

Murder and Mint Tea

Mrs. Miller Mysteries, #1

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Chapter 1

The pale winter sun shone through the kitchen window. I cleaned the last of the mess from my adventure. The caper hadn't gone as planned. How many do? In my many years of life, most of my plans had taken an unexpected turn.

"*Merup.*" Robespierre, my Maine Coon cat, announced a visitor on the way. He's almost as good as a doorbell. The firm rap on the door told me this wasn't one of my female friends. "Come in."

Pete Duggan strode across the room and thrust a bouquet of bright carnations into my hands. A red hue, almost as vivid as his hair, stained his face. "Mrs. Miller, got to hand it to you. I've come to eat crow."

To hide a smile, I buried my face in the flowers and inhaled the spicy fragrance. "How about chocolate chip cookies and mint tea instead?"

"Sounds great." He straddled one of the chairs at the table and picked up the local newspaper. "Local Woman Thwarts Robbers." His grin made him look like the ten-year-old who had moved into the corner house on my block. He cleared his throat. "The guys at the station ribbed me about this. Did you forget the plan?"

How, when the idea to catch the real thieves had been mine? A series of burglaries had plagued the neighborhood for months and had troubled me. Especially when the police had decided two teenage neighbor boys were the culprits. I knew the pair and had disagreed strongly enough to set myself up as a victim. Then I informed Pete.

"Did you forget?" he repeated. "When I crept up the stairs and saw you grappling with one of the men, I nearly had a heart attack."

Heat singed my cheeks. "How was I to know my date would poop out early?"

After filling two mugs with mint tea I opened a tin of freshly baked cookies. How could I admit to a nagging doubt, or tell him I had wanted to be part of the action? In July I had turned sixty-five and in September retired from the nursing staff at Tappan Zee Memorial Hospital. Six months of placid existence had made me edgy. Lunch with friends, coffee with the neighbors and weekly bridge games with old cronies bored me. These events held none of the challenge of meeting crises at the hospital.

Pete scowled. "You could have gone to the Prescott's house."

"They're away." I sipped the tea and savored the cool mint flavor.

"The Randals then." He pulled the other mug across the table. "The guys insist the two of us make one perfect cop. Want to hire on?"

"I've no desire for a third career." Until my husband's death twenty-five years ago I had been the organist and choir director at St. Stephens Episcopal Church. Needing a way to support myself and my son, I enrolled in the nursing program at the community college. "Besides, I'm too old."

"Old, never. You look the same as when we moved here."

“It’s the dye.” His puzzled look tickled me. Dyeing my hair makes me look younger. “I came into the world with red hair and I intend to leave the same way.”

Laughter rumbled deep in his chest. “A worthy ambition you nearly fulfilled last night.” He touched my hand. “Thanks again. You kept me from making a mistake that could have ruined those boys.”

I lifted my mug and inhaled the aromatic steam. The evidence against the pair had been circumstantial and strong. They had done odd jobs at all the houses that had been burglarized. “I’ve known them since they were infants. Nothing I’ve ever seen in their actions to make me believe they were guilty.”

Pete made a face. “I’ve known them just as long. Didn’t stop me from suspecting them. How could you be sure?”

“Forty years of living in the same house has attuned me to the rhythms of the neighborhood.”

“Twenty years hasn’t helped me.”

“There’s living and living.” Some people are so concerned with the melody they never hear the underlying harmonics. As a musician I’ve learned to listen. As a nurse I know how to evaluate symptoms that are sometimes similar but are caused by different diseases. Those traits are a vital part of my nature.

I set the mug on the table. “Don’t blame yourself. You weren’t the only one to suspect the boys. No harm was done.”

He finished the cookie he held and rose. “No harm. Maybe some good. I’ll try looking beneath the surface.”

“That’s a great idea.”

He grinned. “I’m out of here. Work tonight.” He zipped his green down jacket. “How about acting as my silent partner?”

I laughed. “Go away with your nonsense.”

Just then the cat door opened. Robespierre made a grand entrance. Flakes of snow dotted his brown and black fur. His gait suggested a mission. He halted in front of Pete and banged the young policeman’s leg with his head.

Pete crouched and scratched the cat’s head. “Not my fault, old man. She jumped in on her own.”

Robespierre’s rumbling purr suggested he understood and accepted Pete’s explanation.

“He’s been out of sorts since the thieves visited.”

“Me, too.” Pete hugged me. “Never again. Promise. We need you around. Think about being a silent partner. There are times when I need someone to listen.”

“If listening is all you need, I’ll be here. No more active involvement in crime for me.”

“See you.” He clattered down the stairs.

Until I heard the front door close I remained at the top of the steps. Silent partner, no way. I rubbed the tender spot on my head where I’d been bashed. I had enough experience with crime to last the rest of my life.

* * * * *

During the night, Saturday’s few snowflakes became a blizzard and prevented an early morning walk. Though I could have returned to bed, habits formed during

my years of being at the hospital before seven AM were hard to break. I sat on the window seat in the living room and stared through the glass at a white world.

When I converted the small Victorian house into two apartments, the second floor with its view had been my choice. In the autumn after the leaves fall, the Hudson River is visible. River watching has always relaxed me. This morning the heavy snowfall kept visibility to inches. No cars moved along the street and no people strolled on the sidewalks.

I poured a second mug of tea and scratched Robespierre's head. Moments later he yawned and stretched, arching his back with a suppleness that brought a sigh of envy. He leaped from the window seat and stalked to the kitchen. The doorbell rang and I went to answer. The young boys from across the street stood at the top of the steps. They stomped snow from their boots.

"Boy, Mrs. Miller, there's two feet of snow and it's still falling." Larry Randal grinned.

"But there'll be school tomorrow," Jamal said. "Bummer."

"Thought you liked school."

He shrugged. "It's okay but I need a vacation."

"You just had mid-winter break."

"I know."

I chuckled. Blonde hair stuck around the edge of Larry's cap. His cheeks glowed apple red. The cold had burnished his foster brother's coffee-colored skin. The boys jostled in the doorway each trying to be first inside.

"If there's no paper, why are you here?"

Larry held up an orange plastic bag. "We brought the part that came yesterday."

"We have to shovel your walk." Jamal grinned. "And invite you to dinner this evening."

"I'll let your mother know." A glance inside the bag showed the New York Times magazine was there. Part of my Sunday routine remained. "Want some cookies to take home?"

Identical grins spread across their faces. "You bet," they chorused.

"If you come, could you bake a chocolate cake?" Jamal asked.

"Brownies," Larry said.

"I'll see."

"All right." Two hands pumped in the air. "You always say that when you mean yes."

I took a plastic bag of cookies from the freezer and filled a middle-size tin. "Share them with Becca and the twins."

"Yes." They dashed downstairs and banged the door on the way out.

After pulling the magazine from the bag and opening it to the puzzle, I snapped on the radio. Instead of classical music, a lengthy list of cancellations poured from the speaker. Looked like no one was going anywhere. I tackled the puzzle until the phone rang.

"Mom, guess I won't pick you up for church."

"Not unless you bought a snow mobile."

"Even then I wouldn't chance the trip."

Andrew is thirty-nine, a psychiatrist and cautious. He's never made a decision without weighing the possibilities at least three times.

"I'll be fine. The boys have shoveled the walk and Sarah invited me to dinner."

"Mom's second family."

Was there a trace of envy in his voice? Though he and Bob Randal had been friends since infancy they had drifted apart. Sadly their chosen lifestyles made the difference seem almost permanent and I had no solution.

"Andrew." A note of chiding crept into my voice.

"Tell Bob hello."

"You could do that yourself."

"And risk Sarah snagging me to speak to one of the groups she champions? I've no desire to talk about the trauma of potty training to the development of a child's personality."

His dislike of Sarah puzzled me. Perhaps the cause was Sarah's open and liberal nature. Andrew is exactly the opposite.

"Where were you yesterday afternoon?" His voice held a demanding tone.

"Shopping."

"All afternoon and most of the evening. I stopped calling at ten. You need an answering machine."

"I had dinner with Lars. He left for New Mexico last evening. Was it important?"

"Since your recent encounter with those criminals I worry. As you well know, you could develop problems from the blow to your head. How could Pete allow you to be involved?"

"He didn't. Barging in was my choice."

"I'd feel better if there were tenants in the apartment."

"I'll call the real estate agent Monday." My patience with his over-protectiveness thinned. Lately he's been acting as though I'm hovering inches from senility. "Let me talk to Andrea."

While I assembled the ingredients for the chocolate cake my granddaughter chattered about her week. She had earned a role in the school play and had been chosen for a solo in the spring dance recital. Andrea had inherited my love of music. Instead of an instrument for expression she uses movement. After saying goodbye four times I hung up and called Sarah to accept the dinner invitation.

By four o'clock the heavy snowfall had stopped. I stood by the bedroom window and watched the wind blow snow from one drift and drop it on another. After pulling on a pair of russet wool slacks and an ivory blouse with a matching cardigan, I reached for my boots.

I tucked the slacks into the knee-high boots and put a pair of shoes in a bag. The boots are sturdy and warm but the thought of clomping around in them for hours held little appeal. In the kitchen I checked my jacket pocket for house keys, shook some food into Robespierre's dish and picked up the cake container.

Downstairs I paused in the doorway to allow my vision to adjust to the blinding whiteness. The branches of a pair of dogwoods on the corner of the yard next to the driveway bowed beneath the weight of the snow. Rose bushes along the walk resembled small igloos. Since only a skim of snow covered the walk the boys must have only recently finished shoveling it. Each of my exhalations sent a cloud of condensed vapor into the air.

The snowplows had left a cleared trail along my side of the street. Someone had cut an opening in the high bank of snow at the curb. In the distance I heard the scraping noise of the plow signaling a return.

While grasping the shoe bag in one hand and the cake container in the other, I strode across the cleared area. Moments later I plunged into virgin territory. The snow reached the top of my boots. With care, I calculated the distance to the curb. I stepped up. On the downswing my foot hit something buried beneath the snow.

I lost my balance. The shoe bag flew toward the sidewalk. The cake container flew into the air. I hit the ground and learned how little cushioning snow provided. "Not my hip." My cry echoed above the scraping snowplow sound. I'd seen too many older women deteriorate after a hip fracture and wanted no part of that fate.

My leg folded under me. A sharp pain resulted. The cake container opened. Chunks of chocolate cake showered on and around me. Snow seeped beneath my jacket collar and brought shivers.

"Help! Help!" My voice sounded faint. Did snow absorb sound? The scraping noise increased in volume. Visions of being scooped by the blade, loaded in a truck and dumped in the Hudson River evoked a scream. I pushed my elbows against the ground and tried to sit. The exquisite jolt of pain brought tears to my eyes. My screams rose to ear-shattering heights.

"Jamal, it's Mrs. Miller." Larry knelt beside me. "Get Mom and Dad."

"Bummer." Jamal made a face. "The cake is ruined."

His expression and the realization that I'd been rescued brought a rush of tears. "So am I. Tell them my leg is broken."

The arrival of Bob and Sarah brought a reaction a toddler must feel when parents rescued him from an unpleasant situation. They made a chair with their hands and carried me to the house.

"I'll call the police," Bob said. "They'll know which roads are cleared and if I should drive you."

"My hair. I can't go to the hospital looking like a refuge from a food fight."

"I'll wash it," Sarah said. "In the kitchen. We'll pull the table to the sink."

"I do not believe this." Bob's hair flopped onto his forehead. His body moved in concert.

The jerky movement sent knives of pain through my leg. I bit my lip. "Believe. It's called vanity."

"Shock," he said. "Shouldn't we make a splint?"

"The boot acts like one." No one not trained in trauma care was about to touch my leg.

Jamal, Becca, Larry and the two-year-old twins danced around raising the noise level to cacophony. Jamal's cries of "Bummer. She gets all the cake," lodged in my thoughts.

Forty-five minutes later, escorted by the police, I arrived at the hospital. Before removing the boot, one of my former colleagues gave me an injection. While drifting between pain and nirvana I wondered if my beautician made house calls.

* * * * *

Monday was a day of learning truths. Other than to give birth to Andrew I had never been a hospital patient. I'll admit I liked being on giving not receiving side of

care. As I waited for the transport team to take me to the OR for the insertion of a pin in my left leg, my thoughts focused on all the dire complications I could remember. Some were the product of an imagination out of control. My heart thundered. My mouth was dry. Tears filled my eyes.

"You'll be fine," Beth Logan, neighbor and nurse said. "We'll take good care of you."

I clung to the assurance in her voice. "Just think of all the things that can go wrong."

Beth patted my hand. "Just remember how seldom they occur." In that moment I realized how important sympathy is for a patient. Before we could say more, the team arrived and wheeled me away.

The rest of the day passed in semi-consciousness. Drowsiness from the anesthesia and the pain medication scrambled my thoughts. Even Andrew's scolding about my foolishness barely registered.

By Wednesday I felt caged and tired of pale green walls, gray tile floors and white sheets. The television turned low and switched from channel to channel failed to divert me from an aching need to escape confinement.

Dr. Beemish had promised to discharge me once crutch walking was mastered. By noon, the physical therapist hadn't arrived. I toyed with my lunch and prayed for mint tea and the serenity of my apartment.

Lars, my friend and bridge partner, called from Santa Fe. He spends most of the winter months at his home there. He hoped I would heal quickly and grumbled about my penchant for adventure.

When I hung up I waved at Pete Duggan. He held a bouquet of yellow mums. "More flowers. Why?"

"Seemed the thing to do. You chose a dumb way to turn down my offer of a partnership."

I laughed. "Breaking my leg wasn't my first choice."

He slouched on a chair and told me some stories about the storm. The tales made me laugh.

The arrival of Edward Potter, pastor of St. Stephens, ended Pete's visit. The small, dapper man's ringing tenor voice dripped with sympathy and gossip. While he regaled me with stories I would rather not have heard, Paul and Maria Prescott arrived. I eyed the thermos in Maria's hand and sighed in anticipation. One of my wishes had come true.

"Mrs. Miller, I was so sorry you have the accident and I am not here to give you the help. When Paul and I come home last night Mrs. Sarah tell us you have the misfortune. I have brought the tea."

Edward coughed. I made the introductions without mentioning Paul and Maria's last name. Edward's face showed a hint of disapproval. He stared at the gold hoop dangling from Paul's ear. Edward kissed my cheek. "Katherine, I'll keep you in my prayers."

Would his prayers be for my healing or about my choice of friends? I hadn't told Edward that Paul owns the most successful antique store in town or that Prescott Reproductions is on the way to success. Maria designs jewelry and has a growing reputation in her field.

Paul and I had met the year I converted the house. He'd come to evaluate the antiques I'd decided to sell. We had become friends. Several years later on a trip to Spain he'd met Maria. After their marriage he'd purchased the house next door.

Maria opened the thermos. Some people crave caffeine. My choice is mint tea. Like a starving woman I reached for the cup, breathed in the aroma and sipped. The hint of chamomile made me smile. "Heavenly. Thank you. How was your trip?"

"We have the beautiful time. My madre and padre are happy to have us home again. Paul find many beautiful things for the shop. My niece, Bianca, want to live with us so she can go to school. Paul and I think on this." She sat in the chair beside the bed.

Paul leaned against the door frame. His shoulder length blond hair had been pulled into a club at his nape. "I hear you nabbed the neighborhood thieves."

I grinned. "With help from the police."

"Good show. Any hope they'll recover the loot?"

"Call Pete. He should know."

The Prescott's house had been the scene of the first robbery. A gold and emerald ring Maria had designed for a national jewelry show had been taken.

Maria shook her head. "I do not know how you could let the thieving men in your house. I would scream and run."

"I didn't think. Just acted."

Paul crossed the room. "Now, why don't I believe that? Have you ever acted impulsively?" He shook his head. "Bet you dismissed any options before you acted."

He stood with his hands on Maria's shoulders. She looked up at him and the love in her eyes made me sigh. Her dark coloring and near perfect features complimented his rugged handsomeness.

Maria patted my hand. "I should never have go away. First the bad man hit you. Then you fall in the snow. What if no one find you?"

"I'd be part of an ice floe on the river." Her frown said she didn't understand and explaining the town's snow removal system was beyond me. "I'm fine, child."

"When you come home I will care for you. My house takes just one hand."

"We'll see." I looked up in time to catch Paul's nod. "When do you start remodeling?"

"Late summer. Once they spring you and you're on your feet, stop by the ship and check out your investment."

Three years ago when Paul started the reproduction workshop he needed a backer. I invested some of my savings. "I trust you."

He laughed. "Could get you in trouble."

"Maria would never let you cheat me."

"Few people could." Andrew stepped into the room. "Her trusting air is an act."

"Is that a nice way to speak to your mother?"

He stood with his hands clasped behind his back like the presenting doctor for Grand Rounds. "Paul, Maria, good to see you." He acknowledged their greetings with a nod and walked to the bed. "Can't stay long or I'll be late for office hours. Ruth will drop by this evening. Are you sure you won't consider Hudson House for a few weeks?"

“Never.” Though the local nursing home was exclusive and expensive, I wanted my own apartment and bed.

Paul clicked his heels and saluted me. Maria kissed my cheek. “Not to worry, Dr. Andrew. When your madre come home I will tend her.”

Andrew sat on the chair Maria had vacated. “Mom, I’m serious. If not Hudson House, let me hire a nurse.”

“There’s no need. With Ruth’s, Sarah’s and Maria’s help I’ll manage very well.”

“You are the most stubborn woman in existence.” He patted my hand. “I’ve found a tenant for your apartment. Then I won’t have to worry about you being in the house alone. She’s a friend of Ted. Divorced with two children.” He smiled. “Rachel’s a lovely woman. They’ll move in at the end of the month.”

Though I preferred to select my own tenants, I decided to let him win this round. “Rachel what?”

“Rodgers. Ted sent her to me for some therapy sessions. Her divorce was messy. She even lost custody of her children. Ted helped her regain custody. She needs support. You’ll be good for her.”

Something about the way he said her name bothered me. For the past year I’ve noticed an inner restlessness about him. He seems discontent and to be searching for illusive answers. I sighed.

He pulled a paper from his briefcase. “Here’s the lease. Ted drew it up. Rachel has signed.”

I found a pen but first read the brief document. “This is different from the one the realtor provides.”

“Simpler. Ted said you and Rachel would be protected.”

“The terms favor the tenant.” I scratched out several of the terms. “Tell Ted to have this retyped and then I’ll sign.”

“Mom.” Andrew looked at what I wrote. “This is hardly fair to Rachel.”

Something in his voice raised a flood of questions. Before I had a chance to ask my son what was happening, the physical therapist arrived. Andrew left.

For forty-five minutes I embarked on an exhausting attempt to master the extra set of legs. I returned to bed and slept until the nurse woke me for dinner.

Shortly after the trays were collected, Ruth arrived. “Mother Miller, you look so much better.”

“But bored.”

She smiled. “Andrea’s in the hall near the elevators. Let me find a wheelchair and take you to her.”

“I’ll use the crutches. Follow with the chair in case I falter.” I slid to the edge of the bed and positioned the crutches. I noticed the concern on her face. “I should be fine.”

“Of course you will be. I think you can master anything you try.”

“Thank you.”

My daughter-in-law isn’t beautiful but she knows how to dress. She keeps her dark brown hair cut in a style that’s perfect for her narrow face. Though she graduated from college with honors and could have had a brilliant career, she’s chosen to serve as Andrew’s handmaiden. Even when his ideas clash with hers, she doesn’t disagree in public.

“Ready.” Ruth appeared at the door with a wheelchair.

Slowly at first and then with greater confidence, I walked toward the cluster of chairs near the elevators. A drop of perspiration slid down my back. Another made a path down my nose. One hundred steps. Fifty more. Then ten. The trip seemed longer than my usual morning walk.

“Grandma.” Andrea bounced from a chair and dashed toward me. Her dark brown hair had recently been cut and curled around her face. “Crutches, how neat. When you don’t need them could they be mine?” Hazel eyes like mine and Andrew’s sparkled with excitement.

After I eased into the wheelchair Ruth lifted the leg rest to support the case. “Why would you want them?”

“To put them in a dance.”

“Only if you promise I’ll be in the audience.”

“Sure.” She kissed my cheek. “Can I write my name on your cast?”

“I’d love that. You’re the first to ask. Guess my friends think I’m too old for cast decoration.”

“Not you. They’re the old ones. When you come home I’ll stay and be your nurse. Dad thinks you need one.”

“What about school?”

She wrinkled her nose. “Guess I can’t then.”

“Tell me what you’ve been doing?”

Those words released a spate of stories. To each I responded in the proper manner. When Andrea ran out of stories, Ruth pushed me back to my room. She held the wheelchair while I transferred to the bed.

“Are you sure you can manage when you come home?” she asked. “You know I’ll be glad to help unless I’m tied up with Andrea’s schedule.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Andrew blames himself for the accident.”

“If anyone’s to blame it’s his fool mother. If I’d waited twenty minutes the street would have been scraped on both sides.” My sigh was part exasperation and part worry. “He’s too serious.”

She nodded. “It’s a phase.”

Ruth usually read Andrew like an expert but this time she was wrong.

“He’d feel better if he could do something. He loves you.”

“I know that.” Her concern for my son brought a ripple of guilt. My stubborn pride loosened its grip. “Why don’t you suggest he hire a woman to come every morning for a few hours? Not a nurse, mind you. Just someone to help me dress and do some light cleaning.” My sense of the ridiculous rose. “Have him get me a portable toilet.”

Ruth giggled. In that instant she looked no older than her daughter. “That’s wonderful. I can’t wait to see his face when I tell him about the commode.”

My laughter joined hers. “I tried to make the suggestion to him but couldn’t. He has a view of me I don’t deserve. He’d be embarrassed to think his mother has normal human functions.”

She patted my hand. “He does tend to put you on a pedestal. I’d better leave and get Andrea home.”

After she left I turned on the television. The program, one of the crime shows I always watch, barely registered. My thoughts centered on my son and some nameless concern for him.

Chapter 2

On Friday morning Dr. Beemish signed me out. One of the nurses presented me with a packet of discharge papers, including one on cast care. When Ruth arrived to drive me home I was dressed and waiting to make an escape.

The sight of my house brought tears to my eyes. The “Painted Lady” is ivory with shades of coral trim. I’d read about the colorful Victorian houses. Six years ago I’d decided on the color scheme. The house went from gray and drab to beautiful. People often stop to admire.

Paul hurried down the walk. “Welcome home.” He lifted me from the car.

“Put me down. I can walk.”

“Like a snail. There are a lot of stairs. Lunch break’s just an hour.”

“You win.”

Robespierre crouched at the top of the steps. The usually silent cat chirruped. When Paul lowered me to the window seat Robespierre jumped up and rubbed against my face and arms. His fur tickled my nose. “I missed you, too.” I turned to Paul. “Did he eat?”

“Twice a day.” Paul kissed my cheek. “Got to hustle to Sarah’s. The rug rats are mine.”

“Brave man. Thanks for the cat care.”

“No prob. Robes and I are buddies.” He paused at the door. “I’m out of here. The ladies want to plan your life.”

Maria arrived and pushed him to the stairs. “Hurry. I have the lunch ready. Mrs. Sarah need to try the dish. My madre gave me the receipt.”

Over lunch Maria, Sarah and Ruth set up a schedule of visits and meals. After the dishes were in the washer, Ruth and Maria left. Maria had Paul’s lunch and she would stay with the children while Sarah and I visited.

Maria adores children. She draws them the way a siren entices sailors, but to fun, not disaster. She’s had several miscarriages. Though she seldom talks about those losses, I know she was disappointed not to have a child.

Tiredness crept over me. I used the crutches and walked to the bedroom. Sarah followed. Her dishwater blonde hair had been permed into tight curls. “Wash and wear hair,” she always said. “Bed?”

Though I hated to admit to a weakness, exhaustion threatened to turn my bones to jelly. I halted in the doorway. “What happened here?”

“Andrew. Ruth said your single request multiplied.”

“I can see that.”

When the house had been converted I sold the large antique bed my husband and I had shared. I kept a pair of sleigh beds from the guest room. One had been dismantled and an electric hospital bed stood in its place. Though I understood Andrew’s reasoning I wished there had been no exchange. My body knows every

contour of my mattress. For six days I'd dreamed of a good night's rest. The sight of the commode drew a chuckle. Ruth had found the courage I lacked.

"The boys will bring your dinner. Give them a list of what you need from the store." Sarah supported my leg while I got into bed. "One of them will be on duty every evening until you graduate to a cane."

"Tell Jamal I'll bake him a chocolate cake. Larry will have a pan of fudge brownies."

"They'll love that." The grin on her face said she would claim her share of the sweets, something she didn't need. "When do your new tenants move in? I told a friend's daughter to call but the realtor said the apartment had been rented."

"At the end of the month."

"What's she like?"

"I haven't met her. She's Ted's friend."

Sarah arched an eyebrow. "A close one?"

"Don't know. She's divorced and has two children. Andrew said she's lovely."

"She must be gorgeous. He tends to see the world in shades of brown." She put on her coat. "I'll let you rest."

When the door closed I drifted to sleep. After a short nap I planned to practice walking. Being dependent on others is a drag.

* * * * *

March had blustered for most of the month and now crept away in silence. Anticipation for a glimpse of spring and a desire for a peek at the woman my son had called lovely coiled like the tightly curled leaves of the maple tree in the front yard. Crocuses bloomed. A pair of robins gathered nesting material. They carried streamers of dried grass to the tree.

Robespierre curled on my lap with his head against the window. His purrs belied muscles poised to pounce. I poured the last of the mint tea from the breakfast Maria had prepared. With the addition of a cast boot I'd given Bessie Greene, the woman Andrew had hired, the weekend off. Maria had questioned me about the tenants due to arrive today but I had no answers. Andrew had reassured me when I probed but he'd given me no more than the basics I already knew.

Since six AM, I'd studied the sullen sky. Dark clouds promised rain and I wondered if the tenants would arrive before the downpour began. The grandfather clock chimed ten times. A few drops of rain splattered on the window and dotted the sidewalk. I stretched. Robespierre leaped to the floor. Using the crutches as an extra pair of legs, I hobbled to the kitchen.

Twenty minutes later I covered a tray of cold cuts, cheese, rolls and salads with plastic wrap. I taped one of the razor sharp knives Bob Randal had given as gifts to select friends. The handle of ebony wood with slashes of ivory was distinctive and attractive. Feeling as though I'd accomplished a feat I returned to the living room and my observation post.

"I won't be dependent." A smug note entered my voice.

"*Merup.*" Robespierre's cry fulfilled one of his purposes in my life. I've always talked aloud to myself. Guests often gave me odd looks, perhaps questioning my mental state. Having a pet stopped their speculation.

The cat walked beside me. I settled on the window seat with its perfect view of the neighborhood. The rain had stopped. A battered blue van pulled into the driveway and parked behind my gray sedan.

When Ted Thomas' silver Mercedes with a rusty trailer in tow pulled in at the curb, a giggle escaped. Andrew's best friend always considers his impression on others before he acts. The sight beyond my window was enough to shatter his suave playboy image.

A blonde woman left the car. Two children erupted from the van and tore across the yard running through one of the flower beds. I raised the window in time to hear their name-calling. Two men opened the door of the van and carried pieces of furniture to the house. A couch, two easy chairs, a dinette set, several dressers, a bed, mattress and some tables. I thought of the odds and ends of furniture in the attic. Would the offer of beds for the children offend my tenant?

As soon as they unloaded the van, the man carried boxes from the trailer. The children dashed up and down the walk. Ted and the blonde stood like Siamese twins joined at the hip and watched the progress. Ted had attempted to disguise himself by wearing dark glasses.

The phone rang. Without missing a second of the unfolding drama, I answered.

"Just me." Sarah said. "What's she like? Are the kids nice? Is that Ted Thomas?"

"It is."

"Is that all?"

"You know as much as I do."

"Didn't they come for the keys?"

"Andrew must have given them a set." A black Lincoln drove past. Ted turned his back to the street. I laughed.

"What's so funny?" Sarah asked.

"Ted. He's acting like he's about to be caught performing an illegal act. He's wearing dark glasses. Maybe he'd like a false beard."

"If he's afraid of being seen, why offer to help?"

"I can't answer for him but I'm sure I'll learn."

"It's not like he can't be seen with her. He's divorced and so is she."

Sarah was right. Ted has been divorced for five years. Though he and Andrew are buddies and Ted's ex-wife is a member of Sr. Stephens, I've never learned the details of the split. "Talk to you later."

"Good enough," Sarah said. "Shame you're an invalid. Otherwise you could make a neighborly call."

"Goodbye." None of my family or friends knows how far toward independence I've traveled. Yesterday before Bessie left I'd reached the landing. Today I intended to go to the first floor.

The van backed out of the driveway. Ted got into his car. As the Mercedes and trailer pulled away, the blonde blew a kiss.

Curiosity as strong as the cat killing kind egged me into action. I rubbed Robespierre's head. "Too soon to go down."

An hour later, Robespierre pawed my face and startled me awake. He jumped from my side and padded to the kitchen. The cat door flapped. I hobbled to the kitchen and took the tray from the refrigerator and set it on the table. Then with

extreme caution I started down the stairs. After a brief rest on the landing, I continued. In the foyer I wiped my sweat-drenched forehead and felt as if I'd worked hours in the garden on a sultry day. I rang the bell to announce my arrival.

After a short wait, the door opened a crack. "Who's there?" a child asked.

"Katherine Miller from upstairs."

The crack widened. Eyes the blue of summer skies seemed to be the only feature on a dust streaked face. A mass of tangled brown hair hung down the girl's back. Her gaze focused on the crutches. "What did you do to your leg?"

"Slipped and broke it."

"Susie, who is it?" A woman's voice, strident with anger, echoed in the near empty apartment.

"The lady from upstairs."

"Can't you ever do anything right? I told you not to open the door." The girl seemed to shrink. Her shoulders hunched as if expecting a blow. "Find out what she wants and get back to work."

"There's a platter of cold cuts and salads for you." I raised my voice in an attempt to remove the child from the communication line. "Moving day can be hectic. I wanted to welcome you."

A boy sauntered to the door. "Snoop. That's what you are. You come to snoop. You're an ugly old witch."

His verbal attack stunned me. "This is my house."

He pushed a lock of honey blond hair from his forehead. "Don't believe you."

"Bring the tray in," the woman called. "Susie, put water on for coffee."

"She don't have anything," the boy shouted.

"The tray's upstairs. I'm on crutches. I came down to see if one of the children could fetch it. Don't bother with coffee. I know you're busy."

"Stay. I need a break."

"Then I will."

Planting my crutches firmly on the slate I crossed the foyer and entered the living room. The few pieces of furniture seemed lost in the L-shaped room. Years ago a concert grand had dominated the space.

"Be just a few minutes. Lord, I'd forgotten what real neighbors were like. In the apartment complex where I lived, I was lucky if anyone spoke."

"You'll find this is a friendly neighborhood." Hoping she would appear, I continued through the living room. A conversation with a disembodied voice is eerie.

"Snoop," the boy whispered. He sat on the floor in front of the television and ate chips from a bag. Why wasn't he helping?

"Tim, stop that," Susie said. "I'll tell Mommy you're rude."

"She won't listen to you. You'll be the one in trouble. She hates tattle-tales."

Tears rose in the girl's eyes. Tim smirked. My hands tightened on the crutches. I smiled at Susie. As quickly as the tears had appeared, they vanished. In the kitchen she pulled out a chair. My leg throbbed. The blood seemed to pulse against the cast. Gratefully I sat.

“Don’t mind Tim. He’s mad about moving. He really liked the old school ‘cause of the sports.” She opened a box and removed pots and pans until she found a kettle.

An elderly man shambled from the bedroom off the kitchen. “Susie honey, open a beer for your old uncle. Movin’s thirsty work.” He straddled a chair. His heavy eyebrows lifted. “Didn’t know you had company.”

“She’s from upstairs.”

“Katherine Miller,” I said.

“Willie Hinch, Rachel’s uncle. Pleased to meet you.”

Though he wasn’t as old as I first thought, I wondered if he was ill. His skin bore an unhealthy yellow I’d seen on many cancer patients. He drained the beer in several gulps. Alcohol also causes jaundice. He left the bottle on the table and shambled to the living room.

The kettle whistled. Susie filled two cups and stirred in instant coffee. She carried the cups to the table. When an attractive blonde entered the kitchen, Susie skittered into the room off the kitchen. Through the open door I saw two cots covered with sleeping bags.

“Mrs. Miller, so nice to meet you. Andrew has told me so much about you.” Her voice reminded me of whipped cream. Tight jeans hugged her hips and slender waist. Her red tee shirt emphasized the size of her breasts. As she walked toward me I realized she was braless. “So nice to finally meet you.”

“So good of you to come down.” The expression in her blue eyes belied her words. “Andrew said you were confined to bed because of an accident.”

“He’s over-protective. Being confined makes me edgy. I’m practicing to escape.”

Her throaty laughter held a slight wheeze. Was she a smoker? “Good for you.” With feline grace she sat on the chair. “I’ll have to apologize for instant coffee.

“That’s fine.”

“Did you say you’d fixed a platter?” I nodded. “That’s so nice. You’re every bit as nice as Andrew said.” She ran a hand along her arm in a lover-like gesture. “When you leave, one of the kids can go with you.”

Thoughts of the sullen Tim in my apartment brought a chill. “Susie. She’s about the same age as my granddaughter.”

“Andrea, right? I saw her picture in Andrew’s office.” Her smile hinted of secret knowledge. “A lovely child. Poor Susie’s so awkward. I think she’s a changeling. I was never awkward. Neither was her father.”

I put my cup down. “Most children outgrow their awkward stage.”

“Maybe she will.” She leaned forward. “Now I see why your son is such a warm and caring person.”

Warmth had never described Andrew. Contained, efficient, inhibited, role-playing were words that came to mind. What part had he chosen to play for Rachel? Understanding doctor, comforting friend, sympathetic teacher? I shivered and reached for the crutches. “Thanks for the coffee. I’ll let you get on with settling in.”

“Susie.” The strident note returned to her voice. “Go with Mrs. Miller.”

While I can slowly make my way upstairs with the crutches, I had discovered a quicker way. I sat on the step and bumped up one step at a time. Though I usually

carried my crutches, Susie took them. On the top landing she helped me stand. I pushed the door open.

“Don’t you lock it?” she asked.

“Not unless I’ll be gone for awhile.”

“Maybe you should.”

Why the warning? “I’ll try to remember but old habits are hard to break. A few years ago we could leave our doors unlocked all the time.”

“It’s just... just. Forget it.” She stood in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room. “A piano.”

“Do you like to play?”

“Yes.”

“Would you like to?”

“Could I?” Her blue eyes glowed.

“Go ahead.”

She sat on the bench. “I always wanted lessons but Mommy couldn’t pay for them and Daddy wouldn’t. The music teacher at school showed me a little.” She opened the keyboard. “We went to a private school ‘cause Daddy wouldn’t give Mommy money she would spend on herself. Mr. Thomas helped. He likes Mommy. So do a lot of men. That’s ‘cause she’s so pretty.”

Her confidences startled me. How much was true and how much a child’s fantasy? As though pulling a melody from the air, she stroked the keys. A promise of beauty shone through the dirt streaks on her face. Robespierre emerged from beneath the sofa and jumped to the top of the piano. His sudden appearance halted the haunting melody Susie had been creating. She reached to touch him. He rubbed her hand with his head. Then he put his teeth on the skin between her thumb and fingers, marking her as a friend.

“He likes you.”

“I’d like to have a cat but Mommy hates them.”

“He’s Robespierre and you can visit him any time.”

“That’s almost as good as having him. Mommy says pets are too much trouble.”

“A lot you know.” Tim appeared in the doorway. “Mommy says the yard is big enough here for a dog.”

Thoughts of my flower and mint beds being a repository for bones made me shudder. “You’ll not have a dog in this house, young man.”

His laughter sounded too adult to come from a child. “A lot you know. Mommy will get the owner to agree. He’s a man and men like her. She knows how to get what she wants from them.”

“I am the owner and don’t you forget it.” I met his glare. “Don’t you believe in knocking before you barge into someone’s house?”

He shrugged. “The door wasn’t locked. If you don’t want people walking in you should bolt it.” He swaggered into the living room. “You rich? You sure got a lot of nice things.”

“I’m going to tell Mommy how rude you are.”

“Tattle-tale.” He stuck out his tongue. “Do and I’ll fix you.” He grabbed her arm. “Mommy’s mad because you’ve been here so long. I’ll tell her you was playing with a dumb cat. Move.” He grabbed the knife from the top of the tray and sliced through the air. “Looks sharp. Get the tray.”

With her shoulders hunched and her head down she looked as old as Willie Hinch. "I put my hand on her shoulder. "Wait while I put some cookies in a tin."

Tim whirled. "You'd better hurry." He vanished. So did Susie's aura of age.

"Come later for the cookies," I said. "Your music is wonderful." Poor child. Was there a way I could help her?

* * * * *

On Sunday morning Beth Logan, a neighbor and fellow nurse, took me to church. Andrew picked me up after the service and drove me to his house for the afternoon. The pleasant family time extended through dinner and until Andrea's bedtime. At nine fifteen Andrew and I arrived at my home. With the cast, maneuvering in and out of a car is tricky. By the time we reached the porch I was exhausted. I sat on one of the wicker chairs to catch my breath.

Andrew looked down at me. "Why do you push yourself so hard?"

"Independence."

"Haven't you reached a place... a place—"

His voice drifted into silence. My gaze moved toward the door. Rachel stood with one foot forward. The seductive pose held my son's attention. Gray velvet slacks hugged her hips. A lavender silk blouse tied at the waist revealed more cleavage than I've ever hoped to possess. A musky aroma reached me.

"Hello, Andrew." Her husky voice caressed each syllable. She turned to me. "I sent Tim up with your tray but you weren't home. He can do it now."

My encounters with her son had been so unpleasant I refused to let his attitude ruin the remainder of my day. "No hurry. I have others."

"Sure wish I could be so cavalier about my possessions." She stepped onto the porch and paused beside Andrew. She held a leather coat. A step beyond my son she turned and flashed a smile. "Do we have an appointment tomorrow?"

Andrew cleared his throat. "At eleven."

"I'll be there." She paused at the edge of the porch and tapped her foot in an impatient rhythm.

Ted Thomas' silver Mercedes pulled in behind Andrew's blue sedan. With brisk strides Ted hurried up the walk. "Andy, was going to call you and set up a match." He passed Rachel and took my hand. "Katherine, you're looking great."

Rachel pouted. "What about me?"

"Babe, you always look terrific." He slid an arm around her waist. "A bit public for the greeting I have in mind." His gaze fastened on her cleavage. "Like the outfit."

Using my crutches, I rose and walked to the door. Andrew stepped to Ted's side. My son dwarfed his friend. Andrew's trim body made Ted appear heavier than he was.

"Tennis Wednesday?" Ted asked.

Andrew nodded. "Two o'clock at the club."

"Maybe I'll come and watch." Rachel ran her tongue over her lower lip.

Ted laughed. "You can't. Private men's club." He steered her to the steps.

"Andrew." I called.

My son stared after them. When the Mercedes pulled away from the curb, he turned. "Sorry." He shook his head. "I don't know how he does it. In the past five years he'd dated one foxy lady after another." He followed me upstairs.

"Why let that bother you? His flings don't last. He sees his sons once or twice a month. He pays a hefty sum in child support and alimony." I paused on the landing. "Are you and Ruth having problems?"

"Who could have problems with Ruth? She's perfect and predictable."

"She's what you've made her." Irritation filled my voice.

He unlocked the door. "It's just a mood. I'm feeling my age. Time is flying and I'm standing still."

"Ridiculous." I grasped his hand. Was he thinking about his father's sudden and premature death? Was he regretting that he hadn't dated anyone other than Ruth since his freshman year in college? Or that they had married a week after he graduated from medical school?

"I know." He hugged me in that special way a man reserves for his mother. "I'll stop by later in the week. Let Mrs. Greene and your friends do things for you."

"I'll try." At least I hadn't made a promise I couldn't keep.

Robespierre stalked into the room and wove a pattern around my legs. After feeding him I headed to the bedroom and prepared for bed. I returned to the living room and turned on the television. My familiar curled beside me.

Men. Do they all have these restless periods? I couldn't remember if my husband had ever been as edgy as my son. What could I do to help Andrew? A dozen ideas flooded through my thoughts and were rejected. I had to let him find his own peace.

As soon as the news ended, I turned off the television and went to bed. As I drifted to sleep, I wondered what I should say to Ruth. The interface between a woman and her daughter-in-law is as fragile as a soap bubble. Any warning, any hint about her need to change might be labeled as interference. I shied from that role. Sleep ended my search for answers.

* * * * *

On Monday Sarah, Maria and I met for coffee and to plan our week. Both Maria and I take turns watching Sarah's children so she can shop or keep appointments. I vetoed their plans to come here. I left Bessie pattering in the bedroom and waiting for the hospital equipment to be picked up. As I clomped downstairs I had an idea. I rang my tenant's bell.

Willie Hinch opened the door. When I asked for Rachel, he shook his head. "She's sleepin'. Never was much for getting' up mornings." He smiled. "Me and my wife raised her after her folks died. You should have seen her as a child, all gold and sunlight."

"Who gets the children ready for school?"

"I do. 'Til we moved here they was in a boardin' school."

"Do you mind taking care of them?" He must be living in the apartment. Where did he sleep? Did Andrew know Rachel's uncle was part of the package? My son never mentioned a second adult would be a tenant.

He shook his head. "Rachel's young. Needs her freedom. If Steve had been good to her she wouldn't be livin' this way. Workin' as a cocktail waitress. Good thing Mr. Thomas comes around most nights to drive her. Cabs cost like the dickens."

"That's nice of Ted."

He nodded. "He's a good man. If you need any odd jobs let me know. I'm right handy with tools."

He smelled of cigarettes and stale beer. "I will." I opened the front door and left.

Chapter 3

For several minutes I stood on the front porch and inhaled deep breaths to chase the lingering odors emitted by Willie Hinch. My new tenants were different from the previous ones. I wasn't sure I liked the idea of sharing the house with them. The lease was for a year. Could I find a way to break the contract?

Maria strolled up the walk. "Mrs. Miller, I have come for you and to see if the new neighbor would drink the coffee with us."

"I stopped by but she's still in bed. She worked last night."

"I see her leave in the silver car. She is a most beautiful woman. And her clothes, they are expensive and chic."

I joined Maria. "She's a cocktail waitress."

"Maybe I should give up the jewelry but Paul would not like me to do the waiting."

"Jewelry's more lasting." We walked across the street.

Sarah's house is interesting. Part was built before the Revolutionary War and a number of additions have erased the original structure. Maria and I followed Sarah into the spacious kitchen. Several years ago the pantry and back porch had been enclosed and added needed space.

Sarah poured coffee and joined us at the table in front of the sliding doors. "So tell us what you know about your tenants."

"Very little."

Sarah arched a brow. "Last night one of the twins was sick so I was up. Ted Thomas brought her home around three. He went in and left around six. I'm sure they weren't talking."

"Does it matter what they were doing? She's divorced. So is Ted."

Sarah's lip curled. "He's a snake."

If Andrew felt uncomfortable around Sarah, Ted loathed her. All during high school Ted, Bob and Andrew competed to be best student, athlete and stud. Once Bob and Sarah started dating he changed. Ted blamed Sarah for Bob's lack of fame as an artist.

"Everyone knows how you feel about Ted." I reached for my cup.

"I tried to like him." She shrugged. "He married Ann for her money and dumped her when he learned she wouldn't pay for his amusements."

"Really." Hoping to hear more I leaned forward.

Sarah shook her head. "What I know about that split, I can't tell." She refilled her cup. "Met those children at the bus stop. Tim seems okay. The girl is a mess. Wrinkled clothes, squirrel's nest hair. What's wrong with what's her name?"

"Rachel," I said. "Tim's not nice. Susie's sweet. Robespierre likes her."

Sarah chuckled. "Any friend of my cat is one of mine. There's something secretive about the child."

"She's afraid of her brother." I related the Saturday scene with the pair.

"How can that be?" Maria asked. "A brother and sister should love each other."

"The way she cringes when he orders her around makes me think he hits her. He walked into my apartment without knocking and appraised my things."

Maria patted my hand. "He is the child. He will learn politeness. I will make these children my friends."

"Easier than we can," Sarah said. "My pack adores you."

Maria sighed. "Did the mother not come to the bus?"

"They were alone."

"Never would I permit my children to go to the school without a mother's kiss no matter how long I was awake in the night."

"Enough gossip." I reached into my shirt pocket. "Here's my grocery list. I'll need the boys for yard work. Send them over after school."

Two cups of coffee later Maria and I headed across the street. "Let me show you what the boys should do this week."

I pointed to the plots that needed to be turned and what beds should have the winter debris cleared. We reached the backyard.

Rachel sat on the back steps holding a cigarette. "Sorry I missed you earlier." A lazy smile crossed her face. "Was it important?"

I waved away a cloud of smoke. "Just a coffee klatch. Rachel, this is Maria Prescott. She lives next door."

"Does the gorgeous man with the beard belong to you?" As she rose she pulled her robe close.

"Paul. He is my husband."

"Just as I came out for a smoke he entered the house."

"I go now." Maria's eyes glowed with happiness. "I am happy to meet you. I will see you again. Paul is waiting." She ran across the lawn.

Rachel's smile faded. "Some people are lucky. It's not fair." She rose.

"Life seldom is."

"Unless we make it the way we want." The door closed behind her.

I hobbled to the front door and went upstairs. After eating the light lunch Bessie had left for me, I went to the bedroom and to my own bed and took a nap. I had just risen and made a pot of tea when Larry and Jamal arrived for their assignments. "Maria will do the inspection."

"We'll do a good job." They clattered down the stairs.

The apartment seemed stuffy. I carried a thermos of tea downstairs and sat on the porch. If I couldn't work, I could watch. Tim started toward the boys. He tossed a ball into the air and missed the catch. The baseball landed in one of the mint beds. He plunged after it.

"Watch where you're going," Larry yelled. "Those are Mrs. Miller's plants."

Tim halted with one foot in the bed. "Look like weeds."

"Mint," Jamal said. "There are lots of kinds. Mrs. Miller dries the leaves for tea and other things like cookies and cakes."

"Want to play catch?" Tim asked.

"Maybe when we're finished unless Mom has a job for us," Larry said.

"She pay you?" Tim turned and pointed to my window. "If the money's good I'll take the job."

"No pay," Jamal said.

"Mom won't let us take money from a neighbor."

"You two are sure dumb. Why not charge her and forget to tell your mother? That's what I would do."

"Our mom would learn," Jamal said.

"Ask for a tip. My mother says the bigger the tip, the better service she gives. Last night Mr. Thomas gave her fifty dollars."

Susie dashed from the back door. "Can I play?"

"We don't want no girls," Tim said. "Aren't you supposed to help Uncle Willie with supper?"

"Already have. Why can't I play?"

"I don't mind," Jamal said.

"Me either," Larry added.

"Well, I do and it was my idea and my ball." Tim pushed Susie.

Maria stepped over the low picket fence between the two yards. "I see you have finish the work for this day. A good job. What names have your friends?"

"I'm Susie and he's my brother, Tim. We live here now."

"And I hear the boys want to play without the girl. Now they do but when they have grown they will follow you." She held out her hand. "Ask your madre if you can take the walk with Maria."

Susie ran off.

"We would let her play," Jamal said.

"Are you going to the shop?" Larry asked.

"Not this day. Until Susie come every day I see the boys. I need to learn the girl neighbor. Tomorrow we can go to the shop."

Susie returned. "I can go."

Maria waved to the boys. "We bring the surprise. Tomorrow Paul will have the wood for the house in the tree, but only if you permit Susie to play."

"Promise," Larry and Jamal said.

Tim watched Maria and Susie walk away. "She sure talks funny. She some kind of dumb foreigner?"

"She's Maria and she's wonderful," Larry said.

I finished the tea and went upstairs.

* * * * *

April arrived and moved toward May. Occasional discordant notes sounded on the bass line underlying the neighborhood harmony. Though I hadn't yet isolated the source of the sour notes I had my suspicions as to the source.

As the weather warmed I had Mr. Hinch remove the storm windows. I left the windows open. Most nights at some tome between two and four the slam of a car door and voices woke me. Rachel and some man, usually Ted, argued about his

spending the night. Sometimes the car erupted from the curb and shot down the street. At other times the car left around my usual waking time.

Rachel's promiscuity troubled Sarah. A pinch of envy of Rachel's freedom and a cup of concern for the children brought negative comments. Sarah believed a proper mother should put her life on hold until her children were grown. Rachel was young. I saw no reason she should cut herself from male companionship. When Andrew was still living at home I dated, but I never brought a man to spend the night.

Thoughts of Andrew made me shake my head. His discontent and restlessness reminded me of the tremors preceding an earthquake. Though puzzled, Ruth accepted his behavior. Sundays at their house became a challenge. My questions went unanswered. I didn't push. Perhaps I feared the answers.

On the last Sunday in April when Andrew drove me home he leaned forward in the seat as though urging the car to a greater speed. He pulled into the driveway. Rachel lounged on one of the wicker chairs. This time her slacks were black and the blouse blood red. In costume I decided. Andrew and I reached the porch.

Rachel raised her hand. Her eyes glided over Andrew. "Lovely weather." Her tongue caressed her lower lip.

Andrew leaned against the porch railing. "They're predicting rain for tomorrow."

"Then don't be upset if I'm late for my appointment. Cabs are so expensive."

"No problem. I've nothing scheduled after you until two."

"That's good." She undulated from the chair. The deep vee of her blouse parted and exposed her breasts.

Andrew sucked in a deep breath. My hands tightened on the cane. The mother in me thought of a dozen warnings but he wasn't a child. He made his own decisions. I hoped his habit of examining the possibilities three times would keep him from grabbing the bait she dangled. Though the encounter played like a friendly flirtation, somehow, I knew she was serious.

* * * * *

The cast came off the first week in May. Maria was attending a jewelry show in the city. Sarah had no sitter and Ruth was home room mother for Andrea's field trip. Andrew took time from his office schedule to accompany me.

As I left the doctor's office I felt as though a part of me had gone missing. Before I adjusted to walking with a reduced weight on one leg I nearly landed on my face.

Andrew chuckled. "First time I've seen anyone run on crutches."

"I'm sure it's been done before. I must find another cane so I can resume my morning walks."

"Don't push yourself. You've no need to rush into anything."

"I never have. Rushing rings regret. Look at most of your friends. Jump into marriage. Run for a divorce. Leap into a second marriage."

Andrew held the car door. "Life doesn't always leave time for introspection. Some opportunities vanish if you wait too long."

He'd never talked this way before. What was he trying to say? "If something evaporates that quickly, it's not worthwhile."

For several minutes he concentrated on driving and avoiding the mini-rush of lunch hour traffic. "Have you given any thoughts to selling the house and moving to an apartment? There are a number of senior complexes."

What had brought this on? "When I'm too infirm to climb the stairs I'll move to the first floor. I'd hate an apartment with paper-thin walls and the presence of strangers who want to remain anonymous."

"What about a house in a retirement community?"

"A jail with the inmates hidden from their families. Where did this idea come from?"

He shrugged. "Before he left, Lars and I talked about his place in New Mexico. You might like to live near him."

"I've no desire to live across the country. His daughter and one of his sons lives there, the other two are here. That's why he divides his time. Do you want to get rid of me?"

He grinned. "No chance of that. You're like a mother bear protecting your cubs. The house is your lair. The neighborhood the cubs. I just worry about you living alone."

"Don't. Lord knows I'm old enough to care for myself. I've been doing that for years." I leaned back. He loves me. He cares about my safety. Why did I think there was another reason for his suggestion and he was hiding something he didn't want me to know?"

The moment the car pulled into the driveway, Rachel appeared on the porch. I left the car and walked toward the house. Her hot pink shorts barely covered her rear and the matching tee shirt left little to the imagination. "Mrs. Miller, we have a problem. There's a leak from your apartment into mine."

Andrew strode up the porch steps. "I'll check it out, Mom."

"That would be terrific," Rachel said. "I hate putting your mother to trouble." She smiled and turned away.

"Don't you have office hours?" I asked.

He checked his watch. "In an hour. Go ahead up. I'll let you know if there's a bad problem."

Instead of following, I sat on the chaise. My leg throbbed. I elevated it on a pillow. Andrew and Rachel entered the house.

Twenty minutes later he returned. I carefully examined his face, his posture and his clothes. What I had expected to find wasn't evident yet. I felt no relief. "There's a small leak. Two ceiling tiles in her bathroom are stained. I called a plumber. He'll be here within the hour."

For two seconds I felt guilty about my suspicions but a glimpse of Rachel's smug smile brought the suspicions back. "I'll wait down here."

Andrew kissed my cheek. "Let me know what he says."

"Thanks." Rachel sauntered past him. Her erect nipples showed through her tight top. She sat on the porch rail with one leg stretched on the surface and the other bent.

"No problem." Andrew hurried to his car.

Rachel uncoiled from the railing and sat on one of the chairs. "You're a lucky woman. I hope Tim grows up to be a thoughtful man."

"Training and observation. My husband was a thoughtful man."

She sighed. "Raising a son when there's no man around is so hard." She lit a cigarette and inhaled. "I shouldn't cry about a marriage I'm better out of. Steve was a possessive and controlling man. Even hid my shoes once. His jealousy turned him nasty."

"Did he hurt the children?"

Smoke trickled from her nostrils. "He was an okay father. Strict but not mean." She leaned back. "Thought I was getting a bargain. He was an auto mechanic. Owned his own shop specializing in antique and foreign cars. Had no family. Thought having no in-laws would be great. He never gave me a cent. Even paid for the groceries."

"That must have been frustrating."

"You don't know the half." She ground the cigarette on the porch floor. "He has what he wants now. An adoring wife who slobbers over him. He gives her anything she wants. Doesn't care that he's behind on child support. She has other uses for the money. Even offered to take the kids and then dumped them in that school. I'd be crazy to let him do that again. Sporadic child support is better than nothing."

Had her husband's jealousy or her unwillingness to be tied to one man caused the failure of the marriage? "Can't he be forced to make the payments?"

"Ted's helping with that. Steve paid a pretty penny for the kids to be in that dumb school. He can damn well give me the same amount. He fusses about my not being home with the kids at night. Doesn't understand I have to work. Let him live on what he gives me. He won't even buy beds for the kids."

"Maybe I can help you. There's a set of bunk beds in the attic. I think there's a desk, too."

Her eyes narrowed. "How much?"

"A gift."

"You're crazy but I won't say no. I'll send Uncle Willie up for them when he gets home." She paused at the door. "If he can stand. He drinks. Wish he wouldn't since his pension is the only steady income coming into the house, unless you count what I have left after I buy the things I need for work."

Though I didn't condone his drinking, I disliked her belief that she had a right to his money. "Aren't your tips good?"

"Not lately. The economy, you know." She paused. "Thanks for your offer of the beds."

"Hey, partner," Paul called. "Cast is gone. Congrats."

I waved to him. "Just canes from now on."

"I'll bring you several from the shop. Clever ones with secret compartments."

"Great."

"He's going to be disappointed," Rachel said. "His wife left on the city bus this morning."

"He knows. She has a jewelry show."

"God, he's such a beautiful man." She left the doorway, dashed off the porch and walked to the side yard.

I walked upstairs. In the kitchen, I stood at the butcher's block table in the alcove. The window there overlooks the backyard. As I reached for the casserole Bessie had left for my lunch I saw Rachel and Paul. He stooped to examine the

picket fence. She stood so close that when he rose, he brushed against her. He stepped away and walked to his house.

I frowned. First Andrew and now Paul. How many men did she need? This time her choice was faulty. Paul was so in love with Maria he would never touch another woman. I turned from the window and ate without tasting the food.

After lunch I played the piano. For an hour I stroked the keys and send music flowing. When I finished, the uneasy sense of being swept into a whirlpool vanished. I went down to the porch so I could give my yard workers their orders.

Soon after the school bus left the dozen grade school children off at the corner, Willie Hinch and Susie arrived. "Where's Tim?" the old man asked. "Three would make lighter work."

Susie shrugged. "He has plans with his friends." Susie's lower lip quivered. "We were going to work on the tree house today."

"You can go," Willie said.

She shook her head. "Mommy told me to help you. He'll tell her if I don't."

I handed Willie the key to the attic. "Susie, when you're finished why don't you come up for your first piano lesson?"

A smile animated her entire body. "I'll ask Mommy. How much will it cost?"

"A smile. A thank you. And ask your mother if you can come to dinner Friday night. My granddaughter will be here. Andrea always complains that there are too many boys around here. Would you like me to speak to your mother?"

"I'll do it," Willie said.

For the next hour I heard the pair making trips up and down the stairs. Willie knocked on the door and handed me the attic keys. "That was a nice thing you did for Susie. She has few pleasures. Rachel doesn't think Susie suffers. She thinks only Tim does because his father ignores him. Says Steve always favored Susie so she has to do for Tim."

* * * * *

On Friday morning I repeated the conversation to Sarah. She shook her head. "Please. I don't see the boy receiving special treatment. The only one in that family who gets anything is Rachel."

"Wrong. Tim doesn't have to help around the house. He always has money to run to the deli. Susie spends most of her free time doing housework."

Sarah turned to look at me. "That's not fair. What's wrong with that woman?"

Children are important to Sarah. I think she would go in rags to see her children have the things they need.

"Rachel is selfish and greedy. I wish I'd told Andrew no when he said he'd found a tenant. The day my cast came off she tried to seduce Andrew and Paul."

"That's pushing her luck."

"I'm not so sure."

Her eyes widened. "Which one?"

"Maybe both."

"Can't you get rid of her?"

"The lease is for a year and she hasn't broken the terms." I frowned. Ted hadn't returned the copy with the changes I'd made. A phone call was in order.

"Isn't having her uncle there a breach?"

“Would you have her leave the children alone at night?”

Sarah shook her head. “Does she really believe Paul or Andrew would accept her invitation? Paul is totally in love with Maria. Andrew would never do anything that might be considered fun.”

“They’re men. They respond to her.”

Sarah sighed. “Those poor kids. No wonder Tim’s so greedy. He always takes the biggest piece of cake on the plate.”

I looked up. “If you think he’s deprived, you’re wrong. He believes the biggest piece is his by right. I’ve heard him bossing Susie.”

“What can we do?”

“At present very little. I’m giving Susie piano lessons.”

Sarah sniffed. “I’m insulted. You wouldn’t teach the boys.”

“Who had no desire to learn. Susie composes her own pieces. Rachel lets her come up so she doesn’t interfere with the boys. Tim says she bothers them. Rachel doesn’t think girls should play with boys.”

Sarah walked me to the door. “I’ll find a way to protect those children.”

“Good luck.”

As I crossed the street, Pete Duggan jogged toward me. His navy headband matched his sweat suit and made his hair seem a brighter red. He ran past me.

“Am I a stranger?” I asked.

He turned. “Just lost in thought.”

“A complicated case?”

“You have no interest in crime, remember.” He laughed. “Woman trouble.”

“Oh.” For six months I’d seen the same car parked in the driveway of the house that had been his parents. The same leggy brunette had spent time in the yard. “Are you crushed?”

“Nah. She wanted more than I’m ready to give. Just takes a bit of time to get used to an empty house.”

“Get a pet.”

“With my hours?”

“How about some mint tea and sympathy?”

He groaned. “Sympathy. More like a lecture on settling down. The tea sounds great and if there are cookies, I’ll be your slave.”

I laughed. “Cookies. No lectures. How often have I done that?”

“Not as often these days. I’m just restless today.”

We walked into the house. “Must be something in the air. Do you suppose there’s a pollen of discontent floating around?”

“I hope not.”

The moment we reached the porch, Rachel strolled from the house. Did she have some super radar in her head that sensed the approach of a male within a hundred yards? “Pete, Rachel Rodgers, my tenant. Pete is our resident police officer.”

“Hello.” Her greeting screamed with interest.

“Hi.” Pete took my arm. “Didn’t you promise me tea and cookies? Mrs. Miller makes killer chocolate chip ones.”

Rachel frowned. “Don’t let me keep a man from his pleasure.” Her gaze traveled over his body.

“Never happen.” Pete opened the door.

As we walked upstairs puzzlement needled me. Though Pete had an eye for women he had ignored Rachel, something no other man had. “No vibes toward my tenant?” I asked as I brewed the tea.

He shrugged. “She’s plastic.”

“Funny, a lot of men find her beautiful.”

“She is that but artificial.” He straddled a chair. “What are you up to these days? Ready to resume your morning walks?”

“Not yet.”

“How’s Andrea?”

“She’s coming to spend the night.”

He rested his arms on the back of the chair. “Maybe I’ll wait until she grows up.”

“I never thought you were a patient man.”

We drank mint tea and he enjoyed some chocolate chip mint cookies. Pete rose. “Got to go. Evening shift this weekend. See you.”

At four Ruth dropped Andrea off. Susie arrived at four thirty. The girls took to each other. They shared giggles, hatched plans and told secrets. Watching Susie’s eyes light with pleasure brought me delight. She left at nine and returned for breakfast. The sound of the girl’s laughter made me smile.

When Andrew arrived for Andrea, the girls parted with promises to call each other every day. Susie stood on the edge of the porch and waved long after the car vanished.

“Susie.” Rachel’s strident call caused the child to stiffen. “Has your fancy friend left?”

“Yes, Mommy.”

“Then get your butt in here. Just because I let you play with her doesn’t mean you get off free. The kitchen’s a mess. You have the ironing to finish. Do my yellow blouse first and if you scorch it, you’ll feel my fist.”

I stiffened. Did Rachel abuse the child?

Susie’s eyes filled with tears. Her shoulders hunched as if in anticipation of a blow. She moved closer to me. “Don’t ever let her know you heard,” she whispered. “She’ll do something mean to you.”

I grasped the porch railing. Abuse or only a threat?

Chapter 4

On Sunday when Andrew brought me home, Rachel wasn’t on the porch. The tightness vanished from my chest. As usual Andrew walked me upstairs. Just inside the door, I stopped short. One of the kitchen windows had been broken. Glass shards glistened on the dark linoleum. A baseball lay beneath the kitchen table. I reached for the broom and dustpan.

“Do you still keep old cardboard boxes in the attic?” Andrew asked.

“Yes.” I swept shards into the pan. Andrew took the keys from the hook beside the door and headed for the attic.

"I want my ball."

I turned. Tim stood in the doorway.

"What are you going to do about the window?"

"Nothing. It's yours."

"Then I'll keep the ball."

He curled his hands into fists and started toward me. Andrew started downstairs. Tim turned and ran.

My son rounded the corner with a large box in his hands. He sat at the kitchen table and cut a price big enough to cover the window. "This will keep the wasps out. There's a nest under the eaves. Who took down the storm windows?"

"Rachel's uncle. You know he walked in here as bold as brass and demanded his baseball."

"Mr. Hinch?"

"Tim. This is the second time he's done that. I need to talk to his mother about his behavior."

"Mom, he's a child."

"A very rude one. He's the same age as Larry and Jamal. They've never barged in."

Andrew shook his head. "You're making too much of this."

While Andrew worked on the window, I finished cleaning the glass, fed Robespierre and put a kettle on to heat water for tea. Was Andrew right? Did my dislike of the boy color my view of his behavior?

A tap sounded at the door. When I opened it, Rachel stood on the landing. "I want my son's baseball." Her voice was strident and threatening. "What right have you to keep it? Let me tell you this. I don't take this kind of treatment from anyone." Her eyes darkened until they resembled gray slate.

"Perhaps you'd like to come in and discuss your son's rudeness." I opened the door wide enough for her to see Andrew.

A smile removed the anger from all but her eyes. "Tim feels dreadful about the window. That black kid's fault. He threw the ball too high for Tim to catch it."

"Really." Disbelief filled my voice. "If Jamal was responsible he would come and tell me."

"Tim's just a child. He's afraid of you." She sighed. "He's never been around older women."

Andrew turned. "Rachel, hi. Mom, are you going to let her stand in the hall?"

I wanted to push her down the stairs and out of my house. If Andrew hadn't been here, what would she have said or done?

"I'm not exactly dressed for visiting." She held an aqua robe closed with one hand. A cigarette dangled from the other. "Tim was so upset about the broken window that I jumped out of the shower and came right up."

Andrew grinned. "You look fine."

Was this my son? Smoke spiraled toward the ceiling. I placed a saucer on the table and put the baseball beside it. "I kept this because of his attitude. He walked in. Didn't knock. Demanded his property."

Rachel laughed. Her robe parted to reveal the curve of one breast. "If that's what he did, I apologize. You know how excitable boys can be." She stabbed the

cigarette in the saucer and picked up the baseball. As she turned to leave, her robe opened and exposed her legs completely.

As soon as she started down the stairs, I faced my son. "He didn't knock and he was deliberately rude."

The glazed expression faded from Andrew's face. "Mom, there are things I can't tell you. Rachel's had a hard life and she's struggling to keep her children."

I touched his hand. "Don't."

"What are you talking about?" He kissed my cheek. "I'll call you during the week."

I filled a tea ball with a blend of pekoe and mints and hung it over the side of my favorite pottery teapot. The encounter with Tim and Rachel had left me with an uneasiness the tea would soothe. I carried a mug to the living room and returned for the pot. As I sat in the window seat Andrew's car backed out of the driveway. I rubbed my hands along my arms. He had no defense against a woman like Rachel.

* * * * *

That night Rachel's strident voice woke me. I went to the window. She stood on the walk at the foot of the porch steps. Ted's car was at the curb. "Ted Thomas, you don't own me. There's no ring on my finger."

"Honey, calm down. You know I'd do just about anything for you."

"Then get off my back. He likes me. Just last week you laughed over the way he drooled."

"He's my friend and married to a nice lady. Don't toy with him."

"Who says I am?"

He put his hands on her shoulders. "You're not happy unless every make over the age of sixteen is sniffing around you. One of these days you're going to get hurt." He strode to the car and sped away. Moments later the downstairs door slammed. Returning to sleep was difficult.

* * * * *

Willie Hinch arrived the next morning at nine. He measured the window and left. An hour later he returned with a piece of glass. Was Rachel responsible or had Andrew provided the money? Though I had planned to have coffee with Sarah and Maria, I called to cancel.

While I worked I sat at the kitchen table and mixed a batch of ginger cookies. Willie kept up a steady monologue. "Your son is a fine man. Treats me like a person. That's more than some of Rachel's friends do." He must have seen the distress on my face. "I'm not sayin' he and Rachel are really friends, though. I sure wish she'd find a man like him."

He removed the cardboard from the window. "You should have seen her as a child. All golden and sunshine. Boys always liked her. Never had many girl friends." He turned. "Could you hold the glass while I set the brackets?"

"No problem."

His monologue began. "Steve should've given her what she wanted, nice clothes, jewelry, the things a beautiful woman needs. For awhile he did. Then Susie come. He paid the baby more attention that he did my Rachel. She cried but he made her stay home. Wouldn't let me watch the baby so Rachel could go places."

"So she was bored."

He nodded. "Got worse after Tim came. One night Steve worked late for a special customer. I watched the babies while she went dancin'. Weren't doin' nothin' wrong. Just wanted to be where there was people and music. When she come home he'd thrown all her shoes in the garbage."

"Couldn't she talk to him about her needs?" I wasn't sure why I asked. Perhaps I hoped to hear something damaging.

"Called her a flirt. He started drinkin' with his buddies. She had to stay home. Wasn't fair. Her friends come to the house. He didn't like that either. Once the kids was in school she found a job. He kicked her out and put the kids in boarding school. Rachel has to fight every month for the support money. Asked her Uncle Willie to live with her. I owed her so I come."

He stepped back and reached for the calking. I went to the oven and removed the last tray of cookies. "Does her ex-husband ever see the children?"

"Don't want to be bothered. Got a new wife. Heard she's expectin'." He turned to me. Sadness filled his pale blue eyes. "Sure wish Rachel could find a good man. You should have seen her as a child, all golden and sunshine."

I tuned him out and left the kitchen. Was his recitation the way the affair had happened? Hadn't I heard he and his wife had raised Rachel after her parents' death? What did he owe her?

* * * * *

Every Memorial Day Sarah holds a neighborhood cook-out. The Randals provide the hot dogs, hamburgers, sodas and beer. The neighbors bring dishes. Generally eight or ten families participate.

Larry and Jamal arrived to carry the potato salad and the chocolate cake across the street. Though I had graduated to a cane, I crept when I wanted to run. Plus, every time it rains I know hours before the storm begins.

Susie leaned against the porch railing and stared across the street. Tim ran ahead of Larry and Jamal.

"Thanks for waiting," I said.

Tears filled her eyes. "I'm not going. Tim told Mommy I wasn't invited. She said that was good since you and Maria do too many things for me and nobody does anything for Tim. She said it's time I learned how it feels to be left out."

My hand tightened on the cane. I wanted to rap Tim on the head. "He lied. The party is for everyone. I'll tell her."

"She isn't home."

"Then I'll tell your uncle."

She shook her head. "She'll be mad if I go."

I carried my anger across the street. I decided to speak to Tim and tell him what I thought about liars. When I reached the backyard, Maria waved.

"You look good with the cane. Soon your leg will heal. Where is Susie? Paul and I thought she wait for you."

"Tim told Rachel she wasn't invited."

Maria frowned. "I have tell him to be nice to his sister. Sometimes he is mean. I tell him he cannot be my friend if he act like this." She looked around. Tim stood with Larry and Jamal near the tree house. "Tim, come to me," she called.

Sarah kissed my cheek. "Jamal's watching the cake. He wants the first piece."

Tim swaggered toward us. He stopped beside Maria. She put her hand on his shoulder. "Why did you tell your madre Susie was not invited for the party for all?"

Tim stared at the ground. "Susie lied. Mommy punished her. She lies and steals. Remember when Mommy brought back the earrings Susie stole."

"That is the lie. I saw your hands take them. When your madre bring them to Maria, I do not tell her the truth. I think you should do that. Go home and tell your madre the party is for all."

"Mommy's not home. She went to a party with Mr. Thomas."

Sarah straightened. "I thought your sister was spending the day with your father."

"She musta come home early." He ran off.

Sarah put her hands on her ample hips. "I won't have that child feeling sorry for herself."

Twenty minutes later she returned with Susie and Willie Hinch. Susie looked scared. The smirk on Tim's face brought back my desire to smack him with my cane.

"Wait 'til I tell Mommy."

"I'll handle this." Willie patted Susie's hand.

By the end of the evening I wasn't sure Willie could handle anything. After he'd drunk half a dozen beers I stopped counting. At ten o'clock I crossed the street with Susie and Tim. Willie shambled after us.

I fell asleep in the living room while watching the late news. At two I roused and headed to the bedroom. The sound of Rachel's voice drew me to the open window.

"You're drunk. If Steve hears about this and makes trouble I'll fix you. Where'd you get the money? Thought you were broke until your check comes."

"Cross the street at the party. Tim lied. Everyone was invited."

"You let Susie go?"

"Why not?"

"I said she couldn't. The witch upstairs does plenty for the brat. Susie's a turkey. Don't know why I got stuck with such an ugly kid. Tim's my angel. Don't like people who aren't nice to him. Susie will learn."

"Rachel, honey, don't go makin' trouble."

"Her son's ripe, you know." She laughed. "Ted bet me a grand I couldn't hook Andrew. I'll do more than that."

"He's married."

"When did that ever stop me? God, you smell like a brewery. Sleep out here tonight."

"Rachel."

The door slammed. I sat on the edge of the bed. She's evil. Something had to be done before she destroyed my family and her own daughter. Unfortunately, I had no idea of how to act.

* * * * *

June arrived. With the warmer weather I spent more time on the porch and in the garden. Since the incident with Tim's baseball and what I'd heard on Memorial Day, my relationship with Rachel had deteriorated. She appeared to sense my

growing dislike and when we met, she never spoke, only glared. Her ice-filled stares chilled me.

Susie told me what had happened. Rachel had lost her job but that didn't change her nocturnal habits.

One afternoon, I sat on a lawn chair and enjoyed the sun and the cool breeze. Rachel sauntered to the edge of the porch and leaned against the railing. Bees drifted around the newly opened red and white climbing roses. The sweet scent filled the air.

"Do you have to entertain those noisy brats so early in the morning?" Her husky voice was as strident as when she spoke to Susie. "I need my rest."

This morning Sarah and Maria had joined me for coffee on the porch. Becca and the twins had played quietly. "We were here after ten and the children were quiet."

"A lot you know." She lit a cigarette and blew a cloud of smoke toward me. "I called your son's office to complain."

"Why?"

"He should know what I have to put up with. His stupid secretary refused to put me through."

"Rightly so. Interrupting a therapy session for idle chatter isn't done." If she had been working we would have met at Sarah's or Maria. I reached for my cane. The marble head made her threatening stance less menacing. "Why call Andrew? You're the first tenant to complain. This is my house and if I want to have a ten piece band on the porch every morning, I can."

"Who cares about the other people who rented here? You have no right to make noise when you know how late I work."

"Are you working again?" Unable to resist a dig, I smiled. "I heard Tim telling the boys you lost your job."

"That doesn't mean I can't go out." She ground the cigarette on the porch rail and flicked the butt into the garden. "Don't look down your nose at me. I have the right to live my life the way I please."

"I never said you didn't." I walked to the door. "So do I."

Her hands rested on her hips. "Get real. Tenants have rights. I signed my lease with your son and that makes him my landlord. The next time Ted and I are with Andrew I'll let him know how I'm being treated."

"Check your copy of the lease. You won't find Andrew's signature." My cane thumped on the steps.

She laughed. "You're old and crippled. Could be committed or something. Andrew worries about you living alone. He could act for your safety and send you to a nursing home. What if you fall again?"

"Are you threatening me?"

She turned. "Never, but kids can be careless with their toys. One left on the steps and you fall. Just remember I need to sleep mornings and we'll get along fine."

I grasped the banister and walked upstairs. My hands shook. She had threatened me and I had no plans for dealing with her. Once inside the apartment I sank on a kitchen chair. Time for mint tea. I selected a blend with a touch of chamomile.

A half hour later, Susie arrived for her piano lesson. Before going to the instrument she knelt on the Aubusson rug beside Robespierre and scratched his head. "Uncle Willie isn't home. Mommy's mad. I'm worried something bad happened to him."

"Like what?"

"He's sick, you know. He and Mommy had a fight last night and she... she..."

She jumped up and ran to the piano. Angry chords rang out. The discordant jangle continued for a time. Finally she gulped a breath and began to play the piece I'd taught her last week. Though she had missed her daily practice sessions, she made only two mistakes. We spent a few minutes on note reading. Someone pounded on the door. Susie ran to answer.

"You've been goofing off long enough." Rachel's voice had the same effect on me as bone grating on bone. "Get home and make supper for Tim. He's hungry."

Susie fled down the steps with a swiftness of a bird's shadow across the grass. "Thanks for the lesson," she called.

Rachel glared. "She can't be hanging around up here when I need her at home. Bastard. I bet he's out drinking his pension check."

How would she feel if her uncle had been hurt? Angry and resentful since he wasn't around to serve her was my take. Rachel was a spoiled brat who thought everyone should be her puppet. As I stood in the open doorway staring at her retreat, depression darkened my spirits.

* * * * *

After the eleven o'clock news I walked to the bedroom. A light breeze stirred the pale green curtains and brought the sound of someone singing. I walked to the window. Willie Hinch staggered toward the house. With each step his voice grew louder.

"About time you showed up." Rachel's shrill scream grated. "I called off a special date. What the hell do you think you're pulling?"

"A man... has a right... to enjoy... the company... of friends."

"You're no man. You're a lush."

"Don't hit me, sweet Rachel. You always were a beautiful child. Pretty Rachel. Uncle Willie will make it up to you. You're not nice to me. Used to hug and kiss your old uncle so he'd do what you wanted him to do."

"You make me sick. I put up with you for the kids' sake. After tonight's binge how much of your pension is left?"

"Didn't hardly spend a cent. I have friends. Tonight they bought me drinks because I was hurtin'. You know what the doctor said."

I heard what sounded like a slap. "That's another of your lies."

"Mommy, what's wrong?" Susie called.

"Shut up, brat."

The door slammed. Muffled shouts from the apartment downstairs troubled me.

* * * * *

All the next week Susie failed to come for her practice sessions. The school year was coming to an end. Perhaps summer would give the child some free time. Was Rachel punishing Susie for disobedience or for not fitting Rachel's idea of the perfect daughter? If I tried to interfere would the treatment worsen?

On Friday Paul and Maria invited me to dinner. At six I made my way downstairs. Susie was huddled on one of the porch chairs.

"I've missed you."

She sniffed. "I was bad." She kept her face hidden.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Come when you can."

She lifted her head. A dark bruise stained her cheek near her right eye. "What happened? Who did this to you?" I swallowed a rush of acid and decided to call Child Protective Services in the morning.

"Tim was horsing around with his Frisbee."

What she said sounded plausible but I didn't believe her. "What did your teacher say?"

Teachers and medical personnel are required to report suspected instances of child abuse. I'd been a nurse for too long to ignore the signs.

"She talked to Tim and told him to be more careful."

I patted her hand. "I hope he learns." I left the porch and walked across the lawn. Was that story true? If I called would the truth be learned?

Maria met me at the door. Her dark eyes glowed. "I am so happy you have come for the dinner. Paul will give you the wine. I do not drink for I have a miracle to tell. I am with child."

I kissed her cheek. "Wonderful. When?"

"He will be a Christmas baby. For the Navidad. I have hoped and prayed but I say nothing until I am sure. Mrs. Sarah know. She take me to the doctor."

Paul presented me with a glass of white wine. The look he gave Maria made my heart leap. I'm a pushover for romance. I cry at happy endings at the movies and in books. "To Maria and the baby." We touched glasses and drank.

"Come and sit. You should not stand on your leg so long," Maria said.

I walked to the oak couch where bright embroidered cushions padded the seat and back. Maria had blended her Spanish heritage with Paul's love of oak. He remained beside the antique oak icebox he'd converted into a bar. "How do you feel about becoming a father?"

"Stunned. Excited. Scared. Happy."

Maria laughed. "Now I ruin the English again. I am so full in my heart for everyone. Later you and Paul can talk of the business. The report is good. I have more happiness. A rich woman gave me a commission for the emerald necklace. The happiness is too much."

"There can never be too much," I said.

After dinner over coffee Paul and I discussed my investment. I accepted a large check for my share of the profits. With the money I decided to do something nice for Susie.

I reached my apartment in time for the late news. When the broadcast ended I was too excited for the Prescotts to sleep. I selected a mixture of calming mints and brewed a pot of tea. I carried a full mug to the window seat. Perhaps the effect of the tea is psychological but whatever works is good. I stared at the street and listened to the gentle rustle of the leaves on the trees.

A car door slammed. My mug tipped, pouring tea over my skirt. Andrew got out of his car and walked around to help Rachel from the passenger's seat. She moved

into his arms and pulled his face to hers. His hands moved over her body. She broke free and ran to the house. My son stood on the curb.

Fool. How could he? The urge to run downstairs and shake him overwhelmed me. What would that action accomplish other than precipitate words we both would regret? My son was an adult. I hoped he would realize his mistake. Tears filled my eyes. How could he risk what he had for a woman like Rachel?

Chapter 5

On Monday shortly after the bus left the children off, a shouting match began. Tim and Jamal stood outside the Randals' house. They faced each other. I hobbled to the curb.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," Tim shouted. "You lost my baseball on purpose."

"Did not. You threw it over my head."

Tim threw his glove on the ground and swung his fist. "You're dumb. Mommy says that's what you are. Dumb and dirty. She don't want me playing with you and you're not allowed to come near my house."

"Take that back." Jamal raised his hand to ward off Tim's flying fists.

"Chicken, chicken, chicken. Won't even fight back. But I know why. Your kind goes to jail if they hit a white boy."

Sarah stormed out of the house. I wish she hadn't and I wish Jamal had fought back. Tim was a bully and bullies back off when confronted.

"Jamal, in the house right now." Sarah faced Tim. "As for you, young man, I don't like name-calling or fighting. Keep that kind of behavior on your own side of the street." She wheeled and marched into the house.

Tim ran across the street and stormed past me into the house. Several minutes later Rachel followed him down the walk. "Don't let her bother you. You have a right to find your baseball and if you teased her brat, so what. If she tries to stop you I'll knock the shit out of her. Maybe you'll learn to stick to your own kind."

While Tim searched the bushes Rachel strode onto Sarah's porch and pounded on the door. Sarah appeared and the two women seemed to be arguing. Tim picked up something and ran across the street. Rachel wheeled and left.

A few minutes later my cell phone rang. For several minutes Sarah's hysterical voice filled my ears. "I'll kill her. She threatened my boys. Who does she think she is?" Words spilled over each other. She finally ran down.

"What did she say?"

"I'm so angry I'm shaking." Tears filled her voice. "Jamal and Tim were playing catch. When Jamal missed, instead of looking for the baseball Tim attacked Jamal with words and his fists. You know how I feel about that kind of behavior."

"I saw most of the event. What happened when she came to the door?"

Sarah released an angry sigh. "She pounded. When I answered she spewed a stream of filth ending with, 'This is a free country and I have my rights.'"

I shook my head. In Rachel's opinion her rights were supreme.

"Then she said, 'My son can go where he pleases. If you ever yell at him again you'll find yourself a bloody mess. If I find that kid on my property, I'll kill him.'"

When had my house become hers?

Sarah cleared her throat. "When I reminded her she was only a tenant, she laughed. 'You'll see. The witch won't live forever. As for you, you're nothing but a flaming liberal fat-assed bitch.'"

"Oh dear."

"I snapped," Sarah said. "Takes one to know one. Everyone in the neighborhood knows you sleep around for money." She laughed. "If you weren't married what man would enjoy your flabby body? My son's white and his rights come first."

"Did she really say that?"

Sarah paused. "She did. I think it best if Jamal and Larry stay over here until the situation calms. Larry will bring the Sunday paper. She's never up that early."

"You're right but there has to be a better solution."

"Short of moving, I'm stumped," she said. "I wonder why she'd grown so bold about your house."

I didn't respond to her curiosity. I couldn't without telling her about Rachel and Andrew. My usually level-headed son was acting out of character. I prayed while he and Ruth were away on their anniversary trip he would emerge from his dream world. Then we could discuss my unwanted tenant.

* * * * *

By Friday the weather had become hot and muggy. I feared I would soon be growing mold. After coffee at Sarah's, Maria and I crossed the street. Since the quarrel with Rachel, Sarah refused to let the boys work in the garden. I needed to ask Willie about the lawn.

When I reached the backyard Rachel came out of the house carrying a blanket. "It's a beautiful day for sunning." She smiled and there was none of the usual smugness on her face. "You don't mind, do you?"

Why was she being so nice? "The backyard is the perfect place and sheltered from the street."

She spread the dark green blanket on the ground. "Would you like me to get you a chair?"

Thoughts of spending a moment longer in her company made me nauseous. "I wanted to speak to your uncle about doing some yard work. It's time to begin picking and drying mint leaves for tea."

She frowned. "I thought tea came in boxes."

"I prefer to make my own blends. Andrew thinks I'm addicted to the calming effects."

"Maybe I'll try some." She took off her robe and stretched.

In that instant I understood my son's fascination. Her body was lush and her movements, even though I was her only audience, were erotic.

"The other night Ted and I ran into Andrew." Her smile reminded me of Robespierre when he polishes off the last bit of chocolate ice cream in my bowl. "I promised him I'd keep an eye on you." She lowered herself to the blanket.

"I'm sure he was pleased." Her words frightened me. Her earlier threat about the stairs lingered like an inky shadow. I turned and walked to the front of the house.

Upstairs I whipped up a casserole of leftovers and put them in the oven. I carried a mug of iced mint tea to the table in the alcove and planned dinner for the three friends who were coming this evening for dinner and bridge.

A light and welcome breeze stirred the air in the alcove. A scent of roses rode the air. I looked into the yard. Rachel had removed her bikini top. She lay on her back with one arm across her eyes. If I had been an artist I would have drawn sketch after sketch of golden Rachel on a deep green blanket against the lighter shade of the grass. She rolled to her stomach.

Paul strode up the walk to his house. Rachel leaned on one elbow. "Hey there, neighbor," she called.

I felt sure she'd raised her voice on purpose. Paul continued walking.

"Could you rub lotion on my back?"

I didn't hear his answer.

"What's the matter, handsome? Afraid of a little skin?"

Paul strode away.

"I'm not done with you," Rachel shouted.

Paul looked over his shoulder. This time I heard his response. "I'm not buying what you're selling. Stick to Ted Thomas and his ilk."

I continued to stare at Rachel. I didn't want her in my house. How, short of murder, could I get rid of her?

* * * * *

On Sunday Andrew waited for me at the curb in front of the church. Lars and I lingered on the steps speaking to Edward Potter. Once a date for bridge had been made we walked to the car. My son drummed his fingers on the steering wheel while I slid into the passenger's seat and accepted my cane from Lars. During the summer months Lars is a resident here. We have dinner at least once a week. "See you Wednesday."

"At six," Lars said.

"Hot date?" Andrew asked.

"Dinner and cards." When the car moved into the slow stream of traffic, I cleared my throat. "I'm looking for a way to break Rachel's lease."

"You can't."

"And just why not?"

"Ted drew up a tight lease. As long as there's no wanton destruction of property you have a tenant."

"What about destruction of people?" The words emerged stark and angry.

"What are you talking about?"

"I've never judged a person by their lifestyle before. You can't imagine the trouble she's caused in the neighborhood. She stays out until all hours. She neglects her children. She treats her daughter like a servant and probably abuses her. She called Sarah and the boys nasty names. She propositioned Paul. She threatened to hurt me."

Andrew's laughter sounded false. "Mom, don't be ridiculous. You've misjudged her. She has to work nights and her uncle watches the children. There are things you don't know and I really can't break her confidences. She's a... patient. Her life has been filled with tragedies. Her parents died and left her in care of two

alcoholics. Her daughter is emotionally disturbed. The child lies and steals. As for propositioning Paul, you have it backwards.”

I shook my head. “I know what I saw and heard.”

He pulled into the driveway. “What’s wrong with you? Rachel likes you. She worries. Just the other day she disciplined her daughter for leaving toys on the steps.”

I reached for the door. He was so enamored of Rachel’s plastic glitter he wouldn’t listen.

Andrew touched my arm. “Mom, she needs someone like you. You’re always helping people. Rachel’s insecure and unhappy. You could make a difference.”

He wasn’t speaking as a therapist but as an emotionally ensnared man. When I left the car Andrea ran across the lawn. I welcomed the diversion and her excited chatter.

* * * * *

The following Friday morning Ruth brought Andrea for the weekend. For a few minutes my granddaughter played with Robespierre. Then she ran downstairs to find Susie.

Ruth smiled. “She’s so much like you. Always looking out for those who have less than she does. While she packed she wished she was taller so she could give Susie some of her clothes.” She laughed. “Andrew’s like that, too. He nearly called off our trip because he has a patient in crisis. Three evenings this past week he’d returned to the office for an emergency session.”

Rachel’s name popped into my thoughts. “How do you feel about that? Do you ever worry about his female patients?”

“Andrew? He worries about all his patients.”

Did he? Was this another of her blind spots? “Tea?”

She waved away the offer. “I need to finish packing. He’ll be home at noon.” Her eyes shone with anticipation. “I’ve been planning this weekend for months. I’ve bought a new dress and a slinky nightgown. We’ve been lazy about our marriage lately.”

“I won’t laugh. I’ve done the same thing. Occasionally men need a jump start.” I studied her pencil-slim body. Could she compete with Rachel’s lush promise? Was Ruth aware she had competition? The thought of her behaving in a seductive manner to satisfy Andrew’s recent cravings seemed impossible.

“You’re right.” She sighed. “Deep inside Andrew’s a romantic but he bottles his emotions. Maybe the cork will pop this weekend.” She kissed my cheek. “See you Sunday evening. Don’t forget the party on the Fourth.”

“I won’t. Cake is in the freezer.”

She ran down the stairs. May her dreams come true.

* * * * *

Susie came to dinner that evening. When she left tears welled in her eyes. I hugged her. She leaned into me. The fierceness of her need for love nearly knocked me over.

My thoughts roiled with anger. Her mother should be shot. What miniscule drop of love Rachel spared from herself was lavished on Tim. Susie would return three times the amount she received.

After Andrea fell asleep, I walked downstairs to sit on the porch. Crickets chirped. Leaves rustled. The blinking lights of fireflies shone against the dark sky. Robespierre curled on my lap.

Rachel's strident voice shattered the stillness. "Why doesn't he answer? Why am I saddled with two brats? Susie, your whining makes me sick. You're just like that bastard who fathered you."

Was that a slap I heard?

"Mommy, I love you," Susie cried.

"How nice. Tim, you're a beast. No movie money for you tomorrow. You took the ten out of my jewel box."

"Didn't. She did."

"Don't blame her. She was upstairs with her fancy friends." Her voice turned into a sob. "How can he be away when I need him? He said he'd come any time I called. He'll learn."

Did she mean Ted or Andrew? Wearily I left the porch and went upstairs.

* * * * *

On Saturday evening Andrea, Susie and I sat on the porch playing Old Maids. The television blared from the open window of the first floor apartment. The girls giggled when I lost the game.

"There's an apple pie on the table and ice cream in the freezer. Susie, ask your mother, Tim and your uncle if they'd like to join us for dessert. You two can bring the dishes and silverware as well as the dessert." Most of me hoped the invitation would be refused.

Susie ran inside and soon returned. "Mommy's going out but Tim and Uncle Willie will come. This is like a party."

The girls soon returned after making two trips. Ted's silver Mercedes pulled into the curb. "Mrs. Miller, how's your leg?" he called.

"Almost normal. Haven't seen you for weeks."

He shrugged. "Rachel and I had a little spat." He sat on one of the wicker chairs. "I hear Andrew and Ruth went away."

"Their anniversary celebration. How are your boys?"

"Tomorrow's my day with them. Guess we'll go to a ball game." Hurt shone in his dark eyes. "It's hard to know what they enjoy when I only see them twice a month."

Rachel's husky laughter broke into our conversation. "Looking for motherly advice?" Her white dress with a halter neck accentuated her golden tan. She ran a finger down his cheek, then turned so the flair skirt swirled around her legs. "Like it? Thought I'd better start looking like a lady since I've been meeting some of your fine friends."

Ted clasped her hand. Just then Susie stepped toward her mother. "Mommy, you look beautiful."

Rachel moved back. "Don't touch me. You'll mess my dress."

Susie's shoulders slumped. "Sorry."

Ted led Rachel from the porch. "See you later."

"She looks like a movie star but you're going to be prettier when you grow up," Andrea said.

“Do you really think so?” Susie asked. “The kids at school call me an ugly mess.”

“You’re not,” Andrea said. “I have an idea. Why don’t Grandma and I do your hair when we come home from church?”

“If that’s all right with her mother.”

“She won’t care. She never does.”

The arrival of Tim and Willie cut off our conversation about hair. After enjoying the pie, Tim and his uncle helped carry the remains upstairs.

That night as I tucked Andrea in bed, she gave me a big hug. “I’m glad I have you and Mom and Dad.”

I patted her hand and looked away. How much longer would she have her father?

* * * * *

After church Susie followed Andrea and me upstairs. Once her molasses taffy colored hair was washed we went to the kitchen. With a pair of shears I carefully trimmed her hair. Though not a professional cut the ragged ends lay on the floor to be swept up and discarded. With a brush, dryer and Andrea’s curling iron, I attempted a style to suit Susie’s narrow face.

She wiggled in the chair. “Can I look?”

“Sit still.” Andrea leaned against the counter and studied her friend. “You’re going to be beautiful.”

“Really. I want to see.” She twisted in the chair and nearly earned a burn with her restless dance.

“Not until I finish.” I reached for the comb.

“Please. I promise to come back and sit still if I can just have a little peep.”

“No way.” Andrea and I chorused the answer.

My granddaughter giggled. “Salt.”

“Pepper.”

Susie frowned. “What?”

“It’s a game we play because we said the same thing at the same time,” Andrea said.

A pounding at the door interrupted our laughter. Before Andrea could cross the room Tim burst inside. “I’m hungry. Uncle Willie isn’t home and Mommy just did her nails. She said for you to get downstairs and make my lunch.”

“She’ll be finished in five minutes.” He had knocked so I didn’t scold him for barging into the apartment.

His hands rested on his hips. “Mommy know they’re messing with your hair?”

“She said she didn’t care.”

Andrea smiled. Tim strolled across the room. He stared at his sister. “You should look like this all the time. Then the kids at school wouldn’t tease me about my slob sister.” He turned to Andrea. “Want to play catch later?”

“Probably not. Grandma and I are walking up the street for ice cream. Want to come along?” She looked at me. “That would be okay, wouldn’t it?”

I twisted the last strand of Susie’s hair around the curling iron. “Of course.” If we included her pet, Rachel might be less angry with Susie. I put the curling iron down. “Go look at yourself.”

Susie ran to the bathroom. When she returned her blue eyes glowed with pleasure. "Come on, Tim. I want to show Mommy. Then I'll make your lunch."

His blue eyes turned a slate color. "Mommy is going to hate your hair." His smile showed his teeth. "What time are we going for ice cream?"

"Around two."

At two fifteen the four of us strolled up town. The Ice Cream Parlour is three blocks from my house. This walk was the longest since my accident and tired me. The line at the window where cones can be bought trailed about ten yards down the street. Thoughts of inching slowly forward daunted me.

"Shall we eat inside?" I asked.

Susie opened the door. Tim darted in first, knocking my cane from my hand and nearly causing me to lose my balance.

Andrea retrieved the cane. "Boys can be so rude."

To my surprise Tim's cheeks flushed. He pulled out a chair for me and one for Andrea. Susie settled beside me at the round metal table. The metal chairs had been constructed from scrap the owners had found in junk yards. Old newspapers coated with shellac covered the walls.

"If you want sundaes instead of cones, you can." The girls and I ordered double scoops of ice cream. Tim chose a banana split.

When we finished I handed Tim the money to pay the bill. He pocketed the change and ran ahead of us down the street. Though less than two dollars, I felt disappointed but decided to say nothing that might spoil the day.

* * * * *

That evening while Andrea and I were eating dinner Ruth called to let me know she and Andrew were home. After he checked his answering service for messages he would come for Andrea. The laughter in her voice raised my hopes the web woven by Rachel had been broken.

An hour later, Andrew arrived. Andrea and I were on the porch. When he hugged his daughter I noticed his hazel eyes held the same discontent I'd seen there for months. He went upstairs for Andrea's suitcase.

Ted's car stopped at the curb. By the time he reached the porch Rachel sauntered out. He took her arm. "You look great. Let's go. We don't want to be late."

"Hello, Ted." Was he ignoring us?

"Mrs. Miller, I'll catch you later. You too, Andrea,"

Andrew stepped onto the porch. He scowled. Sadness brought the sting of tears to my eyes. Why couldn't he see she was what Pete had called her? Plastic.

* * * * *

On Monday, by the time I returned from my morning walk to the river, my blouse was damp from perspiration. I sank on the chaise to catch my breath. Sunday's trip for ice cream had boosted my confidence in my ability to walk modest distances. Wondering if I had pushed too hard and too far, I closed my eyes and dozed.

When Robespierre batted my face with his paw I went upstairs to feed him and change my blouse. Instead of asking Sarah to take me shopping, I walked to her

house. Maria was there and so was Bob. No gossip today, I thought. A short time later Maria and I left.

“No Mommy, please. I’m sorry.” Susie screamed.

Maria ran. She reached the backyard several yards ahead of me.

Rachel held the child’s shoulders and shook her. “Look at my leg. Damned brat. I’ll have a bruise. Can’t you watch where you’re going? Clumsy. Ugly. I hate you.”

“But Mommy, Tim chased me. He wanted to hit me with his baseball bat.

Rachel slapped her daughter. “That’s right. Blame your brother. I bet you did something to him first.” She turned her head and released her hold so suddenly Susie fell. The child jumped up and ran to the house. Rachel walked to us. “She should’ve watched.”

Maria bent and examined the mark on Rachel’s leg. “If you use the ice today and tomorrow the heat you will not have the black mark.”

“Ice,” Rachel said. “Probably don’t have any. The brats never fill the trays.”

“I will get some.” Maria hurried to her house.

I turned to Rachel. “Children tend to act before they think. You need to be patient with them.”

Rachel glared. “I’ll give her patience with the flat of my hand. I’ve told her a thousand times not to tease her brother. She doesn’t listen. Oh, I know you think she’s sweet but you’ll learn. Wait until you find little things missing.”

There was no sense arguing with Rachel. I walked away. Upstairs I took my purse and returned to Sarah’s. We drove to the grocery store. When we returned, Sarah pulled into my driveway. The sight of Maria and Rachel on the porch surprised me.

“A new twist,” Sarah said.

“Maria’s trying to make friends. Surprises me after the scene I witnessed this morning.”

“Do tell.” When I finished Sarah nodded. “I was right when I heard a child scream last night. I called the Abuse number. They said someone would investigate.”

Sarah had done what Susie had begged me not to do. “Nothing will be solved,” I said. “Susie’s teacher was concerned but Susie said Tim was at fault. She could be telling the truth.”

“Maybe. Knowing him it’s possible. But I still think Rachel’s the one. Doesn’t matter. Whoever’s hitting Susie hard enough to cause bruises should be stopped.”

I grasped her arm. “Did you leave your name? Heaven knows what she’ll do if she learns.”

Sarah shook her head. “No names. I wasn’t about to have her storming over here with her nasty accusations.”

“Good enough.” I left the van and carried my two canvas bags of groceries to the house.

Chapter 6

When we reached the porch, Maria and Rachel had vanished. Willie Hinch stopped the mower and walked to the porch to sip a beer he had left on the steps. Sarah waved and returned to her side of the street.

"Is Susie all right?" I asked.

Willie shrugged. "She's in her room. Punishment."

"For an accident? Why?"

He shook his head. "Rachel's not always fair to her."

"I've heard the child screaming. Does Rachel hit her?"

"Guess she's swatted her a time or two. You got to understand Rachel. She hates living like this with no money comin' in."

"Why doesn't she do something practical? When my husband died I went back to school." Over the months since Rachel and her children moved in my patience with his niece had fallen to zero.

"Steve won't give her the money 'less she has the kids. He's always late with the checks. Then she blames Susie and Tim."

I lifted the bag of groceries. "That doesn't make sense."

"She loves them. I know she does." A forlorn look appeared in his eyes. "Wouldn't be right for a mother not to love her kids. Rachel says you want to put us out in the street. Give her a chance. This is the nicest place she'd had since Steve tossed her out. She needs to feel secure." Willie drained the beer can and crushed it with a hand. "You should have seen her as a child. All golden and sunshine."

"I don't care about Rachel as a child," I snapped. "I'm worried about Susie." And the other lives Rachel is poisoning. That thought remained unsaid.

"I do my best." He left the porch.

* * * * *

The next morning I took cookies from the freezer for Sarah's children. Maria joined me on the sidewalk and we crossed the street together. "I have the things to tell Mrs. Sarah. She must learn the forgiveness."

An official-looking car stopped at the curb in front of my house. A woman holding a briefcase got out and strode up the walk. Sarah opened the front door of her house. "I wonder how she'll wiggle out of this." A smug smile appeared on her face.

"Mrs. Sarah, what have you done?" Maria asked.

"What was necessary," Sarah said.

"She reported Rachel for hitting Susie." I turned to Sarah. "Am I right?"

Maria frowned. "I do not understand why you do this. Should the madre not be allowed to discipline the child?"

Sarah made a face and uttered a rude noise. "Discipline is one thing. Deliberate abuse is another. I did what I thought was right."

"I hope the trouble you bring her doesn't come back to you. Rachel has a volcano in her head. She could blow and bring harm to you."

Though I agreed with Maria, I also believed Sarah had done the right thing. Perhaps the warning would force Rachel to think before she acted against her daughter again.

When I returned home Rachel stepped from her apartment. Her cold gray eyes and tight mouth frightened me. "Keep your nose out of my business."

"I beg your pardon."

"You heard me. Someone reported me for child abuse. Susie's your pet so it figures you were the one."

"I didn't report you even though I watched you shake and push her yesterday. I wouldn't for a single incident. Every mother loses her patience with a child at least once."

She put one hand on her hip. "Then who did?"

"I don't know."

"I'm warning you to stay out of my life. If you interfere I'll make you pay. When I learn who spread the news, believe me, they'll suffer."

As I walked upstairs I thumped my cane on each step. I pulled the copy of her lease Ted had finally sent from an envelope and read every word. The changes I had made had been deleted. Andrew had signed this copy. I blamed myself for trusting Ted and Andrew to protect my interests. I considered calling my son but I was sure he'd give me a lame excuse. I wasn't prepared for an argument. Yet.

* * * * *

On the morning of the Fourth I dressed for my son's barbecue. The party would be nothing like the casual Memorial Day gathering at the Randal's house. At one o'clock the children of their friends and some of the parents would come for a pool party and a cook-out. When the children left at six the caterers would arrive and the affair would become strictly adult.

The sun shone in a cloudless sky. The humidity continued to climb. Ted brought his sons. He changed into a bathing suit. His flabby abdominal muscles contrasted with Andrew's taut ones. Usually Ted and my son banter. Today they edged around each other like two rams ready to butt heads.

At six Andrea and I used Ruth's minivan to drive three of the children home. Their parents had dropped them off and left. When we returned Andrea ran to the house. Ted's Mercedes pulled into the driveway behind the minivan. He called to me. Rachel clung to his arm. She wore the white dress that enhanced her stunning beauty.

"Back again." He offered me his other arm. "I could have driven you home and saved Andrew a trip."

"I'm amusing Andrea while the adults play. I'll be the last one to leave."

Rachel smiled. "Such a devoted grandmother."

The hint of malice in her voice caused me to release Ted's arm. For several minutes I stood at the edge of the driveway. Before long a crowd, mostly men, had gathered around Ted and Rachel.

"There's Susie's mom." Andrea tugged on Ruth's arm. "She's with Mr. Thomas. Come meet her."

My tenant laughed at something someone had said. Ted tightened his hold on her arm.

Andrea dragged her mother into the cluster. "Mom, this is my friend, Susie's mother."

Rachel couldn't hide her distaste at being so named. Her mouth tightened and her nostrils flared.

Ruth smiled. "I'm Ruth Miller." She reached for Andrew's hand. "Have you met my husband?"

A fear that Rachel would deliberately ruin the party surfaced. I moved forward in hopes of preventing a disaster.

A lazy smile crossed Rachel's face. "Ted's done the honors many times. I'm Rachel Rodgers."

"I've heard so much about your daughter from Andrea," Ruth said. "She sounds like a delightful child."

Rachel took a cigarette from a gold case and looked to Ted for a light. "Perhaps she is." She exhaled smoke in Ruth's direction.

Moments later Ruth edged away from the group and put her hand on my arm. "I think I've just been snubbed."

For fear she would read my worried expression, I turned my head. Rachel stood between Ted and Andrew. She ran a bright red fingernail along Ted's arm. He tried to draw her away. Andrew straightened. Rachel ran her tongue over her lower lip. As Ted half-dragged her to the bar, my son nodded. Ruth joined him. She touched his shoulder but Andrew continued to stare at Rachel.

She's in heat, I thought. She's stirring a rivalry Andrew and Ted had left behind in high school.

Quickly I walked to the buffet and filled a plate for Andrea and one for myself. We carried them to the lower level family room. Andrea turned on the television. I stared at the scene in the yard.

Andrea tugged on my hand. "Grandma, that's where I want to go. Will you take me?"

I focused on the television. An ad for Hershey Park flashed on the screen. I thought of the check Paul had given me as my share of the profits. "Yes."

"When?"

I gave her my full attention. "Why not in a week or two?"

Andrew entered the family room. Andrea bounced up and down on the end of the couch. "Guess what? Grandma's taking me to Hershey Park."

As though trying to make sense of what she'd said, Andrew frowned. "Mom, why?"

"She wants to go and it looks like fun."

"Are you sure? There's a lot of walking and she can't ride alone. Surely you're not ready to tackle roller coasters."

I put my plate on the coffee table. "She can take a friend. They can ride and I'll watch."

"Please say I can go." Andrea danced around the room. "We'll have fun. Who should I invite?"

"One of your friends."

"I know. Susie. Grandma likes her. Oh, this will be great."

"I'll call the hotel for reservations in the morning. We'll stay three or four days."

"Let's go ask Susie's mom." Andrea pushed the sliding doors open and ran into the yard. Andrew and I followed. My granddaughter stopped beside the chair

where Rachel lounged. "Guess what," Andrea said. "Grandma is taking me to Hershey Park and we want Susie to come along."

Rachel arched an eyebrow. "That would be nice but too expensive."

"My treat. Andrea wants to go and she needs a friend for the rides. Susie was her first choice. I'm planning to go two weeks from now."

Rachel ran her tongue slowly across her lip. "I think that would work. That's the week Tim will be at camp. I thought Steve would take her but he changed his mind."

Ted grinned. "This is a great idea."

Rachel turned to him. "Just might be a vacation for me, too."

He reached out, took her hand in his and pulled her to her feet. "Come on. We have serious plans to make for a week without your kids."

"Three or four days," I said.

"That's good enough." He laughed.

"Just a minute." Rachel's voice hardened. "You don't own me, Ted Thomas. I'll make my own plans and if you're included, I'll tell you." She walked to the bar. "Call Susie tomorrow."

Andrea and I went inside. She got ready for bed. After reading her a story, I returned to the family room. Andrew woke me. "Do you want to spend the night?"

"I'll sleep better in my own bed."

"Ready to go?"

I slipped on my shoes. Ruth hugged me. "Thanks for coming." She kissed Andrew. "I'll probably be asleep before you back out of the driveway."

"Then I won't wake you when I come in," he said. "Great party. You're good at things like that."

"Night, Mother Miller." Ruth headed for the stairs.

Andrew and I walked to his car. Neither of us spoke on the ride to the house. The porch light glowed in welcome. Andrew walked me upstairs. "Are you sure you want to take two girls to Hershey Park?"

"It'll be fun and a treat for Susie. She's a sweet child and has few chances for fun."

"Maybe she'd sweet around you but not at home. I don't understand my daughter's choice of friends."

Any more than I understand yours. I didn't say that aloud. "The girls enjoy each other."

He paused at the door. "Rachel said someone reported her for abusing the girl. A ridiculous charge. From what Rachel says Susie is unstable. Are you sure you can handle her?"

"She's a delight. Quiet, eager for love but not greedy. She's quite musically talented. Have you ever talked to her?"

"Children aren't my field. I've recommended a therapist but Rachel hasn't made an appointment yet. I believe she'd reluctant to have her daughter labeled as emotionally disturbed." He kissed my cheek. "Night, Mom."

Would Rachel take her daughter to the therapist? I believed her hesitation was out of fear the truth would be learned. "Good night. The day was lovely. Ruth does everything so well. I'm glad you married her."

Without responding to my thrust, he bounded down the stairs. Fool. Why couldn't he see his wife was pure gold and Rachel nothing more than glittery plastic?

Ten minutes later I had changed for bed. Andrew's car remained parked at the curb. I walked to the living room and peered through the window. My gasp was loud enough to be heard across the street. My son stood on the lawn with Rachel. She glanced toward my window before turning and walking around the house to the backyard. Andrew walked with her.

I snapped off the light and scurried to the kitchen alcove. Rachel and Andrew stood near the picnic table locked in an embrace. With a voyeur's curiosity I watched my son and my tenant move into the shadows.

Perhaps I should have turned on the kitchen lights to signal my presence but I didn't think anything could have stopped her. In all my encounters with Rachel I'd learned she took what she wanted without caring how her actions affected other people. While my imagination supplied the details of what happened between my son and my tenant I stared at the trees.

Time dragged. Finally Andrew appeared. He pulled his shirt over his head and zipped his shorts. Rachel lit a cigarette and stared at the window where I stood.

Andrew caught her in an embrace. After releasing her, he strode away. Rachel finished her cigarette before sauntering to the house.

I walked to my bedroom. The room seemed stuffy. No breeze stirred the thin curtains. The only hope I had for my son was that he hadn't acted like a man in love but like an animal in rut.

* * * * *

Though my enthusiasm for the trip with the girls had lessened, I kept my promise and made reservations. The Lodge was booked but I found a room at a nearby motel.

Then I shopped for Susie. The child had few clothes. I didn't think she owned a dress. Sales of summer clothes abounded. I bought four short sets, a skirt and blouse, a pair of jeans and a top, a bathing suit, sandals and sneakers.

When I returned I found Susie on the porch. "Mommy told me about the trip. Andrea called." Her blue eyes shone.

I handed her the packages to carry upstairs. "We'll have fun."

"I can't believe she's letting me go. Mr. Thomas is paying for Tim's camp. Mommy wanted Daddy to take me but he couldn't. Things won't be so bad when Tim's gone. He hits me a lot. That's what I told the lady who came to see Mommy."

So that was how Rachel handled Sarah's complaint. Though I believed Tim hit Susie, he had to learn his behavior from someone. Rachel was my choice, but who would believe me? Andrew would confirm Rachel's story. So would Ted and Willie. I pushed those thoughts aside and smiled at Susie. "Want to see what's in the bags?"

"Sure."

One by one I pulled the clothes from the bags. She looked at me. "They're nice. Andrea will like them."

"They're for you."

“Mommy won’t let me keep them. She says there’s no sense buying me a lot of clothes. I grow too fast.”

“We won’t tell her until we return from the trip. After you’ve worn them I can’t take them back. She’ll have to let you keep them.”

She threw her arms around me. “I love you more than anyone ‘cept Mommy.”

The phone rang. When I answered Susie waved and left. The sound of Andrew’s voice surprised me.

“I’ve been trying to reach you all morning. Have you changed your mind about the trip, yet?”

“Not one bit. Reservations are made.”

“Why don’t you take Ruth?”

“Don’t you think I can handle two girls? Remember the camping trips I took with you, Ted and Bob?”

“We were older than the girls and you were younger.” He groaned. “I’m not questioning your competence. It’s well... well... I’ve been busy lately. Most evenings I’m at the office late. I thought Ruth might enjoy being with you and the girls.”

I felt sure he wanted Ruth out of the picture to leave him more time with Rachel. “This is my trip. Ruth understands your late hours. She trusts you.”

“I know but—”

“I’m doing this my way.”

Several times during the week he called to check my plans. Every time he had a different reason to include his wife. I resisted.

* * * * *

The heat and humidity continued to rise. Even my usually cool apartment resembled a steam bath. Rachel sunbathed every afternoon. Maria often joined her. Willie watered the lawn, flower and mint beds every evening. Every day I scanned the local paper for an order to limit lawn watering.

Several days before the girls and I were to leave for Hershey, I walked over to Sarah’s. Paul and Maria had offered to feed Robespierre and take in my mail, a job usually reserved for Sarah’s boys. I carried a tea ball stuffed with mint leaves. The steamy weather called for iced coffee or tea.

I rang the bell. No one came to the door. Since Sarah expected me I stepped inside. The sound of Maria’s voice raised in anger startled me.

“Mrs. Sarah, you do not know her. Why do you call her those ugly names? She is good to me. Her life has been the tragedy. Sometimes you have no kindness in your heart for the people who have the trouble. I know you love the children. So does Maria. Rachel say you get paid much money to take care of Jamal and Becca who do not have your name. She gets nothing for the children who are hers.”

I paused in the kitchen doorway. Sarah’s round face was scarlet. “Listen to her poison. Yes, I receive money for Jamal and Becca but I spend more on them than I am given. Just tell her that. Next thing you know she’ll be dragging Paul into the bushes the way she did—” Sarah saw me and stopped the rush of words.

Maria laughed. “She do not even like my Paul. I tell her he is good to me and he love me. He have not look at another woman since we have marry. She thinks that is sweet. Love is hard for her to know. She has not have a man who love her.”

Maria pushed her chair back. "I go until I am more happy with you." She brushed past me. "Mrs. Miller, I see you another time."

"What was that about?" I reached for the tea kettle.

Sarah released a breath. "I'm sick and tired of listening to her defend the whore. Rachel this and Rachel that." She walked to the sliding door. "It's too hot to think. That brat sits on your front steps and yells nasty things at the boys every time they're in the front yard. I keep hoping they'll move."

"No chance of that until March. Andrew won't help me break the lease, especially now." I poured hot water into a teapot and added the tea ball.

She stared at her hands. "What does she want with Andrew?"

"I don't know but I know what's on her mind. Sex. They might as well have been two rutting dogs on the Fourth."

Sarah shook her head. "How do you know they had sex?"

"I saw. In the backyard." To keep her from seeing my anger, I pulled an ice cube tray from the freezer and filled two tall glasses.

She gasped, choked and laughed. "Right in the yard. I can't believe Andrew would have an affair. Remember how he laid into Ted about marriage and fidelity. For once Andrew and I agreed. What are you going to do?"

I would've liked to tell her I wanted to see Rachel dead but I couldn't be the one to do the deed. "Nothing for the moment. When I return from Hershey Park my son and I are going to have a long talk. Then I'm hiring a lawyer. Ted may have had a conflict of interest when he wrote the lease I never signed."

"You didn't."

"Andrew did and he had no right."

"I hope you win."

I sat at the table. "Enough about this. What are you going to do for a sitter when I'm not available?"

We talked about the teenage girl she'd hired and how well the children related to the young woman. Once I felt calmer I went home. Maria and Rachel sat on a blanket in the side yard. Willie stood on the porch. Through the open windows of the first floor apartment I heard the television and the bickering voices of Susie and Tim.

"Good morning."

"Too hot." Willie wiped his forehead. "When it's this hot, trouble always arrives. Can feel it in the air."

Rachel, I thought and decided to avoid even a chance encounter with my tenant. Upstairs I cleaned the refrigerator and welcomed the cool air. With this chore done I made a salad for lunch. I had just finished eating when Paul arrived. "Afternoon." I poured him a glass of iced mint tea.

He carried the glass to the alcove window and leaned against the frame. "What's happening to us?"

"What do you mean?"

"Maria's changing and I don't mean because of the baby. Sarah's boys aren't allowed on this side of the street."

"The heat."

He shook his head. "Rachel. She tells Maria stories about her rotten life and how she's been mistreated by everyone. My wife's an innocent. She can't see Rachel chose the life she lives."

"I quite agree."

"There's more. I don't want to hurt my wife but a man can take just so much teasing. Rachel comes to the house. When Maria leaves the room –" He sank on a chair and covered his face with a hand.

What could I say? I had seen how Rachel had lured my son.

Paul looked up. "Maria and I haven't made love since she learned about the baby. Since she's had three miscarriages the doctor suggests we refrain. Rachel knows. Maria told her. When Maria leaves the room Rachel offers to ease my needs. What kind of woman is she?"

"An evil one. Tell Maria you don't want her around."

"How? Maria believes they're friends."

Children's screams erupted. Paul ran downstairs. I followed. When I reached the porch I saw a drenched Sarah holding my garden hose. Rachel stood with her hands on her hips. Water dripped from her bathing suit.

"You're crazy," Rachel screamed. "Attacking a kid. I'm calling the police."

Jamal and Larry stood on the walk. They were also wet.

"Go ahead," Sarah yelled. "We'll see who gets the blame."

"What's going on?" Paul shouted.

Sarah dropped the hose and sprayed Paul and me. The cold water felt good. Sarah pointed at Tim. "That little monster turned the hose on, ran into the street and hit the twins full force. They're babies. He could have killed them. He thought he was funny and danced around laughing. I decided to teach him a lesson."

"You have no right to touch my son." Rachel raised a fist.

"Don't hit my mother," Larry cried.

Rachel whirled and slugged him so hard he fell on the ground. Jamal ran to pick him up.

Sarah grabbed Rachel's arm. "Don't you ever touch one of my children again. What you do to your own is between you and social service." She slapped Rachel and marched across the street herding the boys ahead of her.

"So it was you," Rachel screamed. "You'll be sorry."

Paul disconnected and rolled the hose. "Sure hope we have rain soon."

"Makes two of us."

Praying the incident wouldn't ruin the Hershey trip, I returned to my apartment. Would Rachel take her anger out on Susie and refuse to allow the child go? Maybe her desire to have both children away would be greater than her anger.

Chapter 7

Early Saturday morning I stood at the edge of the Hudson River pelting the water with pebbles. Would that my fear and anger could be tossed so easily away. As I listened to the river and felt the temperature of the day rise to meet the humidity, I chided myself for not acting sooner.

Until the accident decision making had never been a problem. Since the day I fell and broke my leg and the stay in the hospital, knowledge of my vulnerability had colored my life.

Finally I left off tossing stones and walked to the steps leading from the benches to the street. Pete Duggan stood just beyond the stairs. How long had he been watching me?

“Pete.”

He held out his hands. “How many pounds of rock have you added to the river bed?”

“Maybe one. You’re up early.”

He nodded and pulled me over to one of the benches someone had placed on a small grassy area halfway to the street. “I remembered your early morning walks and needed to talk to you.”

“About?”

“The water fight the other day. “I can’t believe Sarah Randal snapped.”

“The heat and the humidity the combined with a nasty brat. Some threats were made. Rachel tried to hit Sarah and slugged Larry instead. Then Sarah slapped Rachel.”

He slouched on the bench. “Are the threats the kind to worry about?”

“Rachel is a bully. She won’t act if she thinks trouble will inconvenience her.”

He stared at me. “I wasn’t talking about Rachel.”

I shook my head. “Not Sarah.”

“You?”

“I don’t know.”

* * * * *

On Sunday morning the insistent blare of a car horn interrupted my work on the New York Times crossword. Tim shouted for his mother. I walked to the window. The boy wore clothes that from this distance looked new. He loaded a duffle and a sleeping bag into the trunk of Ted’s Mercedes. He yelled again. A light drizzle dampened the sidewalk.

Rachel appeared at the curb. As usual she clutched her aqua robe with one hand. She pulled Tim into an embrace and kissed him on the mouth. Something about the way she held the boy troubled me. He pushed away and climbed into the back seat of the car.

Ted put his hand on Rachel’s shoulder. She shook her head and stepped back. For several minutes he stared at the house. Then he got into the car. If the street had been gravel-covered the car wheels would have spit pellets in the air.

* * * * *

That evening when Andrew brought me home Andrea bounced up and down on the backseat. “Tomorrow Hershey Park. I can’t wait.” At the house she ran ahead of us, leaping over puddles left from the rain.

Andrew put her suitcase in the trunk of my car. By the time we reached the house, Susie and Andrea giggled together. “Are you packed?” Andrea asked.

Susie nodded. “Want me to get my things now?”

I winked. “That would save time in the morning. We’ll leave around ten.”

She ran into the house and returned with a brown paper bag. "Tim took the duffel and Mommy said she needs the suitcase. She might go away for a few days."

Andrew frowned. Either Rachel hadn't mentioned her plans or she was playing games. I wanted to warn him. I also wanted to laugh but neither reaction seemed designed to penetrate the dense fog surrounding him.

I patted Susie's shoulder. "No problem. I have an extra bag on my bed for your things."

"Thanks." She and Andrea ran upstairs.

Andrew turned to me. "Are you sure you don't want Ruth along? I'm sure she would be delighted to join you. The girls seem to be a lively combination."

"We'll be fine. Are you trying to get rid of everyone?" I smiled but wanted to grab his shoulders and shake some sense into him.

He stared at his feet. "Why would I want to do that?"

As though his words were a cue in a farce Rachel appeared in the doorway. She stretched, thrusting her full breasts against her tee shirt. "Susie's so excited about the trip she can't settle down. Let me know if she gives you a moment of trouble and I'll take care of her when you return."

I held back my question about her methods. She wouldn't admit the truth in my son's or anyone's presence. "When she's with me her manners are perfect."

Rachel shrugged. "I wish I could say the same when she's home. I've some tough decisions to make about her soon."

What did she mean? Everything Rachel said about her daughter seemed designed to make people believe the child had emotional problems. With a mother like Rachel, I was sure the child had fears.

Andrew headed to the apartment to carry the rest of the suitcases down. He brushed against Rachel. His hand touched her breast. "Sorry."

She pouted. "Can we talk about what I should do with Susie during our session tomorrow? I must make that decision soon."

He nodded. "A good idea. See you later."

Rachel laughed. "Is he always this reticent about acknowledging his patients?"

"Prevents people from asking questions he doesn't want to answer. We'll leave around ten tomorrow."

"I'm sure Susie will be ready before then. Why leave so late?"

"I know it's about a four hour drive but I want to stop at a restaurant I discovered while driving across the state to visit a friend." I sat on one of the chairs and hooked my cane over the arm. "Won't you be lonely with both children gone?"

She smiled. Andrew emerged with a suitcase in each hand. Rachel's gaze slid along his body. "I'll find plenty to do."

Perhaps my fears showed on my face because her smile broadened and exposed her teeth. The smile reminded me of Tim's just before he verbally attacked his sister.

Andrew put the suitcases down. "What did you pack? Bricks?"

"Just some tins of tea."

He laughed and for a moment, he became the Andrew I had raised. "Guess you wouldn't be caught dead without your tea."

“Alive. Dead, it would be a waste.” I pointed to the suitcases. “To the car. Then go home. Ruth’s waiting.”

He walked away. Rachel studied me. “You’re very close, aren’t you? I guess it’s that way between a mother and her son. Tim and I have the same closeness.”

Remembering the way she had kissed her son this morning, I doubted the similarity of the relationships. Andrew placed the suitcases in the trunk and walked to his car.

Rachel lit a cigarette. “I meant what I said about Susie. She has a fearful temper. She tried to stab me once. I woke to find her standing over me with a knife.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“You’ll see. She has nightmares that trigger violent outbursts.” She shrugged. “Maybe I should keep her at home.”

I reached for my cane. At this moment I wanted to smack her face with the marble head. If Susie had tried to stab her mother, the child had been provoked. “That’s why I have a supply of mint tea. Some of the blends are very calming.”

“Make sure she drinks gallons.” She exhaled a cloud of smoke. “Not a good idea. Sometimes she wets the bed. I’d be distressed if she caused problems for you and Andrea. That’s it. She stays home. I’ll tell her when she comes downstairs.”

“I thought you wanted a few days of freedom.”

She followed me to the door. “Andrew is concerned for you and his daughter. He and I have discussed my problems with Susie.”

“He only knows the things you’ve told him.” I paused in the doorway. “I can’t force you to let her go.”

She ground the cigarette beneath her shoe. “I’m in a bind. It’s impossible to please everyone.”

The only person she ever pleased was herself. I went upstairs to join the girls. Why hadn’t I invited Susie to spend the night? In the morning would we find her waiting or would Rachel make good on her threat to keep her daughter at home?

* * * * *

The next morning Susie sat on the top step of the porch waiting for us. The sight of her faded jeans and torn shirt made me wish I hadn’t packed all the new clothes yesterday. The contrast between Tim’s new clothes and Susie’s ragged appearance showed Rachel’s true feelings for her children. What cruel trick would she play in her daughter next? I wished my son had been here to see.

Though we left at a few minutes after ten Rachel didn’t come outside to tell her daughter goodbye. Another slap that while not physical was just as damaging. How did Susie maintain her sweet nature?

Andrea took the front seat. Once they were buckled in I handed each girl a pack of sugarless gum I’d put in my over-sized handbag. I put a small cooler filled with juice on the back seat. “You’ll trade places after lunch.”

“I’m used to sitting in the back,” Susie said.

“Grandma’s right. It’s only fair to change.” Andrea unwrapped a piece of gum and put the paper in the small bag hanging on the door. “Are you excited?”

“And sad. I’ll miss Mommy.” Susie pointed to the porch where Robespierre sat on the railing in his Sphinx imitation. “Who’s going to take care of him? Won’t he be lonely?”

“Paul and Maria. He adores Paul.”

“So do I.” Andrea sighed. “When I grow up I want to marry someone like him.”

Susie sniffed. “I’m never getting married. Men aren’t nice.”

I shifted into reverse and backed into the street. “You’ll change your mind.”

“No, I won’t. Mommy says men only want women’s bodies.” She paused. “I won’t be like her either.”

“What do you want to do?” Andrea asked.

“Run away and live with someone like your grandmother. Then I could play the piano all day.”

“Wouldn’t you get tired?” Andrea cracked her gum.

“Never.” Susie’s voice held notes of desperation. “Sometimes when I’m falling asleep I hear music. I keep trying to find it but I never do.”

My feelings for the child deepened. As long as she lived with Rachel she would never find the music. Rachel relished bringing discordant notes to everyone’s life she brushed.

Was there a place for Susie? What if Sarah’s report of child abuse had succeeded? Where would Susie have been placed? The answer to these questions depressed me. Since her father showed little interest in custody I doubted he would be considered. That left boarding school or a foster home. Unless there was a Sarah, Susie would never find the melodies she heard.

The miles sped past. Shortly after noon we reached my planned stop. The restaurant had been created from a locomotive and a dining car. Before we went inside I opened the trunk and took out one of Susie’s new short sets. “Go to the rest room and change. We’ll wait.”

Andrea climbed into the engine and rang the bell. Susie took the clothes. Her eyes had lost some of their haunted shadows. When she returned, before she joined Andrea, she hugged me. The girls played for fifteen minutes.

“This place is neat,” Andrea said. “Did you ever ride this train?”

“Not this one but several like it. Your grandfather and I traveled by train to Niagara Falls for our honeymoon.”

“I wish I could hear the whistle.” Susie freed her hair from the rubber band that held it in a crude pony tail. “Sometimes late at night when I was at the boarding school I heard a train’s whistle. The sound was sad.”

“The sound can be happy, too.” I caught their hands and led them inside. “What you hear depends if you’re going away or coming home.”

On our way to the dining car we stopped to admire the collection of miniature trains, all replicas of ones that had once been in service. A hostess wearing a striped engineer’s cap led us to a table in the dining car. A lantern hung above each table. Andrea twisted and turned in her seat to count the number of different lanterns.

When she read the menu, Susie’s eyes widened. “I’m not very hungry.”

I leaned closer to whisper in her ear. “If it’s the price don’t worry. This is our vacation.”

“Just a hamburger and fries,” she said.

The huge burger and heaping plate of fries satisfied my hunger. Even Andrea shook her head at the waitress's suggestion of dessert. I paid the bill and followed the girls to the car.

When we reached the motel I checked us in and picked up information about the park and other points of interest in the area. The girls quickly unpacked.

"What are we going to do now?" Andrea asked.

"I'm going to rest my leg. Why don't you go to the pool? There's a slide and a swing, too. I'll come out and relax on one of the lounges."

Andrea ran to the bathroom. The look on Susie's face made me wonder if the pool had been the wrong choice. Maybe she couldn't swim and was afraid Andrea would laugh. My granddaughter had been swimming since infancy when Ruth had enrolled in a mother/child program at the Y.

"I'll stay with you," Susie said.

"Can you swim?"

"We had lessons at school."

"Then go ahead. The new suit is a good color for you."

Andrea scurried from the bedroom. "Come on, Susie."

"Go ahead. I'll come later." She sat on one of the chairs at the round table near the sliding doors.

"Don't stay for me, child."

"All right." Susie walked to the bathroom.

When she emerged, I couldn't hide my shocked gasp. Livid splotches of black, brown, red and yellow covered the parts of her back not covered by the suit. "The bruises. How?" Better yet who had done this?

"Tim hits me. Mommy says he doesn't understand his strength because he's a boy. They're old."

Not the one that peeked from the edge of the suit. When we returned home I had to confront Rachel. There was no other option.

"This is why I don't want to go swimming. I don't want Andrea to see."

"Put on your old tee shirt. Tell Andrea you're afraid you skin will burn."

She hugged me. "I think I love you best."

I closed my eyes so she wouldn't see my tears. Though I feared and distrusted my tenant she had captivated my son and Ted Thomas. Ted paid her rent. My son lusted after her. They would believe her lies. Would Rachel stop abusing her daughter if I threatened to tell Ted about her affair with Andrew? While I didn't believe in blackmail, some action had to be taken before Susie's spirit was as bruised as her body.

The girls spent two hours at the pool. I napped and joined them for the second hour. Susie's animated behavior pleased me. I wished I could pack a suitcase full of pleasure for her to take home.

We dressed for dinner and ate in the motel dining room. Then we made plans for the remainder of the stay. Tuesday and Thursday would be spent at the amusement part. On Wednesday we would explore the area's other attractions. By nine both girls slept. I drank mint tea and read.

* * * * *

Before seven the next morning the girls bounced out of bed. Though as usual I'd awakened at six, knowing there would be miles to walk at the park, I had stayed in bed. The park didn't open until ten so there was time for a leisurely breakfast.

Long before ten we followed a line of cars into the parking lot. As more vehicles arrived and busses dropped off passengers, the girls insisted on going to the gates. We strolled after a stream of people. Andrea darted around clusters and waved for Susie and me to hurry. Though quiet, Susie quivered with eagerness.

Just inside the gate we bought a map. Years ago my husband and I had come here with Andrew. The park had expanded. Andrea sat on a bench and took a pen from the side pocket of my handbag. "I want to ride everything." She turned to Susie. "What about you?"

I reached for the map. "We have all day and most of the evening. We will not dash about."

Andrea grinned. "I'll be good."

My granddaughter is an organized rider. After the pair completed a ride, she marked a circle or an X. The X meant she wanted to ride again. For most of the day I sat on a bench and waited for them. They coaxed me onto the Ferris Wheel, the Tower, the Sky Lift, the Merry-go-round and the monorail that goes around the park. Susie smiled, then laughed and finally entered into the day with an enthusiasm to match Andrea's.

After dinner we sat through one of the shows. Then the girls persuaded me to go on a water ride. As we plunged down an incline and hit the bottom in a huge wave, the girls screamed and I laughed.

"There's a park not far from home with all water rides," Andrea said. "Can we go there next?"

"One park is enough for me this summer." I wiped my face.

"I'll ask Dad to take us."

A strange look crossed Susie's face. Did she know about her mother and Andrew? I patted her hand. "Are you all right?"

She nodded.

Before my thoughts spiraled downward, Andrea grabbed Susie's hand and pulled her to another ride. At nine o'clock two tired girls and I returned to the motel. They were asleep soon after we reached the room.

Sometime during the night a wail woke me. At first I thought Robespierre wanted fed. Then I remembered I wasn't home and switched on a light. The pain-filled sounds came from Susie. She sat against the head of the bed and held her hands as though fending off an attack. "Please, Mommy. I'll be good." Though her eyes were open no awareness shone in them. "Don't hit me. I don't know what you want. How can I be good if you don't tell me how?"

I felt no pleasure at having my suspicions confirmed. Were those the nightmares Rachel had warned me about? Could I wake the child without frightening her?

"It's only a bad dream." I pitched my voice low and stood beside the bed where she and my granddaughter slept. Though I wanted to take her in my arms I kept my hands at my sides. "It's all right. You are a good girl." My crooning words continued.

She shuddered. "Mrs. Miller."

"Come and tell me about your dreams." I sat on a chair. She stood beside me.

"I dreamed about today. Then Mommy came and spoiled the fun. She hit me. Tim hit me. Uncle Willie stood and watched. Then she hit him. Tim danced around and laughed. She hugged him."

"Are you afraid of her?"

She nodded. "But I love her. She hates me. I ruined her life. Daddy loved her 'til I came." An outburst of sobs shook her body. "She kisses Tim all the time and hugs him. She always tells me to go away."

I pulled Susie into my arms and let her cry. When she settled I tucked her in beside Andrea. Damn Rachel. I had to act for Susie's sake. How the child survived her mother's treatment was beyond my understanding.

* * * * *

We woke to find the weather had turned from sun to gloom. Dark clouds filled the sky. The weatherman on television promised scattered showers and the chance of thunderstorms during the morning and afternoon.

"Good thing we're not going to the park," Andrea said. "I bet they close most of the rides."

"The pool here, too," Susie said.

The girls looked as glum as the skies. "Up and dressed, we have places to go."

We began our day with a tour of Chocolate World. On my last visit here, we'd taken a tour of the factory. I remembered the overwhelming aroma of chocolate. Though less cloying the tour was fun. We rode through the exhibit and listened to a tale of the history and making of chocolate.

In the gift shop we collected our free gifts. I purchased presents for family and friends. I even bought a tee shirt for Tim. Susie and Andrea bought huge Hershey Kisses for their mothers.

Since I had guessed the girls would want to buy chocolate I'd put ice from the motel in the small cooler. After stowing the gifts we drove to the museum. For nearly two hours we examined artifacts. The music boxes fascinated Susie. Twice we stopped to watch the Apostle's clock.

By the time we finished at the museum the girls claimed starvation. We rode the bus to an old-fashioned drugstore for sandwiches and ice cream sodas. Then we headed to the zoo.

All our trips were taken between showers. The rain made my leg ache but I couldn't leave Hershey without a visit to the gardens. The flowers delighted me and bored the girls though they pretended interest. By the time we returned to the motel the clouds had vanished. Andrea grabbed her bathing suit. "To the pool."

"Sure." After Susie changed into her suit and tee shirt she lingered. "I'm glad you were here last night. Please don't say anything to Mommy."

"I'm afraid she'll really hurt you."

"Please." She bolted from the room.

What a dilemma. How could I speak but how could I keep silent?

* * * * *

We spent our last day at the amusement part. This time the girls rode their favorite rides. Though Andrea wanted to stay until the park closed, by dinner they were tired of the lines and the sun. We returned to the motel and watched a movie.

The next morning we ate breakfast and were on the road by eight. Four hours later we stopped for lunch.

As we drove into town, Susie sighed. "I hate to see the trip end."

"Me, too," Andrea said. "I'm going to make a dance about our trip and you can make the music."

"Maybe."

I parked the car in the driveway and opened the trunk. We carried our suitcases to the porch.

Susie hugged me. "Thank you. I had fun. I can't wait to tell Mommy about the trip and give her the present."

"Go then." I prayed the meeting with her mother would bring a moment of the love Susie craved.

She turned. "Do you want the clothes?"

"They're yours."

"Oh, thank you." After a second hug she carried the suitcase and the bag with the gifts inside.

Andrea ran upstairs. I followed. Robespierre met us at the door. He butted our legs with his head. Andrea sat on the floor and scratched his head. I opened a can of his food.

"Knock, knock," Paul carried our suitcases inside. "Was on my way to feed the old boy. Didn't expect you back so soon."

"The girls were up early and there was no sense hanging around the motel. Thanks for the delivery service. How's Maria?"

"Fine." His voice seemed strained. "She and Sarah have ended their quarrel. Rachel's been too busy to have much time for her." He reached for the door. "Be back later."

His abrupt departure made me wonder what had happened while I was away. The cryptic comment about Rachel raised some questions I wasn't sure I wanted answered. I walked to the living room to call Ruth.

Twenty minutes later she arrived. Dark shadows filled her eyes. What had Andrew done?

She refused my offer of tea. "I'll call you later. I need to talk but not now. Andrea, let's go home."

"I'll be here when you're ready. Andrea was a delight. I'm sure you'll hear everything on the way home."

"There's so much." Andrea picked up her bag of presents. Ruth carried the suitcase. "Wait 'til I tell you about all the rides and how Grandma got splashed."

Ruth shook her head. "Sounds like you'll need a week to recover."

"Just one night in my own bed." I followed them downstairs and stood on the porch until Ruth's car turned the corner. One question nagged. What had my son done?

Chapter 8

As I headed for my apartment Rachel appeared. "Good afternoon." I smiled. "Susie was a delight."

Her hands rested on her hips. "What's the big idea of buying her all those clothes? She doesn't deserve them. I don't want her getting big ideas. Don't think you can make me feel guilty either." She smiled. "I won't leave your son alone no matter how much you spend on the brat." She blocked my path to the stairs.

"I bought the clothes for Susie because I wanted her to have some pretty things."

She laughed. "I know about all your prying and spying."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because I can." Her eyes narrowed. "Maybe I want what your son will give me. You don't know what it's like to scrape and do without. Andrew's ripe. I'll pluck him and suck him dry. His rigid stick of a wife can't compete. She doesn't give him what he needs. I do." Her hands trailed from her hips to her breasts.

"What about Ted?"

"He had his chance." The sneer on her face made me wish for a camera. All traces of beauty had vanished.

"Who will pay your rent?"

"You've got the wrong idea. Ted's still sniffing. I'll drop him but not yet. He'll never walk away." She stepped toward me. "Tell you what. Sign this house over to me and I'll drop Andrew so fast he'll have a concussion."

I gripped the cane. "No."

Her laughter raised gooseflesh. "So be it. Your son's happy family is dust. Your granddaughter is gonna learn how it is to want things and do without the way it was for me. Believe me, when I finish with him there'll be nothing left."

Fury kept me speechless. I brushed past her and stumbled on the door sill. At least I think I stumbled. Someone grabbed my arm and kept me from falling.

"You've got to be more careful."

I turned my head. Willie had been my rescuer. "Thanks."

"It's about time you showed up," Rachel said.

He grinned. "Susie's home and so am I. Was you worried about your old uncle? Was to the doctor's this morning. News weren't good."

"Don't give me that. You want an excuse to drink. Since you're home, stay with the brat." She marched across the lawn to the Prescott's house and deliberately tramped through one of the mint beds. At the door she turned and waved.

Susie crept from the apartment. Tears rolled down her cheeks. "I hate her."

"What's wrong?"

"Chocolate makes her break out."

"That's a shame."

"She ruined my new clothes." She threw her arms around me.

Willie stared at his grandniece. "You don't have new clothes. Your daddy's check came while you were gone. She spent the whole thing on herself."

"I bought Susie some things for the trip." I held the trembling child close.

"She said I was ugly and pretty clothes wasn't gonna change my looks." Her tears wet my blouse.

"Maybe I can repair them."

Susie shook her head. "She cut them with that sharp knife. She said she wished we'd been killed in a car wreck." With an anguished cry she ran into the apartment.

I released my held breath. "Something should be done about Rachel. She's spoiled and evil."

Willie shook his head. "You should have seen her as a child. All golden and sunshine. How can she have so much hate? I weren't good enough to her."

I walked to the edge of the porch. "Maybe you did too much. She's greedy." I tapped my cane against the floor. "I won't let her destroy Susie. The child has too much love to give but before too long it will be buried beneath anger and hatred. Why don't you stop wallowing in false guilt and do something for the child? You'll never change your niece."

He raised his hands in a gesture signaling helplessness. "What can I do?"

"Tell Susie's father. The next time Rachel hits Susie, call the police. Hold your money back. Do whatever you think will work." I stomped from the porch. My cane hit the ground with a dirge-like rhythm. I marched across the street.

Sarah answered the door. "You look ready to have a stroke. Bad trip?"

"Good trip. It's that woman." I handed her the bag with the gifts for the children.

"Rachel."

"Who else?" I told Sarah about all that had occurred in the short time since my return.

She shook her head. "She's wicked. She's been busy since you and the girls left."

"Andrew?"

"Among others. She had a fight with her uncle and pushed him down the porch steps. Ted and she had a real row. I thought I'd have to call the police. He pushed her out of the car and she landed on her rump. A short time later Andrew arrived. Then yesterday Paul dropped by her apartment and was there for an hour."

"Paul? Are you sure?"

"I was on my way over to see if Maria needed a ride to the doctor's tomorrow. She thought Paul was working at the shop through lunch. I met him on the sidewalk. He said he'd come to feed the cat. I thought he meant Robespierre."

I laughed though what she'd said wasn't funny. "He was afraid of this." The coffee tasted as bitter as my thoughts.

"He should be shot." Sarah slapped her hand on the table. "He saw what she is. How could he fall for her line?"

"I'm not a man but I can think of a number of reasons. Abstinence, her teasing and seductive ways. She's been after him since Maria told her what the doctor had said about sex."

Sarah bit her lip. "What are you going to do?"

"Go home. Call Lars for the name of a good attorney. Rachel said she'd drop Andrew if I'd give her the house."

Sarah choked on the coffee. "You wouldn't."

I waited for her to catch her breath. "No." That might save my son but there was Susie, Paul, Maria, Ted, Willie and even her son to be saved from Rachel's self-centered greed.

* * * * *

On Friday morning Bessie Greene arrived to do the weekly cleaning. I made my phone calls and felt disappointed to learn the attorney Lars had recommended was out of town for a week.

Did another week's delay matter? I jotted the appointment time on the calendar. No amount of waiting would lessen my determination to rid my house of an unwanted tenant.

The mournful spiritual sung fortissimo clashed with the steady honking of a horn. Wondering who was in such a hurry I walked to the window. Sarah's minivan stood at the end of the Prescott's driveway. Maria hurried down the walk and got into the car. I recalled Sarah's mention of Maria's doctor's appointment.

Ten minutes later Bessie had progressed to the kitchen and the "Blues." I glanced outside and saw Paul hurrying down the street. Since he'd forgotten to bring my mail, I grabbed my cane and walked downstairs. Paul had disappeared. Then I heard his voice raised in anger followed by Rachel's laughter. I headed for the backyard,

Sarah's van pulled into the Prescott's driveway. Maria ran up the walk to the house. I hurried across the lawn to intercept her but I failed. A near nude Rachel clung to Paul. Maria screamed. The cry held the sound of pain, anger and disappointment.

Paul pulled away from Rachel. He spoke but Maria's anguished screams drown the words. She put her hand over her mouth. The cries stopped but echoes of her sorrow hung like notes of doom.

"I thought you could not leave the shop this day," Maria cried. "Why have you come to this house?"

Rachel donned her aqua robe. With one hand on her hip she held the robe closed. "I called and he came to me. I told you all men were alike. You won't give him what he wants. I can."

"You cannot have my husband the way you have the son of Mrs. Miller." Contained fury colored Maria's voice. "I see Dr. Andrew come in the night while the madre is away. This matter belong to you and him. Paul is my husband. He is my business. I will tear you to pieces." She ran toward them and tripped over the low fence separating the yards.

Paul ran to her. "Maria, I'm sorry. I love you."

Tears spilled down her face. "The baby, he come. The pain come like the other times."

I grabbed Paul's arm. "I'll stay with her. Call the doctor."

Rachel's taunting laughter caused him to turn. "Damn you."

"I wasn't alone. You were eager and willing."

"Go." I pushed him to the house.

Sarah strode across the street. "What's wrong?"

"Maria believes she's in labor. Paul's calling to the doctor. Run to my apartment for my purse. We'll take her to the hospital in my car."

When Paul returned, he lifted Maria and carried her to my car. Maria bit her lip. Tears flowed.

"Damn her," Paul said. "I'll kill her."

“No.” Maria’s voice rose. “The blame belongs to me. I have thought she was my friend. I tell her things I should not say to any person. She is beautiful like the orchid living off other people.”

“I knew what she was,” Paul said.

Though Paul and Marie tried to take the blame, I knew the responsibility was mine for not checking the lease earlier and not seeing my son had signed the copy Ted had sent me. Wanting to help Susie had kept me from prompt action. Silently I echoed Paul’s threat. I’ll kill her.

“She should be shot,” Paul said.

My thoughts ran to a slow and painful death. I pulled into the emergency room driveway, parked the car and hurried inside ahead of Paul and Maria. The triage nurse looked up. “Katherine, what’s wrong?”

“My neighbor. Threatened abortion.”

She moved from behind the desk and located a wheelchair. “Dr. Lloyd?” I nodded. “Go right up. He’s on his way.”

* * * * *

For two days Maria’s cramps disappeared and the doctor thought the crisis had passed. On Monday morning Paul called and asked me to come to the hospital. Maria had lost the baby and had to go to the operating room. He didn’t want to wait alone.

Neither of us spoke. What comfort could I offer? Guilt and anger roiled inside like a pair of dice. When the doctor came through the double doors we both jumped to our feet. The doctor put his hand on Paul’s shoulder. “No more pregnancies.”

“Forever?” Paul asked. “She wants a baby.”

“There are other ways to have children. She needs time to heal. In a year or two we can reassess.” He strode away.

Paul’s shoulders slumped. He turned to me. His eyes screamed of his pain and guilt. “What am I going to tell her? All this grief for a few minutes of relief.”

“I’m as much to blame. I should have taken the steps to evict her.”

He shook his head. “I’ve been around and I knew what kind of woman she was. Maria is an innocent and trusting. I was a fool.” He slumped on one of the chairs. “I went to feed Robespierre. She came into the hall and asked if I could replace one of the ceiling light bulbs. Like a good neighbor, I followed her into her bedroom and fell into her trap. She laughed. Said she couldn’t wait to tell Maria that I was no hero. I didn’t want Maria to know so I continued to see Rachel. Will Maria ever trust me again?”

“You’ll have to show her that she can.”

He swallowed. His hands tightened on mine. “I’d like to strangle Rachel.”

The determination in his voice startled me. I could see him making the threat into reality. “What would that give Maria except another sorrow?”

“You’re right but squeezing her neck would feel so good.”

Deep inside I hoped I could convince him to think of Maria first.

* * * * *

I returned from the hospital determined to speak to Andrew about my decision to have Rachel evicted. I called his office and left a message with his secretary for

him to call. Maria's loss had solidified my resolve. Unlike Rachel, I preferred to deal openly. Tears born of anger, guilt and frustration soaked three hankies, two more than I usually carry.

The afternoon dragged. Since I waited for Andrew's call, I couldn't go across the street to Sarah's. My thoughts were circular. What should I do? What should I say to my son? A knock at the door scattered my unresolved questions. I left the window seat and unlocked the door. "Andrew, what are you doing here?" I had hoped to tell my truths with him on the other end of the phone line.

"What's wrong? Mary said you sounded militant when you asked me to call. Nothing can be that bad."

"Maria lost the baby."

He frowned. "I know you're close to the Prescotts but hasn't she miscarried before?"

"Let's sit down. I have a number of things to say and I'm not standing while I say them. The miscarriage isn't why I'm angry." I returned to the window seat.

"I don't understand."

"You wouldn't. You've been blinded by her surface glitter."

"Mom!"

"Let's start at the beginning. Did you have any idea what kind of woman Rachel was when Ted conned you into allowing her into my house?"

He sat on the sofa. "I knew she was divorced and having trouble gaining custody of her children."

"Didn't that make you wonder?"

He leaned forward. "I know you don't like her. That has troubled her since she has no idea what she's done to alienate you."

I laughed. "She knows. She's plastic and she's setting up her nasty business in my house."

"How can you say that?"

"I have eyes and ears. There's Ted, several men whose names I don't know, you and Paul. I don't like my house being used by a woman with no morals."

"You're wrong. She's my patient." He looked away.

"You visited her while the girls and I were in Hershey. You stayed several hours."

"She called. She and Ted had a fight. She threatened suicide."

I rose from the window seat. "Pity she didn't succeed. That's not why you stayed. I saw the pair of you on the Fourth, just as she meant."

He glared. "What Rachel and I do is my business."

His expression showed no guilt or shame. "What I do is mine. I have an appointment with an attorney next week to talk about the lease. You had no right to sign. You and I discussed this. Ted had a conflict of interest when he didn't make the changes I wanted."

"You can't throw her out in the street. What about her children?"

"What about Ruth and Andrea?"

"This has nothing to do with my family."

"How can you say that?"

"Rachel needs me in ways Ruth never did." He combed his fingers through his hair. "Ruth is strong and I'll always see my daughter has everything she needs."

“Except a father.”

“I’m not leaving my family. I need to sort out what I feel and what I want. Maybe I’m in love with Rachel or it could be her need for security draws me.”

“Baloney.”

“Mom, please.”

I fisted my hands on my hips. “Lust. You like sleeping with her. Sneaking around gives you a thrill. I can’t tell you how to live your life but I don’t have to allow her to live here. She caused Maria’s miscarriage. She seduced Paul and taunted Maria. Her daughter’s back is covered with bruises. She threatened Sarah’s boys. As long as Rachel lives in this house, you’d be wise to keep Andrea away.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

Why had I shouted everything I knew? “There’s no sense talking to you. I’ve made my decision. She goes.”

“What about her children?”

“They can go to their father.” I entered the kitchen.

“He doesn’t want them. He put them in a boarding school.”

“He couldn’t raise them alone. He’s married now.”

“You can’t take her children away. She loves them. They belong with her.”

“Tell that to the child who cried in my arms. The one whose nightmares woke me. She was pleading with her mother not to hit her again.”

“Susie’s a pathological liar.”

“I didn’t know you saw the children. Did you speak with Susie?” I filled a tea ball.

“Rachel told me.” He shook his head. “You won’t believe anything she says.”

“You’re right. You’re afraid to listen to the truth. Deep inside you know Rachel’s not the helpless woman you’ve created.” I turned to face him. “She offered to give you up if I would give her this house. Wait until she asks for yours.”

He walked to the door. “Mom, stay out of this. I love you. I don’t want to quarrel with you.”

After he left I sat on a kitchen chair and cried. How can he be so blind? She didn’t want anything but the power her body gave her to lure and destroy.

For several minutes I wondered if I had set these flaws in my son. Andrew had been twelve when my husband died. Had I failed in some manner? I banged my cane against the floor with rhythmic beats until my anger faded. Then I turned the kettle on and walked to the living room. Andrew’s car remained in the driveway.

A scream built in my chest. The urge to walk for miles went unanswered. How could I leave the apartment and chance meeting Rachel and my son?

A timid tap on the door forced me to put my anger aside. Susie stood on the top step. “Mommy said I should keep you company. Why was she kissing Andrea’s dad?”

“I don’t know. Run in and practice.”

Susie sat on the bench and softly stroked the keys forming a sweet and sad song. I sat on the window seat and copied the notes. I knew how Paul felt. Having Rachel’s throat between my tightening hands would be a treat. Hatred stronger than any emotion I’ve every felt built.

I'm not sure how long Susie played the piano before Rachel appeared in the doorway. "Susie, downstairs."

The child fled. I put the sheets of music aside.

Rachel crossed her arms on her chest. "Andrew said you were upset and intended to see a lawyer. Cancel the appointment. Andrew and I are adults. Some fancy-talking attorney might decide I have a better case."

"What do you mean?"

"Malpractice. A suit would ruin your son. Having sex with a patient is a no no." She laughed,

"Is that a wise move? He'll fight."

"Doesn't matter. He thinks I love him."

"Are you sure he does? He could just be scratching an itch."

She lit a cigarette and dropped the match on the Aubusson carpet. "I told him we should cool things. You should have heard him beg. There wasn't an inch of me he didn't kiss."

"Get out of my apartment." Though a fury raged inside my voice remained calm.

She laughed. "I'm on my way. Sure can't wait for Andrea's next visit. Susie's gonna tell her about her daddy and me."

What a dreadful position for Susie. "What do you want?" With measured steps I walked toward her.

"Free rent. Would get Ted off my back." She opened the door. "I'll marry Andrew. He's so easy to control."

After she left I slumped at the kitchen table. How could I stop her? Short of murder there didn't seem to be another option.

* * * * *

Some time on Sunday Tim returned from camp. The next two days he sat on the porch taunting Larry and Jamal. Sarah's boys retreated to their backyard. Tim laughed. Did he feel the same heady sense of fire his mother savored when she manipulated the men in her life?

On Wednesday Sarah called and asked me for the keys to the Prescott's house so she could clean before Maria returned. "I'll help. Meet you there in ten minutes."

We joined forces on the sidewalk. As we crossed the lawn, the back door of Rachel's apartment opened. Susie fled down the steps.

Tim followed. "Get back here. Mommy said you was to fix my lunch."

"I don't want to."

"Why not? Mommy said that's all you're good for. Girls are supposed to take care of men." He grabbed her arm and raised his fist.

I took a step toward them.

Sarah caught my arm. "Don't interfere."

"I can't allow him to harm her."

While trying to fend off his attack, Susie struck a lucky blow. Blood spurted from Tim's nose. "Mommy, Mommy," he screamed. "Susie hit me."

Rachel raced from the house. She shook Susie. "Cow. How many times have I told you not to touch him? You deserve every blow he lands on your ugly body."

Sarah took the keys from me and strode to the house. I stared at the scene. Willie came outside and grabbed Rachel's arm. "I told you not to hit Susie again."

She wheeled to face him. "I'll do as I please. You're drunk." She swung and connected with his jaw. He landed on the grass. Her laughter chilled me.

"I'm leaving and I won't be back," he said.

"Good." Her hands rested on her hips. "Susie's headed for the funny farm. Tim and I don't need you."

"Why are you so jealous of a child?"

Containing my anger was impossible. "She's afraid of the future. In a few years Susie will make her look plastic and jaded."

Rachel stared at me. "Keep out of this, witch. I told you what I'd do if you interfered."

I walked to the Prescott's porch. Willie shambled toward town.

"Get back here," Rachel screamed. "I'm not done with you."

Willie continued walking. Good for him. I entered the house where I heard water running and the clatter of dishes.

As I entered the kitchen, Sarah turned. "You're still in one piece."

"Her uncle arrived first. He left. Said he wouldn't be back."

Sarah laughed. "He'll return. She doesn't let go of her men."

I grabbed a dish towel. "She's having Susie labeled as emotionally disturbed. I'm so ashamed."

"Why?"

"Andrew's helping her. I waited too long to act." I pushed her to the door. "Let me handle the kitchen. Dishes suit my mood. There's a lot to be done. He keeps the shop and store neat but he couldn't manage here."

Sarah smiled. "Maybe the next generation of men will be more self-sufficient. My boys can cook, clean and do laundry."

As I recalled Tim's demand for Susie to make his lunch I frowned. "They're exceptions. There are a lot of Tims who have been taught to see women as servants. Your boys might find women trained to serve and all your teaching will be wasted."

Chapter 9

The next day at eleven o'clock, Sarah and I waited on the Prescotts' front porch. Since his vehicles are a van and a truck, Paul had borrowed my car to bring Maria home. The horn tooted. Sarah and I waved and left the porch.

"Look at them," Sarah said. "That's obscene."

At first I thought she meant Paul and Maria who stood in an embrace. My gaze followed Sarah's pointed finger. Rachel lay face down on a blanket. Tim knelt beside her and applied lotion to her back.

"Ignore them."

We continued toward our friends. Paul held Maria's hand. From a distance they looked like a pair of lovers. When they reached me I saw Maria's sad expression and the anger in her eyes. Paul looked guilt-ridden.

“Maria,” Tim called.

Rachel stood and stretched. “Behold the tragic heroine and the frog prince. You know if you had stayed on your side of the fence, we might still call you Mommy.”

Maria released Paul’s hand. She took two steps toward the fence. “Come inside, honey,” Paul said.

“I will have the facing with her.” Maria walked to the fence. “I have belief you were my friend but you do not have friendship for anyone. Outside you have beauty but inside is the rot. One day the men will not want you. Already your breasts fall. Lines come to your face and more paint is needed to hide them.”

“Spic,” Rachel shouted.

“I am from Castile and proud.”

Paul pulled Maria toward the house. Sarah’s gaze raked Rachel. She turned and followed the couple into the house. At the door, she turned. “Maria’s right. You have about two good years left.”

“You never had any. Your husband doesn’t sniff after other women. He’s so ugly no one would want him.”

Sarah’s hands clenched. For an instant I thought she would attack Rachel.

“Mrs. Miller, don’t you have anything to add?”

I turned my back on her and entered the house.

Paul held Maria close. “Don’t cry. She’s not worth your anger.”

Tears flowed down Maria’s cheeks. “She make me too angry to close my mouth. I have the hatred for her.”

“Please,” Paul said.

She looked at him. “I have these words I must say. She kill our baby. Not you, not me. Someday I do the same to her. I will wait for the good time. You are a fool like many men. She know you have need and she play like the cat play with the mouse. She talk about all the men she have. She say one is not enough to give her the ease.”

“Stop it,” Paul said.

“I need the poison gone. She say she can have any man she want. I say not you. She do not like to hear no.”

Paul nodded. “I know.”

“Mrs. Miller’s son, too. She think Dr. Andrew own the house. She want the house. She and Ted have the bet. He tell her the bet is gone. She is angry. She say Dr. Andrew is hungry. Hungry men make the best lover. You had the hunger, too. We will put that away, smile and find new happiness. We have love, not hunger.”

I stood in the kitchen door and silently approved her decision.

Paul kissed her. “You’re amazing. I love you.”

After setting the table for four, I returned to the doorway. “Paul, are you joining us for lunch?”

Paul looked at the clock. “Rain check. I’ve a lunch appointment with a man who’s opening a new restaurant. Wants to talk about furniture.” He walked to the door.

After the door closed behind him Maria joined Sarah and me in the dining room. “Mrs. Miller, this is like the day when you come home from the hospital.”

Not exactly. On that day there'd been no Rachel waiting to infect us. I wished Andrew had heard the things Maria had said. Would he have listened? I feared not.

Maria put a sandwich and several salads on her plate. "I will say no more to Paul about my hatred. To you, my friends, I say many things. He is a man and do not understand. I think many times to see Rachel dead but I do not want these hands to do the killing."

Sarah reached for a sandwich. "I agree."

"But she did not give you the hurt."

"She threatened Jamal and she hit Larry."

I spooned potato salad on my plate. "She plans to hurt anyone who acts contrary to her wishes. I'll join the pact."

"How would you do it?" Sarah asked.

"I'd like to strangle her but she's stronger than I am. What if we design a mysterious way to kill her?"

"Maybe the Orient Express manner." Sarah sliced a tomato with one of the knives her husband had given to the neighbors.

"I do not know that way." Maria filled glasses with iced mint tea.

"A number of people stab the victim and no one knows who struck the fatal blow," Sarah said.

"With our luck we'd all end in jail," I said.

"On the television I see how there are men who kill for money," Maria said. "We could make the collection."

Sarah giggled. "I don't think there's a Dial-a-killer number. What about this for an idea? Bob and I saw a nail gun demonstrated. I could buy one and come over to mend the fence and accidentally trip and shoot a nail into her chest."

"Silver nails would be good for killing vampires. How could you be sure she was there?"

"She does the sunbathing every day when there is no rain." Maria shook her head. "Mrs. Sarah, she would not let you come near her." She turned to me. "Could you make the tea from mint leaves and some poison plant?"

"I could but how many people around here make their own tea? Pete wanted me to become more involved in crime. He didn't mean for me to turn killer. Maybe we could stuff her in a piano while I played a stormy concerto. The wires would slice her."

"In the piano just like Hansel and Gretel." Sarah laughed so hard she nearly choked.

"Like the witch." Maria giggled. "The children push her in the oven. The piano would be very unclean."

I envisioned the mess and joined Sarah's hysterical laughter. Anger dissipated and our laughter ended. Though the discussion had become frivolous, I continued to worry. Talking can precipitate action.

After lunch Maria went upstairs to rest. Sarah and I washed the dishes. I wrote Paul instructions for cooking the casserole I'd made for their dinner. When we left I locked the door. Sarah hurried across the street to relieve her teenage sitter. I walked across the lawn and up the steps to the porch.

Susie huddled on one of the wicker chairs. I paused. "Want to come up for a lesson?"

"Can't." She raised her head. A triple line of scratches marked her cheek. "I'm not allowed to talk to you but she's not home. She's sending me away. I love her. Why doesn't she love me? Why does she lie about me? I don't think she loves anyone."

I ached to comfort her but I couldn't lie. "She loves Tim."

Susie shrugged. "She yells at him, too. Then she hugs and kisses him. It's not fair." She jumped up and went inside.

Upstairs the ringing phone greeted me. "Hello."

"Mother Miller," Ruth said. "I was afraid you weren't home."

"Just walked in. Maria came home from the hospital this morning. Sarah and I made lunch for her."

"How is she? If she needs someone to talk to who understands how she feels, have her call me."

I remembered the two babies Ruth had lost and her grief. "Did you want something special?"

"I'd like to cancel our Sunday afternoon. Andrea's spending the weekend with a friend. It's not that you're not welcome but Andrew and I need to talk."

"I don't mind. He and I had a disagreement yesterday. A vacation from our routine might be a good idea."

"Funny. He never mentioned anything to me. The two of you are never at odds."

I laughed. "Ask him about his teen years when I had to work three to eleven. This was over a business matter."

"There's something going on with him. We hardly see each other. When we do he's distant. Do you have any idea what's going on?"

I couldn't tell Ruth about Rachel. That was for Andrew. "Maybe it's a mid-life crisis."

She sighed. "I think it has to do with his practice. Maybe the threat of a law suit. Malpractice seems to be the fashion these days."

"I hope not. I'll see you a week from Sunday."

"Why don't Andrea and I come over next week? We can go to lunch and invite her friend, Susie along."

I nearly dropped the receiver. Even if Rachel permitted Susie to join us, the idea of such a jaunt made me ill. "Call me."

I hung up and bustled around the living room. Susie, Andrea and Ruth were innocents. How could I protect them? If Ruth and Andrea came here, Rachel would carry out her threat to force Susie to tell my granddaughter about her father. Susie was so eager for her mother's approval she would obey.

While I waited for tea to brew, I silently cursed my son. Would he tell Ruth he wanted another woman so badly he was willing to lie about the woman's child?

* * * * *

The next morning as I left for my early morning walk, I heard voices in the lower hall. I paused on the landing and identified the voices as Rachel's and Ted's. I paused and pressed into the shadows.

“You heard me. I want to start a malpractice suit. It’s easy money. If you won’t there are plenty of greedy lawyers who don’t care who they sue.”

“He’s my friend.”

“So?”

“You haven’t a chance of winning.”

She laughed. “So the truth comes out. Friendship doesn’t matter. Winning is what you want. Don’t worry. He’ll settle out of court.”

“He might decide to fight. Then where will you be?”

“I’ve proof. Remember the tape recorder and the camcorder you gave me?” She laughed. “I have an unusual collection of tapes. Some are of you. Care to listen and watch?”

He grabbed her shoulders. “You turn everything you touch into shit.”

“Even you? Hardly.” A hint of anger colored her voice. “You were shit before I met you and you haven’t changed. Play my game or I won’t play with you. No more visits to your office for a quickie. No more extended stays at your apartment or mine.”

“No more rent payments,” he countered. “No more court orders for support. No more petitions for Susie’s placement so you can get rid of her. I can play that game, too.”

“Damn you.”

“Someday you’ll end up dead. There’ll be too many suspects and no one will be arrested.” The door slammed.

What I’d just heard filled my thoughts. I left the house and walked to the river. Even the serenity of the water lapping against the shore failed to drive my knowledge away. Could I use this information to open Andrew’s eyes? If he refused to believe me, would Ted tell him the truth? For so many years the two had been friends and rivals. Until now in their competition neither had tried to hurt the other.

On my return to the apartment I drank mint tea and considered possible actions. Finally I reached for the phone. One Saturday a month Andrew had office hours. He answered on the first ring.

“Mom, what’s wrong?”

Nothing and everything I wanted to say. “If you’re not busy, I have several questions.”

He laughed. “No hello. No how have you been.”

I settled on the window seat. “Are you busy?”

“At the moment, no. Had a cancellation. Have you seen that lawyer yet?”

“I’m the one with questions. Are you helping Rachel have Susie placed?”

“I can’t answer that. Patient confidentiality.”

“Then tell Rachel to be quiet. She’s bragging about how she’s getting rid of her daughter.” I drew a deep breath. “Have you examined the child?”

“Not exactly. If you heard the stories Rachel tells me about the girl you’d understand. If I’d have known the extent of her disturbance I would never have permitted you and Andrea to go on that trip.”

“We were in no danger. Susie is. Rachel has cleverly blocked any effort to have child abuse complaints taken seriously. You have helped her. That shames me.”

“Mom, listen. Rachel woke up the night you returned to find Susie standing beside the bed with a knife. She fears being killed while she sleeps.”

“Hogwash. Rachel slashed the clothes I bought Susie and ruined them. If she’s so afraid why hasn’t she taken Susie to the therapist you recommended?”

“The cost.”

My grip on the phone tightened. “Rachel’s manipulating you.”

Andrew growled. “You’re blind because you fear Rachel is a threat to you. She’d not. Susie is.”

I clamped my lips together. “There’s no sense talking to you. I hope you have a good attorney when she sues you for malpractice.”

He laughed. “Where did you get such a ridiculous idea? Rachel won’t sue. She needs me. She loves me.”

“Ask Ted about malpractice and Rachel’s audio and video tapes.”

“Why would I talk to him? He’s jealous.” He paused. “See you tomorrow.”

“Goodbye.” I decided not to tell him Ruth had cancelled the plans. If he knew she wanted to talk to him, he would find a way to avoid a confrontation.

As I was about to hang up he spoke. “I wish you would try to understand. Since the day I met Ruth there’s never been another woman. Our life has settled and is boring. I need more.”

“The excitement of sneaking around and the lure of the forbidden.”

“Mom.”

“Andrew James Miller, you’re a fool. You’re throwing away a jewel for a chunk of plastic.” I slammed the receiver into the cradle. For the next ten minutes, I ignored the persistent ring. Nothing short of murder would keep him from throwing his life away.

* * * * *

Sunday passed without a call from Ruth or Andrew. I had dinner with Lars and we spoke about my fears. Though he sympathized with me, he urged patience and seeking legal advice. By Monday morning my fears had escalated. The heat and humidity had begun to rise.

Had Andrew told Ruth about the affair? Had he asked for a divorce? The unfairness of the situation bothered me. Ruth had done everything to make their marriage a success. In the doing she had given up her identity.

On Tuesday morning Ruth called. Though questions bombarded my thoughts, I kept them to myself. For a few minutes we concentrated on pleasantries.

“Grandma.” Andrea broke into the conversation. “Can we come over today? I miss Susie. It’s been ages since I saw her. She’s never home when I call. Could I come for lunch?”

Could I risk having her visit? “I’d have to check with Susie’s mother. Maybe tomorrow or the next day.”

“It will have to be tomorrow,” Ruth said. “Andrea and I are going to Nancy’s beach house for a few days.”

She knows, I thought. Ruth’s older sister is a top divorce attorney. The sisters have never been close. In the past their attitudes about every facet of living were polar. Ruth often joked about visiting her sister when she and Andrew decided to divorce.

"I see."

Ruth laughed. "It's not what you're thinking."

"Really."

"Andrea, off the extension, please."

"Okay, Mom. Grandma, don't forget to ask Susie's mom."

"If I see her." And I hoped I wouldn't.

Several seconds later Ruth spoke. "Andrew and I talked, rather I did. I've decided to go back to school."

"How did he react?"

"Completely supportive."

"Why this trip to your sister's?"

"She's in Europe. I thought a few days at the shore would give me time to think. Why don't you join us?"

With Ruth away, who would be here to keep Andrew from destroying himself? "I've too many things to do. Enjoy."

"We will. Call me tomorrow about Susie."

"I will."

* * * * *

That afternoon Sarah called and invited me for dinner. Thoughts of spending the evening with friends delighted me. Though the heat of the kitchen soared, I baked a chocolate cake. At a few minutes after five I carried the cake downstairs. Rachel, Susie and Tim lounged on the porch.

Rachel uncoiled from a chair and blocked my path. "He's coming to pick me up." She wore the white dress. The heavy scent of a musky perfume nearly choked me.

"That's nice." I tried to keep my voice bland.

"You can't stop me from having him."

I ignored her taunt and stepped around her. Though I wanted to lash out with my cane, I kept my anger contained.

Willie Hinch shambled down the street. He halted at the end of the walk. "Rachel, honey, it's your Uncle Willie come home. I've been missin' you."

"I haven't missed you." The strident tone of her voice rankled.

"Who's been watchin' the kids when you go out? Are you stayin' home?"

"They're fine alone at night."

"Steve know?"

"What does he care? He doesn't want them."

Willie strode up the walk. As he passed me, he nodded. "Thought I'd come home. School starts soon. Kids will need someone to get them up."

"Just Tim."

"You can't send Susie away."

Rachel moved to the top of the steps. "Why not? She goes next week."

Those words chilled me. I paused at the curb and looked back.

"Don't do this," Willie begged. "You'll regret it. When your folks died me and Martha took you in. We was family. Didn't want you stuck in no orphanage or foster home. Gave you everything you wanted. Why can't you do the same for your own child?"

Rachel's hands rested on her hips. "Never wanted her. Steve tossed my pills out. Said a kid would cool my ass. Sure as hell didn't. Let me tell you about living in your house and listening to Aunt Martha whine about her health. Putting up with your drinking. Remember when we came home from the funeral and I wanted to go out with my friends? Don't disrespect the dead. Then you pawed me and breathed your stinking alcohol breath in my face."

"Nothin' happened. Seem to remember you was the one who come to my room."

"And got nothing. You never were a man."

"Bought you things. Gave you money."

"You owed me. Go away. I don't need you."

"Let him stay," Susie cried. "I get scared at night when you're not home."

Rachel whirled. "Keep out of this. Who cares if you're scared? Won't be long before you're gone. Maybe they'll put you in a foster home where they'll beat you."

"Mrs. Randal's a foster mother. She doesn't beat Becca and Jamal."

Rachel grabbed Susie by the shoulders and shook her. "Keep your mouth shut. After all the things I told the social worker, they'll treat you like a vicious dog."

Willie grabbed Rachel. "Told you not to hurt her again. Don't care what you do to me but I'm gonna tell your fancy men just what you are."

Rachel pushed Susie away. The child stumbled across the porch. I started up the walk. Sarah grabbed my arm. I gasped. I hadn't seen her arrive.

"Stay out of this," Sarah said. "She doesn't care who she hurts."

I raised my cane. "I'll fight back."

"And have her manipulate things so you end up charged with assault."

Rachel punched Willie in the stomach. He pushed her. "I said I was gonna tell. You'll be the one put away. Ain't natural for a mother not to love her child."

"Let my mother alone." Tim fanned the air with his fists. One of his blows struck Rachel.

She slapped him. "Can't you stay out of things that don't concern you? You're nothing more than an accident."

He danced away. "You know them tapes you was making. The ones with the men." He laughed. "Got them all and you can't find them."

"Honey, give Mommy the tapes."

Willie laughed. "He's your kid."

"Mommy, I love you," Susie said. "I know where Tim hides things. I'll get them for you."

"Shut up, brat." Rachel walked toward her son. "Tim loves Mommy. He wouldn't do anything to hurt her. Give me the tapes."

Tim jumped down the steps and nearly ran into me. He dashed along the sidewalk. "I'm going to the deli. Found me some money, too."

"Get back here," Rachel shouted.

"Mommy, I love you." Susie tugged on her mother's arm.

"Shut up. Don't want your stupid love." Rachel paused at the top of the steps. "Have you two nosy witches gotten an earful? Mrs. Miller, forget what you just heard. Andrew's mine, every inch and every brain cell."

I put the cake holder in Sarah's hands. She started to speak but I nudged her toward the street. "Let it be. The entire neighborhood has heard."

"You're right," Sarah said. "My lips are sealed."

We remained at the curb until Rachel went into the house. Willie sat on one of the chairs holding a sobbing Susie. Though I wanted to add words of comfort, I knew my presence would trigger a renewal of the scene.

Chapter 10

After dinner Sarah took Becca and the twins upstairs for their baths and bed. Larry and Jamal sprawled on the living room floor staring at the television. Bob and I loaded the dishwasher. When we finished we carried glasses of white wine to the front porch. I stared at my house and sighed.

“Penny,” Bob said.

“They’re not worth that much.”

“She’s sure stirred Sarah.”

“The damage she’d done to so many people. This is the last time I trust Andrew’s judgment.”

As though my words had conjured him my son’s dark sedan pulled up to the curb. I gulped the remainder of my wine.

“Were you expecting Andy?” Bob asked.

“No. Rachel is.”

As Andrew strode up the walk, Tim strolled toward the house. He held a large paper bag. Rachel stepped onto the porch and into my son’s arms.

“What’s that about?” Bob asked.

“A fling. A mid-life crisis. A disaster. Andrew wants a divorce so he can marry her.”

“He’s a fool.”

“Is he? Honestly, what would you think if a woman like Rachel came on to you?”

Bob laughed. “Call a shrink for her. I’m not the kind of man women fall over. He’s good-looking, has money and prestige. I can’t see him falling for a line. Do you really think she’s the marrying kind?”

Sarah stepped outside. “She’s getting older and Rachel looks out for herself. She might want security.”

Andrew held the car door for Rachel. As they drove away she waved and blew a kiss. My lips tightened.

“The nerve,” Sarah said.

“Let’s talk about something less threatening to my mental health like war, pestilence or famine.”

Bob chuckled. “You’ll survive and be stronger.”

I lightly tapped his arm. “How many times did I say that to you, Ted and Andrew?”

“At least a million. I’ve found you were right.” He turned the conversation to the ad campaign that had used a pair of chimpanzees that brought laughter hard enough to cause tears. Tim ran to the house. He turned and yelled an obscenity.”

At close to nine I left the Randal’s house. A light and welcome breeze stirred the leaves on the trees. Willie sat on the porch. “Evenin’.”

“Good evening. Is Susie all right?”

“As good as she can be.”

“You tried.”

He shrugged. “Child cried herself to sleep. Tim’s watching TV. Sure is mighty pleased with himself. Never realized how much like her he is. Needs a man to keep him in line. I ain’t the one.”

“You tried,” I repeated.

“Sure hope he ain't too far gone to be saved.”

“What do you mean?”

“Can’t let her keep the kids. Called Steve. Told him how she treats Susie and lets Tim run wild. Told him I’d back him in court if he wants them back.”

“That’s a good move.”

“Not that he believed me. Him and his new missus are too busy travelin’ to have kids around. His fault for the way Rachel turned.”

“How old was she when she came to you?”

“Susie’s age. You should have seen her as a child. All golden and sunshine.”

I edged to the door. “Gold and sunshine can blind a person.”

“Sure do. Reflect without showing what’s inside.” He sighed. “Saw the doctor today. Tumor’s growing. Wanted me to do the chemo stuff. Told him weren’t for me. Gettin’ harder to walk. Be an invalid soon.”

I touched his shoulder. “Try the chemo. I’ve seen people given a year or two more they wouldn’t have had.”

He shook his head. “Don’t want the pain of livin’ no more. Drink don’t stop what I feel. Got to see Susie and Tim settled afore I can’t do for them.”

“Let me know if I can help.”

“Will do.” He sighed again. “Rachel’s gonna hurt Susie. I just know she is. When Rachel don’t get her way she gets mad enough to kill. She’s been building a real anger for months.”

His pronouncement made me shudder. Rachel’s anger had infected so many of the people I cared about. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Before I entered the house, Maria called. “Mrs. Miller, I have come to have the talk.”

I walked to the edge of the porch. Her swollen eyes and the blotches on her creamy complexion spoke of recent tears. “Do you want to come upstairs?”

She shook her head. “I do not heal good. The doctor want to do the operation. I say no.”

I left the porch and went to her. “Have you talked to Paul?”

“I have not tell him but he talk about adoption. He say the child is for me but I do not have that belief. A man has a need for a son of his blood.” She met my gaze. Tears spilled from her eyes. “Tonight I wait for Rachel and tell her what she have done.”

“Will she care?”

“I have not forget what she say. I have seen what she do to her child. I have the knife. I have the courage to kill her.”

Willie hobbled across the porch. “Just go home and put killin’ her out of your head. You’re young and just might fool that doctor. Go home. Talk to your husband.”

Maria shook her head. "I cannot have the baby and I do not want Paul to think I am not the woman."

"Do you think having babies is what makes you a woman?" Paul paused beside the rose bushes at the side of the house. "I love you. Even if you don't give me children, we're a family." He held out his hand. "Let's go home. What do you think about calling your family? We can make arrangements for Bianca to come."

Maria turned to him. He brushed tears from her face. "I love you and I think we should have the talk."

I watched them walk away. They would solve their problems and be stronger.

"Fine people," Willie said. "Rachel hurt her. She hurts everyone." He shambled toward the door and vanished into the first floor apartment.

I walked upstairs, poured a large glass of iced mint tea and turned on a classical music station. I sat on the window seat. What was going to happen now? My thoughts drifted. The slam of a car door startled me. Andrew's car sped away. Rachel stood on the sidewalk and raised her fist.

Twenty minutes later, Ted arrived. He honked. Rachel ran to the car and they left.

The phone rang. "Hello."

"Mom, you were right about Rachel."

Those words didn't erase my worries. "Where are you?"

"At the office."

"Are you all right?"

"I'm okay but feel like a damn fool." He paused for a second. "I told Rachel I would divorce Ruth so we could marry. She laughed. All she wants is a guaranteed income. A half million paid in installments. She doesn't care what would happen to Ruth and Andrea as long as she gets what she wants. Otherwise she'll sue for malpractice."

"I hope you told her no."

"I haven't decided what to say. She has a case."

"So do you. You aren't the only man she's seduced. Paul would testify. So will Willie Hinch about her treatment of Susie."

"That's a different issue."

"Is it? You could say the seduction was her way of making you agree to seeing that her daughter was labeled and placed."

"But malpractice and the publicity."

"Other doctors have survived."

He groaned. "She would make sure the newspapers knew. What am I going to do?"

"First you need to tell Ruth and then hire a good attorney."

"I would like to kill Rachel."

"You aren't the first person to want that. Killing her won't solve the problem. Go talk to your wife." For an instant I thought I heard him sob.

"How can I tell her that I've been a fool? Every time she'd tried to talk I've pushed her away."

I paced about the room. "She loves you. She's going to be hurt but hearing about Rachel must come from you. How do you think she'd feel if your affair becomes front page news and catches her by surprise?"

He groaned again. "You're right. If she throws me out that's what I deserve. Would be much better if Rachel were dead."

I reached the window seat. "Her death would solve nothing. Ruth is well aware there's a problem."

He paused long enough for me to wonder if he'd hung up. "I'll tell her when she returns from the shore."

"Tonight."

"Tonight," he repeated.

After I hung up I went to bed and picked up a book. Robespierre curled beside me.

Sometime during the night a sound foreign to the usual night noises woke me. I went to the window and peered into the yard. The street light in front of the Randal's house was dark. I saw nothing and I couldn't decide what I had heard.

* * * * *

As usual, I woke around six, showered and dressed for my walk. The ache in my leg told me rain was on the way. Robespierre met me in the kitchen and butted my leg until I cleaned his bowl and fed him. At six thirty, fortified with a cup of mint tea, I lifted my cane, glanced at the cloud-darkened sky and left the apartment.

On the porch, I stared at the sky. Would I complete the walk before it rained? I glanced at the roses at the end of the porch. A scrap of white fluttered. Curiosity sent me across the porch.

I reached for the ragged scrap of cloth and gasped. When I looked over the railing, acid rose in my throat. I swallowed several times. Rachel's body sprawled among the bushes. Her arms and legs curved awkwardly. I hurried down the steps and around the porch. Even if I hadn't been a nurse, I would have recognized death.

On the ground several feet from her body I saw the knife. The blood on the blade seemed duller than the splotch of red on the bodice of her white dress. I bent to study the knife. The distinctive ivory bands on the black handle identified it as one of the knives Bob and Sarah had given as gifts last Christmas.

A rush of thoughts arose and threatened to engulf me. I heard voices crying for Rachel's death.

"Someday you'll end up dead and there'll be too many suspects for an arrest."

"I wait for her. I have the knife."

"You'll be sorry, sorry, sorry."

"I hate her. I wish she was dead."

"How about the Orient Express method?"

What should I do? The voices of my friends and loved ones brought my protective instincts into play. The possibility someone I knew had ended Rachel's life was strong. Once again I saw Tim slice the air with the knife. The day the Rodgers had moved in I had placed one of the knives on the tray of food. Neither had been returned. With a sudden thought, I knew even Susie could have wielded the knife.

I pulled a tissue from my pocket and wrapped it around the knife. After grasping the tissue I turned my back on Rachel, crossed the lawn and walked to the river.

I sat on the bench and stared at the tissue wrapped knife. Rachel was dead. Even in death she retained the power to destroy. Without the knife could the police prove a case against anyone? I walked down the steps to the shore. With a wide swing I hurled the knife and watched the white tissue and its burden vanish.

After washing my hands I waved them dry. A misting rain began. She's dead. Maybe there will be peace. I turned and began the walk home.

"Mrs. Miller, wait up." Pete Duggan jogged toward me. "Guess we were both fooled. Thought the rain would hold off. I'll walk you home."

"You don't need to."

"I'll accept some cookies for payment."

My plan had been to go home and call the police. Would Pete suspect I had seen her body when I set out on the walk? If he questioned me how could I answer?

He placed his hand on my arm. "You look upset. Your troublesome tenant?"

Before I answered, I considered how much I should say. "I'm almost numb to her shenanigans."

"Then what has you looking so glum?"

"Last night a friend told me he has cancer and he's refused chemo." Though Willie wasn't a real friend, his decision to help Susie made him more than an acquaintance.

Pete squeezed my hand. "Sorry." He cleared his throat. "What are you going to do about your tenant?"

"Pray March comes soon."

We crossed the street. As we neared my house, Pete stopped short. "Stay here."

"What is it?" I saw the white heap that was Rachel.

"I don't know. Just stay here."

As I waited for him I gripped the cane. Would I betray my prior knowledge when he asked me if I'd seen her earlier?

He headed back to me. "Give me your cell. Of all the times to leave mine at home."

"It's inside."

"You really should carry one when you're out walking." He gulped a breath. "It's your tenant."

"Is she?"

"Very. She's been stabbed." He shook his head. "You don't need to look."

"I've seen dead people."

"Not like this." He turned and walked away from me. "You probably would have found her on your way home."

As we walked upstairs, I grasped the railing. "Who did this?"

Pete laughed. "I'm sure you can name a few. One problem. The weapon's missing."

I opened the door. The knife wouldn't be found. "I'm not sorry."

"You don't have to be." He shook his head. "She was plastic." He dialed the phone and spoke in terse phrases. After hanging up he headed out the door. "Talk to you later."

When I heard the outer door close, I collapsed on a kitchen chair. Rachel was dead. Though the knowledge should have brought relief, recalling my recent

actions brought a wave of guilt. I cowered in the chair and hoped her killer would never be found.

Finally I corralled my thoughts and brewed a pot of mint tea. My nausea subsided. Breakfast. I took a loaf of unsliced bread from the keeper, reached in the drawer for a knife and found the twin to the one I'd tossed in the river. The knife clattered on the table. My appetite fled. Who had killed Rachel?

I carried a mug of tea to the living room and knelt on the window seat. My front lawn looked like the mob scene from a movie. Uniformed policemen, men in suits, green-garbed ambulance attendants swarmed over the grass and trampled flower beds. A man crouched beside the body. Flashbulbs and glares of light. Several patrol cars with lights flashing lined the curb. Cars headed for the Tappan Zee Bridge crawled past. The light rain continued.

The phone rang. I lifted the receiver. "What's going on?" Sarah asked.

"Rachel's dead. Pete and I found her."

"I'm surprised you're not down there directing them. Your yard's going to be a mess."

"Not as messy as our lives have been."

"True. What did she look like? How did it happen?"

"Pete wouldn't let me see her." I couldn't mention seeing her earlier. Rachel's body had been crumpled like a discarded department store dummy.

"Want me to come over? The sitter's here."

"I don't think the police will let you."

"I guess you're right," she said. "I'll come over as soon as I can."

A pot of tea later and I had come to grips with my decision to destroy the murder weapon. Rachel was dead. Whoever had killed her would have no reason to kill again.

Pete rapped on the door and stepped into the kitchen. "Body's gone."

"What about the children?"

"They're with her uncle. He called the father. The girl's hysterical. Keeps screaming she didn't want her mother dead."

I reached for the teapot and filled a mug for him. I pushed a tin of brownies across the table. "You don't think Susie killed her mother, do you?"

He shrugged. "Probably not." He took a brownie from the tin and bit into it. Then he picked up the knife I'd dropped on the table. He nodded. "She was stabbed with a blade like this."

"Are you going to arrest me?"

He laughed. "Arrest my partner? Why would I do that?"

"I had many reasons to hate her. She was a Typhoid Mary, spreading hate and dissention to every person she touched."

"And you are very protective of those you consider yours." He shook his head. "I can't picture you killing someone."

"I hated her." The words shot out.

"I know but I don't believe you killed her. Let's talk about last night."

I told him how Rachel had left with Andrew and then come home. "They had words. A short time later she left with Ted Thomas."

"Then?" he asked.

"I talked to Mr. Hinch and came up here. I didn't hear her come home. Though sometime during the night a sound woke me. I looked outside. The streetlight was out. I saw nothing."

"Can you describe the sound or have a clue to the time?"

I shook my head. "Just that something woke me around three or four."

He jotted what I told him in a notebook. "Let's talk about your neighbors and others."

"Do we have to?"

He turned the knife over and over. The steady clink of the metal against the table became annoying. "We do. It's me or one of the detectives."

Slowly I spoke of Rachel's impact on the neighborhood and on her family. Some of what I said he already knew. Incidents that seemed innocent took on sinister overtones. Pete stopped me to ask pointed questions. Finally I reached the end. "What now?"

He ate the rest of a brownie. "Everyone will be questioned."

"By you?"

"Probably not. These people are my neighbors. I won't be considered impartial."

"But you questioned me."

He nodded. "You're not a suspect."

"I hated her. I hated the way she destroyed people. How can you be sure I didn't wield the knife?"

"I just am. You'd be more likely to find a way to protect the killer." He paused and grinned. "Like dispose of the weapon."

I studied my hands. A lucky guess or did he have some knowledge? "I could have."

"If you did no one will ever find it."

I met his gaze for an instant. "What happens now?"

"With the investigation?"

"As in funeral."

"The body will be released in three to five days at the most."

"That soon. What if they haven't found the killer by then?"

"They'll have the evidence. Killer might never be found." He spun the knife until it revolved like a roulette wheel. Then he picked it up and headed for the door. "See you." He paused and saluted.

For a long time I stared at the table. Then I rose, went to the bathroom, showered and changed clothes. I thought about calling Andrew or of going to see Maria but didn't. By disposing the knife, I had completed my act of protection.

* * * * *

By afternoon the strangers had left the yard and the cars were gone from the curb. I went down and surveyed the trampled flower beds and the muddy footprints on the porch. The rain had stopped but the sun remained obscured by clouds. Robespierre followed me downstairs.

As I passed Rachel's apartment, Willie opened the door. His face and his eyes showed the grief he felt. "How is Susie?"

"Hysterical," he said. "She keeps saying how she loved her mother and didn't want her dead."

“Everyone knows how the child felt and that Rachel had no love for her daughter.”

“She didn’t kill Rachel,” he said.

“I never thought she did. Is she here?” Instead of tears, perhaps the child would gain some comfort from music.

“Steve came and got them. Do you mind if I stay here ‘til after the funeral? Won’t bother you none.”

“Please stay,” I said.

“Thanks. Have the police any idea who did this?”

I shrugged. “I was asked a lot of questions.”

“Odd. They couldn’t find the knife.” He met my gaze and I saw knowledge there. “Do you suppose they knew who it belonged to?”

“They won’t say until they’re ready to make an arrest.”

He frowned. “Got to see her buried. I’m the only one who remembers what she was like.”

“Let me know about the funeral. I’d like to be there for Susie.”

He nodded. “The child really loves you. She’s gonna miss the piano lessons and the cat.”

“I have copies of her music. Will you see she gets them?”

“Don’t know if Steve’ll let me see the kids. I’ll put it with their clothes.” He turned and stared into the dark apartment. “You should have seen her as a child. All golden and sunshine.”

I listened to his memories of a Rachel who only existed in his imagination. How had he invented the wonderful woman Rachel had never been?

Chapter 11

I returned from my walk to find Ted sitting on one of the wicker chairs. His eyes were closed. For a moment I studied his ruddy face and wondered if he felt grief for Rachel and guilt for what his rivalry with my son had wrought. I held him responsible for bringing Rachel into our lives. Still, the things she’d done had been her own acts and not his fault.

“Ted.”

His pale blue eyes opened but the lowered lids shielded his expression. “I’ve been waiting for you. A bit worried.”

“I didn’t kill her and the police didn’t arrest me. I’ve been browsing in the shops uptown and trying to forgive and forget.”

“I would like to talk.”

“Upstairs then.” As we climbed the stairs I remembered other times when Ted had sought my advice. He’d shared the problems of his teens and twenties with me. After his marriage to a wealthy woman he’d stopped asking for help. I put the kettle on, filled a tea ball with a selection of tea and mints.

Ted sat at the table in the alcove. He rested his elbows on the table and stared outside. I carried two mugs and the teapot and joined him.

He turned and met my gaze. “The police think Andy’s guilty and it’s my fault.”

I filled the mugs. "Why would they think that and why is it your fault?"

"Envy on my part." He cupped the mug. "I had to tell them about Rachel and Andy and the malpractice threat. Six months. That's how long I've known her. Andy's been my friend all my life. She made me forget friendship, loyalty and good sense." He put the mug on the table. "Forget isn't the right word. She just appealed to sides of me I don't like."

The grief in his eyes wasn't for Rachel. He ached for a broken friendship. Nothing would be the same for him, Andrew or anyone she had touched.

I patted his hand. "I told Pete how she had seduced Andrew. I also told them how she went out with Andrew, came home and went out with you."

He cradled the mug in his hands. "I ran into them at the club. They argued. He told her to sue and be damned. He pushed her into the car and drove away. She called my cell and I came here for her. She demanded I start the suit against Andy." He groaned. "I said I would so we went to my place. I brought her home and left." He covered his face with his hands. "No matter what she did, I loved her."

"If what you told me is true, why do you think the police will suspect Andy?"

"I told them we went to the club and he came for her." He pressed his hands against the table.

"Then you'll have to tell them the truth."

"They'll think I killed her." He shook his head. "Sometimes I wanted to."

"You didn't. Neither did Andrew."

"Not you?"

"Though I had more reasons than most I didn't, couldn't and wouldn't."

"Thank God." He lifted the mug and drank the rest of the tea. "You know, you could make a fortune if you packaged and sold your blends. Just think, a new career."

His suggestion reminded me of the one Pete had made months before. "Two careers in a lifetime are enough."

A frown wrinkled his forehead. "Do you know who killed her?"

"I have an idea or two."

"Tell the police. You could be in danger."

"The person who killed Rachel has no reason to kill again. Her death was necessary to cauterize the wounds she caused."

"Be careful." He drained the mug and rose. "I'll be back. I'm on my way to see the police. Then I need to see Andy, if he'll talk to me."

The door closed behind him. I heard him tramp down the stairs. Robespierre strolled from the living room and wove a path around my legs. So Andrew had told Rachel to sue. How had his willingness to fight upset her? Had she made other threats? The answer to my question rested with Rachel on a slab in the morgue.

Ted had been gone for nearly an hour when the phone rang. "Mom." Andrew's deep voice held a note of concern. "Tried to reach you earlier. Where were you?"

"Walking and thinking. Are you all right?"

"Shouldn't I be asking you that question? I hear you found her."

"Sort of." I gathered my scattered thoughts. I couldn't tell anyone what I'd done. "Actually Pete was the one. He wouldn't let me look at her body." The image of Rachel's ungainly sprawl flashed in my thoughts. I'd been fortunate. If Pete had let

me see the body, could I have counterfeited the proper amount of shock? "Have the police been to see you?"

"They just left."

"And?"

"I told them about my involvement with her and how she wanted to sue me. I also told them Ruth and I had decided to let her sue."

"Were you willing to fight on her terms?"

He coughed. "Ruth was. She seemed to understand Rachel better than I did. Ruth wanted to come with me when I told Rachel my decision." He paused. "Would you like to spend a few days here?"

"Why? If you and Ruth intend to go away, I don't think the police will permit that."

"We have no intention of going anywhere. Mom, there's a killer in your neighborhood. Everyone knows you usually have more information about situations than you should. You're alone in the house and could be in danger."

"I'm not alone. Mr. Hinch will be staying in the apartment until after the funeral."

"A lot of help he'll be. He's an alcoholic."

"I'm in no danger."

"How can you say that?"

"Because I'm not." Robespierre popped through the cat door.

"I guess you know. Ruth and I have plans for this evening. We'll drop by tomorrow afternoon so we can talk."

"Come for dinner and bring Andrea."

"Could we do both? There are some things we don't want Andrea to know."

Had they decided to divorce? Before I could ask Paul's special knock sounded. "Someone's at the door. I'll see you tomorrow." When I opened the door, the look on Paul's face caused fear to bubble. Were my suspicions wrong? Had Maria carried through with her threat? Once again I heard her announcing that she had the knife. "What's wrong?" My voice sounded strained.

Paul stepped into the kitchen. "The police questioned me at the shop. Now they're here to see Maria and they sent me away."

"Have they arrested her?"

He shook his head. "This is the second time they've questioned her. You know how she sometimes confuses the meaning of words and how vocal she's been about her hatred of Rachel."

"What did they ask her?"

"How would I know? This afternoon they removed the knives Bob and Sarah gave us last Christmas."

"They also took mine."

"That's something." He shook his head. "Someone told them about her quarrel with Rachel and Maria's threats."

"But you took her home."

He nodded. "I fell asleep on the couch. Sometime around two or so I woke. I heard Maria come inside. She went to bed. I waited awhile before I joined her."

"Did you ask her what she was doing?"

"I was afraid to say anything. What if she killed Rachel?"

"I don't think she did but talk to her. Trust her."

He hugged me. "What would we do without you?"

"Make other friends. Have new neighbors." The expression on his face surprised me. Did he think I killed Rachel?

What Paul said about Maria being outside set my thoughts racing to find a reason. Why had she left the house? Had she heard the noise that had awakened me? I had never considered Maria as a potential killer. Her temper flared in an instant, burned hot and bright and then died. Her anger toward Rachel had seemed different.

With little enthusiasm and no appetite, I prepared a simple dinner. I had reached for the phone to call Sarah when someone rapped on the door. Two men in business suits flashed police badges. I invited them in, answered their questions and related the same story I had told Pete. After they left I called Sarah. Her voice, heavy with indignation, sounded shrill. "Sarah, calm down. What's wrong?"

"The p... p... police," she sputtered.

"I take it they visited you."

"With questions and demands. They took the knives, the ones we gave last Christmas. Do they believe I killed her? Knowing what she was, why should they care?"

"No matter what you felt about her, she was murdered. If they don't search for her killer they wouldn't be doing their job."

"I know." She sighed. "Will you be all right tonight? Do you want me to send the boys over? They could sleep there."

"Thanks, but no thanks." Except for special occasions Sarah's boys go no further than my kitchen. My apartment isn't decorated to host a pair of ten-year-olds who possess ten thumbs and two left feet each.

"Aren't you afraid?"

"Of what?"

"Her killer."

"Why would Rachel's killer want to harm me?"

Sarah's long drawn out sigh troubled me. "Just what do you know about her death?" she asked.

"No more than you do." Except for the location of the murder weapon.

"Sure you don't." Disbelief colored her voice. "Come for coffee tomorrow."

"As usual, I'll be there." I set the table for the dinner I didn't want.

* * * * *

The next morning at seven I left the house for my walk. Pete waited at the end of the sidewalk. "Morning. Care for a companion?"

"Do I have a choice?" I planted the cane firmly against the concrete. "Are you fishing for a confession or have you joined forces with those who think Rachel's killer will harm me?"

He ran his fingers through his already ruffled hair. "How about a bit of both?"

I laughed. "What do I have to confess?"

For the longest time he remained silent. Finally he cleared his throat. "Why you took a walk yesterday considering the chance of rain."

"Afternoon showers predicted, remember. Weren't we both fooled?" My cane tapped on the sidewalk. "I walk almost every morning no matter what the weather brings."

"What happened to the knife?"

I continued walking. "What knife?"

"The one that matches the ones I took from your house. The Randals gave everyone four. We've only located fifteen. There's one missing and it was yours. Do you have that one?"

"No."

He arched a brow. "Who did you give the second of yours to so they would have a pair?"

"That knife vanished months ago."

"Who are you protecting?"

"Everyone."

He groaned. "Figures."

We reached the end of the road. Exhausted by the verbal sparring I sank onto the bench. "Stalemate."

"This isn't a game." He sat beside me. "We'll learn who killed her. You could be named as an accessory."

"Perhaps."

He pointed to the river. "I bet the knife's out there somewhere."

"Really?"

He put his hand over mine. "I saw you down on the shore. You tossed something into the river."

"Rocks. I rid myself of frustration and anger by throwing rocks into the water. I'm sure you've seen me doing that."

"And knives." He grinned. "If it's there, I doubt it will be found."

Pete's probing gave me hope and a tinge of fear. Rachel had told my son about waking to find Susie standing beside the bed with a knife. Had the child done that? I now had a new fear, one I had to explore. Would Willie give me the phone number for the children's father? I needed to talk to Susie.

* * * * *

Shortly before ten I walked downstairs. The change in the atmosphere of the house brought a smile to my face. Would the same lightening of spirits encompass the neighborhood? I stepped outside.

Willie sat on the porch. He rose. "Mornin'"

"Beautiful day." He had taken pains to look nice. His shirt and trousers had been pressed. He had shaved and combed his gray hair. "Steve and the kids is comin' for their things. Been packin' and sortin'."

"Susie's music. Let me go get it."

"Why don't you wait for them? Susie might be needin' to see you. Took on something fearful when she heard 'bout her mother."

"I would like to see her. I'll just run up for the music."

Upstairs I picked up the pieces of music Susie had played while I wrote the notes. I added the beginner's books we had used for our lessons. Robespierre

leaped from the window seat. "Susie's coming." He followed me to the kitchen and downstairs.

Just as we reached the porch, a minivan pulled into the driveway. Tim jumped out and raced across the lawn. As he pushed past me, he nearly knocked me down.

"Careful."

"Snoop."

"Timothy, your manners."

I looked at the dark-haired man who Rachel had constantly maligned. He nodded. Susie walked beside him. Her expressionless face resembled a mask. Tim vanished inside.

I turned to Susie and her father. "Katherine Miller."

"Steve Rodgers."

"Is Susie all right?"

"She hasn't spoken other than yes or no since I took her home."

"She's grieving. She loved her mother."

"I don't know why." He scowled. "I saw the bruises. Timothy said Rachel beat Susan."

"My neighbor reported Rachel for child abuse, but nothing came of that. The bruises were blamed on Tim."

He nodded. "Rachel always wiggled out of trouble. The children chose to live with her. I don't understand why. She never gave, just took."

How well I knew the truth of his statement. "I would like you to take these pieces Susie composed and the books we used for lessons. She has a definite talent."

He took the things from me. "Thank you."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

He shook his head. "We'll manage. Susie didn't want to come here today. Acted scared. Damn Rachel. I've spent years cleaning up her messes. At least I won't be facing a hotshot lawyer."

"Susie may need some counseling."

"I know. Tim also. I've called a therapist who specializes in children."

"Good luck."

He went inside. I stood on the porch and waited for them to return. Tim carried a stuffed duffle bag. Steve Rodgers held a suitcase in one hand and Susie with the other.

Willie followed them. "Funeral's day after tomorrow. Blakley's Funeral Home. Viewing at ten. Service at ten thirty."

Steve nodded. "We'll be there."

Susie clung to her father's hand. Her expression remained distant. Tears welled in my eyes. I really loved that child.

Tim sauntered past. "Told her she'd be sorry she hit me."

An image of him slashing the air with the knife rose in my thoughts. "You?"

He laughed. "Wouldn't you like to know? Saw Maria, saw Susie, saw Uncle Willie. Maybe I saw someone else. Then I saw you take the knife away."

"Timothy, move it," his father said.

The boy ran down the steps. At the car he turned and waved. What had he seen? What had he done? I stood at the edge of the porch and stared at the departing car.

"Mrs. Miller," Maria called. "I have come to do the talk."

I walked down the steps and met her on the sidewalk. "I'm on my way to Sarah's for coffee."

She nodded. "I go to Mrs. Sarah's also. I must have the telling to you first."

"Go ahead."

"I have not the belief when the police come to my house and ask the questions to Paul and me. Where were you last night? Who say you? How can I have the knowing what they were asking?"

"They questioned me, too. First Pete asked questions and then two detectives."

"The questions would not be so dreadful if Pete had been the asker. The men talk too fast." She sighed. "Rachel have raise the trouble. She hurt many people. I have say that to the police. I say I want her dead but I do not do the hurt with the knife."

"I know you didn't." Though I reassured her I remained puzzled about what she had been doing outside and what Tim had seen.

"She look... look..." Maria closed her eyes.

Had Maria seen Rachel's body? Had she wielded the knife? I shook my head. "Maria!"

"It is nada. She look like the angel but she is not."

Across the street I rang Sarah's bell. Maria put her hand on my arm. "Who have done the killing? Who have taken the knife away?"

"I don't know." Though I knew about the knife, I would tell no one.

"The police take the knives Mrs. Sarah and Mr. Bob give us when we come to Christmas at your house."

Sarah opened the door. "So they took yours, too."

"Evidently they are similar to the murder weapon." I strode to the kitchen.

"Enough is enough." Bright spots of color glowed on Sarah's round cheeks. "They questioned me and Bob. Did they have to question the boys? How could they think one of them could have killed her? I told them plenty. Said if they wanted to blame a child they should consider her son."

"Sarah!"

"Well, I did." She crossed her arms on her chest. "I told them I didn't like the woman, that she abused her daughter and her uncle and threatened to harm you and my boys. I told them how Ted dumped her out of his car."

"Mrs. Sarah, why have you done these things?"

"So they could see she deserved her death."

"They talk to me and they talk to Mrs. Miller. We have not tell them these things."

"That's not true," I said. "I told them everything that has happened since she moved here."

"But they have not say who kill her." Fear tinged Maria's voice.

"Let's talk about something else," I said.

Though we tried each avenue we explored led to a dead end. "What will happen to those children?" Sarah asked.

"They're with their father. They came for their things this morning."

"How did they act?" Sarah asked.

"Tim's no different. He managed to insult me and hinted that he knew more than he should." I closed my eyes and saw the sad eyes of his sister. "Susie's not handling this well. She didn't speak or respond to Robespierre. Her father says she seldom responds. I hope she receives the professional help she needs."

"I'm not surprised by Tim's actions," Sarah said. "He's a brat."

"I have seen him the night his madre die. I hear the noise and go outside. I see him run to the house."

"Did you tell the police?"

"They have not the asking. Why should I speak of this when all I see is a boy running to the house?"

Sarah refilled our cups. "Maybe he's the one. You should tell the police. Did you see anything else?"

Maria shook her head. "Mrs. Sarah, I would say these words. A gift of the knives brings trouble as we have seen with the killing near our house."

"Knives are tools. Nothing more." I sipped the coffee.

Sarah sat down. "Any idea when they'll bury her?"

"The day after tomorrow at Blakley's. Viewing is from ten and the service is at ten thirty."

"Are you going?" Sarah asked.

"I think I will. And you?"

"Maybe. Maria?"

"I do not know if I will attend. I will see what Paul want to do."

When I finished the coffee, I left. Maria stayed.

* * * * *

I had just finished lunch when Ruth and Andrew arrived. I studied my son's face and was pleased to see much of the discontent had disappeared from his eyes. We went to the living room. Ruth and I sat on the sofa. Andrew took one of the Queen Anne's chairs.

"Thanks," he said.

"For what?"

"The warnings I refused to hear. For insisting I tell Ruth about Rachel. For suggesting I tell Rachel to sue. And for persuading Ted to tell the truth. That's why I'm not sitting in jail."

"They have no real evidence against you."

"With Ted's lies about the quarrel and saying I was the one to take her home from the club, they believed they had enough to charge me."

"He felt guilty about that," I said.

"He should," Ruth said. "The whole affair was his fault."

I looked from her to Andrew. "Not entirely."

Andrew nodded. "Mom's right. If I hadn't been so closed, so restless and stupid, nothing would have happened."

"I share the blame," Ruth said. "I was so afraid of losing you that I lost myself."

I snorted. "All this self-blaming is foolish. You both know there are going to be unresolved feelings on both your parts. What are you going to do to work matters out?"

"Counseling," Ruth said.

"Already have an appointment," Andrew added.

"I'm glad."

"What's for dinner tonight?"

"Cold soup, chicken and salad. Key lime pie for dessert." He sounded more like the son I'd raised than he had for the past year. "Have either of you talked to Andrea about what happened?"

Ruth nodded. "I told her Susie's mother had been killed. We talked about what her friend must be feeling. How is the child?"

"Steve Rodgers brought Susie and Tim to the house for their clothes. Susie is depressed and silent."

Andrew groaned. "Is there something I can do for her?"

"I'm not sure anyone can. Time and love. I hope she'll receive them."

Ruth frowned. "One question. Why did the police take the knives Bob and Sarah gave us?"

"One of them was the murder weapon."

"How do you know?" Andrew leaned forward. "If you and Pete Duggan are trying to set a trap to catch the killer, I'll stop you."

"It's nothing like that."

Ruth and Andrew stared at me. "Mother Miller."

"Mom, what did you do?"

"What needed to be done." The clock chimed twice. "Don't you have office hours?"

"At three."

"I've dinner to prepare. See both of you at six thirty."

They exchanged a look and left. As I worked on dinner, I prayed the funeral would end the trouble.

Chapter 12

On the day of the funeral, the sun shone in a near cloudless sky. The temperature had reached ninety and would rise higher. Thank heavens the humidity remained low.

She's dead.

I walked along the tree-lined street toward the town and Blakley's Funeral Home. The tapping of my cane on the concrete suited my spirits. I smiled when I recalled the reason for my journey. Her death had been a mercy killing. She would never hurt anyone again. Inside I grieved for all those her life had touched and tarnished.

Plastic, wicked woman. I gasped at the intensity of the anger I still felt toward Rachel. I hoped the killer would remain silent. No one deserved to pay for her death.

As I stepped from the shade of the trees, the sun dazzled my eyes. My cane missed a beat. I stumbled and nearly fell. A hand grasped my elbow and steadied me.

“Easy does it. Can’t have you falling again,” Pete said.

Trust Pete to appear here and now. Would he ply me with more questions I had no intention of answering? “Thanks. Old bones heal slowly.”

He laughed. “You’re not old. Are you going to the funeral?”

“Not for her. For Susie. I saw her the other day. She seemed like a puppet being steered by a master string holder.”

“I understand she hasn’t said much since her hysterical outburst when Mr. Hinch told her about her mother. What do you suppose she’s hiding?”

“Not what you suspect. The child is grieving. No matter what her mother said or did, the child’s love remained strong and true.” My breath escaped on a long sigh. “I wonder what will happen to those children?”

“You mean there’s something you don’t know?” His grin broadened. “They’ll be living with their father.”

“I know that. I mean their emotional health. Will he continue to provide professional help for them? Does he understand how badly their mother hurt them? There’s also Willie Hinch. Where will he go? He has no one else. He says the children’s father won’t let him see them.”

Pete shrugged. “He’ll find a room in town and drink himself to death.”

“He won’t live that long.” I paused at the corner. “He has cancer. He told me the doctor doesn’t give him more than a few months.”

Pete held my arm as we crossed the street. “He’s the friend you told me about.” He shook his head. “I can’t imagine you considering him a friend.”

“He’s one because he cared enough about Susie to defy his niece. He would have done anything for Rachel until he decided he didn’t like what she was doing to her daughter. There’s a lot you don’t understand about me.”

“Now that’s something we can agree on.” He released my arm. “Take care of yourself. If you want to tell me about the knife, I’ll keep your secret.”

Though tempted, I resisted. I walked several steps and turned. “About the knife, I will think about who I loaned it to.”

His laughter followed me. “Stalemate.”

As I climbed the steps to the front door of the Victorian house that had been converted into a funeral home, I thought of the irony of this place being Rachel’s last stop on her way to the grave. Old stories speak of the house being built by a wealthy man for his mistress. They also speak of the woman’s faithlessness. Her life paralleled Rachel, except the woman’s death had been a suicide, not a murder.

When I reached the top of the stairs, a reluctance to enter gripped me. For a time I argued with myself. Susie was there. So was Willie. They both needed to know someone cared about their grief. I pulled the door open.

A blast of chill air hit me. I stepped into the foyer. White walls trimmed with gilt rosettes seemed too gaudy for a funeral home. Thin glass candle-shaped electric bulbs had been placed in fixtures once lit by gas. Fake French Regency furniture added a touch of false serenity. An elegant place for death.

I signed the guest book. My name headed the page. Would any of the others Rachel had harmed come to the funeral?

I stepped beyond a partially open door into a small parlor where five rows of chairs stood ready for the ceremony due to begin at ten thirty. A grandfather's clock struck ten times.

I glanced around the ornately decorated parlor. Blond, angelic Tim sat on a maroon and gold brocade sofa in the back of the room. As I slowly walked to the doorway of the viewing alcove, he rose to follow. Susie stood in front of the casket. I reached her and put my hand on her shoulder.

She lifted a tear-stained face that showed no promise of the beauty I had once seen there. Instead of the bleakness of the day she'd come to the house with her father, her blue eyes shone with grief. Her light brown hair hung in two braids.

"You shouldn't cry so. You'll make yourself sick."

"I don't care. Mommy's dead." Her sobs began anew. "She hated me. She was sending me away. The night she died she told me how much she hated me." Susie rubbed her eyes. "Why? Mommy was beautiful."

I pulled the child into my arms. "Everyone knows how much you loved her. She loved you, too, but she was unhappy."

Susie's blue eyes held a trace of hope. "Do you really think so?" She sighed. "Why was she sending me away?"

"She wasn't. She told my son she had changed her mind." Rachel's death meant no one could deny my story. Who could prove she hadn't decided to keep her daughter? Susie needed to believe so she could heal.

"Thank you." She pressed her face against my shoulder.

"Unhappiness causes people to say things they don't mean."

A trace of a smile hovered on her lips. "I know you're right."

I sensed a presence at my side and turned. "Susie watches Mommy because she's afraid Mommy will wake and scream. That's what she did that night. Woke Susie and screamed at her." Tim's voice was a faint, malice-filled whisper. "You lied. Mommy didn't like Susie. Called her ugly. Mommy loved me."

Susie's thin body trembled. I held her until the shaking stopped. Tim's eyes seemed as hard as his mother's had been. For all his angelic looks, he was the ugly one.

"I have to go back." Susie wiggled from my embrace. "Mommy likes people to look at her. She doesn't like to be alone. Tim won't watch her. Uncle Willie sits in the corner." She walked back to the casket.

Tim faced me. "Why did you come? She don't want you here. Called you a witch. You hated her."

"Not her, but the way she treated everyone. She wanted to destroy all of us, even you children."

He laughed. "She was gonna make your son send you away so she could have the house."

"She didn't and she couldn't." I walked to the casket where Susie kept her vigil. Two baskets of flowers sat on a stand at the head of the coffin. A single red rose lay near Rachel's hands, which were folded on a white blanket. In death she seemed a pale copy of the evil and beautiful woman she had been.

"Looks like blood." Tim's whisper startled me. "Is this the way she looked when you found her? Someone stabbed her chest with the knife you took away. It's my

flower. Susie couldn't buy one. Mommy never gave her money." His voice broke. "She didn't love anybody but herself."

I stared at Rachel. Make-up failed to hide the pallor of her skin. She looked like a plastic department store dummy with painted features.

"I hate you." At first I wasn't sure if Tim addressed me or his mother. "You didn't love me. Didn't love Susie. Didn't love nobody. Glad you're dead. Glad, glad, glad. Wish I'd done it."

Once again I saw him in my kitchen, slashing the air with the knife. His words didn't surprise me. Though Rachel had pretended love for her son, the emotion had been as plastic as her heart.

Willie emerged from the shadowy area behind the baskets of flowers. "Tim boy, you can't go on like this. Someone will think you did something you shouldn't have. Got to show respect for the dead."

"Don't have to listen to you." Tim fisted his hands on his hips. His stance was a mirror of the way his mother often stood. "You ain't nothing but an old drunk. Good enough to give her money though. She called you names and didn't care who heard her."

After glancing at Susie, who seemed oblivious of her brother's words, I backed away. Willie shambled after me. The brighter light in the parlor showed how jaundiced and yellow he'd become.

"You should have seen her as a child. All golden and sunshine." His words echoed my thoughts bringing to mind all the other times he'd recited the Rachel litany. He stood close enough for me to smell the mint on his breath. Had he been nipping while he hid in the shadows? Did the mint hide the alcohol he drank to cover the pain caused by his disease?

I had never questioned his love for his niece. He seemed destined to be the one to make excuses for her actions. Though he had appeared to see how she had treated everyone, it seemed to me he believed her actions were justified. Until the day he'd stood up to her about her treatment of Susie, I had no respect for him. The evening before Rachel's death my views had changed. Had he been willing to do what needed to be done?

I chose a seat in the last row of chairs. Willie sat beside me.

"She always loved pretty things. Martha and me did without so she could have the clothes and shoes she wanted. She never changed." His eyes, pale copies of Rachel's, filled with tears. "Wasn't right for her to have and the kids to do without. I told her so. She never listened. Me and Martha should have done different with her."

"I'm not sure that would have changed the way she acted."

"Poor Rachel. Always thought some man would come along and save her. Lots of men came. I blame them for how she became. Couldn't stand to see her destroy any more."

He rose and returned to his shadowed corner. Sarah strode into the room. Tim stalked toward her. "What are you doing here? Didn't ask you to come."

Sarah straightened. "I needed to see."

"She don't want you here. You hated her. She laughed about you. Think you're a good person but you ain't. Mommy said you wasn't good where it counted. That's in bed." He turned his back on her.

Sarah's round face turned red. She exhaled. "I shouldn't have come but I had to be sure she was dead."

"He's never learned how to be a child. Maybe now he will."

Sarah sat down heavily. "I should have tried harder to show him what a family's like. I should have shown him that a person can love other people and that his prejudices were wrong."

"You can't fight what a child hears every day."

"I suppose you're right."

I looked up. Paul and Maria stood in the doorway. Paul looked as though he wanted to be anywhere but here. Maria held his hand.

Tim uncoiled from the sofa where he had perched after confronting Sarah. "Now don't you look sweet." His voice held the same taunting tone as his mother's had. "Just like lovebirds but I know you aren't. So did Mommy." He stood in front of Paul. "Maria, he ain't good enough for you. Saw him and Mommy in her bed." He touched Maria's hand. "Should have heard her laugh when the baby died. She was glad, glad, glad."

Maria blanched. Paul raised his head. Maria squeezed his hand. Paul tried to turn her toward the door. She shook her head. "We will stay." Maria walked to the viewing room. She lifted Susie's chin. "You are the good girl and the beautiful one. Remember this for all your life and not the words you hear so much. You bring love to everyone."

Susie stood taller. Maria returned to Paul's side. She sat next to me and pulled out a rosary. "Now I will pray for my enemy."

Tim strode into the viewing room. He stood in the kneeler and stared at his mother. "I hate, hate, hate you. The worms will eat your body and I don't care."

"Stop it," Susie shouted. "Mommy loved you."

Steve Rodgers and an obviously pregnant woman entered the viewing room. The woman took Susie's hand and led her to the first row of chairs. Steve clamped a hand on Tim's shoulder. The boy scowled. Steve pointed to a chair beside Susie. Tim stomped over and sat down. He held the red rose. Over and over he stabbed the stem against his hand. The clock struck the half hour.

The woman smoothed Susie's hair. The girl moved away from the tender touch. Because Susie had responded to my love, I had hopes she would reach for what her stepmother offered.

Mr. Coomer, a pastor from one of the local churches, entered the room. He had a book tucked under his arm.

At the minister's entrance, Willie moved from his watchdog position and took the end seat in the second row of chairs. The parlor door closed. Ted slipped in, followed by Pete who leaned against the wall. He crossed his arms on his chest and studied the assembly.

Canned music played. Mr. Coomer read from the book he had carried into the room. How appropriate, I thought. A plastic service for a plastic woman.

"Let us pray." The pastor's voice droned. "Oh merciful God, bring your blessed comfort to these unfortunate children of this poor woman. Whatever else she was, she was a loving mother."

Tim's shoulders shook. Was he laughing or crying? Willie pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose.

Susie stared at the casket. She jumped to her feet. "Mommy," she screamed and ran into the viewing room. "I didn't hate you. I didn't mean what I said. I didn't want you dead. I love you. Tell me you love me. Please." She crumpled on the kneeler. Her hysterical sobs reverberated through the room. Tears rose in my eyes. Maria sobbed silently. Sarah sniffed.

Mr. Coomer turned to stare at the child. His expression showed disbelief that someone had dared interrupt his communication with God.

Willie jumped to his feet. With unexpected agility and quickness, he hurried to Susie. He lifted her into his arms and sat on the kneeler, rocking her and crooning softly.

The doors of the viewing room slid shut. Steve Rodgers and his wife rose. They left the room herding Tim ahead of them. As he passed his row of chairs, he stuck out his tongue.

For several minutes I sat in stunned silence. What could I do? Would everyone believe Susie had killed her mother? I lifted my cane from the chair in front of me and rose. Without speaking, Paul and Maria left. Pete and Ted had vanished.

Sarah waited in the foyer. "I'll walk home with you."

"Susie didn't kill her mother."

"I know." Sarah shook her head. "That poor child. What a time to realize that while she loved her mother, she hated her, too. I hope she comes out of this whole."

"And Tim?"

"He'll become the child his father wants just like he was Rachel's ideal child. He's already a master manipulator. You know before the blow-up, when he was at our house, he was the kind of child I wanted to see."

Plastic, I thought. A plastic child for a plastic mother. Susie was a rock. She could be sculpted but never molded. Like a rock, she could shatter. I hoped today hadn't been the final blow.

Sarah pushed the outer door open. The blast of heat made me dizzy. I reached for the railing. "I hope Pete doesn't push Susie over the edge. In the state she's in, she might confess to killing her mother and believe she had."

"How would Pete know about this?"

"He was just inside the door, watching and listening. He's a very stubborn man. He'll chip and chip until he has answers. Rachel is dead. No one should be punished for killing her."

"I agree." Sarah studied me. "Will you be all right?"

"No reason I wouldn't be."

"Do you want the boys to stay with you?"

"I'm not afraid to stay in my own house. No one intends to harm me."

"Not even the killer?"

"That's right."

That ended our conversation and we walked home in silence. We parted on the sidewalk. As Sarah crossed the street I waved. Upstairs I made a pot of mint tea, carried the tea and a mug to the living room. Before the day ended I expected a visitor.

Time seemed to move forward minute by minute. After lunch I brewed more tea. Thoughts of Rachel, her life and death, dominated my musings. I re-lived the days

since her arrival at my house. Her death wouldn't return our lives to the days before her presence brought a blight. Everyone she touched had problems they hadn't had before.

Robespierre prowled from room to room. "I saw Susie today." He paused at my feet. "For a fleeting second she was the child I loved." He purred. "We really loved that child. With time and love, she'll be all right." I had to believe she would.

The cat left my side and went to the door. I heard heavy footsteps on the stairs. I crossed the room and opened the door. "Come in."

Willie handed me the keys to the first floor apartment. "Anything that's left can go on the curb. Won't need to stay any longer. What needed doin' is done."

"Would you like a glass of iced mint tea?"

"Don't mind if I do." He sat at the kitchen table.

I poured the tea and put some lemon cookies on a plate. "I'm sorry for what you had to do."

His pale eyes filled with tears. "She was my life."

"How's Susie?"

"Steve and his wife took the children home. Child was still crying when they drove away."

"She'll be all right."

"Got to believe that." He lifted one of the cookies.

"Did you go to the cemetery?"

"Ted come. Took me there and brought me to town. I had some things I needed to do." He sipped the tea and ate the cookie.

For a time our gazes locked. "Will you be all right?" I asked.

He nodded. "Why did you take the knife?"

"For several reasons, but mainly because I felt no one should suffer because she was dead."

He leaned forward. "I'm glad you did. Wouldn't have been right for nobody to be there to mourn her."

"What are you going to do now?"

He set the glass on the table. "Me and Mr. Thomas are gonna see the police. He'll see they put me in the hospital. Gonna die real soon." He touched my hand. "You were good to Susie. I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"All the trouble Rachel caused. She didn't need to be so mean." He rose and walked to the door. "You should have seen her as a child. All golden and sunshine."

I watched him walk down the stairs. "Goodbye, Mr. Hinch. Rest easy."

