

Chapter One



Present Day—Simone

Simone met Carl on a trip to New York.

At forty-two, she thought she knew her own mind and all there was to know about life. She was good at her job. She believed the choices she'd made over time had given her a life that, if not happy, was at least interesting. Carl changed all that.

A reasonably attractive and quite intelligent woman, owner of luminous brown eyes and medium-chestnut hair, Simone considered her best features were her generous smile and her full lips, always shiny with colorless lip gloss.

Simone was a psychiatrist, specializing in paraphilias—sexual behavior disorders. Dozens of men and women with sexual problems of all kinds came to see her.

Carl had appeared in the middle of a presentation she was giving for the Society Sex Therapy and Research Conference at the New York Academy of Sciences.

Simone was on the stage, facing the audience. Behind the comfortable red leather chairs, the frameless glass walls of the 40th floor allowed a perfect view of Manhattan's sunset.

Simone was the ever-punctual type. She never failed to be first to a meeting. Perhaps this was an unresolved disorder of her own, a neurotic love for the clock. Carl caused a stir as he sought a seat.

“Loewenstein, in his psychoanalytical contribution to the theory of masochism, says the phenomenon is challenging since it contradicts the basic human characteristic, which is to avoid pain and displeasure, thus departing from standards of normality.”

She couldn't finish her thought because, besides arriving late and still standing up, the guy decided to jump in. “But, Doctor, what is pleasure and what is displeasure? And what is normal? Who has established that?”

He'd interrupted her presentation. She had to respond. She couldn't avoid it. “Studies are carried out to learn what normal behavior is. This is what is practiced by the majority of the population in a given country, region or culture. Deviations from such behavior are considered abnormal. Generally, there is a group consensus as to what is good—pleasurable—and what is not. Based on these findings, pleasure and displeasure can be determined.”

But the tardy disrupter proved unhappy with her explanation. “With due respect, Doctor, I still don't understand.”

She sighed a bit impatiently. Seeing that the man would not desist without an answer, she decided to discourage him. “Your name, please?”

“Carl.”

“Carl, my time is limited. Could you kindly leave your questions ‘til I finish? There will be ample opportunity for them then. I won’t be able to conclude my talk, otherwise.”

“There is a seat in the last row.” She pointed.

“Thank you and excuse the interruption.”

He finally went to find a seat and left Simone to pick up her train of thought.

The lecture lasted fifteen minutes longer without further interruption. Afterward, during the coffee break, Carl approached her.

He was attractive and fair-skinned, though not handsome in the classical sense. Charming and magnetic, he had a square and angular face, far from what could be called pretty. His eyes were light brown, his dark hair flecked with gray. He was a tall man and at first sight, you couldn’t tell if he was lean or muscled under his suit. But he was certainly well proportioned.

“Okay, Carl, what do you want to know?”

He seemed shy. She sensed it in his sweet smile, the one only shy people use when they want to be accepted. That was her mistake—she believed in the assurance the shy pass to others that they are gentle, calm, agreeable and pose no risks.

“The question I tried to ask before was what is normal sexuality and what is not?”

The way he spoke showed great interest. He looked her right in the eye while awaiting her response and reaction.

“I think I know where you want to go. Who defines normality? Who has the authority to do it? You don’t have a medical background, do you? You’re apparently unfamiliar with diagnostic standards. Is that correct?”

His little smile said “bingo.” Then he said, “Your diagnosis is right on the money. I’m a lawyer. I really don’t have the slightest idea about diagnostic standards.”

This truly surprised her. A lawyer? At a sexology workshop, she would have expected a psychologist or a therapist or a gay person trying to understand himself. But a lawyer?

“And what brings a lawyer to a sexual disorder workshop?”

“I’m here because I need to build a defense in a case involving sex games that led to a woman’s death. I need to understand the subject better so I can do my job.”

Right, she thought. A lawyer lost among shrinks. Wonderful. Any more surprises? And “lost” was the correct word because the subject involved medical statistics...a bit out of a layman’s depth.

“What *games* are we talking about?” Simone made quotes in the air with her fingers when she said “games.” She wanted to show she didn’t think any sexual activity that led to death was sportive material.

“Sodomasochist games,” he replied, eyeing her intently.

“And you want to understand what’s normal about that kind of game?”

“I need to understand. But your response a little while ago didn’t help me. When you base something on studies where you ask people questions, you’ll have to agree that most of them don’t tell the truth. So how can you know if a given behavior is real or just a lie, and the majority not really a minority?”

“What do you mean by people lying in a study of that kind?” she asked, eager to get a lawyer’s point of view.

“They just lie. Most people are too stupid and frightened and dishonest to answer a questionnaire truthfully. Even more so when it comes to a taboo subject like sex.”

His body language said nothing. It didn’t reveal what he thought about the subject. He seemed to be trained not to physically give away what he felt. Simone hadn’t been able to read him yet.

“But we have to start from the premise that responses are true. If we don’t, we’ll never establish a standard.” She rabbit-punched the palm of her right hand with her left in emphasis. “Regarding sexuality, it’s very easy to identify sadism and masochism because we use a standard that shows only fourteen percent of the population has had an experience of that kind. I’ll grant you that’s not an exact figure but we have to work with the idea that about eighty-six percent of the population behaves differently.”

“They behave differently or they’re lying.”

He was insistent. Clearly, he needed answers that fit the case he wanted to build, and the ones she offered didn’t satisfy him.

“Maybe,” she said. “What’s normal for you?” Better for her to ask the question, she thought. That way she could understand what he really wanted to hear and then she’d be rid of him.

“Normal is to feel pleasure and do everything you can to get it. The rest is prejudice, nonsense or cowardice!”

His heated tone at last showed that behind his noncommittal lawyer’s façade was someone with fire in his belly.

“People kill in pursuit of pleasure. You should know that better than anybody. You’re defending such a person.”

“Yes, the case I’m working on is basically that. Death for pleasure. Someone who puts pleasure above all else. Risking death. And that’s not wrong or good or bad. It’s the desire of someone to have that pleasure—someone who accepts the consequences.” He stressed these words as if to show he truly believed what he was saying.

“True. But considering you’re here, lost among shrinks, it seems your argument’s not strong enough to convince the judge.”

He smiled vaguely, as if agreeing. He ran his hand through his hair, showing impatience, apparently frustrated. “Not only the judge. I need to convince him and the whole jury. The charge is first-degree murder. They’ll say it was premeditated. When my client goes to trial that will be

taken for granted because sex frightens people. Unconventional sex terrifies them. Sex is easy to condemn.”

“Can you sleep at night after you’ve defended a murderer? I’ve never been able to understand lawyers. You always defend one story and it’s not necessarily the true story. My whole life has been dedicated to the search for truth.”

“I hear you. But I understand the situation and I know he didn’t intend to kill, only to give pleasure. It was an accident and...”

Apparently, he believed his own words.

“Lawyers always seem to say that. But you’re right that unconventional sex terrifies the average person.” She glanced at her watch and saw she was two minutes late for the resumption of her presentation. It disconcerted her. “Oh. We have to get back.” She turned and took a step.

“Dr. Bennet, could you help me with my case?”

He placed a hand on her arm. Though partly absorbed by the sleeve of her jacket, the touch sent a frisson all through her.

“My name is Simone and I swear I don’t see how I can help you.”

“Simone, can we talk again after this gathering wraps up?”

“Yes, certainly.” Out the window went her desire to go back to the hotel, take a bath, get something to eat and go to bed.

The other lectures were meat for a sexologist but probably not much help to a lawyer. Carl did, nevertheless, keep quiet and pay close attention. After the final presentation, he waited at the door with his hands in his pockets.

“Carl, you went the distance,” she said, a tiny bit pleased to see him there.

“I toughed it out. How you people do complicate things. It’s impossible to understand some of those terms you use!”

“Just like you lawyers when you write.”

He nodded in agreement. “But our handwriting’s more legible.” He beamed and showed his perfect teeth.

“How can I help you? You’ve just met me. You don’t even know what I do. You don’t know if I’m capable or knowledgeable enough to be of any service to you. And from the little you’ve told me about your client’s situation, it’s complicated.”

“I’m not a psychiatrist but I’ve been practicing law for twenty years. In my field, we also get to know people, to form speedy opinions about a person’s character or worth. You can help me. I know you can. Sexuality is your area. I liked your book. Even though I didn’t understand half of it, I could see that you approach problems with an open mind.”

She couldn’t conceal her pleasure when he mentioned her book. It had taken so much work, so many hours of research, to write. Recognition was always welcome.

“I can’t have preconceived notions in my profession. I’m truly happy to meet someone from outside the academic world who’s had the grit to read it.”

“It was hard. It’s pretty technical. You write with objectivity but it doesn’t let a reader see much of your personality.”

My personality? she thought. If she wanted somebody analyzing her personality, she’d write fiction, not a work of scholarship.

“It’s a scientific undertaking, an extension of my doctoral thesis, not a novel. But getting back to your case. If you know something about my career, you also know I don’t live in New York. I live in Woodbridge and I work in New Haven. I’ll be here for just three days and I only have one free. I don’t see how I can help.”

“I’d like to hire your services. I want your help with this case. My office will pay you for your time. I really need help. I need an expert opinion. I’ll go to Connecticut if necessary, or you can come here if possible. It’s not that far, after all.”

His eyes were timid and sweet and pleading with her. She never turned down a call for help. She nodded without having the vaguest idea what she could do for him.

“I can try. I’ll need more details about your proposal.”

“Can we discuss the case over dinner? I’ll tell you what happened so you can think about whether you can help me and how.”

Simone was prudent as a general rule and even more so because every day she treated people with serious behavioral disorders. Prudence had to be her name. But now she set prudence aside. Her curiosity about Carl took over, along with her attraction to this elegant, opinionated man.

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When they got to his car—a black Mercedes sedan—she couldn’t help analyzing it. The vehicle one chose to drive said a lot about the owner.

She pointed to the parked car.

“You drive a safe and quite traditional sedan for someone who defends the unconventional. Oh well, the world is full of ‘do as I say’ and so on.”

“It’s a good-looking and fast car. I like to take control of a powerful machine, and for clients, it shows gravitas. But I’m not the car. It’s only a car.”

Her remarks had clearly made him uncomfortable.

“Relax, I wasn’t being critical. It was an observation.”

“I am relaxed. I just get edgy when someone analyzes me. I feel like a lab rat.”

He courteously opened the door for her and helped her into her seat. His warm hands on her made the attraction grow.

“Part of the job. Excuse me,” she said.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m starved. How about you?”

Amazing how lawyers can so slickly change the subject.

“Famished.” But her hunger had passed. She was dying to take a glance in the rearview mirror to see how she looked, to make sure she was presentable and that her hair wasn’t a mess.

“How does a tasty risotto sound?”

“Sounds good. It’s on my list of comfort food.”

He nodded in agreement and kept quiet for most of the fifteen minutes it took to reach a quaint restaurant with dim lighting in the Meatpacking District.

He greeted the waiter with a smile. He was apparently an *habitué*. They seated themselves at a pleasant table beside a glass wall with water trickling down it. Very soothing. Only then did he speak. “Do you know anything about wines, Simone?” He spoke without looking up from the menu, which he seemed to be studying as if it were a case.

“Yes, I know they’re made from grapes.” She laughed at her own weak joke.

“But do you like wine?”

“I do. But I don’t understand everything that I like.”

It was getting late. She decided to stop analyzing Carl’s personality. The menu was downright seductive and her hunger had returned with a vengeance. It was hard to choose. She wanted to order everything. He chose right away and waited for her to make up her mind before picking a wine. He didn’t ask her opinion. Maybe he was afraid of another lame attempt at humor.

“How long have you been a doctor?”

“Thirteen years next January.” She felt as if her ballroom days were over when she said it. She was forty-two now, a difficult age for any woman. Confessing to the fact took an act of courage.

“And was there any particular reason for specializing in sexual matters?”

“I didn’t have much interest during medical school. I wanted to be a psychiatrist but sexology didn’t appeal to me. Then two years after I graduated, and with an appointment book full of patients, I began to understand that most problems involve sexuality.” She paused to taste the wine. It pleased her uneducated palate. “So tell me about your case.”

“A complicated situation. Two lovers who liked to play sex games of all kinds. One night, the woman died in the middle of one.”

His description was so nonchalant, he could have said, “I went out for a loaf of bread.”

“What was the game like?”

“She had a fantasy she lived out over and over. She liked him to squeeze her neck during intercourse. That day, he squeezed too hard.”

“And why did he squeeze too hard? Do you know? Did he lose control or was it intentional?”

“She kept asking him to squeeze harder. The more he squeezed, the more she wanted. He squeezed and squeezed and squeezed until she died.”

He seemed as if he was watching the scene, his gaze far away while he described what happened.

“And you’re certain that’s what took place? That it wasn’t rape followed by murder?”

“I’m absolutely certain!” he snapped. “He didn’t want to kill her. He only wanted to give her pleasure.”

Good lawyer. Passionate about the case, she thought.

“But he did kill. Squeezing the neck during the sex act to give and feel pleasure is called hypoxophilia. Many accidents and deaths occur that way.”

“So it’s not uncommon?” he asked, sounding half curious and half relieved.

“No. There are even famous people who’ve died that way. The main problem is that it’s very hard to know if the one who caused the death wanted it to happen or not. At times, it’s not an accidental crime; it’s just disguised strangulation, an obscured rape. It’s necessary to be sure.”

“That’s not the case.” Apparently he was certain.

“You seem convinced of that. The killer’s account is persuasive?”

“I don’t like the word killer. It implies guilt. I’ve known him a long time. He would never intentionally kill anyone.”

“I wouldn’t say that. We’re all capable of killing. It depends on the circumstances and the restraints we have—or lack of them. You have no idea of the number of people who come to me who have killed or were about to kill and who are absolutely peaceful people, people who are apparently normal and level-headed.”

“No one is normal up close.”

“Up close. Apart from the statistics on standard conduct, we don’t know very well what normal is.”

“Then I’d better not get too close to you, Doctor, or my abnormality will show.” He laughed, as if it were a good joke.

“I need to find out how to help you so I can know if I need to get close.” She really wanted to get closer to him. He intrigued her more and more.

“Simone, I need to clear a person. He is a close friend and partner. I need to know the death was not premeditated, that it was not intentional. To prove innocence, I need to be convinced, technically convinced, I mean. For that, I need a psychological study of hypoxophilia.” He placed his hand on his throat as if to squeeze it.

What was this man doing to her? Just touching his own throat made her want him to touch hers.

“Hypoxophilia,” she corrected. “But just studying hypoxophilia will help you clear someone?”

“It will. I need to know what makes someone feel pleasure from that, to know what’s going on inside someone’s head to make her demand such intensity. I want to understand what that behavioral deviation is and to understand what leads her partner to satisfy her desire. I want to know what motivates him.”

He spoke these last words with an emphasis that left no doubt he needed an answer.

“I think we have to be more objective.”

“We have to be? So you’re agreeing to help.” He seemed relieved.

“The case seems interesting. But we need to look at the event itself to be able to find out if it was hypoxiphilia or plain and simple death from asphyxia. I need details to help build your argument.”

“Simone, you’ll get all the information you need. He wrote a minute description of what happened with a wealth of detail.”

“He what? He described it?”

“That’s exactly what he did. And he didn’t just describe the death. He wrote the history of their relationship as if it were a novel.”

“Do they have names, or is it a professional secret?”

“Mark and Lara.”

“But are those their real names?” She was already thinking about Googling deaths by hypoxiphilia to try to find something.

“There are no lies in the text but first, you’ll read, then you’ll be able to say what’s real. At first, I’d like you to just stick to the text. Please don’t go to other sources ’til you finish it. That will eliminate any bias.”

As if he’d read Simone’s thoughts, Carl had put a damper on surfing the web. But, she reflected, he was right. Better to read the text and afterward look for additional information. Besides, the book is almost always better than the film.

“How are we going to do this? Will you lend me what he wrote?”

“Let’s do it this way; I’ll let you take the first chapter. You read it and then tell me if you can help me. If you say you can, we’ll draw up a contract covering fees and confidentiality and you’ll have access to the rest of the story.”

The lawyer had returned to life—contract, fees and confidentiality!

“Sounds good to me.”

He opened the briefcase he’d put on a chair, took out a yellow envelope and handed it to Simone. It felt like it held about ten pages.

“Simone, I suggest you eat. You still haven’t touched your food and risotto is good only when it’s hot.” He pointed at her untouched plate.

She tasted it and closed her eyes, signaling her approval. “It’s wonderful. I love risotto.”

“I do too. And I can make a great one.”

Besides being interesting, the guy could cook. She wanted to take him home and keep him in captivity.

The dinner went well. Carl was cultured and a good conversationalist. She guessed he was more or less her age, based more on when he said he'd graduated from law school than on his appearance. She soon found out she wasn't far off. He was forty-three.

"I'm very curious to know what makes a pretty woman like you decide to spend her life delving into the human mind."

"Thank you for saying 'pretty.'"

Simone had never thought of herself as a pretty woman. She'd always looked at herself as being more "interesting" than pretty. Her hair and eyes were light brown; she exercised regularly and had a good shape. Nothing spectacular.

"The human mind is the most fascinating place that exists." *And your bed's probably number two*, she thought, a bit tipsy now from the wine.

"I prefer Paris."

He laughed. Wine can turn even the most severe lawyer into Mr. Cool.

"I agree. It's a more beautiful and less complicated place. But the trip into the human mind is much more intense and rich."

"Are you married, Simone?"

The wine speaking again, she thought.

"No husband in the world could put up with a life like mine. I'm a workaholic."

"But have you ever been married?"

Did he really care about her life or was he just being polite?

"Yes, a long time ago, and I have a daughter. I was sure that would be your next question."

"Indeed, it was. Classic, right?"

"To be expected. And you? Tie, black briefcase, wife and children waiting at home?" She was praying for him to say no.

"I left the tie in the car. As you've noticed, the briefcase is here. I'm a classic."

"And the wife and kids are at home?"

He dismissed that with a wave of his hand.

"No wife at home, no children. With all the time I spend on the job, they'd have to look for me in the classifieds whenever they wanted to talk to me. But I do have a plant."

So he really does have a sense of humor, she thought. *A bit on the harsh side but it's there. Just keep some alcohol in his blood.*

"That feat's beyond me. I can kill any plant. I always forget they need water." She paused. "Carl, the meal was wonderful. I don't mean to be inelegant but tomorrow the first presentation is at 9:00 a.m. and I still have to go over my notes."

"When will you have time to read the first chapter?" He was obviously in a hurry for answers.

“I promise I’ll do it tomorrow night. Leave me your phone number and I’ll call you on Saturday with my thoughts, okay?”

“I’m anxious to hear them but all right. Here’s my card.”

He gave her his business card, which seemed a pretty cold thing to do. Professional. *Wake up, Simone, she admonished herself. That’s exactly what he wants with you, a professional relationship.*

“I’ll need your cell phone. These are office numbers and the day after tomorrow is Saturday.”

“I’ll be at the office all day. Call me there.”

“Talk about a workaholic. I just don’t understand the live...what? Fern?”

“It’s a cactus, Simone. It’s just like me—tough, prickly, not very pretty and extremely resistant.”

“Careful, Carl. The inside of a cactus is soft and watery.”

“If you say so...” And he kept silent, looking deeply immersed in his thoughts or in another dimension throughout the journey to her hotel. Once there, he wished her goodnight and left.

Lara’s Journal

Book II

Prologue



The nightclub was dark, a few red lights barely illuminating the smoky, crowded dance floor. Music blared from the sound system, loud and shrill. People bounced wildly, unconcerned with keeping rhythm to the frenzied beat, only there to have fun.

At 3:00 a.m., there were very few sober people. She should be one of them, but not today; today she was enjoying life.

Life was unpredictable, she thought. Why not live intensely?

She was not really drunk. She’d had a few drinks—maybe five or six glasses of white wine. Or more...? In any event, she’d drunk enough to relax and loosen up a little but not so much that she slurred her speech or saw doubles.

A very interesting-looking man sat at a corner table, and he’d been staring at her for at least the last five minutes. Although she couldn’t see his features well in the dimly lit club, she knew he definitely had dark-brown hair. He seemed young—much younger than she was—but so what? She wondered what color eyes he had, and decided, if given the opportunity, she’d find out.

He raised his glass in a silent toast, and she smiled back. Deciding to accept his obvious invitation, she nodded, and he was by her side in an instant, bringing two wineglasses with him.

“Hello,” he said. “Would you like to dance?”

“Hello,” she answered, accepting the glass he offered her.

They didn’t talk; the music was too loud for conversation. Instead, she stepped close to him and wrapped her arms around his neck, still holding her glass. They started to move slowly, following the music, trying to balance their drinks. He put his free hand on her waist, moving sensuously, then slid his hand up to caress her back.

She smiled as one phrase echoed in her mind. *Life is short, too short.*

He took her glass from her hand, put his and hers on a nearby table, took her to a corner, supported her against the wall, and lifted her arms. Holding them high, he leaned into her, effectively imprisoning her. Oh, she could easily break free if she wanted to, but at the moment, she wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.

He lowered his head and captured her lips with his. His kiss was hot, hard, and aggressive and demanded an equal response. His tongue dipped inside her mouth, and he kissed her as if he wanted to dredge her soul. His mouth tasted of wine. Too much time had passed since she’d last received such passionate kisses.

He ran his hands over her body, trying to feel her through her dress. For a moment, she thought to stop him—someone might see them—but then she figured, *what the hell?* Who cared what people thought? No one there knew her, and there were several other couples doing the same thing in other shadowy areas of the club.

She kissed him back, her arms still draped around his neck, her body burning at his touch, her blood warming as her heart beat fast. He put his hand inside her dress and touched her breast, and a shiver traveled through her.

He might be younger than she was, but he certainly was not inexperienced. While kissing and nibbling his way down her neck, he pulled down one of her dress straps to expose a breast. Maybe in another time or place, she would have been ashamed, but not now. She felt only pleasure at being touched, at being alive.

He started to suckle her nipples, and she grew immediately wet. She closed her eyes to focus on his touch, a spinning sensation in her head brought on by her lust and the alcohol. She was moaning, but nobody could hear, the music drowning out the sound.

“Come with me,” he said.

At least that’s what she thought he said because he took her hand and led her to the men’s bathroom.

There were a few guys hanging around the entrance and just inside, but nobody seemed to mind her presence. Her new friend took her into the largest of the five stalls—the one equipped for handicapped entrance—and closed the door. A sink and a toilet were lined up against one wall.

He lifted her dress, set her on the marble sink, and started to caress her again, sliding his hands up her legs. She whimpered and clutched at his shoulders.

Desperate to get her hands on his body, she opened the first few buttons of his shirt. She ran her palms over his smooth, warm chest then scraped his pecs with her nails. Her new lover moaned approvingly. She wiggled her ass on the countertop, signaling her desire for him to touch her, to take her.

He grinned before dipping his head to bite at her neck. He rained small kisses all the way down to her shoulder as he pulled aside her panties and put a finger inside her. Excited, wet, and ready for him, she moaned. He worked her for a while, moving his finger in and out, then he gathered the moisture from her pussy and rhythmically swirled it around her clit.

Breathing hard, she opened his zipper, took out his cock, and caressed its length, first with her nails and then with her fingertips.

“*Loca*,” he said, his dick hard, moisture leaking from the tip.

“Fuck me,” she commanded.

He reached into his pocket and withdrew a condom. After ripping open the little packet, he tossed aside the wrapper and sheathed his hard dick.

She spread her legs wide, and he stepped between them. He entered her in one long, smooth glide, and she gasped, digging her nails into his shoulders as her orgasm shattered through her.

Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit. She’d never come so easily or so quickly.

She wrapped her legs around his waist to allow him to go deeper inside her, and they started to move. He thrust into her brutally, his face a mask of desperate concentration as he sought his own release.

His charcoal-black eyes were wide open, and he held her gaze, one hand between them, massaging her clit, the other hand clamped on her waist in a bruising grip.

“Yes!” he whispered harshly, slamming into her.

They came together, him releasing a strangled cry and her biting her bottom lip to keep from shouting. Afterward, they stood there in silence, breathing heavily, the smell of sex permeating the air.

She glanced away. A moment ago, they’d been as close as two people could get, but now she felt uncomfortable...exposed. She uncrossed her legs, releasing him, and fixed her clothes while he got rid of the condom. He helped her to stand up.

She wanted to disappear as quickly as possible.

He asked her something, but thanks to the noise, she only understood the last word. Something about a “telephone”—had he asked for her number?

She refused him with a quick shake of her head, opened the door, and beat a hasty retreat. Without looking back, she lost herself on the dance floor.

Chapter One



Simone—Present Day

Simone sped down the dark hall. Behind her, the masked man drew closer.

Any minute now he'd reach her; she could practically feel his heavy breath on her nape. A staircase appeared before her, and she raced down, jumping the steps two at a time. At the bottom, she came to a closed red iron door. She grabbed the handle, turned, and yanked, but the damn thing was locked.

Simone spun around, leaning back against the door, breathing heavily and straining to listen for the man's footsteps in the darkness.

Heart racing, she searched her mind for a way out but came up blank. Above her, heavy footfalls sounded at the top of the steps. She opened her mouth to scream but found she had no voice.

Simone flew to a sitting position, eyes wide open, a sweat-soaked sheet wrapped around her waist.

"For chrissake," she said, pressing a shaking hand to her chest. "That damn nightmare is going to give me a damn heart attack."

A month had passed since Peter Hay had kidnapped and tortured her, and she'd dreamed of the insane serial killer nearly every night since.

"How much longer will he haunt my dreams?" she said. Although her partner—a psychiatrist who used to assist the police by putting together criminal profiles—had rescued her, and her physical injuries had long since healed, her emotional wounds still remained. The nightmares had started just before she'd left the hospital.

She looked around. What had she heard that had caused her to wake up? On the bedside table, her cellphone vibrated, signaling a call. Simone sighed and leaned over, reaching for the phone. The backlit display showed Edward's name and number.

Why would her partner be calling her this early? She would need to call him back later. Right now, she had to go to the bathroom.

She went into the white marble and glass bathroom, took care of business, then got her Pill case from her cosmetic purse. She removed one of the little yellow tablets, popped it into her mouth, and swallowed it down with a glass of water from the sink.

After grabbing a towel from the shelf, she opened the shower door, regulated the water temperature, and climbed in beneath the spray to take a good, long, warm shower and allow the water to erase all memory of the nightmare.

By the time she stepped out of the shower, she was feeling much better. However, a quick glance in the mirror revealed dark circles under her eyes, proof her nightmares were taking a toll on her physically.

She applied some light makeup then returned to her bedroom, where she dug out a pair of shorts and a t-shirt from her suitcase and got dressed. Only then did she feel well enough and awake enough to return Edward's call.

"Hello, Ed," she greeted him when he answered. "I'm sorry I missed your call. I was in the shower. How are you?"

"Well...to be honest, I'm worried about you. Your daughter told me you left Paris and were headed back to the US, but that was a week ago, and I hadn't heard from you, so..."

"Don't worry, my friend, I'm okay... I'm in Miami Beach. How could I be better?" Simone laughed.

"Miami? How come?"

"Do you remember that friend of ours from college—Arami?"

"Sure, I do. She was a Brazilian nut if I recall correctly..."

"She's still nuts, but she's from Paraguay, not Brazil. We ran into each other in France, and she invited me to come with her to Miami, and I couldn't say no."

Simone was at a point in her life where she didn't want to deny herself a little bit of adventure, and she'd accepted an invitation from Arami to come stay for a while. Simone was suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome, but as a psychiatrist, she thought she could work her way through it...could at least handle her emotions.

"Just like that? You go from Paris to Miami...? That's so not you! Where are you staying? Just in case... The police are still investigating your case, and they may need to talk to you again."

"You're upset, Ed. Just give me a chance to get my head together a little bit. I'll be back soon; I promise."

"Okay, but I want you to be honest with me. How do you really feel...?"

"From a layman's point of view, I'd say I'm getting better, but I'm still a little bit messed up. I can't sleep well if I don't take the pills. I have nightmares, but I feel safe here. From a medical doctor's point of view, I need to stop the pills..."

"Treat yourself like a human being, not as a doctor. You need the drugs right now. Take them until you feel ready to stop...and, Simmie...I miss you."

"Miss you, too."

She did miss Edward, her dear friend, her best friend and partner, but his declaration of love—delivered just before she'd been kidnapped—had changed things between them. She didn't know what to do or how to deal with his feelings for her. She couldn't imagine her life without Edward, but she couldn't imagine a life with him as her lover...at least, not now.

Simone had never been the emotional kind of woman; she always had a hard time dealing with feelings such as love and passion, but she really understood friendship, and Edward's friendship was very important to her. She couldn't lose that, but at the same time, she couldn't even

consider anything like a love affair at the moment. She needed to focus on getting well.

They finished the call, and Simone realized her head was killing her—too much alcohol last night—and then she remembered where'd she'd gone and what she'd done. She and Arami had visited a Latin nightclub, and Simone had drunk a lot...and yes...for the first time in her life, she had sex with a stranger. She preferred to forget that part but knew she couldn't. Still, she didn't feel guilty...

Arami was one of those girls from high-class South American society. She belonged to a rich family. Before her father had been murdered, he'd been a general for the dictatorship. Arami had gone to the U.S. to study and had decided to stay. She was a plastic surgeon, a really good one, and she could speak English with almost no accent. Although her voice had an underlying, unique quality, she didn't sound like a foreigner.

Simone and Arami had run in to each other by chance in a café in Paris. Simone had taken her daughter Tamara to finish an exchange program, and Arami was participating in a Plastic Surgery Congress. They had started chatting over their coffee, and the friendship they'd formed in college came back as if they had only just seen each other the day before. Crazy, considering they hadn't talked since graduation. They had exchanged cards every Christmas and on each other's birthdays, but only that. Some friendships were like that, thought Simone; they would last forever even if you didn't see each other or talk all the time.

When Simone told Arami all about the serial killer, she'd invited Simone to stay in Arami's Miami apartment for a while, and Simone had decided to accept. Although spontaneity typically wasn't part of Simone's psyche, things were so confusing, she had decided to live life without analyzing every move and every act, and she was having a nice time with her old friend; Arami was an easy-going person, and she always seemed to be happy.

Arami's apartment was on Collins Avenue in Miami Beach. The oceanfront property was an example of what good money could buy. Big, luxurious, well decorated, and modern, the suite of rooms had glass walls everywhere that allowed one to see the ocean in all its splendor.

Arami refused to allow Simone to go to a hotel, explaining that Latin American hospitality would never allow a friend to stay in a cold hotel. "You can stay as long as you like," Arami had added. "Forever, if it suits you."

Of course, Simone wouldn't impose for much longer. She was actually thinking about leaving the following week. Not only did she not want to wear out her welcome, she also missed her house and her methodic life.

Someone knocked on her bedroom door, and when Simone opened it, Arami came in like a hurricane, crazy as ever, talking fast, and gesturing with her hands.

Arami was a short, pretty brunette, full-figured and curvy, and she had beautiful, dark eyes that tilted up a bit at the corners, typical features of her countrymen. She really didn't fit the joke that used to go around

college—the one about God saying a woman couldn't be a doctor and be pretty—because Arami had both brains and sex appeal.

“Let's go, let's go, girl.” She moved her hands like a fan. “We have a lunch date today! Did you sleep well? What a party last night, huh?”

She kissed and hugged Simone enthusiastically.

Before Simone could answer either question, Arami went on.

“What a fantastic night we had! Never saw you drunk before, but I guess people change. That's nice!”

Did she see me with him? Simone wondered. While she'd been dancing alone, Arami had been in the corner, kissing some hot guy she'd picked up at the nightclub. Had she still been occupied when Simone had found her own Latin lover? She sure hoped so, and she wasn't about to say anything unless Arami indicated she'd noticed Simone disappear into the bathroom.

“Where are we going?” Simone asked. “My head is killing me...”

“To my uncle's house in Key Biscayne. They are vacationing here, but you can't go wearing those shorts—nice legs, by the way—but my auntie would kill you!”

“Who is this uncle of yours?”

“Cezar Benites. He is a retired general.” She made a smart salute. “He is a dinosaur from the time of the Paraguayan dictatorship...old school...my father's youngest brother...you will see...”

“Really? Is he one of those tough, bossy men? I don't know if I can deal with someone like that right now. I've been feeling a little...fragile lately.”

“Oh, he is bossy... But tough? With you? Are you kidding me? He'll act like a prince, and you'll have him drooling down your neck before you finish saying hello. Don't worry; he is very polite, but he is also a womanizer. Don't wear anything low cut, or he'll dive in...and then my auntie will poison your food.” Arami's musical laughter filled the air.

* * * * *

An armored car sat waiting for them out front. Arami explained those were the general's security rules. He was always afraid of being murdered. The driver was also a private security guard.

“Is he really in danger?”

“I honestly don't know; I believe as a politician in Paraguay, he could be a target...as was my father...but in Paraguay, not here... I'm certain he is a little bit paranoid since my father was killed.”

Arami's father had participated in the liberation of Paraguay. He had helped another general, Oviedo, to depose the dictator. Oviedo died in an accident, and her father had decided to run for the presidency after that, but before the elections he was killed in an ambush, and nobody had ever found out who had murdered him. Arami's uncle took his place, but he had lost the election.

They went to Key Biscayne, arriving at a property surrounded by high walls and a tall, iron gate. The sign on the gate read *Paraíso—Paradise—* and *No Trespassing. Private Property.*

The gate was opened for them, and Simone had the impression she was entering another country. They drove down a paved road lined with square, sculpted bushes. Beyond the bushes grew palm trees and a very lush green garden filled with colorful flowers—a real paradise. At the end of the drive, they came to a Spanish-style mansion. White with brown balconies, the home was huge and beautiful.

Two armed guards stood at the front door. As the car came to a stop, Simone and Arami climbed out. The front door to the house opened, and they entered into a gigantic foyer surrounded by arches. A natural garden stood in the middle of the room. They walked across the golden-brown ceramic tiles and through an archway, whereupon they exited into the pool area. Several women sat on deck chairs, drinks in hand, while two little girls played near another armed security guard. As Simone watched, he arranged his rifle on his shoulder and took one of the girls by her hands and spun her around. The children giggled, obviously having a blast.

I've fallen into a Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel. The Nobel Prize-winning novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, was remarkably similar, she thought. *What kind of trauma will those young girls experience when they grow up, as a result of all this?* Simone's psychiatrist's brain asked. But then she pushed the thought aside. *Not my problem! I have my hands plenty full with my issues and those of my patients.*

The sound of dogs barking echoed in the distance, a parrot sat on top of a huge, iron cage, singing a Latin song, and the smell of a barbecue filled the air, but Simone didn't see a grill anywhere.

When she and Arami approached the women, all eyes turned toward them, especially toward Simone. She silently thanked Arami for advising her to choose a more conservative dress, because all the women seemed to be taking her measure, eyeing her from head to toe.

"Good morning, girls." Arami greeted everybody and waved.

"*Buenos dias*, Arami," the women all said at the same time, speaking in singsong voices.

They all looked the same to Simone—dark hair, dark skin, all of them wearing similar, multicolored, expensive-looking dresses.

Where were the men? Simone wondered, feeling as if she'd stepped into a kind of girls' club.

"English, people, we have a guest here, and she doesn't speak Spanish." Arami pointed to Simone. "By the way, this is Dr. Simone Bennet."

A very classy, elegant lady, sporting a short, chic haircut, approached them. Her dress looked as if it was made of pure yellow silk, and she wore a beautiful pearl necklace. And she either had one of the best suntans Simone had ever seen, or she was naturally bronze, like Arami was. The woman kissed Arami and Simone on their cheeks.

“Nice to meet you, Dr. Bennet. I’m Magda, Arami’s auntie. She told me she was bringing you for lunch. Welcome to our humble home.”

She pointed to the house, no hint of sarcasm in her manner or tone, but Simone figured she had to be joking. Humble...? Hardly!

“Nice to meet you, madam. Please call me Simone.”

“And you, young lady, call me auntie.”

Impossible, Simone thought, but didn’t say a word.

“Auntie.” Magda took Simone by the arm and introduced her to everybody else, one by one. So many names and family positions...Simone would never remember them all. She compared them in her mind to the parade of names inside Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s novel. The more time Simone spent with these people, the more she felt she as if she’d stepped into the pages of the novel.

All the women spoke very good English, some with an accent, some without, but all of them perfectly understandable. After they’d spent some thirty minutes or so in pleasant conversation, a young boy came and said something in Spanish to Magda, and their hostess got to her feet.

“C’mon, ladies, the men wait for us with a nice *asado*.”

Simone looked to Arami, eyebrow raised.

“Barbecue,” Arami translated in a whisper.

They followed a crushed-shell pathway around to the other side of another large building, which appeared to be some kind of gymnasium—where they found the men. Ten or more men stood or sat near an enormous brick barbecue grill that contained what seemed to be a ton of meat.

Arami kissed the oldest man there. He was very short, no more than five feet tall. She then introduced him to Simone.

“Uncle, this is Simone Bennet, the American doctor I told you about. Simone, meet my uncle, General Cesar Benitez.”

“Doctor Simone.” He grabbed Simone’s hands and kissed them. “A pleasure to have an authority on the human mind in my home, especially when she is also a beautiful woman.”

“A pleasure to meet you, General. You have a lovely house, and I would like to thank you for inviting me.”

“No, on the contrary, the pleasure is all mine. Anything you need, you just ask.”

He gave her a look that a wolf might give to a sheep...*a very hungry wolf*, Simone reflected.

“I would like to have a professional meeting with you next week, Doctor,” the general said.

“Uncle, Simone is vacationing here...”

“It won’t take long, Arami.” He touched his niece’s arm in a way that very clearly said “stay out of this” then turned back to Simone. “Once more, Doctor, welcome to my humble home.”

Christ sake, what was this “humble home” shit? Simone was intrigued.

“Arami, tell me, this house must be at least four thousand square feet. Why do your aunt and uncle refer to it as their ‘humble home?’” she whispered.

“It’s a Paraguayan saying, no matter the size of the house. There is no irony in their choice of words, I promise you; it’s just a way to tell you that you are welcome.”

“My darlings, our lunch is served. Let’s go to the table, please,” Magda called for them to join the others.

The “table” had at least thirty place settings. Everyone began loading up their plates with an abundance of food—all kinds of meats and side dishes, most of which Simone didn’t recognize. She tried a little bit of almost everything, from the meats to *Chipa Guazú*—a wonderful pie made of corn and cheese—but she didn’t have the courage to try a black sausage made of pig’s blood called *morcilla*. She considered herself adventurous, but that would be pushing it.

“Not going to try our *morcilla*, Doctor?” the general asked, his eyes twinkling.

“No room, I’m afraid. I’m too full from all those other delicious dishes.” She mentally patted herself on the back for coming up with a graceful way to refuse.

“You should try it; it’s an aphrodisiac, you know.” He grinned.

Great! Simone thought. Just what I need. I’ve already had sex with a stranger in the middle of a nightclub...a morsel of the morcilla and I’ll go to work in a brothel.

“Thanks, General, but we psychiatrists don’t believe in aphrodisiac food...just aphrodisiac minds.”

“So you are going to like men in Paraguay, Doctor. Latin lovers are the best.”

Simone didn’t know how to answer to that remark.

Magda intervened and said something in Spanish to the general, speaking in a tone that sounded as if she was reprimanding him.

“She asked him if he’s crazy or just senile, to say such things to a real doctor.” Arami leaned close and whispered the translation into Simone’s ear. “When they fight, they do so in Spanish, so they have more vocabulary to choose from...”

“I’m sorry, Doctor, my dear wife reminds me that it’s not polite to brag about the prowess of our men in public.”

“No offense taken, General. Don’t worry, few things are able to shock me.”

Magda looked relieved, her shoulders relaxing.

But Simone could tell the general wasn’t a bit embarrassed or regretful of his comments; rather, he was amused. So, Simone analyzed, *a man who likes to shock others...*

“And there he is! The latest man, ever,” the general thundered from the head of the table as he pointed toward the door.

Everyone turned to look.

The newcomer wore blue jeans and a green shirt, and as he strode toward the table he took off his sunglasses and smiled. Simone gasped and grew lightheaded as she stared at the sun-tanned face of the stranger she'd had sex with the night before.

As the general, Magda, and the stranger began speaking to each other in Spanish, Arami translated everything for Simone.

“Father, I was taking care of business. Someone has to!”

“Today is Sunday. I've told you a thousand times...Sundays are holy days,” Magda cut in.

The man approached Magda and kissed her loudly on the cheek.

“Sorry, Mamá! I promise it won't happen again.”

“Sit and speak English, my son; we have a guest.”

Magda pointed at Simone, who was praying—even though she was an agnostic—that the man either wouldn't recognize her or at least wouldn't reveal they already knew each other.

“Dr. Bennet,” said the general, “this is my son Armando, also known as Always-late-for-lunch. Son, this is Dr. Simone Bennet; she is a friend of Arami and now a friend of ours. She is an authority on the human mind and also a published author.”

My whole curriculum, thought Simone, hoping Armando wouldn't add something like, “And she's also a pervert who likes to bang strange guys in bars”.

Armando looked at Simone. His eyes really were black, just as she'd thought last night, and shaped like Arami's were. He too had dark skin and black hair, but unlike his father, he was tall and very sensual looking. She remembered last night very well, and butterflies fluttered in her stomach at just the sight of the guy, but what if he recognized her? She'd be totally mortified...

Tell me about bad luck and it being a small world, she thought. But maybe her luck wasn't so horrible. So far, Armando hadn't indicated he recognized her. Maybe he didn't. The club had been dark, and she'd been wearing a ton of makeup, and thanks to Arami's advice, Simone had also worn false eyelashes... A thousand thoughts flew through her mind.

“Nice to meet you, Doctor, welcome to our home! I hope you are enjoying sampling our customary fare.”

He took the empty chair near his mother—the one Simone had noticed and wondered about earlier—which had obviously been reserved for him.

Simone nodded. “Yes, thank you, everything is delicious. And you speak perfect English.”

Simone had to say something, and a compliment seemed like a good way to start a conversation. She also hoped he wouldn't recognize her voice, but they hadn't exactly done a lot of talking last night, she reflected.

“He must speak your language well, Doctor; we invested a lot of money in his education, and he loves your country...he spends more time here than he should...”

The father and son rivalry sounded clear to Simone’s trained ears.

“Yes, because we have businesses here, and I’m in charge of them. We have a cattle farm in Paraguay, but there’s no point in farming cattle if you can’t export the meat, and that’s what I do in the U.S....”

Armando sounded at ease, not a bit worried or upset about his father’s comments.

Ah, Simone thought, *nothing better than being raised by a dictator*. He seemed to be a man of strong opinions. A general would raise his children with rules and discipline, two factors that, in Simone’s experience, produced strong people...the only chance he was a weak or spoiled man was if his mother had protected him from that discipline...but it didn’t look as if that was the case here.

“Doctor, the life of a child who was raised by a general would make a nice subject for your couch. I could be your patient. Perhaps I could use a bit of therapy. You wouldn’t happen to have an opening in your schedule, would you?”

“Cousin, Simone is here on vacation, not to work. What happened to this family? Suddenly, it seems as if everybody needs the services of a shrink!” Arami said.

Simone didn’t disagree. She wasn’t in the mood to deal with patients. Some of her more complicated cases she still handled through Skype. The others who weren’t dependent upon prescription medication, she’d given some time off. For now, she needed to focus on and take care of herself. Just the thought of working on new cases increased her stress level. Memories of what had happened to her constantly filled her head.

“I really do need to relax while I’m here, but thanks for trusting me. I promise I will think about all your requests.” *Maybe in my next life*, she added silently.

Magda seemed to realize the subject was making Simone a little uncomfortable and changed it.

“Where are you from, Doctor?” she asked.

“I was born in New Haven, Connecticut, where I still work, but now I live in Woodbridge.”

“Have you ever been to Paraguay?” the general asked.

“No. I’ve never been to South America, unfortunately.”

“You would love it there. My country and my people are very welcoming.”

Simone noticed how often the general used the word “my”. My son, my country, my people... The habit was typical of powerful men. On the way to lunch that afternoon, Arami had explained that the general used to command both his business and his family with an iron fist.

The conversation now took a more diplomatic rhythm, appropriate for a lunch. Afterward, Simone asked Arami for directions to the restroom.

“There’s one right inside there,” Arami said, nodding toward the big building they’d passed on their way to the table.

Simone excused herself, got up from the table, and walked back to the entrance of the building. To her surprise, she found she’d guessed correctly. The building contained a complete gym, and there were two restrooms and a sauna.

She finished up in the bathroom, washed her hands in the sink, and then opened the door. She jumped back in surprise. “Oh! It’s you.” Her face grew hot.

Before her stood Armando. She had the distinct and immediate impression he’d planned to meet her alone—he must have followed her. She hadn’t fooled him a bit—apparently, he’d recognized her from the start.

“What game are you playing here, Doctor?” he asked.

“Game?”

“You do remember me, don’t you?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

He grabbed her arm. “Unfortunately? Why do you say that?”

“Because...” She paused and sighed. “For the first time in my life, I decide to cut loose and do something crazy, and what happens? The very next day, I run into the man I did something crazy with! What are the chances? Next time, I’m going to try playing the lottery.”

“I looked for you. Why did you leave in such a hurry? I would like to get to know you a little better. You seemed so...carefree and uninhibited. Today, you’re completely different—straight-laced and formal. Who are you, really?”

“It’s a long story. But I suppose the real me is closer to the person you’re looking at right now. Last night...well, I’ve been under a lot of stress, and I’m afraid I drank a great deal of alcohol...”

Her actions of the night before were so different from how she normally behaved; she found it difficult to explain.

He released her arm. “Can we talk again?”

“I don’t know...your cousin is my friend; I’m a guest in her house. At this point in my life, I don’t need any more drama.” She felt tired and distressed, and she couldn’t think about relationships right now.

“Are you married?”

“No...no it’s not that.”

“Then I would like to see you again.”

He was definitely his father’s son. Simone could hear the similarities in the commanding tone. Although phrased as a request, he was not asking her.

“Let’s have dinner tomorrow,” he said.

“Okay, call me at Arami’s apartment. But I’m warning you; don’t expect to meet the woman you were with last night. She doesn’t exist!”

“Yes, she does...inside here somewhere...” He pointed at her chest.

The powerful sexual energy between them was impossible to deny. Reminding herself she was there on vacation, Simone decided to abandon reason for a while.

“Okay, let’s have dinner.”

“I’ll pick you up at eight o’clock. Be ready. Wear a dress.” He used his father’s commanding tone again.

Welcome to the world of macho men, she thought.

They spent the rest of that Sunday at the general’s house and returned to Arami’s apartment late that evening. Thankfully, the rest of Simone’s visit with Arami’s family had passed without incident.

* * * * *

The next day, Monday morning, Simone organized Arami’s office, a very modern room in the apartment but a messy one. The décor was probably quite sober under all the disorder, guessed Simone. Grey shelves lined the walls. They were full of haphazardly stacked books, old magazines, picture frames, and all kinds of souvenirs Arami must have gotten while traveling.

There was a glass desk with a modern white computer sitting on it, sharing space with thousands of envelopes, pens, post-its, and a dry, half-eaten apple that looked as old as Simone was. A comfortable black office chair sat behind the desk, while two armchairs faced the front of it. Arami had told Simone she could use the space as long as she wanted to.

She spent more than an hour trying to arrange a space for herself on the table without disturbing Arami’s order...or lack thereof. Simone loved organization—some might call it an obsession—and to work in an environment such as this one was a challenge to her nerves. And these days, it didn’t take much to make her feel nervous.

Even while on vacation, she had reserved a portion of each day to listen to some of her patients over the internet. It was important to them to know she was available to them, but in a week she’d be back in her office in Connecticut.

Today, she had scheduled a meeting with Carl—the first time they would speak since she’d been attacked. Thanks to the work she’d done for him, her life had turned upside down. He had hired her to analyze a journal, to give him her expert opinion so he could defend a client—at least, that’s what he’d told her at first—but the truth had been something altogether different, and in the end, his friend and ex-brother-in-law Peter Hay had kidnapped and tortured her.

Friday, he had contacted her, asking for an appointment. She’d felt apprehensive with his request, her heart racing at the idea of getting involved in his problems again, but she couldn’t say no to him.

She consulted her clock. In addition to being organized, she was also a stickler for punctuality. Time to talk to Carl... She opened Skype on her laptop, connected to the program, and waited for him to come online. To her delight, Carl was on time.

“Good morning, Simone.” He greeted her in his normal, charming way. His chestnut hair looked shorter, which made him appear younger and very handsome in his blue suit, white shirt, and blue-and-yellow tie. Despite the fact his brown eyes had gained some small wrinkles at their corners since she’d met him, he was all charm and magnetism, as always.

“Hello, Carl, how’ve you been?”

“Fine, and you? I’m still feeling guilty about everything that happened to you...”

“You know it wasn’t your fault. Relax.”

“You almost died...”

“But I didn’t.”

She didn’t want to continue talking about it, and she certainly didn’t need his pity. She had a hard enough time keeping thoughts of the kidnapping out of her head; talking about the subject was too much for her.

“Tell me what’s going on with you. You told me it was urgent that you talk to me.”

“Yes, sorry, I know you’re on vacation, but I really couldn’t wait.”

He began to talk, his words spilling out in a torrent that showed his anxiety. Normally, he was very discreet and restrained in his emotions.

“I’m not okay. I didn’t want to involve you again in the drama that has become my life, but you’re the only one capable of really helping me. Selfish, I know, and I’m very sorry to do this to you.”

“Don’t worry about me, Carl; I’m a professional, and I’m used to dealing with other people’s issues. Please, go on...tell me what’s disturbing you so much.”

“Lara’s past is back to haunt me...”

Lara had been the love of Carl’s life until she had died during a sexual game they’d been playing one evening. Carl had never really fully recovered from her loss.

“What happened? Is it the usual...you missing her...or something new?”

“Sean, Lara’s brother, called me and told me he wanted to talk. During the trial, he had a few harsh words for me—called me a murderer, killer, vermin, and so on. He always blamed me, and we hadn’t spoken since my acquittal. Needless to say, I was very apprehensive about any conversation we might have, but I couldn’t say no...he said it was important...”

“And how did it go?”

“Hard...first of all, he looks a lot like Lara. Same greenish eyes...it was as if she was looking at me through him, and I could barely stand to look at him. The pain was like broken glass piercing my heart... I’d never noticed the similarities between them before because he used to have a beard, but he’d shaved, and this time, it was as if someone had taken a magnifying glass and held it up in front of him. The likeness was

uncanny. They even have the same long hands. If he was a girl, I would have fallen in love with him at first sight.”

“You’ll never forget Lara...” she told him, thinking what a pity it was that the woman would most likely haunt him forever, and a man such as him would never be available to love again. If she weren’t the professional she was, she would have fallen for him, and she had to admit he disturbed her; she was not immune to him.

“You’re right. How can I? She was the love of my life. I think I’m just like my father; I can love only once.”

His words just confirmed her thoughts. Simone redirected the conversation.

“And after the initial shock of seeing him, were able to talk?”

“For at least two hours. It was bad, and it was good...he asked me to explain what happened. He told me he’d hated me for a long time because he was certain I had killed his sister, and not accidentally, but now he believes in my innocence.”

“What made him change his mind, and what caused him to seek you out and tell you that?”

“He told me he’d always had a romantic image of his older sister as he was never informed of her situation with the senator’s son and all she had been through up until only a few months before her death. He had no idea she’d led such a depraved life full of sexual encounters and other craziness. To see her lifestyle exposed in front of a jury right after losing her was too much for him. He couldn’t believe what people were saying, and he thought my defense attorneys had embellished the truth to make me look better and get me off the murder charge.

“Sean and his sister Deborah decided to sell Lara’s New York apartment, and they had to go through her things before they put it on the market. They found a locked box filled with diaries. Do you remember I told you I started to write because I was inspired by her habit of always keeping a journal at hand?”

“Yes...I remember.”

“They decided they needed to read them. Sean told me he thought he might find some kind of proof of my guilt in one of them, but what he discovered was something altogether different. Apparently, what was revealed about her debauched lifestyle in court was just the tip of the iceberg. She’d written about her entire life...her childhood, her life in Paris, everything...”

“Those poor people! I truly pity them! But at the same time, I’m grateful they found a way to see the truth. It wasn’t healthy for them to continue hating you. The truth can be liberating, even if it hurts. Hate is a horrible feeling, worse for the hater than the one who is hated most of the time. It can eat you up inside.”

“He wanted to give me access to the whole story of her life...he gave me a copy of everything. That’s why I need your help.”

“Have you read it?”

“I started to, but it was too much for me to stomach. When I came to the part about what that scumbag did to her...I was so angry, plagued by homicidal thoughts; I couldn’t sleep for two entire nights... I realized I need your help, or I was going to find him and kill the piece of shit. The idea of doing so rarely leaves my mind.”

“Don’t you even think about doing something like that, Carl; it won’t bring Lara back, and you would end your life in prison.”

“I know! But you have no idea how tempted I am. I would like to hire you to help me through this, Simone. I’ll understand if you say no, but I really trust you, and I need your support.”

Oh, god, she thought. Could she do this all over again? To read the journals, to analyze them was not the problem; her mixed feelings for Carl were what worried her. From the first moment she’d met him she’d been attracted to him, but they weren’t on the same page. He was a lost cause—she’d bet he would never love again... At least, not the kind of passionate love he had felt for Lara—but how could she deny his cry for help? Before her kidnapping, she had promised to help him, to take him on as a patient, but she hadn’t had the time to start the job.

“Okay, Carl, what do you suggest?”

“I would like for us to read it at the same time...kind of like a book club mixed with therapy sessions. We’ll read a few chapters, and then we can discuss them. Of course, I will pay for your services as I did before, and I will respect your time. We’ll work around your schedule, okay?”

“Yes, I’m going to help you. This story haunts my days, too. It will be good to know what happened to her in the beginning...why things turned out the way they did.”

“When do you want to start?”

“Let’s do it this way; scan the file, if you can, and send it to me as an email attachment.”

“Sure! No problem... Actually...I already did that. You can find the files in your e-mail... I don’t know how to thank you!”

So he’d counted on her help and didn’t bother to deny it... *Too sure of himself*, she thought.

They talked for another half an hour, ironing out the details regarding her fee and other practical matters.

When they hung up, Simone sat back in her chair and sighed. She then opened her email box and located Carl’s e-mail. Attached to it were scanned files of Lara’s diaries. *Progress*, she thought. They hadn’t signed a contract yet and hadn’t even discussed a confidentiality clause this time. People change, she supposed. The last time Simone had worked for Carl, he’d had her sign a contract filled with confidentiality clauses.

Here I go again, she thought, *losing myself in the mysterious Lara’s distorted life*. Simone felt a pang of apprehension, breathed deeply to take courage, and opened the first file.

They say everyone has a story to tell, and I suppose that's probably true, but some people's stories are more bizarre than others. I would like to tell you mine. If I had to choose a genre for my life story, I'd have to pick erotica...maybe a little romance...with a healthy dose of horror thrown in for good measure... It's definitely not a fairy tale, although I did have a fairy godmother, of sorts...but more on that later.

Part of the reason I'm writing this is to attempt to organize my mind and my feelings. Homework from my shrink, with love. He advised me that this might be a good way to come to terms with my past... I don't know if that's possible...but I hope so.

What I'm about to tell you is based, in part, on my diaries—I've been keeping a journal since I was a kid. But I'll also have to rely on my memory, as I apparently ripped out some of the pages in a few of my journals—no doubt while in a fit of rage...or out of shame—and some years' journals are missing.

And so, here we go...

About me... My name is Lara Parker... I'm blonde, my eyes are an indefinite color between blue and green, depending on my mood, and I'm very tall—five foot, nine inches. Yes, a gladiator. I'm an architect, and I'm also an interior designer. I love to build homes, and I'm quite good at my work.

I was born in Washington D.C. on June 6, 1978. We lived at 4709 Foxhall Crescent Northwest, in a beautiful, two-story brick house with a big, lovely yard. I don't know if the house is still there; once I left Washington, I never went back, not even for a vacation.

From my early childhood in D.C., I have some good memories. I'm the oldest of three siblings. My brother Sean is five years younger than I am, and my sister Deborah is nine years younger.

My parents were working toward acquiring their piece of the American Dream. My father had a prosperous construction firm—he used to build for the government—and my mother was...well...a butterfly, forever trying to make it to the top of elite society through her social contacts. We were very well off, financially. Although we wouldn't be considered rich, we lived very comfortably, and every year, Father seemed to become a greater success in his industry.

For most of my early years, I was raised by a nanny, and as soon as I was old enough for pre-school, my mother made certain I was enrolled. I don't believe my mother wanted me around very much. I always seemed to be getting yelled at for being in her way. She was never a model of maternal devotion. Quite the contrary—and I don't remember getting along with her...ever. She thought I was a strange kid, and I thought she was a complicated person. We didn't find it easy to live together under the same roof.

My father, Laurence Parker, was a nice and very kind man, but he was also a hard worker, and I barely saw him around. He used to leave the house early, and sometimes he got back when I was already sleeping.

He wanted to give us the best, and the best had a large price tag. But I always knew, deep in my heart, he loved us.

My mother, Sabine, did nothing but party and go shopping. Um, to be fair, she went to the hairdresser quite a bit, too.

By the way, I refer to my mother by her given name... A little later on, I'll explain why.

My parents didn't get along very well; they used to fight a lot, which, when I was a little kid, used to scare the shit out of me.

Thankfully, I had someone else in my life, someone who truly cared for me...someone who didn't believe children should be seen and not heard and who would take time to answer my dozens of curious question. Emma Parker, my father's mother and my paternal grandmother, was half French and half American. She was also the most fantastic person I've met in my whole life, the best influence a kid could have, and a really wonderful woman. She and Sabine didn't get along—probably because they were such complete opposites—and sometimes, Sabine would refuse to allow me to see my grandmother. But my grandmother was the only real mother I had. I didn't know anything about my grandfather—my father's father—until I was an adult.

Grandmother Emma preferred I called her Emms. She didn't want to be called Grandma, not because she thought it made her sound old—Emms was not like that—but because she wanted me to call her the same thing her friends called her. I guess she wanted our relationship to be based more on friendship than anything else.

Sabine's mother—my grandmother Shirley—was an alcoholic and didn't get along with her daughter or her grandchildren. The few times I saw her, she was weird, mean and bitter, and no one wanted to be near her...not even Sabine, who was a weirdo herself. My grandfather—Sabine's father—had abandoned her when she was a kid. To be honest, I can't say I blame him...

I received my very first diary as a birthday present from Emms one year. I remember thinking what a strange gift, especially compared to all the other fabulous presents she used to give me... She must have noticed my disappointed expression because she took me aside and explained. I remember the conversation as if it happened just yesterday.

“My darling girl, some of the best things we have in life are our memories. Everything else can disappear—people can steal from you, you can lose all, but what you have here”—Emms had pointed to her head—“you will never lose. I want you to take notes of the most important things that happen in your life, and when you grow older, you will read your journals, and you will understand how important it was to create a biography.”

“What's a biography, Emms?” I had no clue what she meant.

“It's the story of someone's life, the importance that person had in this world. But open your diary and see... I have another gift for you...” Emma told me.

Quickly, I had opened the diary with its red, faux-leather cover and tiny golden padlock, wondering what would be small enough to fit inside. I flipped through the pages until I reached the middle, and my eyes grew wide. Heart racing, I removed the airline tickets.

“Paris!” I shouted then looked at Emms. “Is this for real? Are you really taking me with you this time?”

Emms had been born in France, and she used to go back there every year. She’d told me dozens of stories about Paris and the Louvre and all the other sites. I’d pestered her for years to take me with her. France sounded like magic to my ears.

“Yes,” Emms had said. “You and I are really, truly going to Paris this summer.”

That birthday was one of those days a person never forgets. I wrapped my arms around my grandmother and hugged and kissed her.

“Emms, I love you more than anything!” I told her.

“I love you more, my little sunshine.”

That’s another one of my fonder memories. She used to have all these beautiful nicknames for me—such as sunshine, my heart, and so on.

I really loved the diary because it had a real padlock and a key, and I could protect my ideas from Sabine, who always loved to snoop around in my things.

Even though Emms had explained the importance of me making certain I journaled on a regular schedule, I still had a rough time getting into the swing of things...until I gave my diary a name. I had decided it wouldn’t feel quite so much like talking to myself if I pretended each entry into my journal was another letter to my new friend Martin. Looking back on this now, I have to smile. Who names their diary Martin? But at that time, my favorite movie was *Back to the Future*, and Michael J. Fox played the lead character, Martin. I had so few friends at that time, and I was desperate to have one. Marty—my little red diary—became my best friend, and I used to write to him as if I were sending him letters.

I don’t have many friends, Marty. Sometimes, I believe it’s because I’m a little bit weird, different from other girls my age, and I spend a lot of time reading. I don’t like to play very much, and I think kids are dumb. I also love to listen to music. I got a stereo on my birthday from Uncle Ruggiero and Auntie Valentine...now I need some CDs. I just have one—and here I’d drawn a little sad face. This birthday was super cool! There weren’t many children, but a lot of nice people came—friends of my father, mostly—and the gifts were just great!

I used to hide my diary in a hole I’d found behind a drawer and had enlarged, by digging out the drywall with a knife because I was so afraid Sabine would find it and read it. I had explained this to the diary, apologizing as if it had feelings:

Sorry to hide you, Marty, but even if you do have a lock, my mom will find a way to open you... She’s like that...nuts...but I believe most grownups are crazy, don’t you think? All except Emms; she is the best grandma in the world, and sometimes, I don’t believe she’s a grownup,

she's so cool. I can talk to her, and she treats me like a friend and not like a silly little kid the way other adults treat me. Most grownups think kids don't know nothing. I hate them. But I believe I hate children more because they do act so silly and stupid. I wish I could snap my fingers and become an adult. I want to have a car and go wherever I want.

Back then, to me, having a car represented independence. I thought adults went where they pleased, when they pleased because they could drive.

In the days leading up to the Paris trip, I barely got any sleep.

Martyyy, I wrote in my journal, *tomorrow I'm going to Paris! Just me and Emms. I'm so happy; I can't sleep. Today, Emms and I talked about the trip.*

"Ems," I said, "I'm so happy we are going to Paris. I'm not going to bother you while we're there; I promise!"

"But who told you that you bother me, my sunshine?"

"Mother told me I'm a bother, and she thinks you are going to complain about me after the trip."

"She told you that?"

"Yes...but please don't tell her I've told you. She will ground me. She loves to do that."

"Don't worry, Lara," Emms said. "I will never tell anybody what you tell me; trust me."

She opened her arms and hugged me, and I was there, in her arms, listening to her heartbeat while we talked about Paris. To this day, I can still remember how she smelled, a perfume mix of flowers and vanilla, and how warm I felt in her embrace, and those memories bring tears to my eyes—me, a woman who rarely cries.

"Can we go to the Eiffel Tower and Triumph Arc?" I asked her.

"Of course. We can go anywhere you like. We are going to see many things in Paris—museums, statues, paintings. There is wonderful art over there. Art is an expression of love. The artist leaves a little bit of his heart in every canvas, every piece of marble, so we can have a little bit of his soul, of his feelings, and then when you have recorded that piece of art in your brain, a little bit of the artist's love will stay with you forever, too. Those memories will give you happiness because you'll know there are beautiful things in the world."

Emma always had a poetic way to explain things.

My First Trip to Paris...

Paris is a party! It's not just a phrase; it is a reality. I fell in love with the city from the moment I first stepped foot there. I adore everything about it—the smells, the food, the people, the crowds.

Visiting there with Emms was like opening a gigantic gift box. She took me every place a kid could go. Museums, galleries, parks, stores, libraries.

My first visit to *Champs Élysées* with its *caffés* made me think I would like to live there as an adult... I didn't know how right I was—or that it would happen long before I became an adult—at least, age-wise.

Emma took me to the Triumph Arc as she had promised. The elevator was broken—nothing unusual these days, I know.

“Madam,” a policeman told Emma, “the elevator is broken. You have to use the stairs if you want to go to the top.”

Of course, he spoke French, so Emms had to translate for me.

“Thanks,” Emms told the officer, and then she turned back to me. “I believe we have to climb three hundred steps, young lady, what do you think?”

“I really would like to go to the top, Emms, can we?”

“Well then, what are we waiting for? Let's go.”

Emms laughed and we started to climb. By the time we reached the top, we weren't laughing anymore, though...and we still had to go down...

But first I had to look at the view. I ran to the edge, which was surrounded by a fence to keep people from falling off, but I grabbed the bars and stuck my face in the middle to look down. It was beautiful! All those avenues that meet in the Arc and all so gorgeous. The day was clear, the sky a pale blue with a few clouds, and a gentle breeze caressed my face and lifted my hair, making it fly in the air. My heart was full of joy.

“How about it, Lara?” Emms asked me. “Worth the climb?”

“Oh, yes! I'm so happy I could shout with joy!”

“Well, go ahead. What's stopping you?”

I looked around us at the other people who'd braved the stairs to experience that amazing view.

“What about them?” I asked, turning back to Emms. “What are they going to think?”

“Do you know them? Are they very important to you?” She gave me a serious look.

“I don't know them at all.” I shook my head.

“So shout. Go ahead and scream, kid! Never let other people prevent you from doing something that makes you happy. Their opinions don't matter.”

I studied Emms's expression. Was she serious?

She grinned at me and nodded, so I took a huge breath.

“Ya-hooooooooooooooooo! I'm in Parisssssssssssssssssssssssssss!” I shouted at the top of my lungs.

People looked at me, some started to laugh, others turned their face, but Emms was laughing hard, and so I started to laugh, too. I was very

happy. I didn't ever want to go home. I wanted to stay there forever with Emms.

Ah...life was so simple then...

In the evening, we went to a nice restaurant Emms knew. It was near the apartment she had there, Fontaine de Mars. Once we were seated at the table, Emms asked me what I was going to order.

"Steak!" I answered quickly. "My favorite!"

Emms frowned. "Don't you want to try something new? I think you're old enough to experience something a little different."

"Well, okay. But what if I order something I've never had, and I don't like it?"

I thought about a big, juicy steak, and my tummy rumbled. I was very hungry.

"Then you'll know you don't like it. But you'll never know until you try. And then you can order a steak and say, 'This is much better than anything else.'"

I nodded. I had never thought of it that way. "Okay...what we are going to try?"

"Hmm...let me choose? Trust me?"

Again, I nodded. I trusted Emms more than anyone else I knew.

Emms ordered, and a short while later, our waiter came over carrying a little round bowl covered in holes. Inside the holes was something brown and juicy looking. I watched Emms use a little fork to pick one up. It looked weird, like a little piece of brown rubber.

"Try this, Lara," she said.

"What is it?"

"Try it first, and then I'll tell you..." She held out the fork.

I leaned forward, closed my eyes, and sucked the little bit of food into my mouth. My eyes flew open at the delicious, buttery taste. It was a little soft but very salty. Some people have a sweet tooth, but I must have a salt tooth because I loved it!

"Well? Do you like it?" Emms asked.

"Oh, yes! Quite a lot. May I have more?"

"Sure. It's called escargot."

"Escargot is good, much better than steak," I told her around a mouth full of another one of the delicious morsels and some bread.

"It's a snail," she told me and waited for the information to sink in.

I stopped chewing. "A what?"

"A snail." Emms smiled.

"Like the ones in our garden? People really eat that?" I asked.

"Yes, you just finished yours and mine, so I'm guessing you really like it."

I glanced down at the empty plate, and my cheeks grew hot.

"I'm sorry," I said. "They were really good. But I can't believe I ate snails!"

"Don't think about what you are eating; just savor the flavor."

I thought about this for a moment and decided Emms was right. After all, I never thought about where steak came from, so why should I think about the snail?

That was how I fell in love with escargots, and to this day, whenever I can, I introduced that food to people I care about. And as usual, Emms had turned the whole experience into a lesson. One I still remember.

"Lara...over the course of your lifetime, you will face many new things. Just because you aren't familiar with something doesn't mean you won't like it. You cannot form an opinion unless you give it a try. Never judge before knowing—we can only make a judgment based on knowledge, okay?"

"Okay, Emms," I told her.

To this day, her words have had an impact on my entire life. I have never judged anything before first trying it, and thanks to Emms, I have always loved Paris and trying different things.

On Being "Normal"...

Early on, I discovered I couldn't concentrate very well in classes I didn't like. I was a genius when I enjoyed what we were learning and a total disaster when I didn't. One day, when I was on my way to biology—one of those classes I hated—I decided to skip school with a new friend. He was alone and sad, and I invited him to go fishing with me. We didn't go far; there was a little lake behind the school, and we went there.

Later that day, Sabine had a fit. The principal had found out I'd missed class and had called her, and she'd had to come to the school to get me. She told me I was stupid for cutting classes instead of studying. I had tried to tell her I had a hard time concentrating—that my mind refused to focus on my work. Instead, I'd find myself daydreaming...imagining I was an adult and lived in Paris, or I would think about the concerts I'd been to with Emms. I really had a hell of an imagination.

When we arrived home, my parents began shouting at each other. I'd been sent up to my room, but of course, I'd snuck back down and was behind the door, listening.

"Lara is totally irresponsible. I don't know what to do with her!" Sabine said to my father.

"C'mon, Sabine, she's just a kid. Kids do things like that. If you spent more time with her, you could talk to her about responsibility, but then again, responsibility isn't one of your strong suits, is it, so how can you teach her?"

I couldn't stifle my laughter at this, and they caught me eavesdropping. They both shouted at me, Sabine ending by yelling one of her most favorite sayings.

"You're grounded!"

Grounded. Again. Whenever that happened—and it happened a lot—I could read in peace, and I didn't mind being locked in my room.

The Brilliant Game

Book III

Chapter I

Simone—Present Day

The lights were off, and everything was dark. R.E.M's *Everybody Hurts* played softly on the stereo, and she was sitting in her favorite armchair, tears running from her eyes. She felt miserable, she felt guilty, and her heart really hurt. *Now I understand the expression, "heartbroken,"* she thought.

Suddenly, the lights came on. She looked up, blinking in surprise against the glare that hurt her eyes.

"Simmie...babe, are you crying again?" Edward asked softly.

Simone couldn't answer. She started to cry harder, sobbing aloud. Emotions had never been her strong point, and she'd always avoided feeling too much, tried to prevent herself from getting too close to any one person because she didn't want to suffer. But there was she, suffering like hell and crying every day.

Edward approached her, sat on the arm of her chair, and wrapped his arms around her, holding her close, letting her head rest on his shoulder. He caressed her hair and waited for her to calm. He sat there

for a long time, holding her and being supportive and telling her everything was going to be all right.

“Ed...do you really believe she’s alive?” For the first time, she found the courage to verbalize the question that had been hammering inside her head.

Peter Hay, suspected serial killer and the man who’d kidnapped and tortured Simone just months ago, had kidnapped her daughter Tamara, and for twenty days there had been no news about the girl. Tammy had been in France for an exchange program when she disappeared. French police and the FBI were searching for her, but so far, no news. It was as if Tamara had vanished into thin air.

The last six months had changed Simone’s life forever. She was a successful woman, a great psychiatrist, and renowned professional, and then suddenly, after helping a lawyer, Carl, to prepare his defense for a supposed client who’d killed his girlfriend during a sexual game, her life had sunk into a sea of tragedies. A psycho killer had started murdering women who lived in Simone’s hometown, she had barely survived being kidnapped, and some of her clients had been killed...poisoned with Potassium Cyanide that had been added to prescriptions she’d written.

In the middle of the chaos, Simone had started a romantic relationship with Edward, her friend of many years, and that was the only good thing in her life right now. He was the most supportive person ever, and he was working like crazy to help the police find her daughter. Simone hated to think what her life would be like without him in it.

For a strong woman like Simone, depending on someone else didn't come easy. She despised feeling fragile, and that was exactly the word she'd use to describe herself at the moment. Fragile, impotent, and useless. All her knowledge wouldn't bring her daughter home. Relying on people to help, allowing the police to resolve everything, was driving her crazy.

"I do believe she's going to survive, Simmie, because she's your daughter, she's a strong kid, and even though Hay is a lunatic, I have faith he won't kill a child!"

Simone sighed. "I wish I had your confidence, but I just don't know!" She shook her head. "What's going on with the situation with his sister?"

Peter Hay was also the main suspect in the cases of the murdered women. He had confessed his crimes to Simone when he'd abducted her, but since he'd never been caught, the police couldn't confirm he was the killer.

The deaths of Simone's patients', on the other hand, did not seem to be the result of his handiwork. When Simone had been rescued, Hay had run off to China, and there had been no indication he'd returned. Instead, the main suspect in these most recent murders was his sister, a public prosecutor, Deena Hay Morelli. No physical evidence had been found that pointed to her involvement, but the person directly responsible for the deaths, a woman by the name of Maria, had told the police she had been operating under Deena Hay's orders. According to Maria, the prosecutor had blackmailed the poor woman into doing her bidding by threatening

to have the woman's son arrested and tried for a rape he hadn't committed. The woman—an immigrant who could barely speak English—had been frightened into cooperating, but she claimed she hadn't known people would die as a result.

“Deena is denying any involvement. She has alibies. She's a hard worker, Simmie. She works ten to twelve hours a day, and she's a great prosecutor...very fair, according to most people.”

“Do you believe her?” she asked him. Edward was a fantastic criminal profiler, and she trusted his opinion.

“Actually, I do. She seems sad and betrayed; she doesn't act like a cold-blooded murderer. I can see despair in her eyes. But we're still working on the case.”

“I don't know how to thank you, Ed...you've been the kindest, most understanding person in the world, and all I do is cry...”

“I'm the happiest man in the world just because I can be by your side, Simmie... Don't worry about me; worry about your daughter and about yourself. You seem tired, you're not sleeping well, and you insist on continuing to work.”

Simone gave a shaky laugh. “I have to, my friend, or I'm going to go bat-shit crazy.”

People Simone had known all her life were criticizing her for her decision to keep to a relatively normal schedule, but she was following the advice of her own psychiatrist, Dr. Edgar Rhivas, who'd told her she

should try to maintain as normal a schedule as possible, or she would go insane.

Simone was making an effort to do so. She continued seeing her patients because she was a responsible person, and they needed her. Her friends might not understand, but Simone had found that keeping regular office hours was helping her to maintain a little balance. Dr. Edgar had been right; if she decided to wallow in her misery and problems, she would be lost. She had to keep her mind busy.

She had been on national TV, on talk-radio programs, had visited embassies, and had done whatever she could think to do, begging people to send some news of her daughter. The FBI had asked her to stop because thousands of phone calls had come in, all from people who'd provided bogus tips, making it difficult for the authorities to follow the right clues. Feeling as if her hands were tied, she'd turned to work to find as much inner peace as she could.

"I'm going to cook us some dinner. Do you want something special, Simmie?" he asked, as always, going out of his way to please her.

Without them having talked about it or doing anything official, Edward had started spending a lot of time at Simone's house. He'd also taken over her kitchen and had begun cooking dinner for them practically every night. After so many years spent living alone, she found it strange to have someone in her home on an almost permanent basis, but she needed his support and his company. She wouldn't start to question the situation or allow herself to feel as if her privacy was being invaded...not

now. Just for now, she needed to be taken care of, and she would allow Edward to do so. It wasn't easy to take off her Super Woman cape, and behave like a regular person, but she was trying hard.

"I love everything you cook...you can choose. Do I have time for a quick run? It will help clear my mind."

"Sure, go ahead... By the time you get back, our dinner should be ready."

Edward headed for the kitchen while she went to her room to change.

Simone dressed quickly and hit the road. The cold air and the exercise helped her mind and cheered her up. Half an hour later, she was back, out of breath but considerably less depressed, despite the fact nothing had changed. She couldn't allow herself to dwell on what her daughter might be going through at the moment. If she did, she would no doubt curl up in a corner somewhere and become useless to everyone, including herself. No...she had to keep her head and push on.

"I'm going to take a quick shower, Ed!" She shouted once she crossed the front door.

"Go for it, girl! When you're done, you'll find a delicious steak *au poivre*."

As she hurried down the hall past the kitchen, she breathed in deeply through her nose, relishing the delicious aroma. "It smells good!"

* * * * *

After Simone and Edward had a nice, relaxing dinner, sitting at her immaculate white and steel kitchen island, she got up to clean up the mess. She was putting the dishes into the dishwasher when her tapped-by-every-police-department-in-the-world phone rang. An unknown number flashed on the LCD screen. Her heart raced, and she showed the phone's screen to Edward.

He straightened and jumped to his feet, immediately alert. "Answer it, Simmie, and let me listen."

"Okay..." Simone touched the screen to receive the call. She could feel her heart racing in her throat.

"Hello, Simone, have you been missing me?" Peter Hay's voice was unmistakable.

"No, I want you to rot in hell. The only thing I care about is my child! Where is she?"

The moment she said the words, she knew she'd made the worst statement she could have made, but she was desperate and no longer capable of thinking clearly.

"Don't be a bitch! I have a gift for you."

"What did you do to her? What have you done to my little girl?" Simone cried, her voice rising on a hysterical note as she pictured the deranged man's idea of a gift. The thought of receiving a box containing one of Tammy's fingers or ears took Simone to the edge of insanity.

“Nothing, stop being an idiot. I’ve just sent a gift to your e-mail. Open it. I’m not a disgusting lunatic. What did you think? I’d cut off her finger or something? Never! I hate blood!”

And with that, he ended the phone call. She knew he hadn’t stayed on the line long enough for the police to track him, but her thoughts were focused on what kind of so-called “gift” he’d sent her. She ran to get her laptop off the desk in her home office. She brought it out and set it up on the kitchen island. Her hands trembled as she lifted the lid, and she could barely turn it on, her hands were shaking so badly.

“Let me do that for you, Simmie.”

Edward took a seat at the counter and turned the computer toward him. He used the keyboard to navigate to her email box. No password required—she had nothing to hide.

“There’s an attachment. Looks like a movie.” Edward tapped a couple keys.

Simone reached to turn the laptop so she could see, but Ed shook his head.

“Wait,” he said. “Let me watch it before you do...”

Simone could read the apprehension in his expression.

“I can’t just sit here,” she told him. “I have to face whatever’s there!”

After twenty days of silence, she needed news about her daughter; good or bad, she just needed something. She moved to stand behind him so she could see over his shoulder.

Edward double-clicked on the attachment, and the previewer app came up. And suddenly, there was Tammy, sitting in a chair, seemingly very calm. She appeared healthy, but she was wearing what looked like a dog collar and a chain. Just on the edge of the screen, Simone spotted a gloved hand holding the chain.

“Mommy, I want to tell you I’m okay! Don’t worry too much; he’s treating me well. I’m eating, and I’m in good health. And I’ve been a good girl.”

Simone remembered Peter’s words the day he’d kidnapped Tammy. *I always wanted a pet.*

I’ve been a good girl? Simone fumed. How dare that insane bastard treat her child like some kind of...of a dog! God! How deranged could someone be?

The film ended. Simone’s eyes filled with tears.

Ed turned in his chair and wrapped his arms around her waist. “She’s alive, Simmie, and she seems well.”

“She has a dog collar around her neck, Ed! And he’s keeping her on a goddamn chain! She’s *not* fine! That insane son-of-a-bitch is treating her like a dog!”

Simone tried to wriggle from Edward’s grasp, but he tightened his hold.

“She’s alive, Simmie, that’s all we need to worry about. He hasn’t actually hurt her. Let’s count our blessings here. The circumstances aren’t ideal, but overall, she’s okay. I have to send this e-mail to the

police. They can trace the IP address and find out where he was when he sent this message.”

Simone grew still. Edward was right. Her daughter was alive; she should think about that. Tammy would probably be scarred, emotionally, but they could deal with that later, *when she comes back home. If she comes back home*, thought Simone. *She must come back. I have to keep faith. God, I would like to believe there is someone out there somewhere who can help me!*

