

Chapter ONE

I've never been a morning person, and if there's one thing I don't need before my first cup of coffee, it's a visit from the cops. But at 8:45 on a Friday morning, two of them waited for me at my law office.

I shut the door on the steam heat—typical July weather in Maryland—and shook my sticky blouse loose. Seven years in practice had taught me many hard lessons. One of them should have been never to wear dry-clean-only blouses in the summer.

Sheila, the seventy-plus receptionist and secretary for the accounting firm where I sublet space, gave me a brief wave while answering the phone through her ever-present headset. Her long, bony fingers clacked away at the keyboard without skipping a beat.

Both men stood as I approached. I recognized Detective Martin Derry of the Prince George's County police. I wondered what the homicide investigator wanted with me.

"Good morning," I said.

"Morning, Ms. McRae." Derry had light blue eyes, the color of lake water in January. "I need to speak to you about one of your clients."

Derry's companion was tall and gangly, as if loosely constructed of mismatched bones. His frizzy reddish-blond hair was short, making his head seem too small and his nose and ears too big. He peered at me with his head cocked to one side, like a pigeon.

"Let me have five minutes, okay?"

Derry nodded, and I trudged up the steps to my office. I didn't have any clients charged with homicide. Since I'd left the public defender's office, most of my criminal clients were yuppies with first-time DWIs or habitual traffic offenders, so I was dying to find out what he wanted. Whatever it was, it could wait five more minutes.

I went through the daily routine of opening the Venetian blinds, turning down the thermostat on the ancient window unit, and booting my computer. I started a pot of dark roast coffee, placing my mug on the burner to catch it as it dripped out. When I felt ready, I invited them in.

They each did a cop's visual sweep of my office before they sat down. No doubt, they were impressed by the plush furnishings—a used desk, two guest chairs, a metal filing cabinet, a small hutch for my supplies, and tables for my fax, copier, and Mr. Coffee, most of which I'd bought at a state surplus outlet. My one indulgence was a new high-backed desk chair.

"This is Special Agent Carl Jergins, FBI," Derry said.

"Sam McRae," I said, extending my hand. Jergins worked my arm like a pump. FBI? I wondered what was up.

Derry sat stiffly upright. Dark-haired and mustached, he had a solemn, squarish face. In a charcoal gray suit, starched white shirt, and red tie, Derry was one of those people who manage to look dapper, no matter what. We'd met years before when I'd defended the man accused of killing his fiancée. Derry treated me with complete, almost excessive, professionalism. I tried to ignore the charged feeling in the air when he was around.

"We understand you have a client named Melanie Hayes," Derry said.

I stared at him. “She’s not . . . ” I couldn’t finish the thought.

“No. It’s her ex, Tom Garvey. He was found shot to death.”

“Oh, my God.”

“We know you represented her in a domestic violence matter,” Derry said, watching me closely as he spoke. “You understand why we need to talk to her.”

I nodded. “When did this happen?”

“Over the weekend,” Derry said.

“I’ll be present when you question her.” It was not a request.

Derry bobbed his head in brief acknowledgment. “When was the last time you spoke to Ms. Hayes?”

“Last Friday.”

“On the phone or in person?”

“In person. She came to the office.”

“And you haven’t spoken to her since?”

“No. Why?”

Derry leaned back in his chair. He appeared to think about whether to answer the question.

“There’s a problem,” he said. “She seems to have disappeared.”

“What? Just vanished?”

“She hasn’t been home and hasn’t shown up for work all week.”

An angry sizzle interrupted my thoughts. The odor of burnt coffee filled the room. My cup was overflowing onto the hot plate.

“Shit.” I jumped up and exchanged the cup for a carafe. Coffee was everywhere. In haste, I ripped a couple of pages from a writing pad and daubed at the mess, grinning sheepishly at the cops.

Derry’s mustache twitched into a brief grimace. Jergins stared.

“Well, I have no idea where she could be,” I said, swiping at drops that had landed on my blouse.

Both cops studied me, maybe waiting for more. I sat down and drank my coffee. The air conditioner clicked and roared in the background.

Jergins cleared his throat, leaning forward. “Ms. McRae,” he said, in a gruff, rat-a-tat voice, “it’s extremely important that we get in touch with Ms. Hayes as soon as possible. Her life may be at risk.”

“Why? And what’s the FBI’s interest in this?” I looked directly at the bony fed.

Jergins’ nostrils flared as if he’d detected a bad smell. From the look in his beady eyes, you’d have thought I was the source.

“Has your client ever mentioned the name Gregory Knudsen?”

“No. Who is he?”

“What about Christof Stavos?”

“What about him?” I asked, a little annoyed that he’d ignored my question.

“Have you heard that name? Ever?”

“Nope. Never ever.”

Jergins did that pigeon move with his head again.

I resisted the urge to imitate him.

He said, “Mr. Stavos is a sick and dangerous man. It’s absolutely essential that Ms. Hayes get in touch with us as soon as possible. For her own safety, if nothing else.”

“Why?” I asked. “Who is he?”

“Wiseguy from New York.”

The phone rang.

I decided to let the voice mail get it. “Mafia? What would someone like that want with my client?”

Jergins leaned back, allowing himself a dramatic pause. “Did your client leave anything with you? A CD, maybe?”

“No.”

“And she never mentioned Knudsen?”

“Like I said, no.”

He nodded, still not looking satisfied.

“So, who is this guy, Knudsen?” I said. “And what’s on the CD?”

Jergins said nothing.

“Let’s get back to your client,” Derry said. “Did she ever mention anything about leaving town? Even a hint that she might?”

I spread my hands in a helpless gesture. “Not that I recall.”

Derry appeared to ponder my response then said, “I guess we’ve taken enough of your time.”

Jergins looked like he wanted to subpoena every piece of paper in the room.

“Wait a second,” I said. “What’s going on? Obviously, someone’s been murdered, but is there more?”

Derry glanced at Jergins, who remained mute.

“There’s got to be,” I said. “Or why would the FBI be involved?”

Another look passed between the men.

Derry said, “Right now, I’m concerned about investigating a homicide.”

As opposed to what? I wanted to ask.

“This mobster—what was his name? Stavos?—he’s also a suspect?” I asked.

Silence.

Forget it, I thought. I might as well go outside and ask a fire hydrant.

As they stood up, Derry said, “You’ll let us know if you hear from Ms. Hayes.”

“Of course.”

Jergins pulled out a business card and thrust it toward me. It said he was with the field office in Baltimore.

“You hear anything about Knudsen, you let me know,” he said, in his clipped monotone. Probably picked it up watching too many reruns of *Dragnet*.

After they left, I checked my voice mail. Someone named Christy from my credit card company had called. I was up to date on my bill, and the message didn’t say anything about their “great new services.” Curious, I dialed the number and connected directly with Christy, who sounded like a college student working the phones during her summer break.

“Stephanie Ann McRae?” she said. The credit card was in my full name rather than the acronym I use as a nickname. “I’m calling to confirm your recent application for a line of credit,” she continued, sounding as if she were reading from cue cards.

“But I haven’t applied for more credit.”

A few seconds of silence. “You haven’t? Oh, wow. Have you lost your card recently?”

“No, no. I would have reported that.” I pulled my purse out of my desk, just to check. The card was still in my wallet.

“Well, it looks like someone has applied for a credit line in your name,” Christy said. “I’m glad we were able to catch this. The amount is unusually large.”

“How large would that be?”

“Ten thousand dollars.”

Chapter TWO

“It’s one of those things you think will never happen to you,” I said. “I still can’t believe it. I’m just glad they caught the problem. Do you know how long it would’ve taken to clear my credit?”

“Mmm-mmm,” Jamila murmured, about the best she could manage with a spicy meatball hors d’oeuvre in her mouth.

I had a ginger ale in one hand and a small plate loaded with shrimp and little quiches in the other. This left me with no hands to eat either the shrimp or the quiches. I set my drink on a handy table, hoping that none of the waiters patrolling the banquet room would scoop it up when I wasn’t looking.

Close to a hundred people had shown for the mixer, which surprised the hell out of me. The bar association doesn’t usually schedule events during the summer. The theory, I guess, is that most people take summer vacations. It was a sad commentary on our profession that we were there.

“So I’m finally checking my credit history,” I said. “They say you should do it every year. I’ve always found a reason to put it off until now. Hopefully, the jerk hasn’t applied for ten more credit cards with my information.”

“Unbelievable.”

“I almost didn’t come. I don’t want to see any of these people. Present company excepted, of course.”

Jamila gestured with her diet Coke. “Roger’s trashed.” She referred to the partner she worked for at Haskins & O’Connell, one of the biggest firms in the county.

I looked across the room at Roger. He was smiling, talking amiably to some guy in a nine-hundred-dollar suit, and looking as dull as ever. “How the hell can you tell?”

“Cause he keeps licking his lips.” Jamila straightened and did another quick survey of the room. “You see any judges? There are supposed to be some judges at this damn thing.”

“I don’t know. I just came for the free food.”

Jamila smiled and continued to look around. As usual, she was dressed to the nines. Her dusky brown complexion was a perfect complement to her tan suit, and she’d applied her makeup with surgical precision. She aspired to partnership at H&O and, eventually, a judgeship with the Circuit Court for Prince George’s County. Maybe even the federal court in Greenbelt.

In P.G. County, a Washington, D.C., suburban area with a majority black population, her appointment to such a position was a distinct possibility if she kept her nose clean and went to the right parties. Jamila had been a good friend of mine since law school, but with any luck, nobody would hold that against her.

“I’m sorry about your problem,” she said. “Can you believe, the same thing happened to one of my clients? Only no one caught it, and he’s in the hole *twenty* thousand dollars.”

“Damn.”

“He was supposed to close on some property next month. Now the lender’s trying to back out. We’re hoping to fix things before the closing date, but you know what our chances are of doing that?”

“Pretty slim.”

“We may have to put off the closing,” Jamila said. “Or even cancel it. All because of some little shit who ... I’m sorry. I don’t mean to go on about my problems. We were talking about you.”

“It’s okay.” I reached for my drink, but it had been spirited away. “What gets me is, I’m so careful. I tear up my junk mail. I never give out my social security number to strangers. I rarely buy anything on the Internet. But that’s not enough anymore.”

Jamila said something about recent criminal laws against identify theft that got drowned out by guffaws.

“Don’t you have to find people before you can prosecute them?” I asked, raising my voice above the din.

“That’s what I’m saying. We had to hire a private investigator. Reed Duvall. Ever hear of him?”

I shook my head. “Most of my clients can’t afford me, let alone a detective.”

“He’s supposed to be good. A little unconventional, but they say he gets the job done.”

“I wonder if he could find my missing client.”

“How’s that?”

“The police are looking for this woman I represented in a domestic violence hearing. We were going to go back to court to enforce the order. Now, her ex is dead and the police can’t find her.”

“Oh.” She raised an eyebrow.

“Hey, it’s innocent until proven guilty, remember?”

“That’s what they say.”

I filled Jamila in on what the cops told me, leaving Melanie’s name out of it.

“The FBI,” she said. “Shit.”

“The whole thing looks weird as hell, no question. Thing is, I have no duty to do anything. I don’t have to find her.”

“If she shows up, tell her to go to the cops,” Jamila said.

“Sure. But I keep wondering what the Mob has to do with this. And how is my client involved? If I don’t act, is she going to end up being another story on the eleven o’clock news?”

Jamila’s glance darted toward the door. “Judge Ridgway just came in. We should say hello.”

“Goody.”

She shot me a look. “You’ve got to learn to work these people, sweetie.”

I sighed. “I know. It’s such a friggin’ drag.”

“And another thing. You can’t take responsibility for everything that happens to a client and stay sane in this business.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I knew it all too well. Still, I was concerned about Melanie. For one thing, I simply couldn’t picture her as a killer.

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I don’t like domestic violence cases, but for Melanie I made an exception. Maybe it helped that, like me, she was 36 and single. She was tall and slender with brown hair cut in a short bob. Her intelligence and forthrightness impressed me. She had an air of quiet resolve—no hysterics, no second-guessing about whether she was doing the right thing. She

had everything you look for in a client—a rational and cooperative attitude plus the ability to pay. Not that the case brought in much money, but it never hurts when a client can pay.

Getting the order hadn't been difficult. Tom had been drunk and abusive. When he'd hit Melanie, there'd been a minor scuffle. She'd called the police, and they'd arrested Tom.

Afterward, he'd moved in with a friend in Laurel. Things were fine for a while, then the phone calls started. He started coming by her apartment.

She refused to talk to him. She hoped he would give up, but he wouldn't.

"I want him to leave me alone," she said, staring out my office window at the brick storefronts of Laurel's historic Main Street. She seemed anxious the last time I saw her. I tried to be reassuring. Unfortunately, getting the orders in these cases is one thing and getting the abusers to comply is something else.



Later that afternoon, I tried to reach Melanie at home, without success. I didn't have a cell phone number, so I tried First Bank of Laurel, where she worked as an assistant manager. Melanie wasn't there. I asked for Donna Thurman, her boss. I had done some work for Donna before, and she'd given Melanie my name.

Donna came on the line. "Yes?" she said, her vocal chords sounding as taut as piano wires.

"Donna, it's Sam McRae. Do you have a minute to talk?"

"Well ..."

She sounded busy, so I got to the point. "Have you seen Melanie lately?"

I thought I heard her gasp at the other end. Maybe it was just the phone line.

"Sam," she said, "I'm ... I'm in the middle of something. Can we meet at your office later?"

"Sure."

Around four-thirty, Donna came by. Somewhere in her sixties, she was a petite, silver-haired wonder with skin tanned to a carcinogenic brown from frequent sailing trips on the Chesapeake with her husband. Donna was the kind of person who, rather than soften with age, grew more angular. Instead of slowing down, she seemed to be picking up speed, as if her life were a game of *Beat the Clock*.

She wore a short-sleeved yellow suit and, normally, would have looked terrific. However, when she came into the office, I could tell something was wrong. I'd never seen her so subdued and drawn. I wondered if she was sick.

"Thank heavens it's Friday," she said, collapsing into a chair with a muted grunt. "Sam, I'm so worried about Melanie. She hasn't been at work all week. She hasn't called. It's not like her. I even thought about filing a missing person's report. Then the police came."

"I guess you don't have any idea where she might be."

She shook her head.

"When was the last time you saw her?" I asked.

"Last Friday, at work."

"Did you talk to her over the weekend?"

"No."

"It's frustrating, but there's not much we can do at this point. I hope she shows up."

Donna hunched forward, her expression suggesting there was more on her mind. "That FBI agent. He said something about the Mob being involved. The whole thing is so bizarre—and scary. I've been trying to figure how to tell her parents."

“Her parents?”

“I’ve known them for years. They moved to Arizona a while ago, but I keep in touch with them. I remember when Melanie was born.”

“Could Melanie have gone there due to a family emergency?”

“I suppose it’s possible,” she said, “but Melanie hasn’t spoken to her parents in years. Besides, I think I would have heard about it.”

“What about brothers and sisters?”

“Melanie’s an only child.”

I shrugged. “Maybe she decided to take a vacation or something.”

“She wouldn’t do that without telling us.”

“Well, you know her better than I do. I didn’t realize you were so close.”

“I helped her get this job.” Donna looked sheepish. “To be honest, it’s a little embarrassing for me at work, what with her disappearing like this.”

“I take it Melanie never mentioned any of the stuff the police asked about?”

“Heavens, no.”

“Did she ever talk about Tom?”

“Not much, though I could tell they were having problems. You know, how it is. Sometimes, you can just tell. Now and then, she’d mention his drinking and his building debt. Tell you the truth,” she said, arching a knowing eyebrow, “I wasn’t all that surprised. The better I got to know him, the more I realized he was all surface, all charm.”

I let her vent for a bit about Tom. She hadn’t approved of his moving in with Melanie, and the fact that it hadn’t worked out didn’t help matters. I still wasn’t sure why she’d wanted to meet me, but Donna was a good client—a friend—so I let her take her time getting to the real reason for her visit.

Donna shifted restlessly. “I’d like to ask a favor.”

“Yes?”

“I ran by Melanie’s apartment yesterday. Her car was there, but she didn’t answer my knock. After what the police said, I started wondering ... what if she couldn’t get to the door? What if she was passed out ... or worse?”

I’d also wondered if Melanie might be dead, but I hadn’t wanted to bring it up. “I guess we can’t rule that out, but don’t jump to conclusions. It’s possible she wasn’t home.”

“But what about her car?”

“She could have taken a cab or a bus.”

“Maybe she saw me through the peephole and didn’t answer the door.”

“Why would she do that?”

She hesitated. “Probably ashamed to talk to me. Since things fell apart with Tom ... well, we haven’t spoken to each other much.” She paused, then asked, “Could you run by her place and check on her? It’s not far from here.”

I nodded. “Sure. I don’t know if I’ll have any more luck, but at least I can say I tried.”

“I appreciate that, Sam.” Donna smiled, looking abashed. “I guess I must seem like a silly old woman. I know she’s grown and able to take care of herself. Maybe it’s because I never had kids of my own. She’s all alone, and I do almost consider her like a daughter”

“Don’t worry about it. She’s probably fine.” I hoped I was right.

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After work, I stopped at my place to feed Oscar, my fifteen-pound, black and white cat, and grab something to eat. Dinner was two pieces of toast with peanut butter and salad-in-a-

bag. I'm not much of a cook, and it hardly seems worth it to dirty dishes just to feed myself. I finished the meal with chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream straight from the carton. I rinsed the knife, the spoon, and the plate and headed for Melanie's place.

My '67 Mustang sputtered on the first turn of the ignition key and the second, then finally roared to life. It was an old relic, painted a Welch's Grape purple and in need of a tune-up and a patch job on the muffler, which made noises that attracted curious glances from five hundred yards. It could probably have used a trip through the car wash, too. But it ran—noise, dirt, and all.

Melanie lived in the Whiskey Bottom neighborhood of North Laurel, a collection of *très* suburban brick townhouses and apartments just across the county line. Maybe there'd been a lot of moonshining in that area at one time because the booze theme could be found on most of the street signs, which had names like Moonshine Hollow, Bourbon Street, Brandy Lane, and Barrelhouse Road.

I found a space near the attractive three-story apartment building swathed in greenery and accented with beds of bright red begonias. Donna said Melanie had a red Geo with a crystal hanging from the rearview mirror. It was still there. The heat of the day radiated from the blacktop as I crossed the lot. The air was heavy with humidity, but four young teens—two girls and two boys—were outside, engaged in a bit of friendly competition, shooting hoops at a freestanding basket. Watching them made me sweat.

Melanie had mail in her box. Not a lot, but maybe a couple of days' worth. The building had an open foyer, and her apartment was one of four located on the second floor.

I climbed the steps. No newspaper lay on the mat before her door. I heard a TV set, but couldn't tell from where. I knocked and waited, then knocked again. No one answered.

Just for kicks, I checked under the mat for a spare key and found one. What a lousy place for it. There aren't many options for apartment dwellers, but I wouldn't put my key under the mat.

I picked it up, feeling a little odd about walking into someone's apartment uninvited. But Melanie would thank me later if she was in there, dying on the floor. I used the key in the deadbolt, which unlocked with no problem. It also fit the knob. Turning it, I stepped inside.

The door opened into a combined living room/dining area. Closed curtains made the place gloomy. Even so, I could see a chair turned onto its side and things strewn over the floor. Someone had ransacked the place.

Chapter THREE

I stood at the door, looking and listening. The neighbor's television continued to buzz in the background, but I didn't hear anything else. Finally, I took a few tentative steps inside.

At first, I thought it was the work of vandals. Her stereo and VCR lay on the floor, the housing on each ripped off. Same for the TV set.

At the same time, everything looked too neat. The stuff on the floor wasn't thrown about, but arranged in piles. A few videos here, books there—as if someone had cleared everything off to dust, then didn't bother to put it back.

I wondered if the cops could have done this. Assuming they'd gotten a search warrant, this seemed like overkill for them. Then I saw her CD collection.

Someone had opened all the jewel cases and tossed them aside in a heap. I thought about what Agent Jergins said about Christof Stavos looking for a CD. The thought that the Mob could have been there made my stomach clench.

I did a quick survey of the apartment. Every room was much the same. Dishes, pots, and pans were stacked on any available surface in the kitchen. The dressers and closet in the bedroom had been emptied, their contents heaped on the floor. Thankfully, I didn't find Melanie dead or disabled. Of course, that wasn't proof positive that she wasn't.

I checked each room again, more methodically this time, looking for something like a travel brochure, a credit card receipt, anything. In the kitchen, I picked through some stuff that looked like it came from a "junk" drawer—take-out menus, scissors, a bar napkin, rubber bands, and a small ball of string.

I took a closer look at the napkin. It was from Aces High, a strip joint a few miles up Route 1. The logo was an Ace of Spades with a half-naked woman, eyes closed and lips parted in the throes of ecstasy, sprawled across it. Someone had written "Connie" and a phone number on it. A friend of Tom's, I supposed. Apparently, drinking and debt weren't his only vices. I wrote the name and number in a small notebook I carry.

The bathroom didn't offer much. The bedroom was a mess. I decided to assume for the sake of not taking all night that what I was looking for wasn't in her clothing. Chances were it was on her dresser or in the wastepaper basket. I checked both and came up empty.

A small, dark blue address book, with an envelope tucked inside like a bookmark, lay on the bedside table next to the phone. The envelope was unsealed. Inside was a receipt for a post office box and a key. The stamp indicated a College Park zip code. According to the paper, the renter was Stephanie A. McRae.

I stared at the receipt, not quite believing what I saw. An ugly thought occurred—what if Melanie, pretending to be me, had rented the box. What if she'd applied for that credit line? How would she have gotten access to my personal information? Why would she do it?

I knew one thing—I had to see what was in that box. This didn't look good, but I didn't want to draw any conclusions until then.

The phone rang. Faintly, I heard the answering machine's recorded message, a pause, and then tones. Realizing it must be Melanie, checking for messages, I snatched the phone up.

"Hello? Hello?" I said. No response. Only charged silence, then the mechanical clicks and pops of disconnection.

“Damn it,” I said. I hung up and tried *69, but it wouldn’t go through. So much for that.

The phone was a cordless with caller ID built in. The last caller was *Unknown*. Helpful. I fiddled with the buttons and managed to find out that someone named Bruce Schaeffer called a couple of days ago. The name sounded familiar, and I made a note of it.

I examined the address book again. It had occurred to me that Melanie might be staying with a friend or had told someone else where she was going. I flipped through it quickly. None of the names in it meant anything to me except Donna’s.

If I took the address book, was I disturbing a crime scene? I didn’t know for sure that this was a crime scene. Finding Melanie might be as easy as making a few phone calls. And if I found her, I’d advise her to go to the police. So I was doing the police a favor by taking it. That’s what I told myself. I stowed the book in my purse, along with the envelope.

I locked up behind me when I left and replaced the key under the mat. The early evening sky was a light bluish-gray haze. The humid air felt like warm Jell-O against my skin.

It was after hours at the post office so first thing in the morning, I’d check the box. As I headed home, I remembered who Bruce Schaeffer was—Tom Garvey had moved in with him after Melanie kicked him out. He called a few days ago, after Tom died. Why would he call Melanie? Could they have started a relationship? Maybe after she broke up with Tom. Maybe before. Stranger things have happened.

I pulled over and looked up Schaeffer’s address in Melanie’s file. He was a few minutes away. It was a long shot, but I could at least ask if he knew where Melanie was.



Schaeffer lived in what was euphemistically known as “affordable” apartments, literally on the other side of the tracks. The look-alike buildings were brick boxes—16 units to a box—with shutterless windows as stark as lidless eyes. The lot was full, but I managed to find a space at the far end, near a dumpster that smelled like something died in it. I parked, walked to his building, and clanked up the metal stairs.

I heard the banging long before I reached the third floor—someone pounding on a door. The chances it was Schaeffer’s were only one in sixteen, but sure enough that’s where she was. With odds like those, I should have been playing the horses at Laurel Racetrack instead of looking for leads on a missing client.

The woman was taking a break when I got there, leaning against Schaeffer’s door, her face twisted into a scowl. She was about my age, short and rail thin, wearing a halter top, cutoffs, and red plastic flip-flops with butterflies on them. Her light brown hair was pulled back, held loosely with one of those hair clips that look like something you’d use to seal a bag of potato chips. She glared at me, as if I were to blame for her problems.

“No one home?” I asked.

“Oh, probably there is,” she said, in a dull voice. “Bastard isn’t answering.” She pounded the door again, several times. I was surprised her fist didn’t leave dents. Finally, she swore and flipped the bird at whoever might be inside.

“I wouldn’t waste my time,” she said, and flounced off before I could think of a reply. After a few moments, I knocked on the door, more softly. Schaeffer might have been there, but not answering. In the mood the woman before me had been in, I wasn’t sure I blamed him.

As I waited, the door to the adjoining apartment opened a crack. A red-faced, balding man in boxers and one of those ribbed tank tops reserved for guys over seventy peered at me with impassive, bloodshot eyes.

“Hi,” he said. He had a breathy voice. The smell of alcohol and garlic wafted toward me.

“Hello.”

“Quite a scene.”

“You noticed, huh?”

“Been noticing lots of stuff. This place is turning into Grand Central Station. Dangerous, too. You know, just this week, they found a man shot to death in there.”

So Tom died in the apartment. “How awful,” I said.

He belched loudly. “You bet it is.”

More alcohol and garlic. I tried not to breathe too deeply.

He rambled on about our horrible society, and how no one is safe anymore. I smiled and nodded politely, and was about to excuse myself when he said, “You looking for Bruce? He’s probably working out.”

“Oh, right,” I said. “Now, what was the name of that gym?”

“Kent’s Gym. Right down 197.”

I snapped my fingers. “Of course. Kent’s Gym. Thanks.”

Creepy guy. I could feel him staring after me as I walked downstairs.

The Mustang coughed to life with some encouraging gas pedal footwork on my part. I couldn’t make a left when I hit the main road, so I went right and maneuvered over quickly to pull a U-turn at the next median break.

Behind me, someone honked his horn, long and loud. I looked back and saw a big, black car with dark windows trying to move to the left lane, holding up traffic in the process. I could picture a blue-haired lady or an old man in a hat hunched behind the wheel. I made the U-turn and noticed the black car did the same.

Out of idle curiosity, I kept my eye on the car. It was a Lincoln, gleaming like it had just been driven from the dealer’s. I turned in at the entrance to the parking lot, watching to see if the Lincoln followed. It did.

Could it be following me? Why? Nerves, I thought. The heat must be getting to me.

Kent’s Gym was in an old shopping center on Route 197 with a discount grocery and a place that sold 99-cent greeting cards. I wove through the lot and found a space near the gym. As I was putting the car’s roof up, I saw the Lincoln again. It came down the aisle, at a leisurely pace and with a slight bobbing motion, as if it were floating. Maybe it was my imagination, but it seemed to slow a little as it neared me. The big car had a gaudy, chrome hood ornament and chrome trim. Something about the design suggested a rolling, black casket. I shivered and my skin popped goose bumps, despite the evening’s warmth.

I also noticed it had New York tags.

The car glided away, never stopping, back to the street, where it merged into traffic and disappeared into the evening haze.

Chapter FOUR

The front of Kent's Gym was a huge plate glass window with treadmills and cross-trainers lined up so the whole world could admire the sweaty backsides of everyone using them. The ambiance was chilly and loud, overrun with a post-work-hours crowd that was busy flexing and extending its way to better health on various weight machines. ESPN and MTV competed on two TV sets. In the free weights section, a radio played head-banging music, and a man doing bench presses grunted so loudly with each rep, you would have thought he was giving birth.

I had no idea what Schaeffer looked like, so I asked a young girl reading at the front desk whether he was there. "Wow, he's popular tonight," she said. She had short, spiky black hair and marble green eyes, which did a quick sweep around the room. "He was just here, talking to someone. They might have gone back to the exercise room."

"Okay if I take a look?"

"Sure," she said, like she was surprised I asked. She pointed me toward a hall off the main gym and delved again into her paperback.

I walked down the short hall, past some closed offices, toward the entrance to the dark exercise room. As I approached, a woman inside the room yelled, "You bastard!"

"Keep it down, would you?" A man. Casually, I leaned against the wall near the entrance, as if waiting for someone, then stole a quick peek inside. Three people were in there—two women and one man. One of the women glared at the man. The second woman watched them. It was hard to see their faces, since the only light came from a walk-in storage closet across the room. But I recognized Miss Anger Management in the halter top.

"You're lying," she said.

"Why would I lie about such a thing?" he said.

"He can't be dead. You son of a bitch. You're just trying to protect him."

"We're going to get kicked out if you don't shut the hell up."

In the gloom, I made out her expression in profile, a mixture of disbelief and rage. For a moment, she was still. Then she threw herself at the man, wailing and pounding his chest like an infant having a temper tantrum.

The man was tall and well-built. He seemed able to take it, but he was struggling to catch her flailing arms. The other woman kept taking hesitant steps toward them, then back.

The man finally got hold of each of her wrists. She tried to move them and screeched when she couldn't, then hurled a string of expletives at him that could have peeled paint from the walls. I kept expecting someone to come running to see what was going on, but I guess all the noise up front drowned it out.

Eventually, she stopped. She stood there, glaring at the man and sniffing.

He waited a few moments, then let go of her. "Don't ever do that again," he said.

"Men." She hurled the word at him like an accusation. "I hate you. All of you." She marched toward the door. I went back to leaning casually, and she stormed past without even a glance in my direction.

There was a quieter exchange I couldn't make out between the other two. After a few seconds, I went inside.

The man had close-cropped, dark hair, and a beefy triangle of torso, with broad, well-developed shoulders tapering down to a trim tummy and hips. He surveyed me with a puzzled, wary expression.

“Bruce Schaeffer?” I asked.

“Who wants to know?”

“I’m Sam McRae. Melanie Hayes’ attorney.”

He gave me a cold stare. “Well, that’s nice. What the hell do you want?”

I sensed he would have been less polite if I’d been a guy. He had a round, boyish face, but he was no pushover. His arms were corded with muscle. His yellow T-shirt hugged tight, revealing a ripple of perfect abs.

The woman stood off to the side. Her back was to the storage closet, so her face was in shadow, but the light played off her tousled, honey-blonde hair. She had a chunky frame squeezed into a pair of jeans and a skin-tight shirt with a scoop neck that revealed an awning of cleavage.

“I’ve been having a hard time reaching Melanie,” I said. “I wondered if you might know where she is.”

“Are you shittin’ me?”

“You haven’t by any chance seen her? Or spoken to her?” The caller ID had clearly shown his number. I wanted to ask him why, but I didn’t want to get into how I knew about the call.

His mouth twisted into a contemptuous grin. “Like I have any reason to talk to that bitch after what she did to Tom.”

“She wouldn’t have thrown him out if he hadn’t hit her,” I said.

“Throwing him out did him a favor. I’m talking about how she whacked him.”

“Hold on,” I said. “You don’t know she did that.”

“Right.” He muttered something that sounded like “fucking lawyers,” and then said, “Excuse me,” and walked off.

I watched him leave, then turned to the woman. “That went well.”

She smiled. “He’s a little sensitive about Tom right now.” She had a three-pack-a-day voice. “They were friends. And he found the body in his own apartment.”

“That is horrible,” I said, trying to ingratiate myself a little. “I certainly didn’t mean to offend.”

“You’re just doing your job.”

“I couldn’t help but notice that little scene with the other woman. What was that all about?”

She shrugged. “Beats me. I just work with Bruce.”

“Did you know Tom, Ms ...”

“Rhonda. Rhonda Jacobi.”

As she stepped forward, I got a better look at her face and flinched when I saw the scars. Plastic surgery had smoothed some of the damage, but the right side of her face carried the evidence of burns. Tragic in itself, but even more so when you looked at the other side, which was flawless. I felt awful about my instinctive reaction, but either she hadn’t seen it or chose to ignore it.

“I know he was friends with Bruce,” she said. “Can’t tell you much else.”

“So I guess you wouldn’t know where Melanie is.”

She chuckled. “I don’t even know who she is.”

“Well, thanks anyway.”

“Sure.”

I still wanted to know why Bruce called Melanie if he hated her so much. Of course, it could have been a mistake. Maybe he realized he'd dialed the wrong number and hung up.

□ □ □

I drove past the storefronts on Main Street toward home. I liked living and working on Main Street, because it represented old Laurel, with its little shops in brick buildings—the meat market, the pizza place, the comic book store. Off the main road, the residential sections were mostly old Victorians with front porches, and cozy brick ramblers. Throwbacks to the old days, before the malls and the plasterboard housing started sprouting like weeds.

The street was quiet, except outside Mitchie's Restaurant, where the soaring sounds of blues from an electric guitar pierced the night. I drove another block and turned in at the entrance to my garden apartment complex. My luck was good. There was a spot in front of my building.

I didn't see him at first. I was climbing the flight up to my landing, when he poked his head around the end of the balustrade and said, "Hi, Sam."

"Jesus, Ray," I said, putting a hand to my chest. "You took ten years off my life."

"I'm sorry."

"What are you doing here?"

Ray Mardovich got up, brushing off his Dockers. He smiled in a self-mocking way, looking abashed.

"I just wanted to see you," he said.

I shook my head in disbelief. "Did it not occur to you to call?"

"I tried. Where have you been?"

"Here and there. I've had a strange day." For a moment, I toyed with the notion of telling him I was too tired to invite him in, but he'd come more than 20 miles from Mitchellville in central P.G. County to see me.

"It's been a while," I said, stalling.

He reached out and tentatively touched my arm.

I frowned, and he withdrew his hand.

"I know," he said. "It's been difficult."

"So ... Helen's out of town again, and you got bored?"

"I deserve that," he said.

"I won't argue the point." The regret in his hazel eyes looked real. "Would you like a drink?"

"Sure."

We went inside and I got Ray a beer. I don't usually drink, but I keep it on hand for the occasional guest. That night, I decided to join him.

I had known Ray for years. He was a prosecutor with the state's attorney. I met him while I was with the public defender's office, my first job out of law school. Our affair started six months ago, after a very boring bar association function. He'd been drinking heavily. I had no such excuse. I guess I could blame it on months of abstinence and the lack of a steady male companion for the past few years. Maybe I was looking for what Erica Jong once called the "zipless fuck." Whatever it was, somehow our one-nighter turned into a series of trysts, whenever and however we could manage it.

The last one had been two months ago, and I was starting to wonder if things were winding down between us. Thing was, that whole time, I couldn't bring myself to call or e-

mail him. At first, I thought of calling, but as time passed, I thought better of it. I didn't want to be a pain. If it was over, fine. It's not like I expected this thing to last forever. That didn't make it hurt any less though. I also didn't know where it left our friendship and, for some reason, I was afraid to bring that up.

"I didn't see you at the mixer today," I said.

"I had a case and someone else drew the short straw." He grinned.

"To the public sector," I said, raising my bottle in toast. "And not having to market your services. Mind if I turn on the game?"

"Do I ever?"

We watched the Orioles play mediocre ball, sipping beer and exchanging thoughts on how they could improve their chances of getting to the playoffs, short of firing the entire team.

"You came quite a ways to drink beer and watch baseball," I said.

"I didn't come here just for that."

"Oh, I can imagine."

He shot me a glance. "I missed you."

"I've missed you, too." I wanted to say so much more. I've missed you, but you're married. You've got a family. I can't depend on you to be there for me if I need you. Instead, I said, "What if I'd brought home a date?"

I saw a brief flash of surprise. Then he laughed. "That could have been awkward."

"Not that there have been all that many," I conceded. Actually, there'd been none.

"I've been thinking about leaving the state's attorney," he said. "Opening my own office."

"Really? You've been there a long time, but I always thought you were happy."

"I don't know. Maybe it's burnout. I think it's time for me to make a move of some sort."

"It's a big decision," I said. "It means you have to go to those mixers you hate on a more regular basis."

"You manage it."

"Yeah, after I take drugs to suppress my gag reflex."

"Maybe I just need to get out of criminal law. Try something else that might lead to an in-house position with a company."

"Regular pay," I said. "Regular hours."

"Some places let you have your own practice, as long as it doesn't conflict with the work you do for them. I could start small, doing stuff for fun on the side."

Like us, I thought. *Fun on the side*. "It's a plan. Maybe a better plan than mine. I guess I just had to get out on my own, win or lose."

"I admire your courage."

We looked at each other for a long time. He reached out and stroked my arm, then drew me toward him and kissed me lightly. When we separated, he looked guilty.

"I really didn't come here just ... for this. I really have missed you, but if you want me to go—"

I threw my arms around him and plastered my mouth against his. Our lips were still grinding together as we undressed each other. When our clothes were off, I shoved the coffee table over with one foot for more room. An unread stack of bar association magazines and bulletins spilled onto the floor.

"Get on top," he whispered. We clambered to find a good position on the sofa, while Oscar watched us idly from the other side of the room. The announcer was screaming something about line drives as I put him inside me. Ray's hands touched my breasts and squeezed.

Here we go again, I thought. Were we doomed to repeat this exercise in another two months? Or would it take longer next time? For some reason, it struck me as funny, and I laughed.

“What?” Ray asked.

“Nothing,” I said, breathlessly. I hooked my hands around his shoulders and humped with all I had.

Later, as Ray and I held each other, my thoughts turned to Melanie. I wondered how I could possibly help her when I couldn’t help myself.

Chapter FIVE

Saturday morning is one of the few times I find driving on Route 1 bearable. No traffic to speak of, so there's plenty of room to maneuver around the potholes and bumps and scars in a road that hasn't been paved in God knows how long. Normally, Route 1 is like one of those driver ed movies—cars making sudden lane changes, darting out randomly from hidden entrances, left and right. That morning though, I cruised past the shopping centers of Beltsville, sailed right through the two sets of lights at Rhode Island Avenue, where traffic usually snarls, and breezed into College Park without even getting stuck behind a Metrobus.

I was up early because I'd awakened at four that morning with Ray on my mind for the first time in almost a month. I'd thought about him quite a bit during the month after we last saw each other. When I didn't hear from him, I decided I had a choice between driving myself crazy and not thinking about him. I chose the latter.

After an hour of alternately staring at the ceiling and the inside of my eyelids, I figured it was time to rise and shine, or at least rise. I showered, fed Oscar, scarfed down a bowl of Cheerios, and brewed a double-strength cup of dark roast to go. Then I grabbed the P.O. Box key and headed out.

The post office was on Calvert Road where it dead-ended at the railroad tracks. My route took me past the University of Maryland, my alma mater, a hilly green sweep of campus dotted with colonial brick buildings. Across Route 1 from the campus, the matching brick buildings of fraternities lined a horseshoe-shaped street. Calvert was a residential road that connected with the old U.S. highway in the nerve center of the college town where the bars were. They used to have lines out the door when you could drink beer at eighteen in Maryland. Now, the drinking age was twenty-one. Some of the bars closed, but the rest hung on, continuing to do a solid business with a still young-looking crowd.

I turned onto Calvert and, after countless stop signs, reached the post office. It was a few minutes before 10:00, so I listened to the car radio, tapping my fingers to the music on the wheel and feeling highly caffeinated blood coursing through my veins. At ten on the dot, they unlocked the front door and I went inside.

At the box, I paused before inserting the key and opening the little door.

Two letters were inside. Again, I hesitated before reaching for them. It's like I expected someone to run up and slap cuffs on me if I did. For checking my own P.O. Box that I didn't know I had, for God's sake.

Neither letter had my name on it. One was a piece of junk for "Boxholder." The other bore the name of Gregory Knudsen.

That guy the FBI man mentioned. What did he have to do with Tom and Melanie?

Maybe Knudsen was the identity thief. Could he have been working with Tom Garvey? Or Melanie? The box was in my legal name, clearly a woman's name, but apparently, other people could have mail delivered to it.

I still didn't have any answers. I was only assuming the P.O. Box was connected with my credit situation, but I couldn't think of any other reason for it.

I looked at the envelope again. Just a regular white business envelope. No return address. A New York City postmark from a couple of weeks ago.

I considered opening it. That was tampering with someone else's mail, a federal offense. Wonderful. I checked the flap. Someone had done a crummy job of sealing it, only licking the middle. One slip of the thumb and ...

Reluctantly, I put the envelope back in the box. It could be evidence and was not my mail. I probably shouldn't have this box key, I thought.

I didn't really want to talk to the postal clerk—what would I say? The best place to go with this was the cops, but I didn't feel like getting into it with them either. They'd ask a lot of annoying questions, like, "Why didn't you call us when you saw her apartment was tossed?"

I wasn't quite sure. Maybe I was afraid they'd find something incriminating. Maybe it was the fact that I wouldn't have been there to begin with, if it hadn't been for Donna. Anyway, I made a command decision not to call, not sure of the ethical aspects, but based on my gut. So now what?

I decided my best bet was to put the key back where I found it. I didn't want to impede a police investigation, but I had no duty to assist them either. After I returned the key, I could check with Derry, see if they had searched Melanie's place while I had it, and come clean if I had to. He wouldn't like it, but I didn't think it would put me any higher on his shit list than I already was.

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At Melanie's apartment, I let myself in as before. I went to the bedroom and replaced the key and receipt. I was on my way out when I noticed a box on the dining room table.

It was the kind of box you might want to use for moving or storing files—I know, because it actually was full of files. Printed on the side was *Lobkowicz* along with a fancy crest of some sort. If it had been there the day before, I would have noticed.

The folders had names on them and were filed in alphabetical order. I checked one at random. It held correspondence with a bank, something about establishing a credit line.

I slid the folder back into place. I didn't want to go any farther, but I couldn't stop now. I had to check the ones beginning with *M*.

Malone, Martinez, Mazzuli. Then McCabe, McNally. And there it was.

I pulled out the file with my name on it and found the paperwork for my ten thousand dollar line of credit. Shit. Less than 24 hours ago, someone had left that box. The someone who'd tried to rip me off.

On my way out, I checked the answering machine. No messages, but Bruce Schaeffer's number was on her caller ID again. He had called at 11:24 p.m., long after I spoke to him. Interesting. Her mailbox hadn't been touched. Her red car was in the same spot.

Anyone could have brought that box in. The key wasn't hard to find. Or maybe the locks were picked.

Why did Bruce phone Melanie again? Was there a connection between his call and the box's appearance? Was it a coincidence?

I wondered how many of the questions Melanie could answer.

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I spent a lot of time that weekend phoning people in Melanie's book. In an attempt at efficiency, I ignored the professional entries—doctors, dentists—and anything identified by an institutional name only. As for the rest, I figured I'd start with *A* and keep going.

Personal phone books have this tendency to collect names the way furniture collects dust and, in my quest, many of those names were about as useless. Some people I called weren't home—I left messages when I could. Some hadn't seen Melanie for years, and some barely knew her to begin with. A couple of people knew her from school, some from the bank. They expressed concern, but couldn't help me. I kept going.

By Monday, I'd slogged through to the *M*'s. I'd developed a short explanatory speech that sounded stale by the third call. I got all sorts of reactions, from skepticism to concern, hostility to apathy. I felt sorry for telemarketers. I was glad to stop and turn my attention back to legal work.

I was wrapping up for the day, when I heard a knock.

"Yes?" I said.

The door opened and a man I didn't recognize stuck his head inside. The disembodied head wore a shock of light brown hair and a genial expression.

"Excuse me, Ms. McRae? I wonder if I could have a moment of your time."

I got up and approached him. "For a consultation?" If he was a potential client, the answer was *yes*. If he was a salesman, my preference was to beat feet home to some take-out Chinese and the ball game.

The door opened all the way, revealing a sturdy frame—not fat, not skinny, maybe a slight beer belly—clothed in a pair of Chinos, a Madras shirt, and moccasins. He stuck out a squarish hand.

"My name is John Drake. I'm a friend of Melanie Hayes' parents. Were you busy? I could come back."

"No, that's okay." Feeling curious, I invited him in.

Drake relaxed into a guest chair, crossing a leg over one knee. He looked a bit like an overgrown version of a kid in a Rockwell painting, complete with cheek of tan and unruly cowlick.

"Melanie's mother called a few days ago. Her folks are concerned, because they've been told she's missing. Since I live in the area, they asked me to try to contact her."

"Oh?" The wariness that rose in me was almost palpable. "How do you know her parents?"

"I've known Melanie since she was a kid."

"That's interesting." He looked like he was close to Melanie's age. "So they looked you up? Or have you kept in touch with them since they moved to New Mexico?"

Drake smiled broadly. His teeth were as even and white as Chiclets. "Arizona," he corrected me. "They live in Arizona."

"Oh, yeah. Right."

Drake's smile faded, but his green eyes continued to look amused. "I'm doing her folks a favor."

"Sure. But I don't know how I can help you."

"I understand from someone at the bank that you're her attorney."

That could only be Donna.

"Correct," I said. "You'll understand if I'm a little protective when it comes to a client."

"Certainly. Really, I have no dark motives." He spread his hands, as if he were opening himself like a book. "I'm just trying to help."

"Unfortunately, I have no idea where she is."

"Ah." He looked terribly disappointed. "I was hoping you might have heard from her."

"I haven't."

"She didn't give you a possible alternate address or phone number to contact her at?"

I shook my head.

“Not to impose, but could you possibly recheck your file?” Something seemed to catch in his throat, and he began to cough.

“No need,” I said. “I’ve been trying to find Melanie myself. Believe me, if I had a lead in my file, I would know about it.”

Drake coughed harder. “Excuse me,” he said. “Got a . . . bit of a tickle. Have any water?”

I inclined my head. “There’s a water cooler down the hall. Help yourself.”

He got up and left, hacking loudly. Maybe he really did have a tickle. Or maybe it was an old trick. It was a short hallway, but it still gave a person time to get something from your desk or off your Rolodex. I had two people pull that on me, using different ruses—a reporter who was looking for a name and phone number, and a prospective client who lifted my wallet. Fool me twice, shame on me all over. Maybe I was being paranoid. Still, something wasn’t right with this guy, although I wondered what he could be looking for that he’d be able to find in that little bit of time.

I decided to meet him at the door on his way back.

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to cut this short,” I said. “I have plans.”

“That’s quite all right. I appreciate your time.” I don’t think he believed me any more than I did him.

“Perhaps if you gave me a phone number,” I said. “If I hear anything, I could call you.”

His expression was neutral, but the eyes still seemed amused. “Good idea.” He felt his shirt pocket. “I’m afraid I don’t have anything to write with.”

I got a pad and pen from my desk and he wrote a number down. After he left, I waited at the window until I saw him heading down the front walk. Then I got on the phone to Donna.

“John Drake?” she said. “Never heard of him.”

“This guy says he’s known Melanie since they were kids.”

“That’s news to me.”

“And you never told him that I was Melanie’s attorney?”

“I’ve never even met him. Oh, Sam.” She paused. “You don’t suppose that could be . . . that couldn’t be the one the police were talking about, could it? The dangerous man?”

“I don’t know.” I didn’t think so, but my pulse had quickened. Could that really be Stavos?

“He didn’t seem dangerous,” I said, “but that doesn’t mean a thing, does it?”

“Sam, did you have a chance to run by Melanie’s?”

I paused. “Oh, yeah. She wasn’t home.” I decided to leave it at that.

“I’m so worried.”

So was I. If this was the man Jergins was talking about, he’d managed to find out I was Melanie’s attorney. And if he was that dangerous, would he be satisfied asking a few questions? I didn’t think so. I just wondered what his next move would be.

Chapter SIX

Detective Derry stopped by the office the next day. Jergins was with him, looking sullen and officious.

“Things aren’t looking good for your client,” Derry said.

“Now what?”

“Garvey’s body was found in his apartment. A witness says Ms. Hayes was there that weekend, the weekend he was shot.”

That creepy neighbor of Schaeffer’s, I thought. “So?”

“Didn’t she have a protective order against this guy? Why would she want to see him?”

It was a fair question. “I don’t know, but it doesn’t prove she killed him.”

Derry took a deep breath. “I didn’t say it proved anything.”

“Maybe it was someone who looked like Melanie.”

“Anything’s possible. The witness identified her from a photo we found in her apartment.”

“You searched her place?”

He nodded. “Yesterday.”

He didn’t mention the box or the state of the apartment, and I wasn’t going to bring it up.

“Was there any reason for that, other than a witness’ statement?”

“Fingerprints,” Derry said. “We found her prints at the scene.”

“How do you know they’re hers?” I had to ask.

“The bank where she works routinely takes its employees prints.”

I was at a loss to understand or explain it, but I didn’t owe anyone any explanations. “What do you want from me?”

“I just wanted to let you know we’re getting a warrant for Ms. Hayes’ arrest,” Derry said.

I nodded. What could I say? I’d have done the same thing in their place.

“So if you have any knowledge of Ms. Hayes’ whereabouts, now would be the right time to tell us,” Jergins barked.

I could understand if the FBI didn’t offer courses in diplomacy, but I was starting to wonder if it should. Even Derry didn’t look happy about Jergins’ outburst.

“If I had any knowledge of Ms. Hayes’ whereabouts,” I said, keeping my voice deliberately calm. “I would have told you by now.”

Jergins squinted and scowled at me.

“We thought it would be a good idea to check with you,” Derry said, sounding almost conciliatory. “Just in case.”

“I understand. What about the murder weapon? Were her fingerprints on that?”

“We’ll discuss that at the appropriate time, Ms. McRae,” Jergins said, interrupting.

Derry’s eyes slid Jergins’ way. His cheeks reddened, and I didn’t think it was from embarrassment.

“Really?” I said. “And when did you start working for the homicide unit?”

“There’s an appropriate time and place for everything,” Jergins’ face was tight, making his big ears stand out even more. “We’ll discuss the murder weapon at that time and place.”

“Now, I wonder when that would be. Maybe at the sentencing hearing?”

Derry turned away. I didn’t know, but I could have sworn he stifled a smile.

“With all due respect, Ms. McRae,” Jergins said. “We don’t know that Ms. Hayes will hire you to represent her.”

“Why not?”

“You represented her on a domestic violence matter. That doesn’t mean she’ll want you for this.”

I looked at Derry. He was staring at something on my desk. I realized it was Melanie’s address book, still sitting beside the phone.

“As far as I’m concerned,” I said, addressing my comments to both men, trying to bring Derry back into the conversation, “she’s still my client.”

“Mr. Garvey’s dead,” Jergins said. “The case is moot, and you know it.”

“Sure, the court case is moot, but I don’t consider the *entire* matter closed,” I said. “After all, your interest in her was sparked by that case. I haven’t closed the file. So it’s still an open case, from my standpoint, and she’s still my client.” Not bad, I thought. Pretty smooth, even.

Derry kept looking at the book. The plain, dark cover had nothing to connect it with Melanie, but I couldn’t remember if her name was on the inside.

Jergins sneered. “Very convenient. Keeps that attorney-client privilege intact.”

“You know the privilege doesn’t let me help clients commit crimes.”

“I know that. Maybe we should get a warrant and make sure you know that, too.”

I gaped at him.

Derry coughed. “Can I talk to you a minute?” he said to Jergins. “Excuse us.”

They left the office. A few minutes later, Derry returned, alone. “He’s going to wait in the car.”

“Is this supposed to be some weird variation on ‘good cop-bad cop’? What the hell’s his problem anyway?”

Derry shrugged. “Lacks a few social skills. Guess he has a thing about defense lawyers.”

“You think?”

“He also thinks you know something you’re not telling us.”

“But you know better, right?”

“I think you’re telling us everything you know,” he said. “I certainly hope so.”

“I am.” He seemed to have lost interest in the address book. Guilt gnawed at me, but the book didn’t have any answers, at least not yet.

“The man he mentioned, Christof Stavos,” he said. “He is dangerous.”

“I know. It’s been bothering me. You really think he might hurt Melanie?”

“It’s possible. Or maybe you.”

“Why would he have any interest in me?”

“I don’t know. Maybe for the same reason that Jergins thinks you’re holding something back.”

“Christof Stavos has a thing about defense attorneys, too?”

Derry toyed with his shirt cuff. “Were you talking to someone at Bruce Schaeffer’s apartment?”

That blabbermouthed neighbor must have told them about me. I never gave my name, but Derry may have recognized the description.

“Yeah, I went there. I was hoping Schaeffer would know something about Melanie. Didn’t pan out.” I paused, then laughed uncomfortably. “There is something else. It’s kind of silly.”

“Go ahead.”

I told him about the black Lincoln and the visit from John Drake the day before. Derry's brow furrowed, the lines growing deeper as I spoke.

"You didn't get the tag on the car, did you?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I'm sorry. I didn't even think of it."

"That's okay."

"Another thing—I think that guy Drake gave me a fake name. I checked him out in some of the Internet directories and got nothing."

"I think you're right." Derry paused and arched an eyebrow. "And I think, whoever he is, he has a sense of humor."

"How's that?"

Derry smiled. "You're probably a little too young to remember the show *Secret Agent Man*. John Drake was the name of the main character."

"And they say television isn't educational."

Derry stole a glance at me. The look suggested we were just two human beings talking. No ghosts haunting us, anymore. However, the moment passed.

With the usual formality, Derry shook my hand. "If you hear anything, please let us know. Please keep what we said in mind."

"Sure."

After he left, I wondered what I'd gotten into. I should have given Derry the address book.

I think I would have, except that Melanie was still my client. I wasn't going to run out on a client, not without getting her side first. Something about the setup didn't seem right. Killing Garvey, then leaving a box of incriminating files in her own apartment made zero sense to me.

As for Stavos, I didn't know much about the Mob, but I was under the impression they didn't kill people without a reason. When it came to this case, I felt like I was too clueless for them to bother with me.

Since I had no meetings or court dates, I dug back into Melanie's phone book with renewed vigor. A person didn't just disappear. They left traces somewhere. If she was with a friend, I should be able to find that friend. If she was at a motel, she'd eventually run out of money and have to turn to someone she knew. Donna would have been a logical person, but whether it was shame or pride, something was keeping Melanie from seeking her out.

I stuck with it and managed to make it all the way through *S*. A lot of the calls were long-distance. Either Melanie had traveled a lot or her friends did. She seemed to know people all over the U.S. and even someone in Canada. I figured I'd rest up before I tackled the multitude of *T*'s—Thompson, Tillman, Toohey ... I did some other work and a few administrative chores then left the office around 5:30.

At home, I fed Oscar, then took an evening ride on my old Schwinn. I'd been trying to exercise more regularly, do at least five miles every couple of days. Lately, I'd slacked off a bit, because of the heat and humidity. After the workout, I lugged the bike upstairs, sweaty and panting. Maybe a bit more diligence was in order.

The food situation was reaching a critical point, but I managed to throw together a tuna salad with dill pickle slices for dinner, which I ate while watching the news. The *O*'s weren't playing. TV sucked. I thumbed through some magazines, then went onto the balcony. The sun had set, and the air was as moist and heavy as a wet blanket. Like a locker room, only filled with the pungent smell of cut grass and impending rain. Now and then, I heard the low rumble of distant thunder and saw lightning flicker in the dark sky.

I wished Ray were with me. I knew that wasn't possible. When those months had gone by and he hadn't called, at first missing him was like a chronic ache in my belly. I forced myself to forget. Then he showed up at my door. Now the ache was back. And again, he couldn't be here.

I liked living alone, doubted if I could abide sharing my space with anyone, but sometimes I wondered. If I dropped dead tomorrow, who would care? Maybe a few people, but ...

Still things could be worse. What if I were Melanie? Apart from my problems, maybe that was one reason I was so interested in finding her. She was all alone like me—probably scared shitless and in over her head.

Was that where I was with Ray? Over my head? I felt a wave of self-pity wash over me.

"Damn it," I said. "Snap the fuck out of this."

It was time for drastic measures. I marched straight to the fridge and went for the chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream. Unfortunately, the carton contained about two spoonfuls, tops.

"Shit." I sighed. I didn't really want to go out, but unless I provisioned up, my next dinner was going to be a shriveled hot dog that I probably should have thrown out months ago or another Lean Cuisine. Plus, I needed that ice cream, for medicinal purposes.

I grabbed my purse and headed out. As I walked, I realized a car was pulling up beside me. It had a garish hood ornament. The Lincoln's back doors were already open and two men were coming at me when I turned to run. I didn't get far. They each took an arm and dragged me toward the car, one clapping a hand over my mouth before I could utter a peep.

My head felt light, and my stomach had that hard knot you get before you throw up. My pulse raced. I squirmed, but they had my arms locked in place. I kicked as hard as I could, connecting with one guy's knee. He yelped in pain and his grip on my arm loosened enough for me to wrench free and scratch the other one's face. As he cried out, his hand dropped from my mouth, although he continued to hold my other arm tight.

"Help!" I hollered at the top of my lungs. I tried to pull away from him. "Help!"

More noise, talking, footsteps behind me. Somebody grabbed my shoulders. Before I could yell again, I got a punch in the gut. I couldn't breathe, talk, or move.

"Bitch," a man said, as they dragged me into the car.

Someone blindfolded me and we took off.