

CHAPTER ONE

A shooting star flashed across the night sky and quickly died.

“That’s a sign of good luck,” said Maya, turning toward Ryan with a look of expectation. The shifting flames of the campfire sparkled in her silver earrings and cast her brown complexion in a golden glow.

They were outside on a bluff, with the flickering lights of Sedona, Arizona, below and a billion stars above. Their cabin was behind them, hidden among the juniper and pinyon trees. In the distance, they could hear the faint howls of coyotes through the crackling fire.

Ryan Butler had been planning this retreat for months, but his initial anticipation and excitement had turned sour. He had promised her that this weekend would be special and he would finally tell her the truth about his past.

She had been patient, waiting all weekend for Ryan to broach the subject, but he had said nothing ... and now it was Sunday night. “What were you going to tell me?” she asked, buoyed by the hope of the shooting star. “You’ve been very quiet since we arrived.”

“I know I promised to tell you about my past, but I can’t now—something happened.”

“What do mean, something happened? What could have happened since we arrived here?”

Ryan wondered what he was supposed to tell her. A few days ago, some six hundred miles away in Napa, California, a man came home from work. His wife, daughter, son-in-law, and three-year-old grandson were waiting for him at his house to celebrate his sixtieth

birthday. When he arrived home, he seemed nervous and distracted. When they brought out the birthday cake, he abruptly excused himself and went out to the garage. When he returned to the dining room, he was carrying a handgun. He shot each of them between their eyes and then turned the gun on himself.

“Trust me, Maya, please. This is not a good time.”

“Then when *will* be a good time, Ryan? We’ve been dating for two years, living together for six months now, and I think I have a right to know the person I’m living with. What are you hiding, Ryan? It can’t be that terrible. You’ve told me a little about yourself. I know you grew up in Pennsylvania. I know you were once a minor league baseball player and a corporate lawyer. You confided to me that you were the driver in a car crash that killed a woman. What could be worse than that?”

Ryan said nothing. She was talking about the night in 1966 when he had wrecked a car with three other passengers aboard, including a young woman who died instantly. His own injuries put an end to his promising baseball career. He had told Maya that was the reason he couldn’t fully use his left arm—but that was a lie. He had told her he had worked for a prestigious law firm in Philadelphia in the 1980s but quit because he had become disgusted with corporate law—another lie. He had told her that the only other woman he had ever loved was his ex-wife, during their courtship and in the early years of their failed marriage—yet another lie.

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“You’ll feel better if you tell me,” she said softly. “You know you can trust me, Ryan—whatever your secrets. But I can’t stay with a man who won’t be honest with me. Maybe we shouldn’t go on together.”

The tone of her voice confused Ryan. He couldn't tell whether she was angry or sad; perhaps it was a combination of both. "Why can't we leave things the way they are? It's not as if I don't want to tell you. I can't—not now."

"What do you mean, you can't? Is it something you're ashamed of?"

"No, nothing I'm ashamed of."

"Do you think if you tell me, I'll leave you?"

"I'm not sure. Mostly, I don't think you would believe me."

"I give up," she said, abruptly standing. She wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and headed back to the cabin, leaving Ryan sitting alone by the campfire.

Ryan watched her disappear into the night. He knew he should follow her, but all he could think about were the murders. He had learned of them two days ago, soon after they had arrived in Sedona. He had driven into town to get supplies while Maya unpacked at the cabin. He was in the grocery checkout line when he saw the headlines in the *National Mirror* screaming out "Birthday Murders." With some embarrassment, he bought a copy and carried it back to the cabin concealed under his jacket. When Maya was outside, he read the article. It was short on specifics but big on sensationalism. There were several photographs taken outside the mansion in Napa showing the police carrying out the bodies on stretchers, past yellow barricade tape and crowds of onlookers. There was a short biography of the perpetrator, Daniel Costas, founder and owner of Costas Vineyards, former school board member, community leader, and respected philanthropist. There was an eyewitness account from the housekeeper, who was in the kitchen at the time of the shooting but ran out to the dining room when she heard the first shot, only to retreat in terror when she realized what was happening. There was a

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terse statement from the police indicating that the incident was under investigation but there was no known motive for the shooting. Then there was the shocker at the end that raised the hair on Ryan's neck.

It recounted that a similar shooting had taken place two weeks earlier in Shreveport, Louisiana. A local construction worker had killed his wife and his son in their house, execution-style, and then had killed himself. It occurred on the man's sixtieth birthday. When the police arrived, the white birthday cake was still on the dining room table, splattered in red. The paper called it a "very strange coincidence." The man's name was Peter Darwin.

Ryan recognized both names—Costas and Darwin. They were both part of his secret past. He was sure it was no coincidence.

CHAPTER TWO

Ryan and Maya drove in silence from the towering red rock formations of Sedona to Phoenix, descending gradually across sloping grasslands and then steeply down a curving mountain road flanked by tall green saguaro cactuses. In the distance lay the Valley of the Sun, encircled by ragged gray mountains. Their condominium was on the west side of Phoenix in an area called Litchfield Park, an oasis of green grass, orange trees, and rows of tall palm trees surrounded by the brown desert.

All during the trip, Ryan wondered what he should do, if anything. Whom could he tell without giving himself away, without compromising his past? After all, fifteen years ago the CIA had warned him never to talk about the events of 1986.

Maya kept quiet during the trip, looking out the window or fiddling with the radio, trying to find the NPR station in Phoenix through bursts of static. From her posture and demeanor, Ryan knew he was now the recipient of her “silent treatment.” She had tried it on him before, without much success. Her naturally cheerful and vivacious personality made it hard for her to go the distance, and Ryan hoped the ice would soon melt.

Ryan glanced at the silhouette of her face as she looked out the car window. Her father had been an English diplomat, with a bit of Irish in him, who had met and married her mother while stationed in Guatemala in the 1970s. Maya had inherited her mother’s dark

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complexion, high cheekbones, and hint of Indian roots; but her multiethnic heritage was evident in her blue eyes. Although she was not a traditional beauty, she was quite striking. She had lived all over the world with her globetrotting parents and after two failed marriages had settled in Arizona to pursue her interests in painting and teaching. Ryan had met her two years ago at a political fund-raiser, and they had been together ever since. He had told her that he loved her, but he didn't really know if that was true. There was another woman he was still in love with, a woman he hadn't seen in fifteen years—Alana Shannon, the wife of an old friend.

After unpacking at their condominium, Ryan retreated to his office. When they had decided to move in together, they rented the threebedroom condominium; one room served as Ryan's office, another as Maya's art studio, and the third as their sleeping quarters. Although she was careful to keep the door to her studio closed, the condominium reeked of painting supplies.

Ryan turned on his desktop computer and found the website for the *National Mirror*, searching for the e-mail address of the woman who wrote the article. The byline read "Connie Blythe." He found her address and went back to AOL to compose a message:

To: Cblythe@NatMirror.com

From: Ryabut@aol.com

Subject: Anonymous Tip

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Re: Birthday Murders. You may want to check if both Daniel Costas and Peter Darwin were enrolled at the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 1969.

Please do not contact me.

He paused a long time before touching the Send button. He felt safe. There was no way she could know who sent the e-mail, no way to track him down from the e-mail address. All she could do was reply to the e-mail, and he could ignore her replies. With that finished, he walked out to their courtyard to find Maya.

“Are you going to talk to me?” he asked. It was late afternoon, and she was sitting on a chair, reading a book, under the shade of the big orange tree that covered most of the courtyard. She looked up at him, said nothing, and returned her gaze to the book.

Ryan knew her silence was an invitation to a fight, but he had no interest in battle. He bore too many scars from too many bitter bouts with his first wife. Still, he understood Maya’s hurt and frustration. His first wife had constantly lied to him, concealing her affairs and wounding him deeply. He was caught in a no-win situation. With the news of the birthday murders, telling Maya the truth was no longer an option; he couldn’t chance putting her at risk. He returned to his office.

Ryan had a lot of work to catch up on before he left again for the Middle East. He would first go to the United Arab Emirates and then on to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and possibly a second visit to Iran, assuming the State Department could finalize the necessary diplomatic arrangements. Ryan worked for the Environmental Protection Agency and was part of a team from the United States visiting the Middle East

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to study and tour their water desalination projects. Ryan had come to Arizona several years earlier as a legal advisor for an impact study on a proposed desalination plant near Yuma. The plan was to pipe in water from the Gulf of California, seventy miles to the south, through Mexico. The treated water would provide for agricultural irrigation in Arizona and California, thus freeing up more freshwater from the Colorado River to fill up swimming pools, water lawns, and keep golf courses green in the parched Southwest. His flight was a week away, set for September 11, 2001.

CHAPTER THREE

The first thing Connie Blythe did when she arrived at her office at the *National Mirror* each morning was to check the clippings from newspapers across the country. Years ago, she had started out as a serious journalist, graduating from the Columbia University School of Journalism, interning for the *New York Times*, and landing a job as an investigative reporter for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. That was back when even small and medium-size city newspapers were profitable and could afford investigative units. Those days were long gone. Above her desk, in a wooden frame, hung her pink slip from the *Post-Gazette*—one of many handed out when the newspaper was bought by a national chain.

Journalism jobs were hard to come by with so many ex-reporters competing for the few that remained. It was doubly hard for her; she was a female in a man's world. Some people thought she might be a lesbian. She stood just over five feet and was a little on the plump side. She wore her brown hair short, but not too short, applied nice makeup, and dressed fashionably. Still, there was a vague masculinity about her—a husky voice and an assertive attitude that served her well as a reporter but not elsewhere in life. She lived alone in a garden apartment with two cats and a well-stocked liquor cabinet.

Ultimately, she had been lucky to land a job with the *National Mirror*, a publication she previously had looked down on with disdain. Nevertheless, it was a paycheck and kept her in the newspaper business—with the lingering hope of someday returning to a regular

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newspaper, although she knew that was a foolish fantasy like her dream of winning a Pulitzer Prize. She was the crime reporter for the paper, and her job was to produce several sensational stories each week. Although the front pages usually contained half-baked stories of celebrity breakdowns, infidelities, drug abuse, and other assorted scandals, the editor occasionally liked a good old-fashioned lurid crime headline to break the monotony.

Her job was relatively easy. The news clearing office had subscriptions to all the major newspapers, and the staff would flag the crime stories for her attention. She would select the ones that were most horrendous and shocking and therefore most fitting for the discriminating readers of the *Mirror*. In addition, from her old classmates at journalism school and through her years as a legitimate reporter, she had a network of contacts at local newspapers across the country whom she relied on for the stories missed by the big papers. Small-town murders with some weird twist like bigamy, incest, or macabre dismemberments were always great. They were usually stories that wouldn't make the larger media markets but would still be of great interest and titillation to her readers. It was also good to have pictures—no direct photos of bodies or blood, but side shots of covered corpses, weeping wives, distraught neighbors, or baffled police investigators.

The Costas murder and suicide had made all the media outlets, but no other national paper had noticed the news of the earlier family murder involving Peter Darwin. It had previously come to Connie's attention via a tip from a former colleague who worked for the *Shreveport Gazette*.

At the time, Connie hadn't judged it worthy of national publication, since it didn't involve a famous or infamous person. However, when the Costas story broke, she decided to mention it in her article because of the strange birthday twist. She had thought nothing more of it until the arrival yesterday afternoon of an anonymous AOL e-mail hinting at some connection between the two murders.

On her desk, Connie had assembled all the news reports on both incidents. Several sources reported that Mr. Costas was a graduate of the University of Wisconsin. There was no mention of Mr. Darwin ever going to the University of Wisconsin or even attending college. She called in Toby, her college dropout, stoner, computer wizard assistant.

A few minutes later, Toby showed up at her office with his faded jeans, long brown hair, Metallica T-shirt, hiking boots, and one silver earring. "You called for me, darling?"

"How many times have I told you not to call me darling?"

"I don't know; I lost count."

Connie shook her head. "Okay, Toby dear, I'll let it go this time. Do you remember there was another birthday murder a few weeks before the Costas shooting?"

"Yeah, the evolution guy."

"What?"

"You know—his name was Darwin, right? You're a little slow today, Connie."

Connie smiled. "Find out for me if the evolution guy ever attended the University of Wisconsin, and if so, when."

"Sure thing, darling. Anything else?"

Connie winced. “Yeah, I need you to crack an AOL account for me.”

Toby rolled his eyeballs. “Hey, you know I’m not supposed to be able to do that.”

“I won’t tell anybody if you don’t.”

“What’s the e-mail for the account?”

“RYABUT at AOL dot com.”

“I’ll see what I can do. What do you need?”

“A name, address, and telephone number.”

“I’m on it,” Toby said with a wide smile, and he darted out of the office.

Connie turned her attention back to the e-mail, wondering if it was just another crank message. She received plenty of oddball e-mails, along with a steady barrage of threats, implausible accounts of horrendous crimes, and numerous personal testimonials describing alien abductions. However, if this e-mail was legitimate, then she wanted to know what the sender was implying. Furthermore, if there was a connection between the two cases, who would know such a thing unless they were somehow involved?

It was late afternoon when Toby popped back into her office. “Got it! I spoke to a few police officials down in Shreveport who told me that they had no knowledge of Peter Darwin ever going to college. Told me he had spent time in the army as a young man, but as far as they knew, he had never left home after that. I asked if they could give me the phone numbers of some family members. I spoke to his mother, a very nice

woman with a slow southern accent. She seemed happy to talk about her son—told me his life story. When I got off the phone, she was crying. I was a little misty myself. She told me he spent one year at the University of Wisconsin in Madison on the GI bill after the army discharged him. He didn't want people to know about it because he had flunked out. He returned home the following year." "What year was it"?

"1968 to 1969. Same time Costas was there," Toby said nodding knowingly.

Connie turned her gaze away and rubbed her chin. Toby continued to stare at her. "Are you going to tell me the angle here?" he asked.

"Don't know yet. Do you have a name and number for me?"

He handed her a typed sheet of paper reading, Ryan Butler, 212 Palm Drive, Litchfield Park, Arizona, 623-595-8411. "Now remember, darling, you didn't get that from me!"