager counted down from five and cued the cameras. Showtime!

The evening’s performance by Bill and his heretical panelists was as wicked and wonderful as any wannabe European socialist like Andy could have hoped, and she delighted in every witty transgression. Lorna, who was not a big fan of Maher’s vulgarity, agreed he had been on his game from start to finish, despite his potty mouth. And together, the two baby boomers marveled that Nixon’s national security advisor, who had sent so many of that generation to their deaths in Vietnam, remained in old age as callous and clueless about the human condition as ever. Andy and Lorna sat within spitting distance of the remorseless Dr. Kissinger, now nearly fifty years older, above ground, and still deeply sure of himself, as he demonstrated once again how little he had learned from those high school boys whose futures he had buried.

It was, Lorna proffered, as they walked into Canter’s Deli thirty minutes after the episode wrapped, an evening for the Devil to remember. Located just down Fairfax, the deli was a family-owned landmark, frequented by tourists, locals, and LA’s ubiquitous celebrities.

"I thought you didn't believe in the Devil," Andy said, as they settled into a booth without bothering to look at menus. "We'll split a Rueben and each have a Dr. Brown Cel-Ray Soda, please. Dressing on the side," she told the hostess who seated them.

"I don't believe in the Devil. But I wish he'd shown up tonight," said the accountant. "He'd have to prove himself to Dr. Dawkins, of course, but once he did, he could have taken old Henry home with him."

Andy laughed loud enough to draw the attention of a young couple seated across from them.

"It wasn't that funny," Lorna winced. "Calm down."

"It *was* that funny. I wish I'd said it."

"You've gotten enough laughs in your life, Andrea. You don't need to appropriate mine."

They continued to rehash the night's highlights, until an aging waitress, who had once been young and angular and was now rounding into middle age, brought a sandwich so laden with corned beef and sauerkraut that the top slice of bread had to be anchored with several toothpicks. She set it in the middle of the table, along with a custard dish filled with Russian dressing and the sodas. Sober and speechless, she moved on, as if the food spoke for itself and she needn't bother.

"You know, they have a Kibitz Room here," Lorna informed Andy, as each woman planned individually how to attack the sandwich. "If you're going 'Jewish,' this place is the place to be."

Until now, Andy had avoided mentioning to Harley that one of the truly sublime things about being Jewish is the cured beef and matzo ball soup. As far as she knew, he'd never eaten in an honest-to-God's-People delicatessen. How many could there be in Omaha? "I'll bring him for his birthday," she said. "I promise."

"You're such a good auntie."

It was one of Andy's axioms that a person cannot nosh at Canter's and conduct business at the same time. Most meals require the eater's full attention, particularly when they involve Russian dressing. So Andy waited until the dishes had been cleared to bring out the notes from her conversation with the man from the Puppy Palace.

"This was Gus Andropoulos's former address in Texas," she said. "Billy, Gus's second cousin once removed, confirmed that the house was sold after he died. Are you sure you don't mind doing this?"

"My pleasure."

"You're not being sarcastic, are you?"

"No, Andrea. I'm being perfectly serious."

"Are you going to start with the county clerk or recorder or somebody like that?"

The CPA downed the dregs of her Dr. Brown's and ruminated. "I have no idea. I need to think about it. I suspect it might take a few tries before I get any information."

"You really think someone will have a copy of Gus's death certificate?"

"If Tilda sold the house, there will have to be a death certificate." Lorna called a halt to her train of thought and switched to another. "Unless—"

"Unless what?"

"I've been trying to think all this through. And there is another possibility."

Andy groaned. "Why is there always another possibility with you, Lorna?"

"Because I'm an accountant, Andy. And there is always more than one way to account for something. In this case, there is the off chance that Tilda got Gus to file a quit claim before he died."

"What's a quit claim?"

"It's a deed document that transfers the ownership of property from one person to another. So if Gus transferred full ownership of his house to Tilda before he died, then she would have no need to file a death certificate. She would already own the property, and she could dispose of it any way she wished."

"Well, Gus would have to be a monumental dummy to do that, wouldn't he?" Andy suggested.

"Old men have done far worse for the love of younger women, my dear. We probably shouldn't count on any of these guys, including your ex, to be the sharpest tools in the love shed."

Andy inflated her wrinkling cheeks like a puffer fish and then slowly released her disgust. "I can't believe Mark would get himself involved with a woman like Tilda. I just can't believe it!"

"Then maybe it's a good time for you to take a vacation from all this idiocy," Lorna advised. "Get on that plane to Edinburgh and go play with Sam and the grandbabies. Leave the palm reader to me for a few days. And when you get home, maybe I'll have some good news."

"Gus's death certificate?"

"Well, in its own ironic way, that would be good news."

Yes, thought Andy, better Gus's than Mark's. "You're right. As you usually are, Lorna. And you don't think I should worry about leaving Harley alone while I'm gone?"

"No, I don't."

"You don't mind keeping an eye on him?"

"I'll call him every day."

"You're a true friend, Lorna."

"I want a bottle of Macallan's."

"Very reasonable price to pay."

Chapter 24

The Auld Woman of Wicca

The flight from LAX to Scotland's capital usually took about 11 hours, with time out for a stop in London or Amsterdam. Andy calculated that her daughter had moved about one-fifth of the way around the world. Initially, Andy had been so proud of Samantha's appointment to the faculty at Edinburgh Uni that she had completely looked past the possibility her daughter might do more than simply teach for a few years in another country. It never occurred to her that Sam could fall in love with the place and a man and have babies thousands of miles from home. More to the point, Andy never dreamed she would be making this transatlantic flight with dogged regularity.

As things often do in retrospect, the fact that Sam had chosen a life in Scotland made suitable sense. Andy wasn't angry about it so much as a little mournful, in the same way she was mournful about Lilly's move to Idaho and Ian's life on the road. Even Mitch, who hadn't technically left the building, had transformed himself from an engagingly combative teenager into one of those LA whiz kids who only call home when they have a spare moment and just to be polite. All of her children had chosen exactly where they wanted to be and had made the journey by themselves. Their pigheaded individualism gave her a lot to be proud of – and a great deal to miss.

In all fairness to Samantha's intercontinental move, Andy soon discovered she felt the same affinity for the Celtic countryside and its inhabitants that her daughter did, which really wasn't all that surprising. Andy's paternal grandfather had been a Byrne from County Wicklow in Ireland, and that side of her family tree was ripe with Scots and Welsh. This was a culture that had been genetically imprinted on Andy, where storytelling was competitive, politics were raw, religious identification was often incendiary, and the music made you weep. Now that she understood more about her family history, Andy could grasp the cultural attraction between her Catholic father and secretly Jewish mother. The Celts were not really that different from the Tribes of Israel. Maybe

Sam was the one who properly lived at home now, and the rest of them were living in exile.

Half a day after boarding a plane, Andy arrived at the Edinburgh Airport, leaving the new world behind and happy to be back in the old one. The novelty of her visits had long ago waned, and Andy was content to grab her luggage and a taxi and make her own way to her daughter's flat on Merchiston Crescent, just off Collinton Road. As the iconic black cab pulled up to the front garden, Sam was seated on the step, a child on either side, ready and waiting to take her mother to a puppet show. A visit to Sam's meant you dumped your suitcases and hit the cobblestone running.

Andy managed to stay awake during the entire performance of *Hansel and Gretel*. Additionally, she remained lucid through a dinner of fish and chips in the pub at the Etrick Hotel, during which she regaled Sam and Graham and the kids with tales of cousin Harley's Semitic muttonchops, while avoiding any mention of her investigation or the recent trip to Big Bear. The eight-hour time difference finally caught up with her back at the house after a game of rock-paper-scissors with Ella and Jake and just as she was about to rehash the results of the Ryder Cup with Graham. Without preamble, she decompressed into the sofa at the same time her son-in-law brought her a rum and diet Coke.

"I think she's out," Graham called to Sam, who was putting the two little ones to bed. "Didn't even make it to the after-dinner drinks."

Sam appeared at the living room door and assessed the situation. "Must be age," she said.

"It is not," Andy moaned into the throw pillow. "It's this damned schedule of yours."

"Help her up, Graham," Sam instructed. "We're having lunch tomorrow at the Dome with your parents, and we've got tickets to see the Soweto Gospel Choir at Assembly Hall at two o'clock."

"Have mercy, Sam," Andy groaned. "And I can still get up by myself."

The next ten days with Sam and the kids passed as they usually did this time of year: playing in the park, taking the double-decker bus downtown to lunch, and riding the train to see friends in Dundee and York. For his part, Graham took Andy to golf at a course along the Firth of Forth near a little village called Gullane and then again across the Forth Bridge in Fife. As always, evenings were sacrosanct and tightly regulated. Either Andy babysat while the two parents went out to the pub or Graham stayed home, and Andy and Sam joined the throngs on the streets who were busy mixing equal measures of arts and alcohol at what had become one of the largest cultural events in world.

The Edinburgh Festival is really a collection of many different festivals, firing simultaneously throughout the city for three weeks in August. Theater, music, standup, books, science, film, politics, military tattoos, and harvest—organizations and events celebrating almost everything. Among the individual festivals, the Fringe is the largest, and embedded in it are great evenings of storytelling, ranging from classical tales to comic tattles. It had become an annual tradition for Sam and Andy to hunt out the best spellbinders among them.

Tonight Sam had tickets to see Russell Bain, a weathered and well-cured Scottish highlander known locally for his ghost tales. He was performing at a venue called the The Caves near Cowgate, part of Edinburgh's Old Town and a street originally used for bringing local bovine to market. Sam was so excited about the performance that she arranged to leave Ella and Jake with Graham's parents so that he could attend, as well.

"Have you seen this guy before?" Andy asked her son-in-law, as the two of them waited for Sam to finish getting dressed.

"Only once. When I was a kid," Graham said. "Scared the kilt hose off me. But he's pretty native. It could be tough."

"What does that mean?"

Graham considered the obstacles to enjoying Russell Bain. "He's from Inverness and speaks with a Highlands accent. And his best stories are about the Picts."

“The Picts?”

“Some of our original ancestors. He’s sure to give us a mouthful of local color. But don’t worry, I’ll sit next to you,” Graham assured her, “and translate, when necessary.”

As soon as Sam was ready, the trio stepped out the door and onto the crescent, an elegantly curved street lined by graceful four-story buildings with red, black, and yellow painted doors. The row of upper-class flats featured high, light-gathering bay windows along a street of small hedges and billowing trees, planted to assure anyone passing through that this was a neighborhood with big aspirations and all the right intentions.

The entertainment seekers walked three blocks to Bruntsfield, a village-like shopping area, stopping just long enough to pick up mochas at Project Coffee, a hangout for moms with posh baby buggies.

“Let’s cut through The Meadows,” said Graham, as they resumed their early evening trek toward the The Caves. “It’s faster.”

The Meadows, a grassy, ambling public park, spread out like an elongated piece of pie dough across the middle of the city, with Bruntsfield near one end and the University of Edinburgh near the other. Sam liked to say she traversed it everyday on her walk to work, rain or shine – mostly rain. The park’s best feature was The Links, a small golf course with holes about 60 yards long, plopped down in the midst of playgrounds and picnic areas and open to anyone who wanted to swing a club. It was possible for a Scotsman living in the neighborhood to grab a short iron and play three holes on the stroll to lunch at the pub and another three on the stroll back. Had she lived here, Andy thought, she would permanently carry a wedge in her shoulder bag.

It took less than 30 minutes to reach the Old Town, which surrounds Edinburgh Castle, a medieval monument perched high over the city, atop a spent volcano. The centuries-old stone fortress looks down on the original settlement below, still veined with narrow streets and pedestrian alleyways known as closes. In the 18th century, two bridges were built to connect the Old Town with

the increasing sprawl outward. Within the arches of the bridges, the engineers built 120 vaults to store whiskey, among other things. Over time, the vaults were abandoned and lost to the consciousness of the growing, modern city.

Discovered again in the 1980s by an entrepreneurial rugby player named Norrie, they had since been renovated into a subterranean hot spot called The Caves, now home to restaurants and bars and pricey, kilted Scottish weddings. Tonight, the labyrinth of stonewalled, windowless enclosures was well lit and wired for sound and the venue for at least five festival events.

Leggy and languid, Russell Bains was already on stage, anchored to a bar stool in the midst of a warm, yellowy spotlight, when Andy, Graham, and Sam took their seats. The vault accommodated about 75 ticket holders and was nearly full. The exotic entertainer was well over six feet tall and dressed in a black cotton turtleneck, black kilt, and black high-lace army boots. Riddled with graying curls, his sandy, shoulder length hair dangled over a two-day growth of white stubble. As the house lights dimmed, the storyteller smiled, revealing a glistening expanse of pearl white teeth.

“Brìgh gach cluiche gu dheireadh,” he began.

“Oh, my god,” Andy whispered. “I don’t understand a word he’s saying.”

“Shh,” said Graham. “It’s Gaelic.”

“The essence of a game ‘tis at the end,” Bain translated, in an unusually tender brogue that Andy could almost grasp. “And life is the most bafflin’ game of all.”

Bain’s soothing style hooked the audience like a knitting needle. In rich, lilting sentences, he methodically wove his story, pulling the audience deeper and deeper into the tale of a third-century Pict king who found himself facing an aramach by his kinsman.

“A what?!” Andy said into Graham’s ear.

“An uprising. They wanted to kill the old man,” Graham said into hers.

As the narrative moved on, Andy found herself leaning forward, as if getting herself six inches closer to Bain would help her untangle the rasp and roll of his

accent. The crux of the story seemed to be that the entire rebellion was based on a misapprehension created by the King's young son, an irredeemable womanizer. If Andy understood things correctly, the boy would slip out at night and roam from village to village, seducing women at an alarming rate. When the females in the kingdom began to piece together the Prince's duplicity, they bridled with indignation and retaliated by starting a rumor that the kingdom was being preyed upon by an enemy infiltrator who was attacking the local lassies – and that the King had done nothing to catch him. The uglier the rumor grew, the angrier the village men became and the more the Prince wanted to go fishing off the Orkney Islands, which he soon did.

"The old king daunerred about babhdaireachd," Bain said.

Andy leaned toward Graham, but he preempted her. "No idea," he whispered.

"He wandered about in a puzzlement of mind," Bain explained, all on his own. "He feared bloody insurrection, and he didnae kin what to do. So his advisors, aye, even the Pict kings had advisors, had a blether. They all ken someone must gang to see Iona, the auld woman of wicca, on Mull and learn from her what was to be."

Graham leaned into Andy's ear. "Someone must go to see a witch. On the island of Mull. To find out what was going to happen."

"Wise, she was, Iona," continued the storyteller. "A teller of the future, with tools of staff and dirk and scrying stone."

"Did he say scrying stone?" Andy whispered.

"I think so," Graham whispered back

Holy shit, Andy hissed. Tilda the Terrible had stalked her to Scotland. Was there no place to get away from this woman?

She felt the chill of a post-menopausal hot flash, her aging body's response to things that weirded her out. Shivering with sweat, she tried to concentrate on Bain's story. He was telling his audience that the King readily agreed to the proposal with one proviso: that only his son could be trusted to hear and convey

the fortuneteller's news. So the advisors sent men out to find the Prince and haul him home. When he arrived, father instructed son to set sail for Mull and see what the witch had to say about how the unrest would end.

"Noo witchcraft is witchcraft ye say," Bain observed, "but Iona was a true Pict Wiccan, bawfaced and sleekit. Alone she lived in a wee hoose, where many came to see her beloved keek-stane."

Before Andy could ask Graham for a translation, Bain glared in her direction and explained with perturbed eyes, "A Scottish crystal ball, fur ye who dinnae ken. A peeking stone. Polished and black and powerful in the peely wally hands of Iona."

Andy wanted to die. Instead, she kept her head down, her lids shuttered, and vowed not to open her mouth for the rest of the frigging story. As a consequence, the last ten minutes seemed to go on forever, and because she couldn't watch his lips, Bain's narrative went from challenging to incomprehensible.

"He scowled at me," she said, as the trio made their way back to Merchiston Crescent in the 10 o'clock twilight. "A big, brutish scowl. Did you see it?"

"No, Mother, I did not," said Sam. "It wasn't personal, believe me. He knows there are people in the audience who have trouble understanding him. That's why he stops so often to define the words he uses."

"Well, not often enough, if you ask me. How the hell am I supposed to know what a keek-stane is?"

Graham guided the three of them toward one of the makeshift bars set up for late-night revelers in George Square. "To be fair, Andy, he told you what it was. And also to be fair, it was a brilliant ending, didn't you think? Here, take a swig of this before you give us your review."

Andy took the proffered plastic cup and swallowed impatiently. The ale hit her cascading blood stream, fueled by both embarrassment and thoughts of Tilda, like a warm rain. Within minutes, she felt her system slow to a comfortable calm. For the first time, she noticed the residual sunlight on the horizon to the

west. "In the gloaming," she murmured to herself and, all at once, she thought she understood what the Scots meant by dusk.

"What?" Sam asked.

"Nothing. It's just so amazing to still see the sun at this time of night," Andy said. The wonder of the gloaming mixed sublimely with the beer, and almost instantly, Andy experienced a mind-altering buzz. Suddenly, the Ugly American in her felt as if she could forgive anything excessively Scottish, including Russell Bain. She turned to her son-in-law and, as if she had just stepped out of a monastery, said contemplatively, "How did it end? The story. I couldn't understand it."

Graham laughed and took Samantha's hand, as they headed for home. "Well, the Prince went to see Iona, the old woman on the Isle of Mull. And he asked her to tell him how the revolt would end. She hesitated, saying some things are best left unknown. But he pressed her. So she opened a small box and took out her—" He stopped long enough for Andy to know it was a tease.

"Her keek-stane," she said.

"Aye. And she told him the future."

"Which was?"

"Did you really not get this part, Mom?" Sam asked.

"Sorry, Sam. I really didn't get it."

"Well, the old woman said the rebellion would end when the King was murdered," Graham resumed.

"Murdered?" said Andy.

"Murrdad," he repeated in his best brogue. "And not by an enemy, the old woman told him. The King would be murdered by the one he trusted most."

"Ah," breathed Andy. "And the boy demanded to know who that was . . ."

"He did," replied Graham. "'Ye,' said Iona. 'Because ye are the one he sent.'"

"Got it," Andy piped in. "It's the self-fulfilling prophecy!"

"Ever the writer. Exactly right," smiled Graham. "Would you like to finish?"

"My pleasure." Graham had a penchant for filling her ego, and Andy went with it. "Let's see, I'm going to guess that the prediction made the boy panic. If he told his father the truth, the old man would have his son killed to protect himself. If the Prince failed to tell the truth, the witch would put a curse on him for lying. So the poor lad did the only thing he could do; he went home and killed his old man."

Sam began a round of applause. "Bravo, Mom. Now was that so hard?"

Andy did not mind capitulating, but acknowledging her weaknesses was becoming an increasingly familiar theme in the conversations with her adult kids, and *that* she minded.

"Damn right, it was," she protested. "It takes an above-average American to follow Russell Bain's blather. And I have just proved what most of my Scottish friends already know; I am definitely an above-average American. I need another beer."

"No, you don't," said Sam.

"Yes, I do," announced Andy. "And I'm buying this round."

"Brilliant," said Graham. "And as a true Scotsman, I find you way above average, Andy."

"Enough said."

"Okay. Okay," Sam relented. "But I don't want to hear one word from the two of you about the Ryder Cup or I'm heading home by myself."

Chapter 25

The Ingenious Part

LA welcomed Andy home with a carmageddon-sized traffic jam on the 405. The blockage began near Sunset and continued northward for miles. It took her just over four hours of enforced patience to make the 50-minute trip home from LAX, and she marveled that some second amendment nut hadn't stepped out of his stalled automobile and started exercising his right to bear arms on a public thoroughfare. Pundits complained about the lack of civility in the 21st century, but they were looking in all the wrong places. Thousands of people trapped on a narrow strip of concrete in a confined space for hours on end, and no one steps out of line or lane. Was there a purer definition of good behavior?

Weary and driving by rote as she pulled into the garage, Andy decided to leave her suitcase in the trunk and head directly to bed. She turned off the car, picked up her purse, and headed for the door into the family room. As she reached to put her key in the lock, the door opened without her. The man holding it was big, bulky, and dressed in bituminous black.

"You must be Andrea," he said, in a voice that mimicked the timber of his body.

Her adrenaline spiked, as her stomach dropped. She opened her mouth, but her voice was empty.

"I'm Rabbi Mencachem Moser," said the man.

"Oh. Right," Andy responded, not really that excited but very much relieved. She wasn't sure why this particular clergyman was standing in her doorway, but it had to be Harley's doing, and at this point in her travel itinerary, she didn't care. Her next stop was upstairs in the middle of a familiar mattress. She took a step forward, but he didn't move. And if he didn't, she couldn't. She stood for a moment, wondering how to make nice so she could get into her own house. Finally, she put out her hand. She waited unthinkingly for him to take it, and when he didn't, she watched it dangle pathetically in the space between

them. Then the gender-specific explanation for his behavior dawned, filling her with all the righteous indignation of a 1960s protest march.

Aching with exhaustion and no longer able to sustain the perfect record of good behavior she had just set on the California freeway, she let her rebellion rip. "Oh, Christ," she sneered, "I forgot you guys don't touch women. Well, step out of the way, whoever you are, because I don't want to touch you, either. And whatever the hell you're doing here, do it and get it over with, so I can get some rest."

Mortified, the tubby rabbi nearly tripped in his efforts to move aside. Andy charged forward, right past her nephew, who was seated at the dining table clutching the Oxford Jewish Bible and looking as offended as the man at the door.

"He's tutoring me," Harley called after her by way of explanation. "For my bar mitzvah."

Andy had chosen the shortest route to her bedroom and was not deviating. "Mazel tov," she shouted back. "I'll bring the lox and bagels." And she slammed the door behind her.

Saying too much can be a lot like drinking too much; the next morning you wake up with a throbbing cortex, a lingering knot in your gut, and a trail of damage to repair – most of it emotional. Harley was waiting for her when she stumbled down the stairs to graze for breakfast. Andy assumed he'd still be tucked up in his bed, since it was 6:00 a.m. and only people with hideous jobs and jet lag were up at this time of day. It had been her intention to empty her suitcase before she made any amends. But he was sitting on the patio in his yarmulke and prayer shawl, no doubt muttering that ancient Hebrew standard, 'Blessed are you, Lord, our God, ruler of the universe, who has not created me a woman.' Now she was going to have to apologize to the patriarchy before she'd had anything to eat.

She was just opening the fridge when she heard the ominous slide of the screen door.

“Good morning,” Harley said, in a voice that was unsettlingly serious.

“Hey, Harley,” Andy shot back enthusiastically, flinching from her affectation of pleasantness. “How’ve you been?”

“Fine. Thank you.”

She pulled out a carton of eggs and turned to look at him, thinking eye contact was the best way to disarm the situation. “You’re looking very . . .” She ceased the compliment when she got a full view of his evolving physical persona. “Severe,” she finished. Every hair follicle on Harley’s body was now in full bloom, fuming and unfettered. And, like the rabbi, he wore an ensemble of black on black. “I, ah, wanted to express my regret about what I said last night. I was really tired . . .”

“Please, don’t,” he admonished her. “The rabbi and I are accustomed to ridicule. It is our burden to bear.”

“Oh,” she said. “Okay. If you say so.”

“I just came in to tell you that Lorna called yesterday wanting to know when you’d be back.”

“Really? Good. Great.”

“She wants us to have lunch as soon as possible.”

“Us?” Andy asked, skeptically, drawing the ‘s’ out as sweetly as possible.

“You and me,” he said, as his voice dipped into a bass register she’d never heard before. “At Canter’s. I committed us to tomorrow. Is that too soon?”

She scrambled to adjust to the tone of authority in his voice. “No. No, I don’t think so. Tomorrow’s fine.”

“Well, be sure to get some rest. We don’t want you falling asleep mid-meeting.”

And with that, he stepped back out onto the patio and resumed reciting his morning blessings.

Andy made herself a plate of French toast and decided that if Harley didn’t make it as a Jew, he might have a future as a capo in the Mafia.

They met, as Harley had ordained, at the deli on Fairfax Avenue. It was one of those stunning Los Angeles late summer middays, when the heat radiates off the pavement and sunglasses are necessary for safe navigation. The temperature was nearing 90, and the dearth of smog was a remarkable testament to California's left-wing air quality standards. In the space previously occupied by carbon emissions, the smell of borscht and pumpernickel permeated the air along the sidewalk.

Inside, the accountant, the fedora-wearing teenager, and the washed-out screenwriter took a booth near the window. Lorna seemed surprisingly agitated for a woman of inscrutable emotion, so Andy took on the job of introducing the boy from Omaha to the mysteries of blintzes, potato knish, and chopped liver. Harley examined the entire menu, soberly nodding his approval of both his People's cuisine and their ancient dietary laws. By the time he was finally ready to place his order, Lorna had ordered both Andy and herself a Bloody Mary.

"Okay, do you mind if I get this off my chest right away?" the CPA asked, as the waitress exited with orders for the usual Rueben sandwich for the ladies and sweet and sour stuffed beef cabbage for the boychik. "I want to tell you what I know before we're faced with the Russian dressing."

"First things first," said Andy, ignoring her friend's atypical anxiety. With that, she reached into her purse, pulled out a universally coveted bottle of single highland malt scotch whiskey and placed it on the table. "Am I going to get my money's worth?" she asked.

Lorna nodded.

It was, Andy decided, a forebodingly humorless nod. She abandoned the banter and asked, "What do you know about Gus Andropoulos?"

Lorna trilled her incomparably enameled nails across the tabletop, searching for an appropriate approach. She turned to Andy with a look of unsparing wariness.

"Yikes, Lorna," said Andy. "You're scaring me."

"I'm preparing you."

"For what?"

"For what I discovered."

"It's that disturbing?"

"It's that weird."

"What's weird?"

"And to be fair, ingenious."

"What's ingenious?" asked Andy, in a voice that illustrated just how contagious anxiety can be.

"The M.O."

Until now, the Hasidic newbie had been making a valiant attempt to remain above the female fray, clearly treating it as idle chatter. But Lorna's ominous demeanor was so unsettling that the future rabbi could ignore the conversation no longer.

"What does M.O. mean?" he suddenly asked.

"Tilda's method of operation," Andy explained.

Lorna tried lamely to lighten her gloomy mood and her delivery. "You have to hand it to the woman—" she began.

But Andy was having none of it. "No, I don't!" she spat. "Now, what the hell are you talking about?"

Lorna exhaled and tried again. "Well, I can say unequivocally that Gus is dead."

"O-kay," Andy pronounced very slowly, with a withering cock of her head. "We kind of knew that, didn't we? So get on with it. Did you find out how he died?"

"I did. But that's not the important part."

"The important part?"

Unconsciously, Lorna started drumming her nails again. "The *ingenious* part."

"Enough with the nails, Lorna! What's the ingenious part?"

Lorna clasped her skittish hands. "Where he died," she answered.

Andy sat up in surprise, launching the celery stalk she'd been twirling in her fingers out of the booth and onto the floor.

Harley beat his aunt to the salient interrogatory. "Why is that more important than how he died?" he asked.

"Because it explains almost everything."

The possibility that 'almost everything' could be explained was so intriguing that Andy forgave herself on the spot for not having any idea exactly how. Lorna knew, and that's all that counted. "So give it to us step by step," she said, reverentially. "Beginning with where he died."

And with that, the waitress returned and unloaded their lunch platters onto the table. Harley reached for his fork.

"Don't touch anything," Andy ordered. "This needs our full attention. Now tell us, Lorna. Where did Gus die?"

"Fiji," was the answer.

"Oh, my god. How on earth do you know that?"

The restless nails now hurried to the leather satchel on the booth bench beside Lorna and extracted a single sheet of paper. "Because his death certificate tells us so," she explained, handing Andy a copy of a registered Certificate of Death from the Fiji High Commission. "We were right. Tilda had joint title to the house Gus owned in Texas, and in order to get full title, she needed to file a death certificate. And she did. The certificate was issued in Suva, the capital of Fiji. He died at an upscale resort just outside the city."

"How?" asked Harley, equally awed by Lorna's performance.

"He drowned," she said.

"You got all this from the death certificate?" Andy wondered.

"Mostly. And I got a copy of something called a Medical Certificate for Cause of Death, as well."

"Was there an autopsy?"

“No. The cause of death was certified by the doctor on the scene as accidental drowning, and according to the records, Gus was cremated right there in Fiji.”

For a moment Andy and Harley sat processing the implications of Lorna’s findings. Then the trio began spontaneously ping-ponging the advantages of Tilda’s modus operandi across the table at one another.

“So if you die in a foreign country, there is no state or county record of your death in the U.S.,” Andy served.

“And if you’re on vacation and it looks like an accident,” Lorna volleyed, “there are few questions and no autopsy.”

“And who wants to ship a body home?” Harley returned. “You cremate the body and eliminate any future possibility of questions.”

It didn’t take much to keep this little ball of impeccable logic in the air.

Andy took another aggressive swing at it. “Drowning an old man can’t be that difficult. I have no doubt she could do it. Maybe with the help of a little booze.”

Lorna was ready and waiting. “And if you succeed one time, why not try another?”

“And another,” Harley lobbed back.

“And another,” said Andy, slamming home the point and scoring the first truly plausible explanation of what had happened to Tilda’s previous husbands – and what had happened to Mark. “And *that’s* how Fiji explains everything, right?”

“Right,” Lorna confirmed. “Because it explains how she could have killed all four men and no one has been able to assemble the assorted crimes and put them together.”

“But if she killed them all in Fiji –”

“No, no,” countered the CPA with uncharacteristic certainty. “I’m sure each man got his own international vacation. Anyone as clever as Tilda would never use the same country twice.”

Andy was trying to imagine the kind of uninhibited creativity it would take to dream up a plan like this and the sociopathic compulsion to execute it. "I don't understand this woman," she whispered with respectful revulsion. "I really don't."

"Why should you? Why should any of us?" Lorna pronounced with indignation. "The woman's a serial killer."

This simple and rather obvious observation came as a jaundiced jolt to the writer of so much mediocre fiction. For someone who had put up her share of murder and mayhem on a television screen, she had never really contemplated the seemingly innocuous nature of ending the lives of actual human beings. Nor had she realized how easy it was to habitually kill people and go completely undetected.

Harley was beginning to nervously pinch the hair at the base of his chin and wipe moisture from the rim of his felt hat. "Why don't we just go to the police?" he demanded.

Alarming, Lorna turned her eyes on the boy with a fierceness no one was expecting. "I did," she said. "Those jackasses. I did!"

Chapter 26

The Warm Waters of Denial

Andy issued a rare dispensation and told Harley to eat his cabbage before it got cold. She and Lorna didn't have the stomach for their sandwich yet.

"What do you mean you talked to the police?" Andy wanted to know.

"I've been on the Community Policing Advisory Board in the Valley for years," Lorna reminded Andy. "All those meetings and fund-raisers. Fat lot of good it did me."

"Who'd you talk to?"

"Bill Lornier and Collin Cinco. I took them to lunch."

"Really?"

"I *paid* to have them make me feel like a fool."

It was difficult to tell whether Lorna was more upset by what she had learned about Tilda or what she had learned about the police. Whichever it was, Andy was certain she had never seen her friend so agitated.

"What, exactly, did they say?"

"That at this point, there was nothing they could do."

"For god's sake," Andy snapped. "What point does this have to get to?"

It's not that the two LAPD sergeants had been rude or even dismissive, Lorna explained. It was their painstakingly polite condescension that was so aggravating.

"The way it generally works," Lornier had told her, "is that the Department begins with a crime and then sets out to find a criminal. What you've got is someone you believe may be a criminal, and you want us to help you work backward and find a crime."

"But I think I've finally found one," Lorna had explained.

"No, you've found a possible method for committing a crime," the policemen had countered, alternating sentences between them. "But there is no evidence at all that any crime occurred. This guy, Gus, might have really drowned. And even if he was murdered, Fiji is a little out of our jurisdiction."

Both men had tried to camouflage a smile with simultaneous sips of coffee, but the accountant had seen their smirks.

"In fact, all of this — even the cabin in Big Bear — is out of our jurisdiction," Lornier had added.

"Did you ask them about contacting the FBI?" Andy interrupted.

"Oh, yes."

"And?"

"And Collin Cinco got the punch line on that one," Lorna sighed, ruefully. "He said, and I quote, 'The feds pretty much like to start with a crime, too, and then work their way back to the criminal.' This time they just chuckled out loud."

The personal deflation she had suffered while lunching with the men in blue visibly reoccurred, as Lorna slumped forward, elbows on the table, head in hands.

Andy shoved the corned beef on rye in front of her friend. "Eat. We need to think this through," she instructed.

They ate in silence, except for one unnecessary and obviously misdirected burst of anger in which Andy barked at Harley to wipe a dollop of Russian dressing from his beard.

"It's not even your dressing," she told him.

"I just wanted to try it," he said, in a half apology.

"Humph," was the best she could do.

Dessert was a shared plate of cream cheese blintzes with strawberry jam. When it had been wiped clean, Andy once more ventured the question every American female has been programmed to ask her closest friend in moments of crisis.

"Tell me," she began. "Just tell me again, Lorna. Am I crazy?"

"No. This woman is definitely killing people. I would swear to it."

"Then we really need to do something. I mean, something more."

"Let's order coffee," Lorna suggested. "Because I've thought a lot about that."

"You've got a plan?"

"More of a strategy."

The strategy made the only logical sense one could make out of an increasingly idiotic situation. Lorna laid it out over two cups of decaf and Harley's first egg cream.

"I think if we could demonstrate that each of these four men died while on vacation with Tilda in a foreign country and that she was the sole beneficiary of these deaths, the police or the feds or whomever would be forced to look into it."

"Isn't that still working backward from the criminal to the crime?" asked Harley, who was grasping this whole thing with unexpected clarity.

"Agreed," Lorna said. "However, it's still the only approach we've got. Even the police should agree that nobody has that many husbands die 'accidentally' while on vacation. *Nobody.*"

"So what would we need to do to find out how and where these guys died?" Andy asked.

"I guess we'd have to do what we did with Gus. Try to hunt down a family member, see if the guy owned any real estate, and then contact the county recorder where the property is located to see if Tilda was on the title. If she was and she filed a death certificate, then we contact the country that issued the death certificate to see what happened."

"That's a helluva lot of work," Andy groaned.

Lorna nodded. "I know. But I don't see any other way. Do you?"

Andy grimaced in a let's-all-run-a-marathon sort of way. "Damn Mark! I can't believe he's making me go through all this. The guy's made as big a mess of his death as he did of his life. This could take months."

"I thought you thought Uncle Mark wasn't dead yet," Harley said, unable to mask his confusion under all that facial hair.

"Well, if he isn't, I'll be ready to kill him myself by the time this is over," Andy snorted, making her sound way nastier than she felt about the situation. In point of fact, she wasn't all that sure *how* she felt about the situation. As time

went on, it was more and more likely that Mark really was dead. And somewhere deep down under the warm waters of denial, floated the icy truth: she already knew he was; she just couldn't admit it yet. "Sorry. That was uncalled for. But this whole thing makes me so mad."

The eyebrows perching pensively below the skullcap jumped plaintively.

"What?" Andy said, trying not to bark at him again.

"Nothing."

"Come on, Harley. I'm not mad at you. This is married people's baggage. And it's all filled with sh—garbage. Go ahead. What did I say that upset you?"

"Nothing. Really. I was just wondering why we didn't, you know, take the easy way."

"The easy way?"

"It would sure save time."

Now Andy was the one who was having trouble masking her confusion. "What are you talking about, Harley?"

"Tilda's passport. Wouldn't that have those stamps you get when you go someplace outside the country?"

"Passport stamps?" Andy repeated.

"Like on Rick Steves."

"Oh, my god," she gasped. "You watch *PBS*?"

He was about to answer but never got the chance.

"Tilda's passport," Lorna crooned, her own eyebrows shooting nearly to her hairline. "Of course! We could figure out exactly where she's been traveling by checking her passport stamps!" Feeling an unanticipated surge of adrenaline, the kind that comes after you're sure the game is over and then discover it isn't—quite yet, Lorna sat up and blew a spontaneous kiss across the table to Harley. "One wonders what goes on inside that head of yours!" she marveled.

"No, one doesn't," Andy sniped.

Lorna pointed a finely filed nail at her friend. "Shut up, Andrea. And start thinking about how we can get ourselves back into that cabin in Big Bear this weekend."

In the days that followed, two unrelated yet significant events took unexpected turns and ultimately collided with one another. The first was Harley Davidson's sudden illness. Suffering from migrating body aches and projectile vomiting, the boy was convinced he had contracted food poisoning from the stuffed cabbage. It made no difference that not one other person had reported getting sick that day or that the restaurant had an 'A' rating from the city health department; Harley was convinced the Jewish delicatessen had brought him to his first and only near-death experience. He reacted by shaving his beard (which was a repository for everything that came out of his mouth) and removing his skullcap, even during daylight hours. And thus appeared the initial cracks in his newly established spiritual foundation.

The second event was an impromptu family meeting at Mitch's house, spurred by a phone call to his mother announcing he had set a date for Mark's funeral.

"You what?" Andy asked.

"I have a date. Just come over on Friday after work, and we'll talk about it," Mitch said. "Berkeley will be here for the weekend."

Berkeley was Mitch's daughter from a marriage that never quite happened nearly twenty years ago. By avoiding matrimony and with it cohabitation, Mitch and Berkeley's mother, Sara, had remained close friends, and Berkeley had been spared a childhood of miserable parents.

"You know, Mitch, I'm still working on finding out more about what happened to your dad," she ventured.

"Oh, right. How's that coming, by the way?"

Candor was a waste of time. If she told him about the upcoming break-in at the cabin in Big Bear this weekend, not to mention the previous one, he'd have his lawyer drawing up commitment papers before she hung up.

"Nothing definite to report, unfortunately," she equivocated. "Still trying to put the pieces together about exactly what happened."

"But Dad is dead, right?"

"Well, that's my concern, Mitch. Probably." She thought about it. "Most likely," she amended. Then just to be fair, she added, "At least, I can't find any evidence he's alive. And all Tilda's other husbands most definitely preceded him in death. And probably not by natural causes."

"Oh, you know that for sure now?" said Mitch, a little taken aback. "I thought the Black Widow thing was just exuberant speculation on your part."

"Are you being snide?"

"No. I'm just asking if you found some kind of proof. Because, if you did, you damn well better call the police, Mom. You're not doing anything dangerous, are you?"

Redirection was a family art, and she rendered it as well as any of her children. "It's all about following the paper trail," she half-lied. "I promise I will call the police once I have something definite. In the meantime, I just thought you might like to wait and see what I come up with before we have the memorial service."

"Sorry, but if we're going to make this funeral happen, it has to be now or never. Or the whole idea will just slip away. We've got a window of opportunity, Mom, and I say we take it."

"What window?"

"I'll tell you Friday. Okay?"

Andy surrendered. "Okay. I'll be there."

"By the way, is Harley ambulatory yet?"

"He's lost ten pounds. But, yes, he's out of bed and walking around."

"Did he put his beanie back on?"

"Not yet."

"Are you sure this isn't another crisis of faith?"

"God only knows, Mitch. I can't keep track."

Andy knew her son was used to firing off questions, as well as commands, to those in his employ, but it exasperated the hell out of her.

"What's this about, Mitchell?"

"Never mind. Just bring him along."

"I don't want to bring him along. Why should I?"

"Melissa wants to talk to him."

"Why?"

"Stop firing questions at me, Mother. It annoys the hell out of me. See you Friday."

As soon as Mitch hung up, Andy's phone re-upped. Good, she thought. His most prompt apology ever!

"Hello?"

"Mom?"

It was Ian's voice, as tentative as Mitch's was cocksure.

"Hi, honey. How are you?"

"Good. Good. Fine. And you?"

"Great."

"I'm between sets, but I wanted to give you a quick call to see if it's okay to bring Annabelle with me."

Not sure what he meant, but feeling she should, she fished, "With you?"

"To the funeral."

"Ah, hah," she aspirated, involuntarily. "Mitch has told you his plan."

"Oh," Ian whispered. "He hasn't told you?"

"Not in detail." This awkwardness was Mitch's fault, not Ian's, so Andy moved to put an end to it. "Of course you should bring Annabelle. We'd all love to meet her. Are you two that serious?"

Long pause. Dumb question. He wasn't ready for it. She tried again. "So tell me how the story went when you told her."

Another pause.

"I mean, the story about Dad and Tilda, remember? You wanted to tell her something funny because you said her family stories were so funny."

"Oh, yeah! She loved it. She really cracked up. I guess she's heard a couple other black widow stories at the office but nothing with a burger box," Ian said.

"Really?" said Andy, who couldn't imagine a group of government geeks getting off on black widow stories.

"So has she found a way for you to avoid paying all those back taxes?"

The frost on the ensuing silence made Andy's ear hurt; she'd managed to say something stupid again!

"Annabelle would never do that, Mother," he said, protectively. "She's a real professional."

The reproach sounded almost chivalrous coming from her unassertive son. Who knew that a relationship with an auditor could be so transformative? "Of course she is, Ian. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to imply otherwise. And absolutely, bring her to the memorial service."

"Thanks, Mom," he told her by way of a rapprochement. Then he made one of those nervous, throat-clearing noises and added dramatically, "You won't regret this."

Not sure she had heard him right, Andy looked at her phone, then put it back to her ear. "That's a peculiar thing to say, Ian."

"No, it's not," he said. She detected more than a little indignation.

Where did that come from, she wondered. "I mean, why would I regret meeting your girlfriend?" she asked.

"Because you're always meeting *someone's* girlfriend."

Okay, now he was sounding downright snippy. Evidently, this was leading somewhere, but Ian's route to anything important was often so circuitous it was

difficult to follow. "Are you talking about Mitch's girlfriend?" she asked, taking a stab at the only target that popped to mind.

"Girlfriends, Mom. He brings home a lot. I don't."

"Umm. I guess that's true." Hell, that had been true for years. Why was he bringing it up now?

"Soooo . . ." Andy let the word hang out there long and loose, hoping he'd pick it up so she didn't have to.

"So I just want you to know, I'm not wasting your time."

Oh my god, she thought darkly, why don't I just hang up and let him call back in a year or two, when he's ready to get to the point? "Ian," she said with far more tenderness than she was feeling, "you seem to be angry about something."

"I am *not* angry, Mom."

"Wrong word. Let me try again. You seem to be more serious than usual."

"I am. I am very serious. We're talking about a memorial service here."

"Yes. Yes, we are. And?"

"And you don't bring just anyone to a memorial service, Mother," he pointed out. "Do you?" Those final syllables shot across the cellular signal with more force than any two words her youngest had uttered since childhood.

"Oh!" said Andy, finally getting it. "Are you trying to tell me she's—"

Ian rarely interrupted anyone. He had a hard enough time completing his own thoughts. But this was a sentence he clearly wanted to finish for himself.

"She's the one, Mom," he cut in. "Annabelle is definitely the one."

Chapter 27

Take a Load off Fanny

Never one to spare the food and spoil the chance to have a really good meal, Mitch ordered Indian takeout in excessive amounts and instructed his guests to gather round the pool with their curry-laden plates. Berkeley, who had all of her father's smarts and none of his alpha-male combativeness, chatted amiably with everyone present, including her grandmother. It was a remarkable display of social graces by someone four years younger than Harley. Watching Berkeley in action, Andy hoped her nephew would pick up a few pointers. Then she noticed that Harley was so smitten by Melissa – distractingly dressed in leopard leggings and a denim miniskirt this evening – he was probably destined to remain graceless forever.

Oddly, there was no mention of the funeral at dinner, but as soon as the biodegradable cartons were cleared, Mitch suggested he and his mother retire to smoke cigars, while everyone else did the dishes. Vaguely, Andy felt abandoned by the others, as if she had to face the lion in his den all by herself. She knew, as they all did, that Mitch would probably get whatever he wanted tonight because the sheer force of his wanting it would render any resistance, including his mother's, absolutely exhausting.

"Labor Day," Mitch began.

"Labor Day? But I'm not sure I can confirm your dad is, you know, dead by then," Andy fumbled.

"I thought you said you had no reason to believe otherwise."

"I don't."

"Don't you think if he were still above ground, you would have found him in Texas?"

"Probably."

"And you didn't, did you?"

"No."

“Not a sign of him anywhere, right? Accounts closed. Phone terminated. Right?”

“Right.”

“But you’re still searching for ...” Tilting his head to one side, he squinted, as if he couldn’t quite get his mother in focus. “What, exactly, are you searching for, Mom?”

“You know.”

“No, really. I don’t.”

“I’m searching for the truth, Mitch.”

She saw the cynicism creep into this smile. “Um hum. And how long do you imagine this is going to take?” he asked.

She was finding it harder and harder to defend her reluctance to have the service.

“Tell me, Mom, why do you have to make this so hard?”

“I’m sorry, Mitch. Believe me, that’s really not my intention.”

“Then would it really be so bad if we just go ahead and do this? Because as it turns out, Ian’s going to be in town playing at the Greek Theater on Labor Day. And that also works for Sam and Lil.”

“You talked to the girls already?” Andy managed, weakly.

“I didn’t want to waste your time, if we couldn’t all be here,” he said, “so I scoped things out. Everybody can make it. Long weekend. No school in Idaho, and Sam’s happy to take the kids out of nursery.”

“All the kids are coming?”

“Nice, huh?”

“But how can everyone afford —”

Mitch put his hand up to stem the flow of protest.

“And now it’s about the money?”

“Okay. Okay,” she relented. “I’ll shut up now.”

He lit a delicate, cigarette-sized cigar and handed it to her. “I think you’ll like this. Has a hint of chocolate.”

Andy sat back and drew the vapor into her mouth. It tasted amazing. Mitch lit something that looked like a baseball bat in comparison.

"I told each of them I'd send a little check to help out. I want everybody here. I really want to do this. More importantly, I really can. So let it go."

On her son's prompt, Andy exhaled and wondered why everything, even her ex-husband's memorial service, had to be cost-effective in her mind. The feeling was genetic, she was sure. At least two people in every generation of the Baders had been maligned as 'penny pinchers,' according to family lore. Proudly, often stupidly, Andy had carried that ignoble torch higher than anyone else among the baby boomers.

"Thank you, Mitch. That's really nice," she told her son, successfully stifling her biopsychology and secure in the knowledge that Mark Kornacky himself wouldn't have given a damn how much the plane fare cost his children.

"Now about the music," Mitch trotted on. "I've already decided which songs I want to go on the CD mix, but I'm not sure what kind of music to use for the service."

"There's a service?"

"Melissa's going to handle the nuts and bolts of that. It frees me to concentrate on the music. You know, she's pretty spiritual."

"Any particular denomination of spirituality?" Andy asked, both horrified and intrigued by the prospect of a service planned by The Impresario.

"I just told her it had to be completely inoffensive."

Not 'according to Scripture,' not 'meaningful' or 'moving,' just 'completely inoffensive,' Andy mused.

"What's inoffensive?" she asked.

He shrugged and puffed out a small, but surprisingly dense, smoke ring. "You know, no schmaltzy tributes to Dad's character and no homilies about meeting up in the afterlife."

"You don't think any of us believe in the afterlife?"

"No idea. I just think Dad hasn't spent that much time with any of us in this one," he said. "Seems hypocritical to go on and on about getting together in the next. So I told Melissa to avoid the subject all together. Any objections?"

Well, this was a bracing revelation, thought Andy, who had to admit she'd never seriously pondered her children's attitudes toward the afterlife and wasn't all that clear about where any of them stood. As a mother, she'd definitely put them off believing in hell. But she had been a real waffler when it came to heaven. Still was.

"No. No objections," she said.

"The net and net is, I've decided to hire an acoustic guitar and singer for the actual service."

"Why hire a guitar player? Or singer? Just ask Ian."

"Nope. He's part of the family," Mitch said, firmly. "I'm not going to impose on him. I'll find somebody worthy of his approval, I promise. But my question to you is, what was Dad's favorite song?"

"Hmm?"

"I mean, a song that might be appropriate?"

Andy drew a deeply disturbing blank. "I'm not sure." She shuffled through the options. What music had Mark liked when she first met him? What had he listened to when the kids were young? What might he like now? "Tell me again what you're asking."

"Let me put it this way. Are you okay with using a song from The Band?"

Andy gave a careless shrug. "Why not? Did your dad like them?" she asked, a tad ashamed she didn't know the answer herself.

"Not all that much. But he loved this one cut. From the '60s. About somebody named Fanny. We used to sing it together in the car when he drove me to soccer. I thought maybe you knew why he played it all the time."

Andy didn't. But she knew the song.

*I pulled into Nazareth, was feelin' about half past dead
I just need some place where I can lay my head*

*"Hey, mister, can you tell me where a man might find a bed?"
He just grinned and shook my hand, "no" was all he said*

*Take a load off, Fanny
Take a load for free
Take a load off, Fanny
And (and) (and) you put the load right on me
(You put the load right on me)*

"I think that's perfect," she said, imagining father and son half singing, half shouting the lumbering melody and strangely alluring lyrics in the Volvo station wagon, as they tooted down Ventura Boulevard.

"Don't suppose you know what the words mean."

"No. Do you?"

Mitch shook his head. "I asked Dad one time."

"What did he say?"

"He said it was either about sex, drugs or redemption. He wasn't sure which. And he didn't care. He just loved to sing it."

It was the most uncontaminated memory Andy had ever heard Mitch recall of time spent with his father, and she felt a tear pool along the rim of her lashes. "I think it's perfect," she repeated, maneuvering to keep the excess emotional moisture out of her eyes and voice.

"Good," he said, seeming not to notice. "Then our work here is done." He stubbed his cigar and stood up with an urgent, but unannounced, purpose.

"It is?"

"We're running a little short of time. Melissa wants me to help her with Harley before you leave tonight."

Andy was struggling to follow this abrupt turn in conversation. "Help with Harley?" she asked, surprised and a little perturbed. "What does that mean?"

"Think of it as career counseling," Mitch advised, as if she needed his assistance in understanding Harley. "He seems to be riding some kind of vocational pendulum at the moment. Haven't you noticed?"

"Haven't I noticed?" she repeated, instantly incensed. Who did he think the boy was *living* with? And what gave her bull of a son the right to go rummaging around in this particular china closet? "Have I noticed that I am living with a multiple personality?" she huffed. "Is that what you're asking?"

"Okay. Okay. I put that badly. Of course, you've noticed. Everyone has. All I meant to say is that Melissa and I know you're having a hard time with him. And we thought we might be helpful. Somehow."

"How-how?"

"It's too complicated to explain. Just don't worry about it."

"What? Are you taking over Harley now, too?" she blurted out, her voice cracking with convoluted emotion. "Have I managed to become irrelevant in this area, along with all the others?"

Mitch realized he'd unintentionally hit one of his mother's panoply of raw nerves and decided on an immediate withdrawal. "We just had this idea. And we wanted to try it, Mom. Don't be so proprietary. Okay? Now I really gotta go."

This was what she both hated and loved about Mitch. He could be heartbreakingly helpful. He often was. But his incurable confidence in having a better solution to *any* problem, particularly hers, made Andy want to bare her teeth. Which she did. Fortunately, the intensity of her snarl was muted by the fog of tobacco spewing out of her mouth.

"You presumptuous —," she began mumbling through clenched bicuspid.

"I know. I know. But you'll thank me some day," he said, cutting her off and nearly patting her on the head, then thinking better of that idea. "In the meantime, Berkeley is waiting to play Gin Rummy with you in the living room. We'll take care of Harley in the sunroom."

The card game, along with the baby Buddha persona of her granddaughter, returned Andy to a state of near-calmness within half an hour.

"You and Dad remind me of AP chemistry," Berkeley said, after losing the second game in a row.

"Did you just throw that last hand, Berkeley? So that I would win?"

"You used to do that for me when I was little."

"You knew I let you win?"

The girl smiled so sweetly that Andy actually ached a little. "You knew I liked to win," Berkeley said. "I know you like to win. Just returning the favor."

Andy smiled back. "Why do Mitch and I remind you of chemistry?"

"Similarly charged atoms repel one another. It's a law of nature, Grandma Andy. You can't help upsetting one another."

"He doesn't upset you?"

"Sure. But I'm not like him, the way you are. I don't compete for energy in the universe the way the two of you do."

"I nearly flunked chemistry," Andy laughed. And, yet, it was the most apt description of her relationship with her elder son that she'd ever heard. "But you're right, Berkeley. I guess we can't help ourselves. Your deal, honey."

The girl shuffled the cards and distributed 13 to each of them. "Did you find out anything more about what happened to Grandpa Mark?" she asked.

"A little," Andy said, hoping to avoid a genuine discussion. "Nothing definite."

"Does Dad know you're going to Big Bear this weekend?"

Silent alarms sounded. Andy squared her shoulders slightly, as if this might help her fortify her position. "How do you know where I'm going this weekend?"

Without comment, Berkeley drew from the pile and laid down three aces.

"Harley said something to you. Didn't he, Berkeley?"

"I'm afraid I can't answer that."

"Well, at least he swore you to secrecy. I know it may sound a little adolescent—present company excluded, honey—but I don't think my kids would approve of the direction my research is veering. It's a little melodramatic. Even I find it kind of crazy."

"Then why don't you just stop? Do you think Grandpa's still alive?"

“Let’s just say I don’t think he died of natural causes,” Andy said with highly inappropriate candor to the 14-year-old sitting across from her. In for a dime, in for a dollar. “And that really pisses me off.”

With the wisdom of the old soul Andy believed her eldest grandbaby to be, Berkeley declared, “Truth can be a dangerous goal, Grandma Andy. But it would be really epic if you nailed that palm reader’s ass.”

Chapter 28

A Dotted Line to Follow

Whatever Mitch and The Impresario were up to, it involved giving Harley a brand new 'do,' which he sported without comment on the drive up to Big Bear the next afternoon. It was a little shortish, a little spikyish, and centuries removed from his Hassidic cut – or non-cut, to be more accurate. The new coiffure, along with the shedding of excess pounds, made him look years younger and irksomely cuter, Andy thought, despite the residual black-on-black pants and shirt. Melissa clearly had an eye for something in the boy that Andy couldn't conjure in her wildest dreams.

"Let's go over the plan," Lorna said, guiding her new car up the mountain like it was the Senior Ladies' Grand Prix.

"I'm going in alone," said Andy. "A click and dash. You're sure about where the passport is located?"

"Unless Tilda moved it."

"Okay. She should leave for her Saturday Night Séance at the bookstore about 8:30. The minute she leaves, I'll go in, and you get ready to peel off as soon as I come back out."

"We're going back to LA tonight, right?" Harley asked. "As soon as you're done?"

"As soon as I'm done."

"Because Melissa is picking me up before midnight at Lorna's, remember."

"We know," Andy smirked. "And we're not allowed to ask why."

"It's part of the program, Melissa says."

Apparently, the tried-and-trendy talent scout had her nephew on some kind of 'transformation regimen' that was going to locate his 'inner Harley' and rip it out of him for the world to see.

"You're sure she's not giving you drugs?" Andy asked, not for the first time.

“Will you stop that, Andrea?” Lorna said, her voice crackling with impatience. “I have no doubt Melissa knows exactly what she’s doing. And you need to concentrate on what *you’re* going to be doing!”

The trio of re-offenders reached their destination a few minutes before 8:00 p.m. and waited for Tilda to exit the cabin.

“The place is dark,” Lorna said. “Maybe she’s gone already.”

“Could be,” Andy agreed. “Harley, why don’t you go up and knock on the door? If she answers, just pretend you want another reading.”

“But she won’t have time, if she’s going to make the séance,” Harley pointed out.

“That’s right,” said Andy, her words edging uncomfortably close to sarcasm. “And you will politely tell her you’ll come back another time.”

“Should I make an appointment?”

Instinctively, Lorna reached over to restrain her friend from any further interaction with the boy.

“Your choice, Harley,” Lorna replied. “Just see if Tilda’s home. Now.”

Harley obeyed and was back in the car within five minutes to report what both women had hoped; the coast between them and the passport was clear.

“Looks like we’re a ‘go,’” quipped Andy, as she climbed out of the car. She flipped up her hoodie, slipped her hands into a pair of latex gloves and stepped into the street, now saturated with darkness, and headed directly for the butt of the carved bear on the porch. The key, she signaled with a thumbs-up that no one in the car could actually see, was still there.

Andy was inside the cabin and on her way across the living room, bound for the desk under the stairs, before she was conscious that the only sound she could hear was a pounding thud in her chest that reverberated in her ears. I might as well be deaf, she thought, as she switched on her penlight and located the desk. She scanned the top briefly, noting a pile of junk mail, receipts, a stapler, paper clips, a coffee mug, and a cell phone at least two generations newer than her own. Pushing aside any conclusions her inquiring mind might draw from what

was clearly the same crap she had on her own desk, she focused her attention on the second drawer down on the right. She slid it open and pulled out Tilda's passport.

The closer she came to completing the task, the louder her pulse hammered against her eardrums. Unlike lying to her children, breaking and entering didn't seem to be getting easier with practice. Opening the little blue book with her left hand, she pulled her cell phone out of the hoodie pocket with the right. Her hands were shaking the way they used to shake at pitch meetings just before she was about to do her shtick. So much of her search for Mark relied on the success of this moment, she reminded herself. And yet she couldn't seem to do it with either a steady hand or the slightest bit of aplomb, whatever the hell that was.

She began snapping photos, turning the pages of the passport as quickly as possible. The camera trembled, as if she had Parkinson's. She tightened her grip, which made the wobble worse. She put the passport on the desk and picked up the stapler, thinking she could use it to hold the book open, while she steadied the phone camera with both hands.

Outside she heard the momentary chirp of a car horn. Too muffled to be Lorna, she felt confident. Her two-handed grip wasn't improving matters. Neither was a second beep of a horn that sounded miles away. She inhaled a yoga-sized breath, hoping to reach the Zen of photographic stillness, when the front door suddenly blew open and Tilda Trivette flew in, flipping on the lights as she did. The Wicked Witch stopped mid-stride and stared at the intruder.

"Who the hell are you?" she demanded, looking Andy up and down with penetrating and undeniably sumptuous eyes.

The younger woman was definitely a bracing presence in any room. Taller than Andy and perfectly proportioned, she had very white skin and fearsome black hair that framed an enigmatic face. Her features – narrow nose, high cheeks, trim chin – looked as if they'd been cut from glass and then painted for Kabuki Theater. All of this perched on the most elegant pedestal of a neck Andy had ever seen.

“Andrea Bravos,” Andy heard herself answering over the din in her ears. “I live here. At least, I used to. And who are you?”

“Tilda Kornacky. And I live here now.”

The voice pierced right through the percussion of Andy’s heartbeat. She scrambled like a quarterback desperate for an open receiver.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” said Andy. “I didn’t think anyone was using the place. Don’t you live in Texas?”

Tilda stepped closer, and Andy had to restrain herself from backing away.

“I don’t believe you have any claim to this property,” Tilda said, running an elegant index finger along the arc of her eyebrow, in a gesture that would have made Bette Davis proud. “What are you doing here, Andrea Bravos?”

“I am ...” she said, completely unable to fill the vacancy with a plausible explanation. It was like having writer’s block, only with actual consequences. Instinctively, she closed her eyes and did what she did when she was sitting at her desk at home; she stopped thinking. Like magic, a totally unexpected line of dialogue popped out. “I’m looking for my keek-stane.”

“Your keek-stane?”

Where the hell did that come from, she wondered. And where was it headed? “Yes,” she managed. Just go with the flow, she reminded herself, and your imagination will do the rest. “It’s a sort of a scrying stone. Only, well, more *authentic*.” Whoa, she was managing to be both imaginative – and catty – under pressure.

“I know what a keek-stane is,” Tilda pronounced. “And I find that very hard to believe.”

Andy was starting to get a handle on the scene now. It was amazing what her mind could do unattended. “I guess Mark never mentioned that I’m a practitioner of Scottish Wicca,” she smiled. “Directly descended from the Picts. Do you know the story of Iona, by any chance?”

“What?”

“One of the great diviners of my people,” she explained, feeling she had located the character. “Say, aren’t you a psychic, too? I thought it was a little strange when I heard Mark had married another clairvoyant. What are the chances of that?”

Her performance was complicated by the fact that, while she was delivering her lines, Andy was also trying to slip Tilda’s passport off the desktop and back into the drawer. In the process, she had to maneuver around the state-of-the-art cell phone next to the stapler and realized that Tilda must have forgotten it and returned to get it before going to the bookstore.

“Anyway, I lost my regular keek-stane,” she jabbered on, “and I’m supposed to do a reading tomorrow, and I used to keep a back-up here at the cabin. Years ago. When I was, you know, married to Mark. So I thought I’d just come up here and try to find it.”

The passport was finally back in place, however, the drawer refused to close completely. She tried unsuccessfully to tap it with her hip, as she kept talking. “I thought it wouldn’t matter. Since he’s dead and all. Anyway, I had no idea you’d moved in here. So sorry. Let me just get out of your way.”

Giving up on the desk drawer, Andy began to make her way toward the door. Tilda countered with calculated efficiency, blocking her way.

“How did you get in here, Andrea?”

“We, ah, always kept a spare key under the bear butt on the porch.”

“Are you the one watching me?”

“Watching you?”

“Parking outside my house for hours? Following me in a dark sedan?”

“A dark sedan?”

“Everywhere I go?”

“No,” Andy said, tensing. She couldn’t figure out what the woman was talking about.

Tilda inched closer, pale freckles peaking out from under the exotic makeup. Andy felt dizzy from the thick sweetness of her perfume. “I told your son,

Mitchell, that I wanted you people to stay away from me," she said, in the same ominous tone she had used in her note to Mitch. "I should have you arrested for trespassing."

"I won't do it again. I promise," Andy said, her reserve of impromptu dialogue now depleted.

The younger woman reached out and locked her hand on Andy's forearm in a grip that was both controlled and cold-blooded. "Give me the key."

Deciding obedience at this moment was the better part of valor, Andy dug into her pocket and pulled it out.

"You're a liar, Andrea," came a voice so hot it burned. "Don't think I don't know that." Then the psychic took the key, pushed up the sleeve on Andy's jacket, and sliced raggedly from elbow to wrist.

"Jesus Christ!" Andy shouted, trying to pull away from the searing pain. "What are you doing?!"

Dropping the key, Tilda reached out and clamped her free hand on the back of Andy's neck, forcing her face downward into the younger woman's breastbone and holding it there with suffocating pressure. "I have capabilities you can't imagine, old woman," she whispered. "And I will use them on anyone, including you and your family, if you get in my way." Then she pulled Andy's head up by her hair and, quite literally, shoved her out the door.

Like a drunk who'd been booted by a bouncer, Andy tumbled onto the porch, picked herself up, and made her way to the car without ever entirely catching her balance.

"We called the police!" Harley explained, urgently, as Andy opened the door and fell into the front seat. "We were coming in ourselves in another minute."

"Drive," barked Andy. "I mean it. Drive. Home. Now."

Without another word, Lorna put the car in gear and pressed down on the gas pedal with enough authority to make the tires spin before getting traction. And that's how they drove down the mountain and all the way home. Without another word.

Two and a half hours later, the two women were seated at the dining room table in Lorna's Sherman Oaks condo with a bottle of cabernet between them. Harley had been swooped up by The Impresario almost the moment Lorna's car pulled into the parking garage. Since then, Lorna had been debriefing Andy relentlessly about the encounter with Tilda. Both of them were tired and cranky.

"Why did Melissa feel it necessary to bring Harley all those clothes?" Andy suddenly said, as if she'd just remembered the Banana Republic shopping bag The Impresario handed her nephew upon their arrival.

"Henry Higgins," Lorna replied.

"Huh?"

"You know, she's making him over in her own image. Her Henry Higgins to his Eliza Doolittle. Or that shopping scene in *Pretty Woman*."

"Oh," nodded Andy, too tired to process either allusion. "I hardly recognized him by the time she got him dressed and out the door. Where were they going?"

"As if I know, Andrea."

"Okay. Okay."

They reached for the bottle simultaneously.

"All yours," Lorna said. "Please." Standing up to retrieve another bottle, she noticed that the gash traversing Andy's arm was still weeping beads of blood. She turned the corkscrew and seethed. "We should have stayed and had her arrested for assault."

"She would have had me arrested for trespassing."

The cork popped out with such force that they both mistook it for a gunshot.

"Sorry!" said Lorna. "Should have prepared you. And myself." She topped off Andy's glass and refilled her own. "Did you really tell her you were looking for, you know, a —"

"Keek-stane."

"Ballsy. Andy. I mean that."

"I walked out in one piece, didn't I?"

"Are you sure we shouldn't bandage that?"

Andy shook her head. "I think it will heal faster if it's left exposed."

"I never pegged you for a stoic, you know."

"Don't worry. You pegged me right."

"Then why in god's name did you fail to mention that injury all the way down the mountain?" Lorna pressed.

"I didn't want Harley to know. He likes confiding in pretty girls. He'd tell Melissa, who'd then tell Mitch."

"Maybe they should know."

"Not yet. I don't want my kids finding out how up close and personal I came to Tilda. They'd kill me. Besides, we need to look at these passport photos in peace."

Lorna, who had just picked up her glass of anesthetic, carefully put it back down. "I thought you said you didn't get any pictures of the passport."

"I have been waiting until Harley was out the door and you were drunk to bring it up."

"Holy shit," Lorna whistled. "Talk about self-discipline. First the flesh wound, now the photos. I don't think I've ever seen you exercise this kind of self-restraint in my life."

"It's not really restraint, Lorna, it's avoidance. I was shaking so much, there's a chance I didn't get anything we can use. I wanted to prepare you for the worst."

"Well, something has got to be better than nothing."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"Geez, Andy, what's got into you? You sound like Debbie Downer."

"I know. I know. It's just that I feel like I poked a mad dog with a stick tonight, and I'm afraid it was all for nothing."

"Oh, my god," said Lorna, grabbing Andy's purse. "I don't mind the stoicism, but self-pity drives me crazy. Stop wallowing in ignorance, woman, and get out that damned phone!"

It turned out that Andy had good reason to be worried about the quality of the photos. Her nerves, combined with a lack of light in the room, had produced indecipherable, grainy images. "I can't read any of these passport stamps," she sighed, spreading one of the images with her fingers to make it larger and more visible, then pinching it to make it smaller and sharper. "In fact, it's hard to tell how many stamps are on each page."

"Did you get a shot of all the pages that had stamps?" asked Lorna, leaning doggedly over Andy's shoulder with a magnifying glass in her hand.

"Back off, Sherlock. Who cares how many pages I got, if we can't read them?"

"Did you get them all?" Lorna asked again.

"I guess."

"You guess?"

"Yes. I believe I did. So what?"

"Email them to me."

"Why?"

The CPA had picked up her own phone and was texting. "I have a friend with a photo editing program that can re-render text."

"What does that mean?"

"It locates the basic shapes of letters and numbers in a document and draws them, filling in anything that's missing or unclear. I sometimes have to use it to enhance faded receipts my clients need for a business audit."

"I'm not following."

"You don't have to. Just send me all the pictures you took."

Andy tried. She really did. But instead of feeling energized by what Lorna just said, her beleaguered brain began to retreat, leaving her to stare dumbly at her phone. Lorna slipped the device out of her friend's incapacitated fingers and completed the task herself.

"There," Lorna said. "We should get these back before ten tomorrow morning. Now, when is Melissa bringing Harley home tonight?"

"She didn't say," Andy mumbled.

"Not a problem. You've got the guest room. I told him to take the futon in the study."

Without indulging her comatose co-conspirator a moment longer, Lorna removed the two wine glasses from the table and emptied them into the sink.

"Why are you taking my wine?" Andy whimpered through the late-night fog of exhaustion.

"It's time for another Tylenol, my woozy friend. And you need sleep."

Andy looked down involuntarily at Tilda's 8-inch keepsake. The elongated keystone was throbbing again, shooting hot pulses of pain along the inside of her lower arm. The edge of the jagged metal blade had not so much sliced the skin, as riddled it with dozens of tiny punctures. Andy sat stupefied by the purpling flesh. She'd been wrong to call Tilda a mad dog. Mad dogs acted and reacted in the moment. People like Tilda had volition; they were creatures of choice, with a strong self-will and a long-term strategy.

Fifteen minutes later, Andy succumbed to sleep, drifting off on the notion that the palm reader might simply have been drawing a dotted line to follow, so that next time the two of them met, she would know exactly where to make the *real* cut.

Chapter 29

More Convolutated than the Tax Code

Harley returned to the condo later that night, apparently unharmed by his evening with The Impresario. All Lorna and Andy knew was that he was sleeping deeply and out of earshot on the futon in the study, as they waited for the pictures of the passport to arrive the next morning. The enhanced JPEGs began to appear in Lorna's inbox at 10:20 a.m.

"These are eye-boggling!" Andy trumpeted, as Lorna opened the second of the five digital files.

"That's not a word," Lorna pointed out.

"It is now," Andy declared. Within moments, three of the five photos were spread across Lorna's laptop screen, each one a photo of a different passport page. "You can read every one of the entry and exit stamps, even the ones that overlap."

The accountant was already fishing for papers in an accordion file folder lying on the table next to the computer. "Here are the obituaries for John Levin and Ernie Pacheco," she said a minute later, "the two husbands who came before Gus-the-Greek. All we have to do is work backwards from these two dates and see if Tilda was out of the country just prior – and, if so, where."

Answers that seemed inaccessible days and weeks earlier were jumping off the page this morning.

"The Bahamas!" uttered Lorna, excitedly examining the third photo. "She must have taken old Ernie to the Bahamas. And you can bet your keek-stane that's where we'll find his death certificate."

The fourth file was loading, and Andy was on it like a bloodhound. "Here we go! A stamp dated the month before John Levin's obituary."

"From where?"

"The Canary Islands," said Andy, her eyes lighting like a digital billboard with the news. "She killed him in the Canary-friggin'-Islands."

So far they had accounted for three out of four husbands. Lorna turned her attention to the final and, presumably, latest passport page. The CPA sat up and restlessly arched her back, as the file began to cycle through the hardware and onto the screen. Andy tensed, too. The elephant in the room was up and dancing.

Lorna reached over and gently placed her hand over Andy's. "This should be Mark's page," she said. "Hang on."

The pixels assembled themselves top to bottom, as the passport watermarks methodically unspooled. The page looked just like the others, except it was completely devoid of stamps.

"You're sure you got all the pages with stamps?" Lorna asked, her fingers now slipping off Andy's and curling in frustration.

"I think so."

"You didn't skip a page? Turn two over at once?"

"I don't know. It was dark. I was rushed. I don't know. Maybe."

Lorna slumped back in her chair, looking equal parts puzzled and deflated.

Andy wasn't sure how to feel; she needed clarification. "Does this mean we've lost Mark?"

"I think so."

"Oh," said Andy, quickly losing her short-lived buoyancy. Then she had an idea. "Maybe it means he's still alive."

Lorna wasn't so optimistic. "It could. Or maybe we just don't have his page, Andy. What it does mean is that we have to wait and see if Tilda tries to get title to the cabin. She'll need a death certificate for that. Unless she shows up at the county recorder, we may never know what happened to him."

Andy felt sick. Disappointment and uncertainty were wearing her down. "I don't understand any of this, Lorna. The whole frigging mess is more convoluted than the tax code."

All at once, Lorna smiled for no reason Andy could guess. "What? What did I say?"

"You're right, Andy. It's very much like the tax code. In fact, I'm beginning to think that's the point."

"It is?"

"Yes! Tilda *wants* things to be complicated. Very complicated. It's a crime of obfuscation. Exactly the type of thing people do when they try to cheat on their taxes."

"You mean, like hiding assets in a foreign country?"

"Right. Only in this case, she's hiding far more than assets."

"Jesus," Andy said, with grudging admiration. "The witch hasn't missed a single detail."

Another sphinx-like smile from the CPA. "Except one."

Andy turned to the woman who was, once again, light bulbs ahead of her. "Oh my god, Lorna. You're an accountant. So you know how to do complicated, right?"

"That's right," beamed Lorna. "She's now on my territory. And we're smarter than she is, Andrea. Much smarter."

"Maybe you. But at this stage of the game, I'm definitely bringing up the rear."

"Don't sell yourself short. We each have our gifts. The important thing to remember is that we don't have to wait to find out what Tilda did with Mark because—"

"Because we know she killed the other three!" Andy finished.

"We *think* we know," Lorna corrected. "Now we have to confirm what we believe. And then we have to prove it."

"Keep talking. I'm right behind you."

"We start by contacting authorities in the Bahamas and the Canary Islands to see if they have death certificates for Pacheo and Levin."

"And if they do?"

"Then we contact the coroners in those countries and find out the cause of death."

“And if it’s drowning?”

“Then we can make our case. Nobody’s going to turn us away with that kind of evidence.”

Lorna was right. It was time to go get back in the saddle and start following the paper trail. “Just tell me what you want me to do, and I’ll do it,” Andy pledged.

“We start with another cup of coffee,” said the accountant, reaching for the pot, “and then I tell you how to work a bureaucracy.” With that, Lorna began her unedited account of precisely how she had retrieved the information about Gus’s death from the authorities in Fiji.

“Whoa,” said Andy, when Lorna finished. “There’s a helluva lot you didn’t mention the first time you told this tale.”

“Need to know. And you didn’t then. You do now.”

“Did you really have to lie about being a relative?” Andy asked.

“It just makes things easier. Are you telling me you can’t lie?”

“No, I’m just surprised you can. Well done.”

“Thank you. Any more questions, Andrea?”

“Not really.”

“Would you like your assignment now?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’ll take the Bahamas, and you take the Canary Islands,” Lorna instructed. “Tell them you want a copy of the death certificate, and see if you can get anything akin to a coroner’s report. Pay to have things expedited, and see if they’ll fax you the documents instead of posting them. If they give you a hard time, contact the nearest U.S. Consulate.”

“What’s a consulate?” asked an urbane voice from the offstage hallway, as if it were illustrating the importance of being earnest. In unison, the two women turned to catch a momentary glimpse of a bare-chested Harley Davidson passing by the door, a towel clinging provocatively to his pelvis.

“Ug-h-h-h-h!” rasped Andy. “He’s out of his cocoon again.”

“And where do you suppose this latest metamorphosis is headed?”

“God only knows, Lorna. We’re not on speaking terms.”

On the drive back to Valencia, Andy noticed that her nephew not only looked different, he had an entirely different odor. The smell wafted through the interior of her car, and she was beginning to feel as if it were pissing on the upholstery.

“What are you wearing?” she finally asked.

“A new cologne,” he said.

She couldn’t remember him wearing an old one.

“Where did you get it?”

“It was a gift from Melissa. It’s called Boner.”

Andy’s fingers closed around the steering wheel and squeezed. Hard.

“Really? Bless her heart. And where were you two off to last night?”

“I’m not supposed to say.”

“Harley, I like Melissa. I really do. But I don’t like all this secrecy.”

Distracted by a tuft of under-gelled hair, he was examining himself in the passenger side mirror. “She says it’s for your own good, Aunt Andy.”

The grip became a stranglehold. “I want you to remember this is Los Angeles, Harley. And Melissa is, well, far more experienced in the ways of the world than you are.”

“Um hum,” he said, rolling the errant strand of hair between his fingers.

“I’m not all that sure you’re ready for the kinds of things she might want to introduce you to. You have a lot to learn yet.”

“That’s exactly what she says,” Harley told her, smiling at his new, improved reflection.

“Can you look at me, please?”

He turned. “Sure, but aren’t your eyes supposed to be on the road?”

This latest transformation might be secular and stylish, but it was as aggravating as the others.

"Listen to me, okay? I don't want you doing anything you're not properly prepared for. It's a dangerous city. People are going to offer you bad things. You need the right guidance. Do you understand?"

"Yup."

"Do you?!" Andy scowled. Bad cologne and excessive hair product always made her bitter.

"I get it, Aunt Andy. I do. That's exactly why Mitch and Melissa asked me to move in with them."

She wasn't sure she heard him. "They did what?"

"Asked me to live with them."

She yanked the wheel and pulled the car to the shoulder of the interstate. She was shaking in her seat.

"You're not moving in with Mitch and Melissa!"

"They're saving my life, Aunt Andy. Don't you understand that? I'm going to find myself. And besides, his house is a lot bigger than yours."

"Your mother would have a fit!"

"Please, Aunt Andy! I need to be with my peeps."

"Your peeps?"

"Mitch and Melissa."

"Absolutely not!" The prohibition came down like Maxwell's silver hammer. "Mitch is not doing this to me! You are staying right where you are. Because you're *my* problem, not his!"

Even without fully grasping his aunt's subtext, Harley knew it was time to shut up. He'd never seen her so mad.

Andy rolled the car windows down to let the noxious odors drift out, as the auto exhaust drifted in. Neither of them spoke. Moments later, she merged back into the traffic and drove home.

As the car rolled into the garage, Harley opened the door and leapt out, running for the solitude and sanctuary of his room. Andy remained in the driver's seat, drained from another skirmish with Harley, which was starting to

feel like a war with Mitch. Her cell rang, and she picked it up. The screen read 'unknown.'

"Hello?" she said.

The call cut out. Relieved not to have to talk to anybody, she crawled out of the car and made her way into the kitchen. She'd shuttered the patio windows before yesterday's trip to Big Bear and now crossed the dining room, desperate to let in some sun. The cell rang again. The same 'unknown' was on the line.

"Hello?"

This time there was a long moment of nothing before the line went dead. Not a bad connection this time. Someone hung up.

She pushed open the sliding glass doors. She could feel that something was closing in on her. The responsibility of shepherding Harley through late adolescence? The onus of finding a man she'd barely talked to in twenty years? Or just the burden of being herself – whoever that was going to be – as an old person?

Andy stepped outside into the perfection of a late-August afternoon in LA, that time of day when a cloudless sky meets a three o'clock breeze and it's impossible not to feel happy. And she would have been happy, except for the four chairs around her patio table. Each one faced outward. It looked very odd. It felt worse. Like something was closing in.

Instinctively, she turned around, stepped back into the house, and locked the door. She felt clammy. Claustrophobic. Both restive and ridiculous. She crossed the living room on the way to check the front door. 'Unknown' rang again.

"Who is this?" she asked. The unused connection lingered for several seconds and then broke.

Through the peephole in the large wooden door, Andy could see the sidewalk leading to her front steps and the small porch area just beyond the threshold. Perched on the top step, slightly to the right, was a small, dark, and very glossy object. Andy opened the door and picked it up. With her fingers, she

followed the curve of the concave glass in her hand and knew exactly what it was.

A keek-stane. Probably bought at some occult bookstore on Hollywood Boulevard and delivered, very personally, to her door.

The phone rang again. This time Andy didn't bother to answer. Tilda clearly had a way without words. She knew Andy's number. She knew Andy's address. And she wanted Andy to know she knew.

"Harley!" Andy shouted, stashing Tilda's warning into a drawer in the kitchen. "Harley!"

When he didn't respond, Andy charged up the stairs and pounded on his door.

"Harley, are you in there?"

A small crack appeared between the door and the frame. "What is it?" he asked dryly, like some bored teenager on the Family Channel.

"I've decided you need a change. From here."

"Huh?"

"I think you should move in with Mitch and Melissa."

The crack expanded tentatively.

"You do?"

"Yes."

"When can I go?"

"Now would be good, I guess. Okay? I would like you to leave now."

Air whooshed from behind him, as the door swung almost joyfully on its hinges.

"You mean it, Aunt Andy?"

She could see a suitcase on the bed behind him. The little poser was already packing!

"Yes, I do, Harley. Until further notice."

"I knew I could talk you into it," he said, triumphantly. He began to close the door in her face and reconsidered. Awkwardly, he stretched out his

underdeveloped arms and waited, as if he were only half-programmed for this particular social grace.

Andy waited as long as she could for him to complete the gesture. When it became unbearable, she stepped into the hug, and he put his arms around her. "Thank you, Aunt Andy. I really mean it. Thank you."

He was gone within the hour, at which point, Andy immediately called her CPA.

"I think Tilda may be onto us," Andy began.

"What is that supposed to mean?" asked Lorna.

"She's been at my house."

"How do you know?"

"She rearranged my patio furniture."

"Very subtle."

"Shut up and listen. She keeps calling my cell and hanging up."

"How can you be sure it's her?"

"I just texted you a picture of what she left on my front step, Lorna. Look at it."

"Okay. I'm looking. What the hell is that?"

"A keek-stane."

"You're kidding. How do you know?"

"I'm telling you, *that* is a keek-stane."

Such unimpeachable evidence of Tilda's proximity called for a moment of silence. The two women brooded.

"I think I should get a restraining order," Andy finally said.

"Good luck with that, Andrea. You're talking about a legal system that uses assault and battery as a baseline. There's no way that anonymously dumping witch paraphernalia on your front step is harassment."

"Thanks for those words of comfort. Do you think I should call the police?"

"The question is, do I think they'll care? And the answer is absolutely not."

"Goddamn it!" Andy erupted. "She's wily like a – like a coyote. And now I feel like a freakin' roadrunner. Do you think this means she's decided to come after me?"

"I doubt it. It's more likely she's trying to scare you off. Think about it. There's no way she could know about what we've discovered. Right?"

Andy thought about just that. "Okay, you're right," she conceded. "She can't possibly know how much we know."

"And that brings us once again to the question of how much we really know." There was a tremor of excitement in Lorna's statement.

"You've found something more, haven't you?"

"I have."

"About the Bahamas?"

"Yes."

"And how, exactly, is that possible?" Andy wondered aloud. "It's still Sunday, as far as I can tell. And the government offices there don't open until tomorrow morning."

"Oh, ye of minimal imagination."

"That's a particularly cruel thing to say to a writer, Lorna." The thrill of the hunt made Andy sit up and press her ear to the receiver. "And yet, I am willing to be humbled. What did you do?"

"Well, I was rooting around online, getting ready to call in the morning. I thought it might be interesting to check the newspapers to see if there were any articles about people who had drowned on or near the date of Tilda's passport stamp."

"Very out of the box. And?"

"And there it was. In the archives of the Nassau Guardian. A local news item from the weekday edition. *Tourist Drowns Off Bowen Sound.*"

"Ernie Pacheco?" Andy shouted. "Did the story actually mention his name?"

"Ernest Lyle Pacheco."

Andy was on her feet, pacing like a puma. "That's two out of four, Lorna."

"She did it, Andy. She really did it."

The gun was smoking now. Even Andy could wrap her mathless mind around the remote odds that two men could drown on vacation with the same woman. Their theory had been a long shot, but it had been right. It was like learning they'd just won something very, very ugly.

"I don't know whether we should be jumping for joy, Lorna, or dry heaving in the bathroom," she said.

"We shouldn't do either until you've called the Canary Islands. Time for you to do your homework, Andrea."

"I wasn't as good a student as you, Lorna."

"That's why you ended up in Hollywood, my friend. Don't worry. I'll make sure we footnote every little step Tilda Trivette took. And let's get on this as quickly as possible. That woman's dangerous, with or without a restraining order."

"You're not making me feel any safer, Lorna."

"Good. The government offices you need are probably on Tenerife or Las Palmas. Get up early and call them."

"Again. You are not easing my mind."

"Do you want to come and stay with me?"

"Not really. I like my own bed."

"Do you have a gun?"

"You know I don't."

"Then we need to get the authorities involved as soon as possible. Set your alarm and make those calls early. I'm not kidding. Now hang up and check out newspaper sites for the Canary Islands."

Andy did as she was told. For the remainder of the afternoon and evening she searched through all of the English language newspapers she could find on Tenerife and the other islands. Most of them had search functions, but few had an archive that went back as far as she needed. In the end, there were only two sites she could use. First, she looked for news items about drownings during the

two weeks following the date of the passport stamp from the Canaries in Tilda's passport. Later, she tried searching for 'John Levin,' 'tourist death,' 'missing person,' and 'American tourist.' Nothing produced a result that was helpful. By eleven o'clock, Andy couldn't keep her eyes open any longer. The U.S. Consulate General in Las Palmas opened at 10:00 a.m. local time, which would mean she could try staying awake until 2:00 a.m. California time and make the call first thing. But Andy knew that was never going to happen. Better to set her alarm for 5:00 a.m. and make the call after she'd had a few hours' sleep.

Like most women who live alone, Andy went through the ritual of locking her doors each night with the thoroughness of a pilot checking the plane's navigation equipment. There was nothing like running through a checklist to create an illusion of safety, unless it was running through it twice. Or even thrice. Which she did tonight. Having battened all her hatches, she made a fourth and final tour of the house, turning on one light in every room and leaving the TV tuned to an old movie channel. She was comatose ten minutes after her head hit the pillow.

Chapter 30

Cloudy and Confused

The sound track was from *Sleepless in Seattle*, the scene where Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan are trying to find each other on top of the Empire State Building. She recognized it within seconds of waking up. Andy had always hated the movie, but it felt comforting to hear familiar voices inhabiting the downstairs. She closed her eyes for a moment and wondered how much longer she had until her phone alarm went off. After a few minutes, she gave in and looked at her watch. Six-thirty!

"Damn it!" She jolted upright, wondering if her cell phone battery had died. What the hell happened to the alarm? She looked at her watch and addressed a question she could actually answer: what time was it now in the Canary Islands? Eight hours' difference. Two-thirty in the afternoon. She would have to call right now if she hoped to find out anything before the close of business.

She rolled over and reached for her cell on the bedside table. It wasn't there. Was that why she missed the alarm? But it was always there. She closed her eyes in an effort to visualize the last time she had used the phone. Last night. Sitting on the bed. Setting the alarm. Suddenly, something unsettling slipped into her consciousness through her nostrils. The smell of brewing coffee.

"I waited as long as I could," said an apparition standing in the bedroom doorframe. "Only old people sleep that soundly. Coffee, Andrea?"

Andy gaped at the flamboyant profile, dressed in a silky, multi-colored poncho that rippled over textured leggings and brushed the tops of cuffed riding boots. Except for the Prada shoulder bag and tinted aviator glasses, she could have been auditioning for a Disney gypsy princess. For the second time in days, Andy inhaled the ominous sweetness of the palm reader's perfume.

"What are you doing in my house?" Andy bristled, with surprising forcefulness.

"Pretty much the same thing you were doing in my house," came the answer.

"How'd you get in?"

"I found your hidden key. In the planter. Hide one once, you'll probably do it again."

It was true. Andy always hid a key because, up until this moment, she'd been more frightened of getting locked out than of anyone getting in.

"I mean it, what do you want, Tilda?"

"I'd like to talk."

Inexplicably, Andy sat staring at the woman's brown leather gloves.

"They're made from imported lambskin," Tilda explained. "Now get up and get yourself dressed, Andrea. I'd like to do this over coffee. But I don't have much time. I have a plane to catch."

Under direct supervision, Andy slipped into her jogging shorts and shirt, trying to concentrate on what seemed to be the good news thus far: Tilda wanted to talk, and she was going to leave on a plane. Taken at face value, this could mean the palm reader had violated the sanctity of Andy's townhouse simply to clarify her threat. All Andy had to do was avoid provoking her.

They descended the stairs, Andy first and Tilda following. On the kitchen table two red coffee mugs billowed steam. A carton of half-and-half and a container of whipped cream, which Andy couldn't live without, stood at the ready beside them.

"I know how you like your dairy fat," Tilda said.

How does she know that, Andy wondered, unwilling to risk any unnecessary conversation to find out.

Tilda picked up her mug and drank. Andy wasn't interested in coffee. She wanted to hear what the intruder had to say. Tilda said nothing. Instead, her eyes wandered through the patio window in what felt like a snub. Apparently, she expected Andy to show some manners before deigning to speak. Andy grabbed the half-and-half and dumped more than necessary into her cup. Then she let loose with the whipped cream.

"What's your cholesterol?" Tilda asked.

"No idea," Andy admitted.

"Using all that cream is nasty."

It was tough not to engage, but Andy kept to the plan. "I'm sorry you feel that way," she said. Just to be annoying, she lifted up the cup and took a careless swig, the kind that left a white moustache along her upper lip line. She turned to look directly at Tilda, as she licked it off with her tongue.

"Oh, my god," said the thirty-something. "You really are disgusting."

The satisfaction would be fleeting, no doubt, but Andy enjoyed it anyway.

Tilda still wasn't speaking, but her eyes were on the prize now. Andy couldn't stand the stare.

"Look, I really am sorry about going into the cabin," she said, wondering how much Tilda knew about the reasons and hoping it was next to nothing. "I just wanted to find my —"

"Cut the bullshit." The voice was silken, but the intensity of the command was terrifying. "I want to know what you're after."

It didn't take a genius to realize that the less Tilda learned about what Andy knew, including the fact she'd had three other husbands besides Mark, the better. Keep calm and say as little as possible, she warned herself. "Nothing. I swear."

Tilda took another sip of coffee and leaned in suffocatingly close. "Then why are you harassing me?"

"Harassing you?" Is that what Tilda thinks I'm doing, Andy mused. Harassment was a helluva lot more benign than the truth about what Andy and company had actually been doing. "How am I harassing you?"

"You went to Texas to talk to a lawyer."

"How do you know I went to Texas?"

"A teller at the bank called. Nice, elderly gentleman. Didn't I tell you people to stay away from me?"

"Well, it's just that, you didn't even tell us how Mark died."

"What do you care? He certainly didn't care about any of you. Did he?"

That tidbit of truth pricked through Andy's defenses. Her cheeks reddened with embarrassment.

"You know what I think?" Tilda posited, "I think you're after me because of Mark's money."

Andy almost laughed; Tilda's primary motivation was money, so she assumed it had to be Andy's. "When you're a hammer, everything looks like a nail," she said, before she could stop herself.

"What?"

Shit, thought Andy. Big mistake. Or maybe not. Money was a motivation Tilda could grasp. Maybe Andy should go with it.

"Is that why you're here?" Andy tested. "You think I want Mark's money?"

"Don't you?"

This might be her opportunity to talk Tilda out of her kitchen and out of her life. Andy picked up the red mug again and took a long drink, as she considered how to frame what she was about to say. "Well, I did want his money. I mean, I thought I did. Until now." She calculated that humility and fear were her most convincing allies against this particular enemy. "I admit I should have listened to you the first time. I shouldn't have gone to Texas. And, well, now that I've met you, you scare the shit out of me. Okay? I get the message."

The psychic's expression remained unchanged, but her 'aura' oozed satisfaction. Andy felt she was on the right track. "Let's just say I'm through wanting Mark's money. As of this very moment. I'll never bother you again. I guarantee."

Still no overt response from her audience. Andy pressed forward. "So unless you have anything else to talk about . . ."

The eyes under the glittered lids hardened. The room grew colder.

"Oh, but I do," said Tilda, laying her hands palms down on the glass tabletop and splaying her fingers across the surface. "I want to talk about my passport."

Andy's throat began to constrict. "Sorry?"

"After you left, I found it wedged in the desk drawer. I want to know why you looked at it."

"I didn't."

"Oh, but you did." Tilda raised an accusatory finger and circled it slowly. Andy couldn't take her eyes off the small diamond lacquered in the center of the nail. With the other hand, she produced the cell phone that had disappeared from Andy's night table. "And you photographed the pages."

It was like being tricked into the truth by an illusionist.

"Explain yourself, Andrea."

Andy didn't dare. Tilda's ignorance of what she knew was the only thing keeping the conversation and, by logical extension, Andy alive. She needed to find a way out of the house.

Andy began to spool through the possibilities. The most direct route was from the dining room to the patio and out the back gate. The only impediment was the sticky latch on the sliding glass door. It would definitely slow her down. The alternative would require elbowing her way past Tilda's chair and into the living room, where it would be two steps up to the entryway and a yank of the front door. This route was faster, but it required a physical encounter with the younger, stronger woman.

Maybe she could create some kind of impediment for Tilda.

"I said, explain yourself, Andrea."

"Okay." The pressures building inside Andy were making it hard to think straight. "I took pictures of your passport."

"Why?"

"I'm not sure. I thought maybe it would tell me something about how or where Mark had died." She needed to find a way to disable Tilda. A clear idea. But her thoughts were clumping up like wads of wet cotton.

"What are you talking about?"

"Um. Well, there was no record of a death certificate in Texas," she said. "So I wondered if maybe he died while out of the country."

Andy knew she was telling the witch too much, but she didn't have time to censor herself. She needed to focus on finding that idea. The one for stopping Tilda. The one for getting out of there.

"Why would you think Mark died while out of the country?" Tilda asked.

Below the glass table, Andy could see her adversary's hand reach for the Prada bag. There was the answer. Somewhere below the table. Andy sensed it. But she couldn't grab onto it. She stared dumbly downward, as Tilda put the purse in her lap and slipped a hand inside.

"I know!" she suddenly announced.

"Know what, Andrea?"

"How to stop you."

She could tell it was another foolish thing to say, but Andy didn't have time to think about that. Instead, she slipped her fingers under the wicker rim of the table and prepared to push upward.

"Wait a minute," Tilda laughed. "Are you planning to shove the table on top of me?"

"Yes, I am!" roared Andy. "Because I know you killed all those men."

It felt so liberating to tell the truth, so right to unleash her pent-up honesty, that Andy began to giggle as she pushed upward on the table. When the table barely moved, she giggled again.

"Oops," smiled Tilda. "Give it another try."

Andy did. With the same result. She looked down at her dysfunctional hands and addressed them in a whisper. "What's wrong with you? We're trying to get out of here."

The hands didn't answer. Andy looked up at Tilda, who was holding a small handgun. "Is that pink?" she asked, feeling both cloudy and confused.

"Raspberry pink. A .380 Ruger. Are you having problems?"

"What's wrong with me? I'm very concerned about myself."

"Really. And why is that?"

"I'm not sure. I think my body may be turning off. Is that possible?"

"Yes, it is, Andrea."

"Why would it do that?"

"I put amobarbital in your coffee."

"I don't know what that is."

"It's my favorite barbiturate. It acts as a very versatile sedative in the proper dosage."

"Oh."

"That means you can't control your muscles anymore."

"I can't?"

"No. And it dulls your mental defenses."

"I don't know what that means."

"It makes your brain too lazy to lie."

"I don't like to lie."

"But you have. On several occasions, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"It's all right. Your mind is swimming in truth serum now, and I think I've found out just about all I need to know."

"That's not good."

"Except who's following me."

"Oh."

"Would you like to tell me who's following me?"

"Okay. Who?"

"I don't know. But someone is. Did you tell the police about my husbands, Andrea?"

"No."

"The Sheriff's Department? The FBI? Anybody like that?"

"No. They won't believe me yet. I have to get a paper trail."

"That's interesting. Tell me about the paper trail."

"You know, the vacations, the drownings, the death certificates."

"And you haven't told the police about that yet?"

"I can't. Or I'll look stupid. You know?"

"Yes. Nobody wants to look stupid."

Tilda pushed her chair back from the table and stood up. "How do you feel?"

"Tired. Deeply, deeply tired," Andy answered.

"Can you move?"

Andy tried to stand but couldn't do it by herself.

"It's okay," Tilda said, putting the mini-firearm back in her handbag and setting the purse on the kitchen counter. Without removing her lambskin gloves, she picked up the coffee cups, washed them thoroughly, and placed them on a shelf in the cupboard.

"Am I going to die?" asked Andy.

"Not without your shoes on." Tilda held up Andy's cross trainers and a pair of socks and slipped them into her bag. "Okay, I'm going to help you get on your feet, Andrea. We need to go for a ride."

"Where are we going?"

"You're going hiking at Castaic Dam."

"I like that place."

"I know you do. It's the closest water I could find."

"Am I drowning, too?"

"What do you think?"

"I think you're going to make it look like I had an accident while I was hiking."

"Could be."

Any resistance Andy had left in her was flagging fast. Her limbs were so cumbersome that Tilda had to pull her off the chair and propel her through the kitchen and into the garage where Andy's Camry was parked.

"I don't want to get into the car."

"You don't have to," said Tilda. "You can lie down in the trunk."

Andy halted, nearly toppling them both. "I shouldn't get in the trunk," she confided. "I saw that on Oprah once. Don't get in cars or trunks with strangers."

"Oprah has a lot of good advice," Tilda said, amused.

"Oprah wouldn't trust you, Tilda. She'd tell me to make a run for it."

"Are you going to?"

"Absolutely."

"Good. Just head towards the rear of the car as you do."

Chapter 31

No Time for Mulligans

Inside the trunk, Andy lay face down, as the anesthetic continued its slow, but relentless, invasion of her blood stream. Despite the weariness in her body, her unbridled mind roamed all over the place. She reminded herself how lucky she was to be in her Camry because the trunk was fully carpeted and offered more than 15 cubic feet of space. At the same time, her drugged brain clung to the notion that they were headed to the lake behind Castaic Dam, where she walked most weekends. Trailing right behind was the notion that Tilda was going to put her in that lake, and when she did, Andy wouldn't be able to swim. Like Ernie. And Gus. And Mark. And the other one.

The ride wouldn't take long, and no one would be on the trails yet. Too early. Probably not even light outside. Once Tilda pulled her out of the trunk, Andy would be helpless. Even if Andy refused to move, the younger woman could drag or carry her. With considerable effort, Andy tried to roll onto her back, inspired by the random thought that shifting positions would help her to focus. As she did, her nose violently collided with something metal. She knew instantly what it was: the head of her uncovered driver poking out of her golf bag. Involuntarily, Andy's hands moved to her face, lumbering upward. The creeping numbness of the amobarbital dulled most of the pain in her septum, but her fingers were soon moist from the blood between her nostrils and upper lip. That's when Andy realized she was lying next to an arsenal of weaponry designed by Ben Hogan.

She propelled herself onto her side, willing her right leg to flop over the left and her right arm to get her right hand somewhere near the top of the bag. The shafts stuck out like tree trunks, and she easily latched onto the neck of the driver. She yanked as hard as her atrophying muscles would allow in an attempt to pull the club out of the bag, but it hit the side of the car after only a few inches. There was no way to get any club out of the bag unless the trunk was open.

Andy let gravity pull her back onto her butt and closed her increasingly drowsy eyes. She forced them open. Concentrate, she told herself. Focus on the problem. Be creative. It's the one thing you're good at. Her mind was still all over the place and so was her mouth. She was saying everything she was thinking out loud, just as she had back in the kitchen. But Tilda wasn't here, so what did it matter?

Think of it as a scene, you idiot. What do you do when you can't get a scene to work? You come at it from the opposite direction. Okay, okay. If I can't use a club that's inside the bag, is there a club outside the bag?

Oh, my god, you're a genius, she said. And do you know why? Because you took your 4-iron out when you bought the new rescue club. It's behind the bag, you clever devil, and you're going to use it to kill Tilda Trivette before she kills you.

Another push rotated her onto her side again, and another reach brought her leaden arm in contact with the object of her desire. Andy fished with outstretched fingers until she felt the grooves in the blade. She grabbed onto the shaft as tightly as she could, and this time when she yanked, she got exactly what she wanted. The force of the movement rolled her onto her back again so that she was laid out like a body in a casket, clutching a graphite posy.

The car was slowing now, moving away from Interstate 5 and winding toward the recreation area that surrounded Castaic Dam. It was impossible to know exactly where in the park Tilda was taking her because there were two different bodies of water, a lake and a lagoon. What Andy did know was that she would only have one opportunity to swing the club, and it would have to happen the minute Tilda opened the trunk. If she neglected to make good contact on the first try, everything was over. There'd be no time to take a mulligan.

The problem was clubhead speed. If she remained on her back, she would have to get her arms and the club over her head and then hope she would have enough of an arc to build momentum. On the other hand, if she rolled back onto her side so that her rear end faced Tilda when she opened the trunk, Andy could

put her deadweight in motion, rotating her hips and shoulders and squaring the club face at impact. If she did it correctly, the club and target would meet with full force in exactly the correct place; it was what male golfers euphemistically called hitting the 'sweet spot.'

At last the car stopped, and the engine went silent. In what now seemed like excruciatingly slow motion, Andy once again tried to roll onto her side. It took a few moments to discover she wasn't actually going anywhere. She started to rock herself back and forth, moving as many muscles as were still taking direction from her addled brain. She heard herself grunting and winced in anticipation of Tilda popping the lid before she was in position. Time barreled on. She could hear movement outside. Muffled sounds. A car door shutting. At last Andy was at address, club pointed upward, a neutral interlocking grip, and torso wound like a spring. It was going to be a remarkably powerful swing, she told herself, except for the fact that, with her head facing backward, she wouldn't actually be able to see her target. She heard a breathy, mechanical thump and felt the rush of cool air, as the trunk lid opened. Too late to change her stance now.

Giving it every ounce of venom she still commanded, Andy hurled her unwieldy body from one side to another and let the club snap in her hands like a wet towel. A deep, deafening wail cut through the morning stillness, as the 4-iron met flesh. Almost instantly, Andy's eyes caught up with her accomplishment, as she watched a middle-aged man in a light brown suit reverberate from the blow, his head slicing slightly to the right, just before his entire body began falling backward toward the ground.

"Oh, my god!" she mumbled, wondering what the hell was going on. Completely drained of the necessary willpower to find out, she closed her eyes and gave in to unconsciousness.

Chapter 32

Right Thing for the Wrong Reason

There is no good antidote for an overdose of most barbiturates. You either end up dead or in a coma. If you're lucky, you wake up from the coma sooner rather than later. Andy opened her eyes thirty-three hours later in a hospital room. A nurse was checking her vitals.

"There you are!" said the young woman. "How are you feeling?"

"My head hurts," Andy mumbled.

"To be expected. In general, you're in very good shape."

"Where am I?"

"Henry Mayo Hospital. Do you know where that is?"

"McBean Parkway?"

The nurse nodded. Andy liked her smile. She would have liked anyone's smile right now.

"I live just down the street," Andy said.

"Well, you appear to be functioning on all cylinders. The doctor will be around this afternoon to check you out."

"Oh."

"Do you remember what happened?"

"No. Not really. What happened?"

"Don't think I'm supposed to say." Her kind grey eyes rolled toward the glass window between the room and the hallway. "You'll have to talk to Officer Ortiz about that."

The olive green and tan uniform of the man standing outside the door of the room was unmistakable. An LA County Sheriff's Department deputy.

"Was I in a car accident?"

"I'm really not the right person to answer that," said the nurse, apologetic but firm. "I need to let the doctor know you're awake." She turned to leave.

"Wait," Andy pleaded. "Something happened. Right? It was Tilda. I remember her."

Some kind of home invasion, she could remember that much. She recalled the image of Tilda standing in her bedroom door. "Did she get away?"

The nurse understood what a struggle it could be to piece together the events leading up to a coma. With some barbiturates, there were almost no memories to assemble. "Did who get away?" she asked, just to be polite.

"Tilda."

"I'm afraid I don't know anything about anyone named Tilda."

"But that's an armed guard out there, right?" Andy asked. "The police are here to protect me, right?"

The woman in the blue scrubs looked uneasy. "I'm not sure."

"What does that mean?"

"They don't really tell us that much about these things."

"What things?" Andy asked.

"Maybe you should ask your son, Ms. Bravos."

"My son? Mitch has been here?"

"He left about an hour ago. I think he went to see a lawyer."

Andy must have looked like a deer in headlights because the nurse rushed forward, as if Bambi's mother was about to die on her shift.

"Ms. Bravos, please, don't be upset."

"Why won't you tell me what's happening?"

"I can't. All I know is that you're in police custody of some kind."

"What kind?"

"I don't know. Really. But whatever went on before they brought you in to the ER has your son very worried."

The woman's beside manner wasn't doing anything to quell Andy's mounting anxiety.

"Worried. About what?"

The nurse finally gave it up. "That you're about to be arrested."

"Arrested?" The word tasted acidic. Andy tried it again. "Arrested?" It didn't taste any better or sound any less frightening. She eyed the policemen

outside her door. His gun and girth made her tremble. She hated cops; she hated fat cops more.

The nurse started to back away. Andy grabbed her arm and held it hostage.

"Don't leave me."

"I shouldn't have said that. It was unprofessional."

"What else do you know?"

"Nothing. Nothing, I swear."

Andy looked from the nurse to the policemen and back again. "Am I hallucinating?"

"No, Ms. Bravos. You're fully conscious, believe me."

"Then why do the police want to arrest me?!"

The nurse was desperate to free her arm. She pulled one way, as Andy pulled the other. The tug of war was about to get nasty when a third arm entered the fray and put an end to it. "You're about to be arrested because you beamed a federal agent, Andrea, and that's very serious business."

Andy looked up to see Lorna motioning the nurse toward freedom.

"I what?" Andy asked.

Lorna sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed. "You clubbed, and I use the word literally, a government employee with a piece of golf equipment."

Andy was dumbfounded. "I did?"

"You did."

"I don't remember that." Her brain was still shooting blanks. She strained to recall what happened. "And did I ...?" She was distracted by the sheriff's deputy standing by the door. She reached out and drew Lorna close. "Did I *kill* him?" she whispered.

Lorna snorted. "You may be good, Andrea. But *that* good, you are not. He is alive and lucid and sporting a goose egg the size of – well, the size of a golf ball."

Relieved and utterly derailed, Andy collapsed onto the pillow, trying to hold back the saltwater seeping out of her eyes. "I have no idea what happened. I just don't get it."

"Would you like a hug?"

"No. Keep your distance," Andy sniffed. "Or my dam's going to break."

"All right. Should I help you try to clear things up?"

"Can you?"

"Most things, yes. What would you like to know?"

Andy tried to open her clogged sinus passage by inhaling. Lorna handed her a tissue. Blowing out worked significantly better. "Am I going to jail, Lorna?"

"No. Mitch just called to verify that. The lawyer says that no one has charged you with anything."

"Yet, you mean?"

"Yet. To be fair, the agent was as unprepared to find you at Lake Castaic as you were to find him."

"Lake Castaic? Why would I be at Lake Castaic?"

"Tilda drove you there. In the trunk of your Camry. Whatever she gave you to get you into the trunk also seems to have erased your memory of the events. We know it was a barbiturate, but we won't know which one until your tox screen comes back. Do you remember being drugged?"

"No. But I vaguely remember waking up and hearing somebody in my house."

"Tilda?"

"Or Tom Hanks. It's kind of a jumble."

"Hmm. And you don't remember how you got in the trunk?"

"Oprah," Andy said.

"What?"

"It had something to do with Oprah." The tears started leaking through her composure again. "God, Lorna, this is all so frustrating. Why did she take me to Lake Castaic?"

"I think she was hoping for another accidental drowning."

Even without any clear memories, the sequence of events began to make sense.

"She was going to kill me?"

"She was," said Lorna. "Thank god the feds were following her."

Suddenly, something very specific surfaced in Andy's recollection. A detail in search of a context. "Tilda told me she was being followed! I remember that."

"Did she know who it was?"

"No. No. She thought I knew. But I didn't." Andy couldn't recall anything else about the conversation, but she was re-feeling the feelings; Tilda was angry, and she was terrified. "So Tilda really was being followed?"

"By U.S. Treasury agents."

Andy's one brief shining moment of understanding went completely dark. "Did you say Treasury agents?"

"I did."

Tears of frustration let loose from the corners of her eyes. She couldn't see beyond the puddles collecting around her cornea. "I don't get it, Lorna," she sobbed. "I feel so stupid."

"But you weren't stupid, Andy. You're the one who said this whole thing was more complicated than the tax code. I should have listened to you."

"To me?"

"Yes. We kept focusing on death, when we should have been focusing on taxes. That's the way they finally got Al Capone. And that's the way they finally got Tilda."

"They got Tilda?" Andy asked, sitting up and wiping her face with the bed sheet. There seemed to no end to the number of things Andy couldn't remember.

"Are you saying Tilda was arrested?"

"By the Internal Revenue Service. For tax evasion."

Andy's clueless stupor grew more clueless.

"For failing to report her ill-gotten gains. Can you believe it? We kept trying to prove murder, when all we had to do was prove she was a tax cheat."

"A tax cheat," Andy repeated, numbly. What was Lorna talking about? There was nothing Andy hated more than being in the middle of a situation she

didn't understand. It was why she avoided visiting countries where she didn't speak the language and why she never got involved in discussions of the periodic table.

"Remember all that money Tilda accumulated from her string of husbands?" Lorna went on. "Well, she did the same thing with *it* that she did with *them*."

Andy idled, waiting for her friend to help her get her mind back into gear. "Huh?"

"She moved it offshore, Andy. Hoping no one would notice what happened to it."

Andy sighed, as she finally got a little mental traction. "Of course, she did."

"Naturally, she never reported a penny of the earned income to the U.S. government, so that's how they got her. Talk about feeling stupid. I'm a certified public accountant, and I never once thought about calling the IRS."

"But how did they know Tilda was hiding that money?"

"Somebody besides us must have reported her," said Lorna. "And it's a damn good thing. Because if they hadn't, you might not be here right now."

Despite her drug-induced amnesia, Andy was beginning to understand how close she'd come to dying. "How did the agents know Tilda would be at the lake?"

"They followed her there. Then they watched her leave her car and take a cab back to Valencia. While she was gone, they got a warrant to search the car and found a plane ticket in the glove compartment. When she returned to the park in your Camry, they decided to arrest her before she fled LA."

Tilda was getting on an airplane. Another coin dropped in Andy's memory bank. She told me that, thought Andy, just before she put me in the trunk.

"Oh, my god, Lorna. I was in the trunk, and those agents had no idea."

"Believe me, the poor schmuck who opened it up told me you came as a complete surprise."

The man in the brown suit, Andy remembered. "I hit him with a 4-iron."

“Is that what it was?”

“Oh my god,” Andy cringed and then said without thinking, “I always use way too much club.”

It came out sounding funny, but it wasn't. None of this was funny. More importantly, as far as Andy could tell, these treasury agents all had missed the point. “You mean nobody knew about the murders when they arrested Tilda?” she asked.

“Not a clue. The IRS assumed Tilda's husbands all died of natural causes.”

“They had no idea she was a black widow?”

“None. They thought she was avoiding her taxes. And thank god they did, or you'd be dead, and Tilda would be long gone.”

This wasn't the first time government employees did the right thing for the wrong reasons, Andy noted. She blessed their myopic devotion to duty. “But you told them about her real crimes, right?”

“I told them.”

“And our evidence? Did somebody take our evidence?”

“The FBI can't get enough of it,” said Lorna.

Although Andy had never been a big fan of the J. Edgar Hoover Boys Club, she had a strange sensation—the same feeling she fantasized having if, and when, she ever won an Oscar.

“The FBI! Really?”

“They want to know how we came up with the idea of using those passport stamps.”

Andy found herself smiling involuntarily, a smile big enough to fill the Kodak Theater.

Lorna laughed.

Having accepted the honor, Andy thought it would be a good idea to show some humility. “Well, let's be honest,” she said. “That passport thing was all you, Lorna.”

“Oh, no. Now you’re suffering from selective memory,” Lorna chuckled.
“Using the passport to track Tilda’s travels was actually Harley’s idea.”

Harley. Oh, yes, Harley. Andy had forgotten all about Harley. Where was Harley? An image of the keek-stane Tilda had left on her doorstep flashed into view. She suddenly remembered sending Harley off to Santa Monica for safekeeping.

“He’s still with Mitch, right?”

“Yes. In a manner of speaking. But don’t worry, he’s okay.”

“He’s not with Mitch?”

“Not exactly, Andy. He’s out of town.”

There was a faint stirring of familiar juices under the residual sedative in Andy’s system. “Out of town? Why?” The Academy Award-winning smile was gone now, replaced by an equal, but opposite, emotion.

Lorna could tell Andy was riding the roller coaster of drug withdrawal. She needed to keep things simple.

“For some – training.”

“This is Mitch’s doing, isn’t it?”

“No. No, Andy, it’s not,” said Lorna in her very controlled, very conciliatory account’s voice. “It was Melissa’s suggestion.”

“What kind of suggestion?”

“She sent him off to boot camp.”

“*Boot camp?*” What the hell else had been happening while she was under Tilda’s spell? “Are you telling me that Harley has joined the marines?!”

“It’s not the marines, Andy. She promised me it wasn’t the marines,” Lorna said.

The ebbing barbiturate began to mix with the stomach acid Andy’s eldest child always induced.

“This is over the line! Mitch has really done it this time!”

“It’s not, Mitch. Believe me. It’s The Impresario. And it’s just for a couple of weeks, Andy. She told me to tell you he’s safe and warm.”

“Safe and warm? What does that mean?”

“I don’t know. But Mitch swore to me that Harley’s not in any danger. And he wants you to know . . .” Lorna held up her hands in surrender before finishing the sentence. She hated being the messenger when Mitch was the sender and Andy the receiver. “That Harley will return a better man.”

With that bit of news, Lorna had inadvertently placed the olive into the mood-altering cocktail currently floating around in Andy’s body chemistry. Shaken and stirred, the dam broke, as a full-fledged flood of tears and pent-up emotion gushed forth.

“Oh, Lorna, my life is so out of control,” Andy croaked between sobs. “I feel like I can’t do anything right. I just wanted to, you know, give the kids some closure about their father. And I wanted to help Pam with Harley. But nothing’s turned out the way I thought it would. I’ve screwed up everything.”

Post-traumatic trunk syndrome, Lorna concluded. Andy was not normally a blubberer.

“Why don’t I give you that hug now, Andrea?” Lorna said, urging the blubberer into her arms. Andy did as she was told. “And after you’ve had a good cry, I’ll go out and get us a Reuben sandwich.”

Chapter 33

The Non-answer to Your Unasked Question

The question of who had thought to call the IRS about Tilda Trivette troubled Andy for the rest of her stay in the hospital and the weeks that followed. When she finally hit on the answer, it seemed so simple. And so obvious. And yet she had no official way to confirm that her suspicion was correct. Today, however, Andy was presented with a unique opportunity to find out who the whistleblower had been. Asking someone to violate the laws governing tax privacy was probably a dumb idea, but Andy had been trafficking in dumb ideas for months, so why stop now?

“This is kind of fun, isn’t it?” Lil asked.

Andy looked at her elder daughter a bit surprised. “Driving to the airport? You really don’t get out much, do you?”

“Not the airport. The funeral. I mean, everyone getting together like this.”

Andy groaned. “If you like the four horsemen of the apocalypse all in one room at the same time.”

“What?”

“Nothing. I just find that having all of my children together, as adults, is a little – I don’t know. Daunting.”

The 405 near Santa Monica was cramming up at the intersection with the 10. Lil slammed on the brakes and started up again slowly, all without missing a beat in the conversation.

“Daunting? Really? Come on now, Mom. You’re the one who raised us.”

“Which only makes it more painful. I become the butt of your jokes, Lil. Some of it is deserved, I grant you. But none of you – well, except maybe Ian – knows when to stop. And he’s laughing louder than anyone else.”

The six veins of cars in the southbound lanes were now so clotted that traffic was barely moving.

“We don’t really make fun of you all *that* much, do we?” Lil asked.

“Yes, you do.”

“So you’re pouting about it already?”

“I am pre-pouting, hoping to finish before the festivities begin.”

“Good. I’m proud of you. And this *is* going to be fun,” Lil reassured her mother. “Wait until you hear what’s on Mitch’s memorial mix. It’ll knock your socks off. And he’s making enchiladas for the wake.”

“Wake?”

“Or shiva. Or repass. Whatever. For the after-party. The boys can’t wait. Graham says Mitch’s green salsa alone is worth the trip from Edinburgh.”

The midday sun bounced off the grooves on the concrete freeway, along with the chrome on the cars, giving Southern California its uniquely grimy sparkle. Andy sat back and enjoyed the glistening urban jungle, delighted to live where she lived and secretly euphoric to have all of her children back home and together again. Right on cue, whatever was clogging the artery in front of them broke loose for no apparent reason, and they were suddenly doing 60 mph, approaching Century Boulevard.

“What terminal?” Lil wanted to know.

“American,” Andy instructed. “Odd, isn’t it?”

“What’s odd?”

“That Dad’s the one bringing us all together.”

Lil reached over and squeezed her mother’s hand. “One of the nicest things he’s done since he left us. We *are* great kids,” Lil pronounced, with the familiar and obnoxious confidence that Andy so loved in her offspring. “Too bad he missed his chance to see just how fucking-tastic we turned out.”

“Don’t be so modest, honey. It doesn’t suit you.”

Lil grinned impishly and pulled into the parking ramp.

Annabelle Sakar looked very small and dark and nearly porcelain, as she walked into the LAX arrivals area. On the other hand, she felt wiry and warm and downright effervescent, as she held Andy in her grip of greeting.

Good god, thought Andy, Ian’s found himself a Bengali version of his siblings; there’s a jetpack right behind this hug!

Born in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Annabelle immigrated to Atlanta with her parents when she was three. A good student and even better soccer player in high school, she'd been recruited by Cornell, where she abandoned soccer for field hockey and accumulated very impressive grades. After graduation, she took a job with the IRS and was rapidly making her way up the bureaucratic mountain, with stops in various field offices along the way, currently in Nashville.

"Hello, hello!" Annabelle bubbled, as she moved from Andy to Lil. "How wonderful to meet you. Ian's told me so much – well, actually, he hasn't told me nearly enough about you. Any of you. Which, of course, is why I'm here. Along with the funeral, of course. Should we get my bags?"

Andy was momentarily speechless. Lil, as always, held her own.

"Not until we know what to call you," Lil said. "Anna? Annabelle? Annie?"

"Didi. Call me Didi. That's what my parents call me. It's Bengali for sister."

"Are you offering us a term of endearment already?" Lil asked, with a twinkle.

"Of course," Annabelle smiled.

"Then this must be serious," Lil cheered.

For the first time, Annabelle looked off balance. "Hasn't Ian told you it's serious?"

Andy reached out and took the young woman's hand and started toward the carousel. "Oh, yes," Andy assured her. "As only Ian could."

Andy's younger son was scheduled to arrive later that day on the band bus in preparation for another concert, this time at the Greek Theater in the Hollywood Hills. He was the only family member still outstanding. Andy knew that once she and Annabelle and Lil arrived at Mitch's house, she would have to fight for a chance to get a word in edgewise with her future daughter-in-law, so she needed to make her move soon. As the car approached the intersection with the 10 on its return trip to Santa Monica, Andy couldn't contain herself.

"Didi," she began, "I want to ask you something."

Annabelle was sitting in the front seat and turned to look back at Andy.

"About your job," Andy continued.

The exuberance on Annabelle's face immediately dissipated.

"It's nothing, really," Andy said, trying to minimize things. "Just something I wondered."

"About the tax code?" she said, flatly.

"Sort of."

"I am an auditor, you know." It sounded vaguely like a warning.

"Yes. Ian told me."

"And the privacy laws at the IRS are very strict. I can not discuss his case, you understand."

"I do. And I'm not really asking about his case."

"That's good," she said. "Very good."

Andy had never been adept at treading lightly. She felt like she was walking into this wearing army boots. But she didn't know what else to do. "It's more about his father. That is, his father's wife."

"Ah, yes," said the auditor. "Yes. Yes."

"You know about her then?" Andy asked.

"I do because Ian told me."

"So I wonder if you could tell me something about that case."

The young woman said nothing. Her chocolate eyes had turned uncomfortably professional.

Andy knew the answer, but she asked anyway. "Can you tell me something about that case, Didi?"

"No."

The silence was beyond awkward. It was the kind of silence that sounded like it might threaten their future relationship.

Lil looked in the rearview mirror and sensed that her mother was about to open her mouth again. "That's enough, Mom. It's time to take 'no' for an answer."

"Okay," said Andy, retreating into her seat and offering up an embarrassed smile. "Sorry." She looked out the window, hoping Annabelle would turn away, too. Instead, the brown eyes held their position.

"Now," said the auditor, "since you *didn't* ask, I am quite happy to give you the non-answer to your unasked question."

Andy panned back toward the front seat. "You are?"

"Yes. And the answer is, it was me."

"I knew it! I knew it," said Andy.

"And that is, of course, all I *can't* tell you about the IRS investigation."

"Of course," said Andy, satisfied she'd gotten her answer.

"But there's always the matter of the FBI inquiry," continued the Cornell grad, still sounding officious. "And since I am not, at this time, privy to or part of that investigation, I am free to gossip at will about what they're up to."

"You're kidding," said Andy, excitedly.

"Not in the least!" bubbled Didi. "I've been dying to fill you in."

Andy liked this girl. A lot!

"To begin with, it's a jurisdictional free-for-all," Annabelle continued. "Fiji. The Bahamas. The Canaries. You can imagine the bureaucracies involved in putting the case together. But word is that you did an incredible job tracking Tilda. And they can't believe you broke into her cabin to photograph her passport."

Lil's countenance was now back in the rearview mirror. "You didn't mention that little detail to any of *us*, Mom."

"Not really that important, Lilly," Andy said, trying to get off the subject as fast as possible.

"*Au contraire*," said Didi. "It's what broke the serial killer thing wide open. Your mom is a woman of hidden talents, Lil"

"The operative word being *hidden*," Lil pointed out.

“If Andy hadn’t wondered about what happened to your father,” Annabelle said, “we would never have known about any of this. And Tilda would be sitting on a beach in Mexico sipping mojitos right now.”

“Mexico?” asked Andy.

“The plane ticket they found in the glove compartment of Tilda’s car was to Puerto Vallarta. We think she might have been heading to a little village up the coast.”

“Why there?”

“She had a reservation, from earlier in the summer, at a small hotel in Sayulita.”

Andy had never heard of it. “Sayulita?”

“It’s a tiny village off the beaten path and right on the water.”

Water, thought Andy. She sat up like one of the furry sentinels on Meerkat Manor. *Right on the water. Fiji. The Bahamas. The Canaries. And Sayulita. Four husbands. Four destinations. Maybe Tilda wasn’t just making an escape. Maybe she was on her way back to Mexico to pick up her latest death certificate, so she could lay claim to the cabin in Big Bear. Had she killed Mark in Sayulita?*

By the time Lil pulled into Mitch’s driveway, Ian had arrived, and the guest list was complete; everyone was there. It was the moment they’d all been waiting for, and now that it had arrived, Andy couldn’t wait to leave. After her discussion with Annabelle, she had convinced herself that Tilda’s plane ticket to Mexico was the first genuine leading indicator of what had happened to Mark. She knew, at last, where to find the body – or ashes – of her ex-husband, along with his elusive death certificate. And she was going to go there and get her hands on the truth *before* her children went through with this funeral-in-absentia. They deserved to know what happened to their father, and by god, she was going tell them, whether they liked it or not.

“Oh, no. You’re not going to get Dad’s death certificate without telling us what this is all about,” announced Sam, summing up the general reaction to Andy’s vague request to ‘go to Mexico and finally finish the job she’d started two

months ago.' "We want the *full story*. All this prevaricating of yours is over, Mom."

"I don't have time to explain it now," said Andy, prevaricating on cue.

"Well, you've had months to explain it and haven't bothered," said Lil, sounding like the Mother-of-All-Mothers. "This time we're not letting you out of this house until you fess up to exactly what you've been doing."

Andy hated it when her children issued what they called a '*kid pro quo*,' refusing to give her what she wanted until they got what they wanted.

"Spill it," demanded Mitch.

Thirty minutes later, Andy was seated with her four children and assorted partners at the dining room table. Mitch had seamlessly rustled up an assortment of chips and crackers for the pow-wow, while Lil provided a guacamole dip she'd been making for everyone since she was ten. Coming together over a bowl of fried tortillas and mashed avocados was one of the scattered family's rare rituals, and it bound the siblings to one another in a way their DNA could not. Mystified, they listened in unprecedented silence, as Andy recounted the unvarnished details she had glossed over since the arrival of the Styrofoam burger box. When she finished, she sat back in her chair and waited for the verdict.

"I can't believe you did all that without telling us," Mitch began, with predictable indignation.

"Yes, you can," Andy said, justifying herself, weary of all the explaining she had to do. "It's exactly the kind of thing any of you would have done without telling me."

"No, it isn't," Ian whispered to himself.

"Exception noted," Andy agreed. "But Didi would have done it."

"Your mother's right," proclaimed Annabelle. "I would have done exactly what she did!"

"The point is," Andy ventured, "I want to finish what I started, and I'd like to do it before we have the actual funeral."

“But it’s Friday,” said Mitch. “You’re not going to get a death certificate or anything else before we have the ceremony on Sunday morning.”

“I could reschedule the funeral cast for later in the day, if you think you need more time,” said Melissa, who was wearing a gold choke chain and matching gold studs on her fingerless gloves. “No problem, really.”

“The cast?” asked Andy’s Scottish son-in-law.

Samantha leaned over and whispered in her husband’s ear. “Everything in my family is performance art, Graham. You just have to go with it.”

“No, please, don’t reschedule anything, Melissa,” Andy said. “I’m sure I’ll be back by Sunday.”

“Mom,” Mitch pronounced, soberly, “you’re not listening. It’s the weekend. You’re not going to get any documentation—”

“I’m not looking for documentation!” Andy shot back, with more firepower than she realized she was carrying. “I’m looking for *closure*. I want to know what happened to your father. And I don’t need a death certificate to find out.” The words were barreling out like automatic rounds. “If Mark drowned in Sayulita, somebody in that little town will know about it. I just want to go down there and ask!” She could feel each of her children take an emotional step backward. Unnecessarily, she fired again. “*Is that so hard to understand?*”

For a horrifying moment, Andy feared she might burst into tears. Fortunately, for all of them, she didn’t. She removed her finger from the verbal trigger. “I’ll be back by Sunday,” she repeated, with a tentative calm. “I promise.”

In the stunned hush that followed her outburst, Andy left the dining room and headed for the shelter of the nearest bathroom, where she called Lorna.

“Can you get me a ticket from LAX to Puerto Vallarta ASAP?” she whispered, after telling Lorna about Tilda’s reservation at the little hotel in Sayulita.

“I’m doing it as we speak,” said the accountant. “You really think she killed him in Mexico?”

“An out of the way village? Right on the water? Don’t you?”

Then, without any of the enthusiasm that had accompanied their discovery of the other locations where Tilda’s victims had died, Lorna sighed, “Yes. I do, Andrea. It certainly fits her M.O.”

For some reason, Lorna’s matter-of-fact answer made Andy feel unbearably sad. Not angry or indignant. Just sad. “And can you help me figure out how to get from the airport to Sayulita?” she finally asked.

Lorna’s fingers worked the keyboard. “TripAdvisor says to take a taxi. Fifty bucks.” With that, the typing suddenly stopped, as Lorna called an unexpected halt to their forward momentum. “Andy . . .”

“What is it?”

“You want me to go with you? You know, for moral support?”

“No,” said Andy, feeling surprisingly grateful for the offer. And then wondering why none of her children had offered. “I want to do this by myself.”

“You don’t speak Spanish.”

“I know. But it’s a tourist area. I’ll find someone who speaks English. I’ll start at the hotel.”

“Okay. Good,” Lorna said, without her usual conviction.

“What are you thinking?” Andy asked.

“This is not going to be pleasant. We both know that. We’ve known it from the beginning.” Lorna paused, just long enough to let the inevitable outcome sink in. “Are you sure you’re up to it?”

Andy wasn’t sure. But she was sure it was time to put an end to all this. She would do this one last thing, and then she would let it go.

“I’ve gotta get a life again, Lorna. And it can’t be tramping around looking for my ex-husband. If Tilda killed him in Sayulita, I want to know. If not, well, I’m done looking for the bastard. Because wherever he is, it’s time to let his sorry ass rest in peace.”

Chapter 34

The Amber Haze

As much as the U.S. is a land of opportunity for young Mexicans hoping to make enough money to achieve the comforts and stability of the middle class, Mexico is a haven for old Americans hoping to save enough money to hold onto the middle-class comforts and stability they've already achieved. It is no accident that these two groups pass each other at the border going opposite directions, the Mexicans on foot or in car trunks, the Americans on Boeing 737s.

Sayulita is one of those villages where retired teachers and burned-out bureaucrats from Portland and Seattle buy a lovely little house in the hills and finally get their fair share of the planet's sunshine. The town is home to about 4,000 people, many of whom still fish for a living and many more of whom eat fish tacos, stroll the beaches, and read novels because they no longer have to do anything for a living. The rest of the population runs small restaurants and hotels that serve occasional tourists who eschew Puerto Vallarta for a more 'native' experience.

Andy, who had spent absolutely no time in Mexico, was astonished by how removed the little village was from the clutter and urgency of her American urban life. The place was so unhurried that it had only three short thoroughfares that were fit for vehicles made by major car companies. These streets comprised most of the commercial district, which included handmade jewelry and leather goods shops, small stands renting surfing gear, and local eateries. Most of the rest of the transportation arteries were dirt or cobblestone lanes that wound their way up steep hillsides overlooking the Pacific Ocean and became so narrow that they eventually required a golf cart. Here, Andy found most of the town's housing for both residents and visitors, including quaint adobe villas protected by bougainvillea-shrouded walls and tourist hotels.

Andy stood for a long time contemplating the door to the Hotel De La Rosa, the little hideaway where Tilda had booked a reservation about the time Mark vanished from Texas. The entrance was tucked into jungle foliage growing over a

small lane just blocks from the ocean and yet nearly a hundred feet above sea level, giving anyone making the climb a spectacular view of the water below. The ridiculously charming little inn was exactly the kind of humble establishment where the staff would not ask too many questions of a frantic American wife whose husband had just drowned accidentally.

Andy knew instinctively that this was the place to begin. If Mark had died here, anyone and everyone would know about it. All she had to do was sidle up to the reception desk and ask. But was that the kind of question you just blurted out? In a foreign country? Where you didn't speak the language? The point of coming to Mexico was to find out as much information as possible about Mark's last days. She needed to avoid embarrassing or antagonizing her sources.

How could she break the cross-cultural ice? She considered the possibility of asking the desk clerk about Tilda's previous reservation, but Annabelle hadn't known any of the booking details. She couldn't tell Andy the precise dates. Or the length of the stay. Or even what name Tilda had used to register. All Andy knew for sure was that the reservation had been early in the summer, some time after Mitch had received the ashes.

The struggle over what to say to the desk clerk was paralyzing her. Maybe Lorna had been right. Maybe Andy wasn't really up to this part, the part where you have to ask the question that you don't really want answered. Ten more minutes passed. Her indecision was beginning to rankle. How long was she going to stand here? After all, she'd chosen this odyssey to find Mark of her own free will, hadn't she? But here she was, on the threshold of making herself relevant, and she couldn't seem to take the last self-defining step.

Desperate to overcome her inertia, Andrea Bravos searched for some act of defiance that would motivate her. The only thing she could think to do was spit. She tried it. She liked it. She did it again. This time it felt downright invigorating. Finally, after a third satisfying projectile of saliva, she squared her shoulders, crossed the dirt path, and pushed open the door of the Hotel De La Rosa. Without breaking stride, she stepped inside.

Naturally, there was no one there. The little lobby with the polished tile floor was completely empty. There was no bell or buzzer, so Andy stood at the vacant reception counter waiting for someone to appear. No one did. She called out a poorly accented, but highly audible, 'Hola!' and still no one came to her aid. After nearly 15 minutes, she picked up the handle of her small carry on and turned toward the turquoise doorway that had been glaring at her from the end of a small hall to one side of the lobby. This she did not because she expected to find the desk clerk behind it, but because she wanted a drink – and the sign above the door read *Pedro's Cantina*.

And that, of course, was where she found him.

Although the little bar was located on a lushly adorned stone patio beveled into the hillside next to the hotel, she didn't really notice. Nor was she cognizant of the three small tables perched on the edge of the stone that overlooked the beach below. All she could see was the teak bar to the rear of the patio and the solitary customer seated on a rattan barstool facing the orchestra of liquor bottles.

Even with his lumbering back to her, she recognized the pinkish scar on the nape of Mark Kornacky's neck and the glass of Captain Morgan in his hand. For some reason, seeing him sitting there – in pretty much the same way he had been sitting years ago when she left him – punctured something deep inside her. It was as if the all the helium buoying her up the past two months came rushing out, leaving her unaccountably deflated.

She had been expecting so much more out of the moment that finally ended her quest, something that involved death and drama or maybe even rescue from the clutches of evil. Instead, she found herself staring at, well, a shaggy dog, both real and emblematic: big, rumped, and looking like the anti-climax to a pointless story. He was alive, yes, but surprisingly unchanged and pitifully disappointing.

Silently, she set down her suitcase, crossed the room, and slipped on to the seat next to him.

"I'll have what he's having," she instructed the young bartender, who was busy texting and had barely noticed her himself.

As the boy looked up and nodded, Andy felt the afternoon light pouring in behind them. It was now as amber as the rum in Mark's tumbler, and he appeared to be equally mesmerized by both.

"Hello, Mark," she said, without looking in his direction. Then Andy took possession of her own liquid anesthetic and waited for a new and wholly unexpected day to dawn on her ex-husband.

He didn't speak at first. He just raised his ample eyebrows in amazement and kept them raised in a gesture that looked remarkably like self-defense. "Jesus H. Christ!" he finally muttered.

Not for the first time, Andy was tempted to ask him if he remembered the names of any of his children, but as always with Mark, she deferred to more urgent matters. "You're a hard man to find," she said, turning to face him head-on. The beard startled her; he had never worn one as a young man. It was gray and tired looking. A halo of wrinkles framed his once deep blue eyes. Mark had never been a handsome man, but then Andy had never been a beautiful woman. They had been a remarkably average-looking couple in a town and a business where average was a disability.

"Did I say I wanted to be found?" he asked, with genuine confusion.

"No. In fact, you haven't said very much at all. In years. To me. Or to anybody else you formerly called your family."

He shook his head, as if he did not need to be reminded of the obvious, and he signaled the bartender for a refill. Then in a tone that sounded almost apologetic, he said, "I think we've already established that I'm not much of a family man, Andy. I hope to hell you haven't tracked me all the way to Mexico just to re-litigate that one."

"No. Sorry. You're right. I didn't come all this way to rehash the past. I came to, well . . ." She searched for how to begin. "I came for several reasons."

Without warning, Mark Kornacky straightened his sagging shoulders, as if some spark in his smoldering nervous system had suddenly ignited. "Nothing's happened, has it?" he said, focusing his eyes on her for the first time. "No one's died, have they?"

"What?"

"I mean, you haven't come to tell me there's something wrong with one of the kids?"

"Oh. No, no," she assured him. "Nothing's happened to the kids. Or the grandkids. And no one's died . . . exactly. But, as it turns out, we are in the middle of a funeral."

"A funeral? That's why you're here?"

She nodded.

He waited for a response about as long as could be expected and, when she didn't continue, he said perturbed, "Whose funeral?"

"Yours, Mark. Everybody thought you were dead."

His creased lips parted in surprise, as his inebriated countenance sobered before her.

"What are you doing here, Mark?" she asked, before he had the presence of mind to respond to the news of his funeral.

"What?"

Andy could hardly hear his wilted voice.

"What are you doing in Mexico?" she pushed.

"Waiting."

"For Tilda?"

He nodded and then seemed to recover his self-respect. "Why are you asking me this?"

"Where is she?"

"Why is it any of your business?"

"Please, Mark. It's important."

“Has something happened to Tilda?” Mark swallowed uncomfortably, and it appeared to Andy that his concern was real.

“Just tell me where you think she is.”

He didn’t like the way Andy had phrased the question. His anxiety increased. “In California.”

“Doing what?”

“Putting her name on the title to the cabin up in Big Bear. We decided it was a good idea. She’s, well, so much younger than I am.”

“She is,” Andy said, not wanting to antagonize him, hoping he’d say more.

“We’ve been planning to come to Mexico for a long time. But Tilda wanted to see the cabin in Big Bear and take care of the title change before we buy a place here.”

“You’re buying a place here?”

“Sure. Great place to retire.”

Andy nodded. Waited.

“So I came ahead to Mexico to vacation and to look at real estate, and she went to California take care of business there.”

“When is she joining you?”

“Any day now.”

And there it was, Andy realized all at once, the elusive sequence of events she and Lorna had been unable to piece together. Tilda had made the hotel reservation for Mark, while she had gone to Big Bear to put her name on the title to the cabin. She’d driven across the southwest from Texas to get a look at her latest asset in the mountains of California and to scope out any potential new hubbies at places like the Elks Lodge. She wasn’t waiting for a death certificate—because she hadn’t killed her mate yet. She was planning to return to Mexico long before Andy and the feds had taken an interest in her. The ticket in her car was there because she needed to complete the job of devouring her latest victim. Andy and Lorna, it turned out, had found the spider before she’d had time to finish her meal.

“What’s wrong, Andrea?” asked Mark, sharply. “What are you doing here?”

Andy set her empty glass down on the glossy bar and felt a surge of sympathy for the man who’d spent at least half of their marriage making her miserable. How odd it should come to this: the two of them on a patio overlooking the Pacific decades later – inevitably discussing his foolish behavior with other women.

“She’s a black widow, Mark. Do you know what I’m talking about?”

“No,” he shoved back, indignantly. “And I’m not going to sit here and –”

“She killed three previous husbands.”

“Fuck you, Andy!”

“And she was about to do the same thing to you. Here in Mexico.”

He stood up, his aging face, waning beneath the beard, burned with confusion and anger. She guessed Mark was probably in love with Tilda, in the same way Gus and the others had loved her. She was young, exotic, full of adventure. What was there *not* to love – and keep loving – right up until the end?

“Sit down, Mark,” she instructed. “You need to hear this. Tilda’s not coming. She’s been arrested by the Treasury Department for tax evasion. And she’s under investigation for murder.”

“You’re lying.”

“No, I’m not. I’m here on a mission,” she said, keeping her angry voice as even as possible. “Because Tilda told your children you were dead and sent your ashes to them in a burger box. They are holding a funeral on Sunday morning. This isn’t a lie. It’s an absurdity – of your own making, Mark. And for once, you need to deal with it.”

Slowly, Mark Kornacky sat back down and ordered another rum.

In the end, he did what he always did when caught in a tangled web; he cried. When he was married to Andy, he cried for the mess he made of things and the second chance he always needed. It had taken her years to realize that whatever the crisis, Mark always cried for himself. And today was really no different.

"How could she do this to me?" he wondered, as he wiped his eyes with his palms. "I thought we were happy. I thought she loved me."

And in the end, Andy did what she always did; she tried to turn it all into a morality tale, the kind you write in a bad TV movie.

"I think you should come back to Santa Monica with me," she said, waving away the bartender, who kept nuzzling closer and closer to the conversation in order to follow the story.

"Why should I go to Santa Monica?" he sniffed.

"Because they deserve an explanation."

He nearly asked 'who' before he felt the heat from her glare and stopped himself.

"The kids don't want to see me," Mark finally said, dismissing the idea.

Andy marveled at her ex-husband's capacity for self-pity. "And what about you? Don't you want to see them?"

For a moment, he was stymied by her reverse logic. But then he recalibrated. "It's been a long time, Andrea. Our children are adults now. It's about time they moved on."

He wasn't looking at her anymore. He was massaging the glass in his hand. The ache in Andy's chest bit deeper, and she understood again why our metaphoric hearts are located there, in the same place as the biological ones. That's where she was now feeling the considerable pain of being reminded that she was once married to this man. Even the bartender sensed her shame.

"On di house," he whispered, slipping her a margarita he poured in the silence now hanging between the aging couple.

Andy drank. And then drank again.

"You should contact the IRS and the FBI," she said, draining the glass and dismounting the barstool. "They're going to want to talk to you as soon as possible."

She picked up her small suitcase and carried it toward the turquoise door, then stopped. "Do you remember a song called The Weight?"

"Hmmm?" Mark appeared to have reentered his amber afternoon haze.

"With the lyric *Take a load off Fanny*. By The Band?"

"I like that song," he said, turning to look at her and noticing for the first time that she was leaving.

"Do you think it's about sex, drugs, or redemption?"

He laughed. "No fucking idea, Andy."

"I think it's about dumping somebody's ass."

He laughed again. "You mean, like me? When you dumped my ass?"

"Sadly, Mark, that's exactly what I thought I'd done. A long time ago. Dumped you. But all this time, I've been encouraging the kids to hang on. Because, well, you shouldn't dump your dad, should you?"

"But they have, haven't they? *They've* dumped me now, too." He sounded strangely satisfied, as if this confirmed everything he believed about both himself and his children.

"No. That's not it at all. They never dumped you, Mark. And neither did I. You dumped us. Long before the marriage ended. Years before I got the divorce. The problem is, we didn't dump you back. We're all still weighed down by a load of guilt when it comes to you. I think every one of us has carried it around in one form or another since you walked out the door and pretended we didn't exist anymore."

He swiveled his stool away from her and put his elbows on the bar. "I didn't tell any of you to feel guilty. What you feel is your problem, not mine."

It was an acutely defensive statement, self-serving and mean. Still it stung, probably because he was right. He'd never asked, nor really wanted, them to feel anything toward him. He just wanted to get away.

"You really ought to come see your children," she told him one last time. "They all showed up to see you off. Every one of them. And every one of their children."

He shook his head.

“Will you at least call them? To tell them you’re still above ground and breathing?”

“I don’t think so,” he said, remaining with his back to her. “You tell them for me, Andrea. Okay?” He raised his glass to the emptiness in front of him. “Enjoy my funeral.”

She wanted to be angry. Livid. Seething with indignation over his cowardly petulance. But that wasn’t remotely how she felt. Not this time. Not anymore. What she felt was relief, a lightness of liability that made her smile at his mock toast.

“We will,” she responded, without the least bit of rancor. “We will celebrate your life and death and unapologetic return. But mostly, I think we’ll all just sit around and take the load off, Mark. It’s about time.”

When Andy called Santa Monica from the Puerto Vallarta airport two hours later to report the final results of her investigation, all four of her children were together in the sunroom playing Texas Holdem. Mitch put the call on speaker.

Before Andy had a chance to tell them what she’d learned, Sam grabbed the phone from her older brother and said, in a voice that sounded more curious than concerned, “He’s not dead, is he?”

“What?”

“I said, he’s not dead, is he, Mom?”

Andy staggered a little, rhetorically speaking. She hadn’t expected to cut to the chase so soon. “No. He’s not. How did you know?”

“We didn’t,” Sam explained. “Just a lucky guess.”

“A lucky guess?”

“The truth is, we’ve been waiting around for you to call,” Mitch said. “And you know how we are. We sort of made a little wager.”

“Oh, okay.” This wasn’t going at all the way she had imagined. The kids seemed so, well, perfectly okay. “Sounds like you’re all taking this in stride.”

Lil’s voice suddenly popped up. “Want to know who won and who lost?”

“Ah, no. Not really,” Andy said, still trying to get her emotional bearings. “I’m not sure it’s all that funny, though.”

She could hear someone moving closer to the phone. “Nobody’s laughing, Mom,” Ian assured her. “Really. It was just a probability thing.”

“A probability thing?”

“Yeah, we were speculating on the chances he’d screw this funeral up,” Mitch chimed in. “Kind of like he did all those birthdays. And weddings.”

“Oh,” Andy stammered. “Right. I see.” And she did see. At least she was beginning to get a clearer view out her myopic little window to the world. Mark had not been that far off in his assessment of his children. They *had* moved on. She was the one who’d insisted on doing all the unnecessary heavy lifting. “Well, anyway,” she said, letting herself slip, ever so slightly, into the *esprit de corps*, “he, ah, said to say hello. And to, ah, enjoy ourselves.”

“We are,” Sam announced. “We’ve been toasting him every hand.”

“I don’t suppose you asked him to join us?” Lil speculated.

“Um. I did. Actually. He declined.”

She could hear a clink of glasses in the background.

“We made a bet on that, too,” Ian said, filling her in. “Same odds.”

They were laughing now and talking over one another, not to her but to anyone who would listen. It was chaos, the way it used to be when they were little. A combination of sibling rivalry and genetic symbiosis. Her children were fine, Andy realized, just fine.

“I better hang up,” she shouted into her cell. “We’re about to board.”

“Hurry up, Mom!” Lil called out over the noise on the other end.

“What?”

“We want you to hurry up,” Sam repeated. “Get on the plane, already. We can’t start the party without you!”

Andy cut the connection with her children, as the passengers surrounding her began to assemble near the gangway, eager to board. It was the usual menagerie of travelers: business types, tourists, young families with kids, and

those ubiquitous baby boomers – still flush with good health and money but clearly transitioning into the great *grayness of being*. She recognized herself in the members of this last group, in the crow's feet framing their eyes and the subtle stiffness when they stood. She was one of them, even if she didn't want to be.

Too late now, she reminded herself. There was no going back – to anything. There was only the inexorable movement forward toward an uncertain future that none of us has the power to own.

But we could own the past, she told herself. We could be the narrators of our own history, free to choose the meaning of our journey and, with it, the relevance of our lives. After all, wasn't the 'meaning' of things relative? Didn't we make most of it up? Didn't we make *all* of it up? So why go looking for relevance when you could simply *bestow* it? Give it to yourself. Give it to anyone or anything you wanted! How much easier was that than to run around trying to *find* it?

Andy began to gather her things, then stopped and sat back to linger in her seat for a moment longer. She turned to the window, warming her face in the remaining rays of the day's sunshine, as her favorite star descended gently into the ocean beyond the Bay of Banderas. She felt better. Less lost. More in control of where she had been and less anxious about where she was going. It really was okay to have been a mediocre writer. She didn't care. What she cared about was that she'd had a career she adored. And she could live with having been a mediocre mother. Because she now understood, in ways she never had before, how much her children loved her. By the way they laughed at her. Worried about her. Asked her advice and then didn't take it. And now, this minute, they were waiting for her at Mitch's house. Waiting – not because she'd found their father or even because she probably saved his butt from drowning – but waiting for her because they all felt this indescribable joy in being together. And because they couldn't start the party without her.

Epilogue

Better than a preacher, I guess . . .

Three weeks later, Harley Davidson stood by himself on one side of a ragged pool of sepia-tinted light, as his creamy blues blinked involuntarily. Andy had not seen him since the day he left her townhouse and made his desperate escape into the arms of Mitch and The Impresario. He was nearly unrecognizable. His boyish pudginess had melted by ten or fifteen pounds, giving his body well-defined features and his rosy cheeks a sculpted handsomeness that had not seemed possible. He wore a black, mock turtleneck t-shirt, a black silk suit jacket, and blue jeans. The only remnant of his past seemed to be his Nebraska cowboy boots.

"A comedy camp?" Andy repeated for the third time in succession.

Lorna fanned herself with the sheet of paper that listed the evening's performers. "Somewhere in Ojai. I guess they teach people how to be funny."

"Who thought it was a good idea to teach Harley to be funny?"

"Melissa thinks he's a natural comic."

"Geez," was all Andy could come up with.

"Better than a preacher, I guess," Lorna opined.

Andy considered her accountant's observation, as she watched her nephew wait his turn to take the stage. He was certainly several incarnations removed from Tabernacle U, his abandoned alma mater. And no one would mistake him for a Hasidic Jew this evening. Yet, it had crossed Andy's mind on the drive from Valencia to the Loads of Laughs Cafe in North Hollywood this evening that comedy wasn't all that different from religion. Perhaps it wasn't such a surprising transmutation.

After all, both practices claim to understand the way the world works, while banking heavily on human beings to screw it up. One to get souls, the other to get laughs. And both have this affinity for putting some know-it-all center stage and letting him go on and on, uninterrupted by logic or common decency.

Which, no doubt, explains why most clerics and comics are men with questionable social skills and a penchant for picking on women.

The real tie that binds, though, Andy had decided, is that religion and comedy are both masters of illusion. Truth, just like Funny, is in the mind of the beholder. And proof of God's existence is about as tangible as a good joke; you either get it or you don't. The point of either contrivance is to get out there and find a following.

All of which made Andy wonder – as her nephew finally took his place in front of the fifty or so people in the club – if Harley had finally found his true calling this time.

"Hi," he said, awkwardly squinting into the spotlight. "My name is Harley Davidson."

There was a small ripple of laughter in the audience.

"That's not a joke," he cut in, impishly. "So you don't have to laugh yet."

A larger ripple. The aspiring comic smiled, just slightly. His eyes twinkled. There was something thoroughly engaging in his persona.

"My god," Lorna whispered. "He has a real stage presence, doesn't he?"

Andy nodded in baffled agreement.

"I'm new to LA," he began, sticking one booted foot in the air. "A refugee from Nebraska."

More laughter.

"My mother sent me out here a few months ago to go to college. Which I fully intend to do someday. As soon as I get the time."

Now there was a sprinkle of applause from the largely twenty-somethings.

"Anyway, I thought I should send her my class schedule, you know. Just to set her mind at ease. So I went online and ordered one from a website called www.sex-drugs-and-rock-and-roll. First, you select the 'Parents' icon, and then you click on the button marked, 'What they don't know won't hurt them.'

Hoots of approval, as Andy shuddered involuntarily.

Lorna leaned in close to her friend. “It’s okay. Look on the bright side, Andy. At least this time he’s not telling you where you’re going to spend eternity.”

“But I’m not here to insult my Midwest upbringing,” the fledgling entertainer continued, clearly energized by the audience response, almost as if he’d finally found his jetpack. “Really, I’ll let all you vegans out there take care of Omaha. No, I’m sticking to the people I really can’t get enough of – you crazy Angelinos.”

His mischievous eyes danced across the room until they found Andy.

“Take my aunt . . .” said Harley Davidson. “Please.”

Despite the roomful of strangers, he had managed to deliver the line with more than a hint of affection, she noted, even as she braced herself for the irony of becoming someone else’s source material. Then Andy Bravos sat back in her uncomfortable folding chair and prepared, for a third time in one summer, to let her thematically consistent nephew condemn her to hell.

If you enjoyed this book by Nancy Hersage, please review it on the Follow the Dotted Line book page on Amazon.com.