

Prologue

September, 1996

The woman lifted the rock from the border of the flower bed, careful not to disturb the surrounding soil. She weighed it in her hand. Probably three or four pounds. The top surface fit comfortably in her hand; the underside bulged in a smooth ridge. Perfect.

She had done a lot of things in her life, but she had never taken another human life. She wondered how it would feel. Would she clutch at the last minute? Would she experience the erotic-like adrenaline rush that came whenever she acted on impulse? Would she feel any remorse afterward?

Given what she had overheard that morning, she doubted it.

They had assumed she was sleeping. Normally she would have been, and to this moment she wasn't sure what had wakened her. Her keen instinct for survival? Or something much more mundane—the rhythmic sound of their headboard thumping against the wall. She had waited for the muffled grunt that would tell her he was finished, reflecting bitterly that until the bitch came into their lives, she hadn't needed to hear that distinctive sound through a wall. When all was quiet, she burrowed her head back into the pillow.

It was no use. Sleep wouldn't come again. She threw back the sheet and luxuriated in the feel of the cool air moving from the open window across her naked body. Soon she heard sounds drifting across the patio from the kitchen. Water running. The beep of the microwave. The rasp of the toaster lever. The screen door sliding open as they carried their breakfast out to the poolside umbrella table.

Their voices were pitched low, but the enhanced acoustics of pool water surrounded by concrete walls allowed her to hear every word. First the bitch's voice.

“When is your appointment with Fred Linden?”

“One o'clock.”

“Good. I should be back from the beauty parlor by then. I'll go with you.”

“Don't you trust me to do it?”

“Of course I do, darling. I just thought you might like a little moral support.”

“I don’t need babysitting on this, Carlie. I said I’d take care of it, and I will.”

She lay rigid, digesting what she had heard. He could have only one reason for consulting Fred Linden, who was his attorney. She couldn’t allow it to happen. Ever resourceful, she had soon settled on her current plan.

Now she stood on the west side of the house, rock in hand as she listened to the cadenced splash of him working his way up and down the pool. They were alone, the bitch having left for her appointment twenty minutes before. An eight foot concrete-block wall secluded the back yard from prying eyes. The neighboring houses were all single-story ranches, their roof ridges visible above the wall but all windows hidden from view. Southern California’s obsession with privacy suited her purpose perfectly.

She calculated he was about two-thirds of the way through his daily fifty-lap routine. She stood out of sight while she counted eight more laps. She wanted to catch him near the end when he was tired, but she couldn’t risk waiting too long in case she had miscounted and he finished before she could act.

She heard him turn and head toward the shallow end. She hid the rock behind her back and glided across the patio to the deep end of the pool. By the time he started back, she was sitting on the edge of the pool with her bare legs dangling in the water, her bikini a common enough sight not to cause alarm. She watched his bronzed, well-muscled arms slice through the water, droplets flying like tiny prisms in the sunlight. At fifty-six, he was still a handsome man with graying blond hair, a broad-shouldered swimmer’s build, and only a slight paunch. She had been proud to be seen with him, and although he had never said it in so many words, she knew he had felt the same about her. Then the bitch came into the picture, and everything changed.

He had made his choice. Now she must make hers.

As he came closer, she adjusted her position so he would touch and turn on her immediate right. She pulled her legs up and crouched over the edge of the pool, the rock poised but hidden by her body. Each beat of her heart was like a hammer blow to her chest. She would have only one chance. If she missed... She drove the thought from her mind, concentrating on the rise and fall of his left arm. The moment his fingertips brushed concrete, he would tuck under and push off into his next lap. Timing was everything.

The arm arced upward. His head lifted for the intake of air that would carry him through the turn. Just as his face reentered the water, she struck. The blow carried the force of her entire body, its fierce momentum causing her to lose her balance and tumble headfirst into the pool. The cold water jolted her like an electric current. To her horror, she felt his body pressing down on her. Had he dodged her blow? Was he holding her under in a fit of revenge?

She hadn't had time to take a breath before plunging into the water, and her lungs soon felt as if they were being sliced into tiny pieces. She flailed her arms in panic, pushing and shoving at the bulk that pinned her down. Slowly it floated away. She shot up to the surface and sucked in a blessed lungful of air. She hauled herself out of the pool, still panting and gasping. Only then did she look back. He was floating face down just beneath the surface about a foot from the edge of the pool. She couldn't see the damage to his head, but the surrounding water was pink.

She had done it!

She sat for a moment relishing her success and catching her breath. An inner voice soon urged her to move. There were things that needed to be done before the bitch returned.

First the rock, which had gone into the pool with her and now rested on the bottom. She hated the idea of going back in, but she knew she had no choice. She scooted away from the body and eased back into the water. The pool was only six feet deep, but she wasn't much of a swimmer, and it took three tries before she was able to paddle deep enough and hold her breath long enough to retrieve the rock.

She stood in the sun, running her fingers through her hair and waiting for the water to evaporate from her skin. His towel was heaped on a nearby deck chair, but she didn't dare disturb it. Things must appear as if he had been the only one in the pool that morning. When she was dry enough not to leave a telltale trail of damp footprints, she walked around to the west side of the house and replaced the rock in the stone border of the flower bed. The arid air had already sucked most of the moisture from its surface, and it would soon be indistinguishable from any of its neighbors. Without evidence to the contrary, the police would assume he'd had a horrible accident while diving into the pool for his morning workout.

She hurried back into the house. She went to the laundry room, stripped off her bikini, and threw it in the drier on the hottest setting. She padded naked back to her room. By the time she had dried her hair, the tiny strips of her bikini were also dry. She tucked them into a dresser drawer and crawled back into bed. She was sound asleep when the screaming started.

Chapter One

October, 1998

Abigail Potter was well acquainted with death. Whether it came without warning or played itself out over long agonizing months, she had witnessed the process countless times as a practicing physician. She had learned early on to detach herself from the wrenching emotions that accompanied each loss. It was her job to preserve her objectivity so no clue would be missed, no palliative possibility overlooked. Or lacking that, to provide whatever comfort she could by maintaining the calm of reason and science in the face of her patients' personal chaos.

Occasionally her lack of feeling bothered her. Had she become so callous she had lost touch with the precious value of each life? In the pursuit of her career, had she destroyed a piece of her own humanity? She found the answer at the bedside of her dying father: her capacity for pain was still very much intact.

It was her custom to come straight to his bedroom on returning home after a long day at the clinic. She would pause for a moment outside his door to shake off her weariness and marshal her dwindling emotional resources. Then she would reach for the doorknob and enter the room.

At a few minutes past six o'clock on this particular late-October evening, dusk had long since faded into night, and the cavernous room lay in shadow except for the meager light cast by two lamps. One stood on the bedside table draped with a towel to soften its glare. The other illuminated the small alcove where Cathy, the evening-shift aide, sat reading. She was a short, heavysset woman with rosy cheeks and kind eyes. Abigail had chosen the aides based on physical strength, patience and compassion. Cathy was the cream of the crop.

She laid her book aside and stood to greet Abigail.

"He's been sleeping ever since I came on at three," she reported. "I woke him about an hour ago to see if I could get him to eat or drink something, but he wasn't interested. Susan said he refused his oatmeal this morning and only took a few sips of orange juice. He wouldn't eat any lunch, either. You can check her notes if you like."

Each aide kept a written log of her eight-hour shift so Abigail could review any significant developments. Now she shook her head and said, "Later. Why don't you go on down and get some supper? I'll sit with him awhile."

Cathy picked up her book and left. Abigail walked over to the bed and looked down on her father. Her clinical side evaluated his medical status. Wasted body barely visible beneath the down comforter. Yellowed skin stretched paper thin over the bones of his face. Sunken eyes closed. Gaped mouth panting in spite of the oxygen that flowed constantly through his nasal catheter. She took up his skeletal wrist and searched for the thready, irregular pulse. It was so rapid she couldn't get an accurate count. She timed the labored rise and fall of his chest, calculating his respirations at more than twice the normal rate. She reached for the sphygmomanometer, fitted the stethoscope into her ears, and took his blood pressure. Eighty over fifty-eight. Time was running out.

She dropped into the chair beside his bed, her professional persona suddenly overwhelmed by the little girl inside who was crying, "No, Daddy! Don't leave me!" Although she had known it was coming—indeed, they had reviewed the disease's progression together not more than a few days before and had agreed the end was near—the reality was hard to accept.

She was ashamed to remember her initial response when he telephoned the previous May to tell her of his diagnosis and ask her to take a sabbatical from her teaching position in order to help him maintain his practice at the clinic.

"You've finally found the offer I can't refuse, haven't you?" The words came out seemingly of their own volition, and they shocked her. Was she still so bitter that she needed to lash out and punish? And why him? None of it had been his fault, and he had done what he could to exact some justice.

His hurt resonated in the silence that followed, and she felt an immediate stab of regret. "I'm sorry, Dad. You didn't deserve that. You said there's a tumor. Tell me more."

As she listened, it slowly dawned on her that this man who had always been the sure, indestructible foundation of her life was mortally threatened. The tumor was large and might already have metastasized. Surgery and massive doses of chemotherapy and radiation were his only hope.

"I know it's a long shot," he told her, "but I'm not willing to throw in the towel without trying. For your mother's sake as much as my own. In the unlikely event I beat the odds, I'd like to have a practice to come back to. But I can't do it without some help. I need you to come and take over for awhile. I was hoping you wouldn't begrudge me that."

As he well knew, the request came at a time that made it feasible: in mid-May during the three-week hiatus between the various medical schools' graduations and the advent of the new crop of first-year residents who would become Abigail's responsibility. And so, she had arranged for her year's sabbatical, leased out her Hyde Park condominium, and come home to the Fox River valley.

Benjamin Potter had built the Bonnie Dundee Wellness Center in 1985 and had been its managing partner ever since. He had assumed from the beginning that Abigail would follow him into medicine, gain her experience as a staff physician at the clinic, and ultimately take her place at the helm when it came time for him to retire. Abigail had willingly shared the dream—until the fateful night when her faith and hope in the future were shattered and she was forced to reevaluate everything she had formerly taken for granted. Betrayed, grieving, disillusioned, she fled.

Not far. The University of Chicago's Pretzker School of Medicine. Residency there in family practice. And on to a teaching position, offered because of her excellent academic record and accepted out of determination never to enter the comfortable, monied, self-satisfied world of her father and his suburban colleagues.

Yet when she walked into the wellness center to take his place the previous May, she felt not so much the anger of surrender as a nameless melancholy. She couldn't bring herself to scorn the life she had so quickly and surely abandoned. Indeed, as she began to know the patients and become immersed in the daily routine, she came to understand the energy and dedication her father had always shown toward his work there.

Her father entered the hospital for the surgery that would remove the tumor from his lung. The surgeon's post-operative report was devastating: the cancer was all-invasive. Knowing the futility of further treatment, Ben decided against having chemotherapy or radiation. He would live out his life as normally as he could without the sickness and debility such treatment would bring. And so, the two of them had worked side by side at the clinic with Ben taking more and more time off. When he could no longer come to the office, Abigail brought the charts home and reviewed each day's cases with him, meticulously citing the patient's symptoms and waiting for him to concur in her diagnosis. Ironically, they became the team he had always envisioned them being.

Now it was over. He'd been increasingly withdrawn over the past few weeks. When she talked about the clinic and his patients, he listened, but she could tell it was out of politeness rather than real interest. He had already separated himself from that world, and it was no use trying to draw him back. Most recently he had exhibited periods of extreme disorientation. He spoke about events no one but himself understood. He gestured randomly while muttering to unseen visitors. When wakeful, his hands plucked constantly at the bedclothes. The vigorous, dynamic father of her experience was gone. In his place lay a tired, wasted shell ready and eager to make his final journey home.

He coughed weakly, and Abigail heard the thick congestion in his lungs. His eyes opened. Seeing Abigail, he stretched out a trembling hand and gathered himself for the effort to speak.

“Forgive me.”

His voice was hoarse, barely discernible. Abigail took his hand and gently stroked it.

“It’s all right, Dad. You—”

“No!” he said with surprising vigor, his agitation causing him to cough and gasp for air.

When the coughing subsided, Abigail supported him while he spit the mucous he had raised into the container that was always handy. Breathing heavily, he fell back onto the bed.

“Do you want some Roxanol?” Abigail asked, referring to the morphine-laden medication that would slow his respirations and ease the anxiety that came with oxygen starvation.

He shook his head. Closed his eyes as if willing himself to relax. When his breathing slowed somewhat, he reached out to clutch her arm. “I need you—to forgive me. It’s a burden...” He paused to regroup. “...I can’t bear—any longer.”

Abigail struggled for composure. “There’s nothing to forgive, Dad. You couldn’t have stopped her even if you’d known what she was going to do.”

A tear slid down his ravaged face. “But I should have known. I should have—protected you. I knew what she was. But your mother...”

“Dad, please don’t do this. You mustn’t blame yourself. I certainly never did.”

“She’ll be back. After I’m gone. You must be on your guard.” His eyes took on an intense, frantic gleam. “Don’t let her hurt you again.”

“I doubt if she’ll come back. There’s nothing here for her now. But if she does, I can handle her.”

He made a weak noise of self-disgust. “That’s what I thought—back then. Don’t underestimate her like I did.”

He began to cough again. When the spasm subsided, he panted, “Journal. In the office safe. Read it. And try not to hate me. Use it. It’s all I can do—to protect you.”

She forced her voice into its most soothing tone. “I’ll do it tomorrow. And I will be careful. I promise. Now please stop worrying and rest.”

His eyelids drooped, and he sighed deeply, his lungs gurgling with the exhalation. “Love you,” he murmured as he slipped back into sleep.

Abigail’s eyes flooded. “Love you, too. More than you’ll ever know.”

Chapter Two

Rona Lee Peterson stood in front of the bathroom mirror and swore. Who would have thought she'd ever be living in a dump like this? The tiny mottled square in front of her was the only mirror in the whole goddamned place. She had to get away or she'd go crazy.

She leaned closer, and anger gave way to anxiety. Despite the poor quality of her reflection, she could pick out a few inexorable signs of aging. The grooves on either side of her mouth were becoming more pronounced, and the tiny lines around her eyes were deepening. She noticed with alarm that the delicate skin above her eyes was beginning to sag. She needed to find the money for that surgery, and soon.

She stepped back and gave what she could see of herself an overall look. Not so bad, she reassured herself. The thick honey-colored hair was still vibrant, although some of the ends looked a little dry and brittle. Probably just needed another deep conditioning. Her almond-shaped eyes remained the clear, dark-rimmed green that drove men wild. And her fine patrician bone structure was unchanged. Yes, she was still beautiful. Not perfect, perhaps, but that would come again under the plastic surgeon's knife. Meanwhile she needed to continue with the face masks and moisturizing lotions—

A timid knock broke into her thoughts. Before she could respond, the old doorknob rattled and the door eased open. A flushed, dark-eyed face peered in. Gladys.

"There you are," she said with an insipid, self-conscious smile. "The house was so dark, I thought you might still be sleeping." She swung the door wider and thrust a bouquet of fall flowers into the opening. "I brought you these. Something beautiful for the most beautiful—"

"Get those out of my face!" Rona Lee snapped. "Don't you know I'm allergic?"

Gladys's face fell, and she quickly snatched the flowers away. "Oh, no. Sorry, darling—"

"Don't call me that! What's the matter with you? You're acting like a damned idiot."

The flush on Gladys's face deepened. "I just wanted to do something nice. After last night."

Rona Lee rolled her eyes. "For God's sake, Gladys, you didn't take that seriously, did you? I was drunk. And bored out of my skull." She cast back through the previous night's alcoholic haze and brought forth images of the pale stocky body, the lust-bloated face, the smell and taste of passion fully indulged, acknowledging, "Okay, so we had fun. But it was just for kicks. It won't happen again."

Mortified tears sprang to Gladys's eyes. "I thought..."

"You thought wrong. What do you take me for, a queer?"

Gladys's face grew even redder, and her eyes dropped.

"My God, that's it! That's why you've been panting after me ever since you started working for my father. And it's why you're helping me now. You're a closet lesbo." She giggled. "No wonder you went down so easy last night. You've probably been dreaming about it for years."

"No! It isn't true! I just want to be your friend. Please don't laugh at me. Please..." Her trembling voice gave way, and she began to weep.

"Oh, for God's sake, stop your blubbering. I don't care what you are as long as you do what I say and keep your mouth shut." She turned back to the mirror and flounced her hair one last time. "Why are you so late? I've been waiting. I need to use your car."

"I—I went shopping. I picked up some lobster tail and steak for our dinner. We could have a nice baked potato with it, and I could make some apple crisp."

The renewed eagerness in her voice irritated Rona Lee all the more. "I won't be eating here tonight. Like I said, I'm going out."

"Where? Can't I come, too?"

"*Can't I come, too?* My God, you're pathetic. No, you can't come. I need a total change of scene. And company. Being cooped up here is driving me nuts!"

"I thought you didn't want to be seen around town. Not until..."

"I didn't think the old fart would take this long to croak. Have you heard anything new?"

"At the staff meeting today, Dr. Abigail told us he's near the end. It could be days, or it could be weeks. But he's definitely in the last stages."

"*Weeks?* Shit. Now I know I have to get out of here. But I need some money. Did you bring some?"

Gladys sniffed and scrubbed the tears from her face. In a defeat-laced voice, "We didn't take in any cash today. I have a couple of checks, but they need to be run through the account. I'll see what I have in my billfold."

She turned away and started down the upstairs hallway. Rona Lee followed. The bare bulb in the old-fashioned fixture cast unforgiving light on the scuffed wooden floor and faded

wallpaper. At the bottom of the narrow stairway, Gladys crossed to the half-moon table where her purse sat. She removed her billfold and extracted a thin sheaf of bills.

Rona Lee took the proffered money and counted it. “Thirteen dollars? You must be joking.”

“I told you I went to the store. I thought we’d be eating in.”

Rona Lee shook her head in disgust and held out her hand. Gladys stared at it with an uncertain expression, then slowly raised her own hand to rest in it.

Rona Lee slapped the hand away. “No, you idiot. Keys. I need the keys to your car.”

Blinking back a new wave of tears, Gladys rummaged in her purse and handed over the car keys. Rona Lee tossed them playfully in her hand, all smiles again.

“Thanks, babe. And don’t bother to wait up. If I score tonight, I probably won’t be back until tomorrow.”

She grabbed her mink-trimmed leather jacket from the hall coat tree and opened the front door, tossing over her shoulder,

“Bye-bye. Enjoy your lobster!”