

# Chapter 1

I was sitting in the office of the editor-in-chief of The Mission Review, and only pretending to pay attention.

It had been a busy week. Lord knows how I got a reputation in freelance circles as 'the chick who knows about computers' but somehow I had, and it was four months until Christmas. Northern Homemaker Magazine had finagled me an invite to the seasonal Microsoft shindig, and I was still trying to mush the resulting press pabulum into something rural Alberta housewives would care about. Meanwhile, I was trying to pawn the leftovers onto my other regular editors, who seemed far less impressed than I was that I had even managed to get into such an event.

The problem was simply that four months ahead was fine for a national magazine like Northern Homemaker, but most of the people I worked with day-to-day were news people. Four months ahead was just too long. It was far too soon to be worrying about Christmas, even if there was a cool new button on the latest twisty mouse, or a new game that allowed your child to design their own plant. And for a town that rose and set on one of the most allegedly cutting-edge universities in the country, our collective editorial staff was still mostly living in the twentieth century. Daniel Colter of

the Mission Review was the only one of my regulars who had even got far enough into the information age to manage a Lexis Nexis subscription.

I had cribbed a peek at that on the newsroom computer before coming in here of the off-chance that there was a wire story I could finagle into a feature with a local angle. But my three suggestions thus far—rising debt among college students, rising unemployment among immigrants, and rising rates of English as a second language students among the public school population—had been met with lukewarm dismissiveness. When Daniel started in on yet another tax seminar at the local mall for elderly people story—just the sort of lowest-rung filler he loved to dump on me—I began fiddling with my notes again hoping that something better would jump out at me.

“So if you get there early, I’m sure you can get some great quotes from people,” Daniel was saying.

My finger caught on a stray scrap of paper clipped to the inside of my day-timer. It was a printout of a somewhat ominous email from my Aunt Charlotte, which I had spent much of my morning parsing over breakfast with my stepmother Teresa. It was this email that had distracted me from doing actual preparation for the meeting with Daniel. Charlotte and I were not excessively close, but she was one of my few local relations, so I tolerated her occasional

swooping in. But it seldom ended well. Last time I'd seen her, I wound up enduring an hour of tearful entreaties as to how I had broken my father's heart, then got stuck house-sitting her cats for a week while she went to Fiji. That was three months ago, and Teresa was still picking cat fur out of her clothes every time she came over. The current email was brief, but prickly: she had to see me, and would be coming over sometime this afternoon.

"And you've got such great contacts at the university," Daniel was rambling. "I'm sure you know who to speak to about getting an interview with one of the law students..."

That was a no-brainer. The university was pretty much my regular beat. Not that I had been giving it proper attention lately, what with Microsoft and Aunt Charlotte and breakfasts with Teresa. If I had been on top of things, I would have been able to come up with something better than tax seminars for the elderly at the local mall. I'd pay for my sloppiness by writing Daniel his clunker of a story, but I made a mental note to have a few lunches and nurture my pathetic little rolodex in the next few weeks. I did not want to lose the university beat. It was one of the few I could do without driving.

Daniel finally noticed my wandering attention. "Helena? Unless you have something else you are working on?"

I thought quickly. Daniel's story was news, and news was 500 words. But a feature meant up to 1500. At 30 cents a word, that was quite the pay raise, and I frankly needed the money. There was nothing to be done but hedge my bets.

"Not yet, per se, exactly," I said. But my contact at MCLA has been hinting that she might have something..."

I would have to talk with the Mission College Legal Aid people anyway to get a law student to interview for Daniel's tax story. If my bluff got called and they had nothing juicy for me, at least I would get the smaller story out of the meeting...

"All right. While you're there about the tax story, you can go fishing, see what you get. You come up with anything decent, there's a feature spot open in next week's Lifestyles."

He looked suddenly thoughtful. "Alex Calvin has a contact there too, doesn't he? Check in with him on your way out, will you? He might have some notes you can use."

I was smart enough to keep the grimace in my head this time. Alex Calvin. Great.

★★

I had known Alex since my college days. He was friends

with my former roommate, and he had been known around the dorm for 3 things: his Shirley Temple head of dark and darling curls, his freakishly creative taste in pizza toppings, and his large collection of novelty condoms, which he kept in a red Canadian Tire toolbox under his bed. He was like one of those bratty little fourth graders who never quite grow up, and his obscene cuteness made my dislike of him all the more infuriating. I used to complain to Teresa that if they ever made a movie of my life, they would invariably cast some hot young actor to play the part of Alex Calvin, and our two character's every encounter would be fraught with sexual tension. The few times I have shared my view that Alex is an annoying twit who is the bane of my life and a curse on my profession, I have been greeted with incredulous murmurs of 'but he's so cute!'

The little troll was already smirking when I ambled by his desk

"Hey. Long time, no see."

His curls had been breeding since the last time I'd seen him. They covered his head in pretty little ringlets that smacked of salon help. The boy belonged in a shampoo commercial.

Oblivious to my seething hate, he was leaning smugly into the back of his desk chair with a decidedly cocky smirk.

“So,” he said. “Daniel tells me we’re working on a story together.”

“We are not working on it together,” I told him. “You’re just giving me some notes.”

“Oh, I am, am I? Is that what he told you?”

“As a matter of fact, yes.”

“Those were his exact words?”

“Check in with Alex Calvin on your way out,” I recited. “I think he has some notes you can use.”

“Ah.”

“So, do you?”

“What?”

“Have the notes.”

“Maybe I do,” he said. “Maybe I could discuss them with you over dinner.”

“Nice try. The notes?”

“Or lunch.” He grinned wickedly. “Or tea or supper or midnight snack...”

I slowly counted to ten in my head, then looked him very deliberately in the eye. "I don't think so."

He beamed angelically. "Awww. Am I annoying you?"

"Actually, yes. And not only that, I actually have other plans."

"You do? Really?"

"Gee thanks. And yeah, really. Not that it is even remotely the slightest tiniest bit of your business, but my Aunt Charlotte is coming by, and..."

"Whatever. So, you want my notes?" He tossed me a file folder and turned back to his computer screen without another word. I showed myself out, counting my blessings that I had come out comparatively unscathed.

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I still had some errands to run, and it was nearly 4 by the time I got home. Aunt Charlotte was already waiting for me. She was sitting primly on the lawn chair that passed for lobby in my tiny apartment building, with a small, serious boy fidgeting on her lap. She edged him aside and leapt to her feet at first sight of me.

“Helena! Thank you, Jesus!”

I juggled my various bags and held out a hand in greeting. “Charlotte. You look well.”

She nudged the boy forward. “Your brother Christopher. Don’t think you’ve met him, have you?”

I hadn’t seen my father since he and Teresa had separated about 7 years ago. The boy looked almost exactly that age. He was staring at me with large, solemn eyes, but he did not say hello.

“Well, we should talk,” Charlotte said. She took a step forward, nearly tripping on her feet. Even Charlotte was usually more put together than this, and in the sickly fluorescent, I saw that her eyes were dull and her face blotchy. She had clearly had a rough night.

My apartment was on the second floor, and at the far end of a very long hallway. It was a studio apartment, but a large one for its type: a kitchen off to one side, a bathroom off to another, and a small alcove alongside it that opened into the main room. I had the desk propped up against the wall nearest to the door, the bed on the wall diagonal, and the couch kitty corner, with the bookcase running unobtrusively up the side and over top of it in a neat, square arch. If I pulled out the desk chair and counted the



bed as a makeshift bench, I had a fairly uncluttered and comfortable little seating triangle for at least six. Aunt Charlotte went for the bed and propped the child up beside her.

“Did you want a drink?”

She blinked, then shook her head and immediately leapt into a “Look, Helena...”

I stowed my stuff in the kitchen and poured myself a glass of water. I sat down on the couch and finally gave Aunt Charlotte my attention. “Right. So how have you been?”

“Helena, your father’s dead.”

I’m not sure what my face read just then, but whatever it was, it turned hers nearly purple. “I’m sorry. I thought you ...well, that is to say, I’d hoped...”

“There is no one but you, Charlotte. How would I have known? How would I...how? I mean, did he...”

“It’s still under investigation,” she told me. “They were saying it was an accident, but that was days ago, and then there were these other people, and they asked so many questions...he was in a state, Hel, and you hadn’t even seen him to...” She exhaled slowly. “I apologize. I did not come here to blame.”

“What, then?”

I had almost forgotten about the boy until Charlotte gave him another nudge. “You won’t find him much trouble. I’ve got his stuff downstairs in the car. I assume he’ll be over for visits and such, so I kept a few things at my place, but you should have enough to manage, and I’m happy to take him shopping for you if you find you’re missing things...”

The implication sank in, and I sputtered my shock. “You’re leaving him here?”

“Helena...” The edge of combative defensiveness drained out of her, and she folded her hands in her lap with a tired sigh. “Well, I certainly can’t keep him! I’m too old for this. I’ve already raised my kids. I’ve already raised my brother! I can’t do this again. I mean, I certainly can’t be expected...”

I looked at the small, strange boy, then at Charlotte again. “But...where’s his mother?”

“In a mental hospital somewhere in Nova Scotia, last I saw. I don’t think you ever met Catherine, but she had some ...some problems.”

I glanced at the boy again, unsettled by his preternatural lethargy. “Oh god...”

"But he's well-behaved," she told me. "Keeps to himself, a quiet boy...odd, but sweet."

"Charlotte, I don't have the space for a child. I don't have the money!"

"I'll help out when I can," she hastily reassured me. "There might be some money coming in from the estate. He had nothing when he...I mean, when they found him, but he gets some royalties from the book, I think."

My father had been a college professor, and the book, a series of critical essays on his specialty Shakespeare, had still been a work-in-progress when Teresa and I had left him. So he had finished it, than. It surprised me to realize that this detail pleased me.

"There are still arrangements, I expect," Charlotte was saying. "About the boy, about the money...not sure what will be left when I deduct for my expenses, but..."

"Expenses? How long have you had him for?"

"Almost two weeks. But he had nothing, HeI, I had to buy him clothes and food, and my god, if you had seen where they found him..."

I wasn't sure I wanted to go there just now. I eyed the boy warily. "But he's okay?"

“Oh, I suspect he is. Look, it’s been a long day. For all of us, I think. Why don’t I leave you two to get acquainted, and we can meet again tomorrow, maybe...”

“I work, Charlotte.”

“Yes, but from home, I thought. Surely you can manage a personal day?” She gave the boy a perfunctory peck on the top of his head, and whisked herself away into the ether. Chapter 2

The boy stared back at me with wide, round eyes. I had no idea what to do with him.

“Well,” I said.

His gaze was eerily attentive, but he did not answer.

“You want to go to bed?”

Sunlight streamed through the window. It was barely 4:30.

“You want to eat?”

Slowly, a nod.

“Okay,” I said. “Teresa—you don’t know her, she was married to your dad before your mother was, and—well, anyway, by convenient coincidence, she runs this little

restaurant..."

The boy said nothing.

I took a deep breath and knelt down to his eye level.  
"Christopher, right?"

Impassive stare.

"Chris?"

No answer. Then, a flicker of gossip from one of Aunt Charlotte's infrequent letters suddenly came to me. I scootched closer. "Kip?"

He graced me with the barest nod.

"Okay," I said. "Kip, I'm Helena. I'm your sister. And...look, are you okay?"

His wordless gaze was starting to get a little creepy, but he held my glance as I slowly reached out my hand to him. When I touched his arm, he flinched away. A response, albeit a guarded one...

"Do you feel scared?" I asked him. "Cause it's okay if you do. A lot of changes, right?"

And as they finally started sinking in, I realized I wouldn't be

the only one with baggage here. It had just occurred to me that if I took him to Teresa, I'd have to be the one to tell her the news. I still wasn't clear on what exactly had happened, and I was frankly a little stunned by these sudden developments—my father's mysterious death, the sudden inheritance of this unknown little brother, and to top it all off, the involvement with Aunt Charlotte that this would all entail. I wasn't sure I had processed what it meant to me, never mind to Teresa. And if she did choose to take the news of my father's death badly, was I prepared—tonight—to nurse her through it? But what choice did I have? I certainly had no idea what to do with a child. Where else could I go for help?

“So, you want to go for a walk?”

I thought I saw his teeny tiny shoulders shrug.

“Okay. So we go have dinner, we talk to Teresa, we work out a plan. Sound good?”

I walked toward the door with him. He let me take his hand this time.

★★

The restaurant Teresa owned was a 50's style diner in the heart of the student ghetto. It was there my father had met her. She had been a former beauty queen trying to work

her way through night school, and he had been a professor of literature at the university. I had just turned eleven and my mother was still warm in her grave. My father had been taking it worse than I was: my mother had been sickly for as long as I could remember, and even now I can only recall her as a sweet, benign background to the first years of my life. But my father—he had courted her, he had loved her, and he had slept with her long past the night she got sick enough to lock herself away from me. Another man might have found himself a stiff drink sort of place, but he went looking for distraction, and that meant conversation. Endless forests of poetry, philosophy you could get lost in. In other words, grad students.

She had dropped out three credits short of her degree to marry him, but Teresa had kept in touch with people, and when she found herself divorced and at loose ends, old Mr. Geschlepp had seized his chance to retire and sell the place out to her. If she had regrets, she never shared them with me—Geschlepp's remained a popular hangout, and she a beloved fixture. And at barely a ten-minute walk from my place, I managed to meet her there most mornings for breakfast.

Teresa was just starting to show signs of pre-dinner-crowd frazzle when I arrived with Kip. Her shoulder-length platinum waves were loosely bound in an elastic, but sweaty strands were already coming loose, and her face

was pinched in focused concentration. She still had on a waitress's apron over a red Geschlepp's t-shirt and a black mini-skirt, but when the dinner crowd hit she would lose the apron and head behind the counter. Even now, I could see the wheels turning in her shrewd little head as she made her preparations, but when she saw me come in, she waved me to a table while she worked out the logistics of her break with Jack, her manager.

A 'Hey, Kiddo' to me and a 'We covered?' to Jack later, she squirmed out of her apron and snatched me into a sweaty hug.

"Jack says I only have ten minutes."

I hugged back. "You're the owner, Teresa. I don't think he can really..."

"Sure he can. It's what I hired him for. And when I'm working the floor, I'm just another warm body. And you did kinda ambush me, kiddo. I wasn't expecting you for dinner."

We both knew that wasn't what she was surprised about. She knew I had seen Aunt Charlotte today—we had been talking about the impending meeting for days. She had already done the math in her head and was eyeing Kip with a look of wary suspicion.

"This couldn't wait until morning," I said.



"I see that." She put on a game smile, looked at Kip and waited for me to explain myself.

"This is Kip," I said. "Daddy's orphan."

She crumpled microscopic inch by microscopic inch as the implication sank in, fists unconsciously clenching at her side. "Meaning?"

I nodded to Kip, unsure of how much I should say in his presence. "Something's happened, Teresa. It's why Aunt Charlotte called..."

Her eyes drifted. "I haven't seen him. It's been so long..."

I focused her attention the only way I knew how. "I need your help," I said. "Charlotte kind of did a drive-by on me, and there's still a lot of stuff I need to work out, but I've got Kip staying with me. Well, for now, anyway. And Teresa, I have no idea what to do with a kid."

Her hands unfisted and her breathing slowed, just as I had been hoping. Action always calmed Teresa down. She took a final, fortifying deep breath, then graced Kip with a smile. "Well, I think dinner would be a good start. Cheeseburger and fries?"

He shook his head.

“Hot dog? Grilled cheese?”

He finally nodded, and Teresa gave me an odd look. “Not much of a talker, is he?”

I shrugged. Teresa was freaked out enough right now. I didn’t think it was the best time to tell her that the boy had been with me nearly an hour already, and he hadn’t just not talked “much.” He hadn’t talked at all.

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Teresa stretched a little, half-stood, then waved Jack over to take our order.

“On the house,” she said, still staring at Kip.

It was never not on the house. Poor Teresa. I had shocked her straight into frazzled mode, which she did well. But this was not productive-frazzled, it was stunned-frazzled, and that was a different, scary thing. I wished I had something else to tell her.

I held her gaze, trying to anchor her while she got a grip. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them they were once again tight and focused. She set about arranging things.

“Do you have something for him to sleep on?”

"I think I saw a sleeping bag with Disney on it. Does that count?"

"And he's got clothes? And food?" She appraised Kip, noting his spindly arms and tiny, bony legs. "Does he even like food? Or is he one of those picky ones?"

Jack plopped a basket of French fries and a plateful of grilled cheese in front of us. Kip squinted, picked up a single French fry and nibbled delicately.

"He's probably terrified," I said, watching him pick at the food. "I mean, he's spent the last two weeks with Aunt Charlotte then gets dumped on me, a total stranger, and..."

"Two weeks?" Teresa's tone wobbled slightly. "It's been two weeks?"

"Oh, for god's sake, Teresa, you haven't seen him in seven years!"

Then my cellphone rang. I stifled a curse and smacked it open. "What?"

"Now, now," Alex Calvin crooned into my ear. "Didn't your mother ever teach you any manners?"

"My mother died when I was ten, and my father, as I have

just learned this afternoon, died two weeks ago. So I'm not really..."

"Shit, Helena."

"Yeah. So..."

Someone was tugging on my sleeve. I looked down and Kip's earnest, pinched little face was staring up at me.

"Well, I was calling to see if you'd given any thought to my offer to help you with the..."

"For God's sake, Alex!" I covered the phone with my hand and turned to Kip. "What?"

"Bathroom," he said.

I turned my attention back to the phone. "Look, my father just died, okay? If you honestly think I've paused to give any thought to anything but that..."

"Bathroom," Kip said again.

"Got it," Teresa mouthed, standing up and taking Kip by the arm.

On the phone, Alex was being soothingly contrite. "I'm sorry about your father, Helena."

“Yeah.”

“So how did he...”

“I don’t know. Look, this is still kind of sinking in, you know? And I’ve got my brother with me...”

“Huh. Didn’t know you had a brother.”

“I didn’t really either. Look, can we do this later? Cause I...”

“Sure, sure. I can handle one measly feature, if you need some time with your family...”

“No!” Thoughts flashed through my mind about the kid I now had. This was going to cost me money, I knew it was. And my life really was pathetic enough that I couldn’t afford to lose a feature, even if it meant I had to deal with Alex Calvin.

“I just need tonight,” I told him. “Just give me tonight, okay? Let me...look, just let me have tonight?”

Teresa was back. She nudged Kip into the booth, but did not sit down to join him. I snapped the phone shut.

“You’re leaving?” I panicked.

“I have to work, Helena.”

“Teresa, I...”

“I need a few hours. You need a few hours. Look, I’ll come by when my shift is over, okay? Then you and I can talk.

”Chapter 3

When I got home with Kip, it was dark already. He’d grown tired of the French fries almost as soon as Teresa had left us, and I was not in the mood for hanging around any more than he was. I suspected Teresa had gone off to find a corner in which to freak out in solitude. I didn’t want to see it, and I knew Teresa wouldn’t want me to either. My best bet was to go home and wait: she’d turn up later with her game face back on and a solid plan for what the heck we were supposed to do about this.

Aunt Charlotte had mentioned money. Was there an estate here? Was I supposed to be handling this? Aunt Charlotte would have mentioned such a detail, wouldn’t she? Was there a will? Aunt Charlotte had already had a two-week head start on me. Wouldn’t such details already be taken care of?

But there was still the issue of Kip. My father had left a minor child behind, and someone would have to see to that. I was still not clear just what Aunt Charlotte intended in that regard. Was his presence here tonight just him being babysat, or was I intended to keep him indefinitely? And

with his mother apparently not a factor, had my father made any arrangements in that regard? There was a lot I didn't know. So, with a slight pang of guilt for not being a better...well, sister, babysitter, mom, whatever I was...I dumped the boy unceremoniously at my kitchen table with a vat of Lego I found among his possessions, fired up the computer and opened Metasearch.

'Mission College AND Douglas Patrick Snowden,' I typed.

Several hundred relevant hits, at least half of which appeared to be bookstores and ebay vendors peddling his book. In all the fuss over Kip and Teresa, and my father being suddenly dead, I'd almost forgotten that Aunt Charlotte told me the book had finally been written. I cleared the search box and typed 'Douglas Snowden AND Book Review' in the search field, then clicked on the first search result.

It was a review that had been printed in the alumni magazine at Mission College, where my father taught several classes.

'Snowden is not the first scholar to attempt psychoanalysis of Shakespeare's famous characters,' the review began. 'But his tome is a nonetheless daringly readable attempt to analyze the pathology of the parent/child relationship in Shakespeare and its link to mental illness.'

I paused, hearing the ping of alarm bells in the back of my mind. Mental illness. This was the second time I had heard the word today in the context of my father's life. Something about Kip's mother that Aunt Charlotte had off-handedly remarked on. But it can't have been off-handed to him ...was this a deeper reason why the subject of mental illness should fascinate my father so much that he would devote an entire book to it? Or was it closer to home even than that? My father had always had traits one could generously call quirky: a certain moodiness, and a tendency toward obsessive behaviour that had made him such a meticulous scholar—and that had driven Teresa crazy. Was it just absent-minded-professor syndrome, or was there something else going on there? Had the 'circumstances' Aunt Charlotte had mentioned surrounding his death been some kind of mental breakdown?

I bookmarked the review and went over to the website for the Gazette, a daily paper that covered not only Mission, but several surrounding towns. It was the only daily that covered Belmont, the nearby town where my father lived. I typed his name into their search engine and got one hit, a headline reading 'Local Professor Found Dead' accompanied by an explanatory note that the article text was only available to paid subscribers. Crap. I suppose it spoke ill of me as a journalist that I had let my subscription lapse, but I was poor and lived in a college town full of small presses and tiny magazines. I could pretty much only



afford to buy the ones I worked for, and I tended to snag the Gazette, when I remembered, from my neighbour Darlene's recycle bin when she was done with it. I had missed it the last few weeks because Darlene was in West Palm Beach attending the birth of her new granddaughter.

So here I was: my father had died, and I had completely missed it. Were it not for Aunt Charlotte's desire to unload Kip, I might not have heard about it for months, and that perturbed me. It also surprised me, now that I thought about it, that this one mention was all he had gotten. Did the death of a college professor and published author merit so little text these days? Was the university not a tiny bit more grief-stricken—heck, I'd settle for vocal—about the loss of one of their own? Unless he had been having problems there...were those the mysterious circumstances Aunt Charlotte had alluded to? I made a mental note to ask around tomorrow when I was there working on my story for Daniel.

I had my day-planner out and was about to start making notes when I heard a knock on my door followed by Teresa's voice.

"Hel? A little help here?"

Teresa did have her own key, but when I opened the door for her, I saw at once why she had been knocking. She was

overloaded with boxes. Some of them were cardboard ones, a few of them were milk crates she had pilfered from her diner, and I saw a few stuffed animal heads poking out of a ratty shopping bag. On quick glance, I saw toys, clothes and take-out cartons from Geschlepp's.

"What's all this?"

"Provisions," she said. "Not sure what Charlotte brought you..."

I motioned toward the kitchen, where I had stashed both my brother and his stuff. I picked up one of the take-out cartons. It was so fresh it was still perspiring.

"You didn't have to do this, Teresa."

She popped open the carton I was holding and nabbed a chicken nugget. "S'okay..."

"And...where did you get all this stuff?"

"Lost and found box." She snagged another nugget. "So? How long will he be here for?"

"Not sure. Aunt Charlotte was kind of vague on the whole thing..."

"Well, you'll want to make a place for him here anyway,

won't you? I mean, you aren't going to leave him with her, are you?"

The 'her' was accompanied by a distasteful grimace. It was Teresa's one failure of spirit: she could not stand my Aunt Charlotte. I had never managed to ferret out just where their animosity came from, and Aunt Charlotte was hardly my favourite either, but I knew from tried and true experience that it was best not to get Teresa going on that.

She polished off the last of her impromptu snack, wiped her fingers on the sleeve of one of the rags in those boxes, then stood with a brisk clap of her hands.

"So..." she began.

Then there was another knock at the door.

"Unfinished business, Helena?"

I looked up from my scavenging. "Not that I know of. I mean, the only people I really talked to today were Aunt Charlotte and Alex Calvin..."

A return visit from either of them did not sound terribly thrilling. I crossed my fingers for luck and opened the door to option B, Alex Calvin, his pretty ringlets damp and fruit-smelling, his gym attire suggesting he was fresh from a workout and shower. He pressed past me into the

apartment and took note of the clutter with a dopey grin.

“In or out?”

“Excuse me?”

“The boxes. Are you moving in, or are you moving out?”

“I’m not moving anywhere, this is my brother’s stuff. So, why are you here?”

“Helena...”

“Cause I thought I was pretty clear about it earlier. I don’t need your stupid notes.”

“Helena, I...”

“And if I did need them? It wouldn’t be until tomorrow. Cause tomorrow, I’m...”

“I’m not here about that.”

We both jumped as we heard a crash coming from the direction of my bathroom. It’s closed off from the main room of my apartment by the alcove, and it was there we found Teresa. She was trying to move my dresser out, and had knocked over some of my milk crate shelving.

“This seemed a good start for a room for him,” she

explained between grunts of exertion. I mean, all you're using it for is clothes, it has its own closet and door, and it's big enough for a bed and some creative storage..."

She stopped pushing against my furniture, suddenly noticing the visitor.

"Teresa, this is Alex," I reluctantly introduced. "Alex, Teresa."

"A pleasure. Here, let me help you with that." He beamed her a smile, then artfully retrieved the envelope from his gym bag and thrust it at me. "And while we finish this up, why don't you go find yourself a quiet corner and have a look at these..."

I almost mouthed off at him, but Teresa indicated the kitchen with a pointed nod, and I remembered that I had left my brother in there. Duty called.

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I found Kip doing something with Lego, just as I had left him—and I mean 'just as I had left him' in the most literal, most unsettling sense. He was in the same chair I had plopped him in, half-seated on knees just as before, and with the same tense little set to his bony shoulders as he concentrated. The boy had not moved an inch.

“Kip?”

He looked up at me.

“You okay?”

He looked down at his project again. I took this as an affirmative and nudged a take-out box toward him. “Want some fries?”

He took them. Another affirmative. I pulled up a chair, leaving him as much space to play in as I could, then opened up Alex’s envelope and very nearly passed out. They were printouts of the article in the Gazette that I had tried to access on-line before. There were several other pages, all with media mastheads and the Lexis Nexis logo. He had raided all his subscription-only databases for me.

I started with the Gazette article that I had been reading earlier:

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## LOCAL PROFESSOR DIES

by Kerry Irwin, The Gazette

The body of local English professor Dr. Douglas Snowden was found on Tuesday morning in his Belmont apartment.

He was discovered after police were called to the premises by child welfare authorities contacted by his son's school.

Sources told the Gazette that significant quantities of alcohol and questionable substances had been found on scene, but police officials would not comment.

"At this point, the case is still under investigation," said Detective Hugh Girardi of the Belmont police. "It is premature to declare this death either accident or foul play."

Dr. Snowden's neighbours on Carlton Street painted a portrait of a man down on his luck and struggling to get by.

"He told me he had lost his home to a fire," neighbour Marjorie Strassberg said. "He was staying here until his insurance money came through. I think it was taking longer than he thought, he seemed quite depressed and I often saw him drinking."

Beatrice Evans, who rented her basement apartment to Dr. Snowden, said that he was three months behind on his rent and had really let the place go.

"You'd walk in and see papers everywhere, and empty pizza boxes, and dishes in the sink...if there was not a child involved, I would have evicted him long ago."

Dr. Snowden's colleagues at Mission College were stunned by the news of his death.

"He was a wonderful teacher," said Dr. Michaela Yost, a colleague. "He had a real love for his work and rapport with his students."

Dr. Heathcliff Malafanto, chair of the Department of English Language and Literature, was equally effusive in his praise. "His scholarly abilities were well-known in the department," he said. "In fact, he had only just come out with a new book. We will all miss him."

A trust fund has been established by the university for Dr. Snowden's six-year-old son Christopher. Donations will be gratefully accepted in lieu of flowers.

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The article concluded with a contact number for the trust fund (the Dr. Yost the article had quoted seemed to be arranging this) and a sidebar about the fire that had burned down my father's house three months earlier. It was singularly unhelpful, full of awaiting-the-lab-results and still-under-investigations and other such filler. But I was so out of touch that even that was news to me. How had I gotten myself so insulated that I had not heard about this? Even taking my father out of it, this was my community. How had I



missed a story like this? I'd like to think that I might have helped him, if only I'd known. I had chosen our estrangement perhaps more eagerly than he had, but casual indifference was a far different thing than wishing harm. Even in my most bitter moments, I would not have liked to think of him alone out there and actively suffering...

I skimmed the rest of the articles, putting most of them aside for later. But one of them caught my eye: a society piece about his book launch. There was a picture of my father, mostly as I remembered him—the graying but full head of hair, the glasses with space-age invisible frames, the chronically sun-burnt face with the impish wrinkles around his eyes and the scatter of tiny pimples he would get around his nose when he was stressed. But he looked older, too old to account for a mere seven years. He looked less sparkly, less...less passionate. He looked like he was struggling, and tired of it.

He had one arm around a fat, fey little man with a twirly dark moustache and a worn tuxedo. And he had the other arm around an attractive if somewhat overweight-looking woman with an ample chest and a really bad dye job. What caught my eye almost as much as the picture itself was the caption, which identified the two others as Dr. Heathcliff Malafanto and Dr. Michaela Yost.

I did not learn much else from the article except the name

of the book: *The Betrayal of Cordelia: Hamlet's Father, Lear's Daughter and the Psychopathology of Parenthood in the Works of William Shakespeare*.

I wasn't sure I wanted to go there just yet. At some point, I supposed I would have to read the book, but I was getting an uncomfortable feeling that it would be all about me. Lear betrayed his daughters by failing to believe that they loved him enough. And at the end of the play, he wasn't the only one dead. My father had named me Helena Rosalind—both names from the comedies. But Kip—that was Christopher Marlowe, named for one of Shakespeare's biggest, bitterest rivals. And he was writing about the tragedies now...

I shook the envelope again, and one more page fell out. It was a list of names and phone numbers, with entries for Kerry Irwin (with a margin note 'use my name!' from Alex) and Hugh Girardi, Marjorie Strassberg, Beatrice Evans and the two professors already filled in. Damn you, Alex Calvin, I can make my own contact list. That's if I was actually working this as a story, of course. Which I totally, totally was not. Chapter 4

I felt Teresa's hand on my shoulder, and then became aware of sounds. Kip was packing away his Lego.

"Helena?" Teresa shook me gently. "You okay, hon?"

I tried to clear my head. "Sorry. Guess I spaced out for a second. Is everything..."

"Your friend Alex left about ten minutes ago. He said to tell you you're welcome and he'll call you tomorrow about the story."

"Yeah. Okay."

"I put away the food I brought. Enough breakfasts, lunches and dinners for at least three days. It looks like your brother is about ready for bed. And we have a place for him..."

I followed her out into the apartment proper, and took in the significant change. They had moved my bed sideways and across to the wall where my desk had been, and pushed the dresser in front of it like a room divider. All of my milk crate shelves had been stacked on top of it, and to my surprise, it didn't look bad. The desk had migrated to the bed's former spot, where it camouflaged neatly with the wall and left the room open. As for the alcove, I pulled open the roll-away door to find it nearly stripped away. The milk crates Teresa brought had been stacked flush with the door as makeshift shelving, and Kip's meager belongings were unpacked on them. The bottom cushions of my couch had been arrayed on the floor like a bed, and made up with a spare towel and Kip's sleeping bag. There was just

enough space to walk past him to the bathroom.

"We'll need to get a few things," Teresa said. "But you can see the possibilities..."

Indeed, I could, and they were almost charming. A bed, some under-the-bed storage and perhaps some hanging shelves and a reworking of the closet, and he could actually have a room in here. I'd have to come through it every time I wanted the bathroom, but something told me this self-possessed little guy was not likely to get in my way.

"Go tuck him in," Teresa said. Then we should talk, shouldn't we?"

"Yeah."

"I'll make us tea."

I watched her go, then turned back to find Kip, face neatly scrubbed, pajamas on, ready for bed. He barred his teeth and showed them to me.

"Um, great," I said.

He closed his mouth and climbed into his sleeping bag.

"So, goodnight, okay?"

I called that 'tucking in' and went to find Teresa.

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She was on the fire escape, legs dangling over the side, hands wrapped around a mug. She looked cold.

I sat down beside her, and she passed me my tea.

"So?"

I nodded. "Yeah. So, I don't know what to tell you. This is ...this is really hard..."

"I know."

"So I'm not crazy, then. You're...you're feeling it too?"

"Oh, sweetie, of course I am. I know he and I had our problems, but...well, he was a bad husband, and possibly a bad father too. But he wasn't a bad man, Helena."

"Yeah. We kind of drew a hard line there, didn't we? You don't think...you don't think we maybe wrote him off too easily?"

"Now, don't even go there. We did the best we knew how, Hel. We had to have a life! Heck, he had to have one too. And we were just not on the path of having one together."

“But he didn’t, Teresa. I think...maybe he never did have a life at all...”

I filled her in on the clippings Alex had brought. She was suitably horrified by the news.

“A fire? Poor Doug. That would have been devastating. He was too rigid about his environment to even stand travelling for business. And to lose his books...”

Yes, that would have been a blow for him. But big enough to send him into a nervous breakdown? I told Teresa about the hovel of an apartment that they had found him in.

“That doesn’t sound like him,” she admitted. “But then, we don’t know what his financial situation was like. If he was waiting on insurance money...”

“What about sales from the book, though? And his job at the college...”

“Well, royalties can take awhile. And the rest of it, well, we don’t really know what other expenses he was dealing with. Paying for a divorce, for instance?”

That was a good point. Had he still been married to Kip’s mother when he died? Or did he maybe have obligations regarding the ‘hospital’ Aunt Charlotte had mentioned she was at? Something else to add to the growing list of

questions I was accumulating about this whole thing.

“So what do I do, Teresa? I mean, I thought I had everything resolved with him. That we were...that we were done somehow. I wasn't prepared for anything like this, and now...”

“You have regrets?”

“I have complications.”

“The boy,” she said.

“For instance. I just don't feel ready to have a kid! Not even a part-time one, and not even with Aunt Charlotte and you to help me.”

She brushed a lock out of hair out of her eyes. “Yeah. About that...”

I tensed. “About what?”

“Well, I am here for you, of course, Helena, you know I am. But...”

“But you don't want anything to do with Kip,” I slowly realized. “Teresa...”

“Don't even start. I won't take guilt from you on this. He just

...just creeps me out a little. There's something about him that's...I can't quite put my finger on what it is. But I'm not sure it's something I'm ready...or willing...to handle it right now. He is not my child, Helena."

"I wasn't either."

"That was different."

"How? Each of was baggage, just from different mothers is all. Only difference is you still loved him when you got stuck with me."

"I still love him now," she snapped. "God, Helena!"

"You...you do?"

"Of course, sweetie, of course. It was never him I didn't love, it was what I had to do, what I had to compromise in order to live with him. I didn't need to make those same compromises with you."

"And if you had, would you have left me with him?"

"If I had, you would have been better off with him. Helena, it's not that I blame Kip for his mother, or his father, or for being whoever he is. He's young and innocent and adorable and I probably just need to get over myself. But I'm just not...just not in that place yet. Does that make any



sense to you?"

She shivered, and took another swig of tea, then said "I think I'm still in shock..."

I did not handle Teresa well when she was weak. I felt suddenly very, very tired, and I wished for nothing more than to be done with her. "Fine. Don't help me. I'll do it all myself."

"Helena. I didn't mean..."

"I'll manage, Teresa."

I stood, then waited for her follow. She shivered again and pushed aside her mug.

"I think I'll stay out here for awhile. Just until my hands stop shaking..."

"I was planning to...well, to..."

"Oh, you go on ahead." She indicated the fire escape. "I can see myself out."

There was nothing else to be said. I left her there

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I fell into a hot, dreamless sleep sometime around midnight,

and awoke to the ringing of the telephone. As I fumbled for it, I banged my hand into the dresser.

Rats. I had forgotten about that. In fact, I had forgotten about my brother until the smack of my hand into my middle drawer reminded me. Some maternal instinct I had.

I let the phone ring and dragged myself out of bed, trying to locate Kip. I found his little nest in the alcove neatly made, the towel smoothed over my cushions and the sleeping bag zipped shut and neatly folded. Kip himself was in the kitchen, fully dressed and eating waffle strips and sausages out of one of the take-out containers Teresa had left.

“Glad to see you making yourself at home,” I said.

He shrugged, his face suddenly lit by a tiny, perfect grin. It was the most emotive response I had seen from him yet. Progress!

I pressed my luck even further. “So, did you see where the phone went?”

He immediately put down his waffle, walked over to my desk and plucked the phone from beneath my notebook. I was still ringing, and I stifled a groan—only Alex or Aunt Charlotte would be so persistent as to let it ring so long.

I took the phone from him. "Hello?"

"Morning, Gorgeous," preened Alex. "Did you and the munchkin make out okay?"

"Yes. Fine."

"Fab. So, you up for a little mind meld this aft? Hash out the story idea?"

"I wasn't aware we were getting a joint by-line on this. It's still my feature, Alex."

"Well, yeah. But I have to come over anyway to pick up my notebook, don't I? I don't even get to hear how you did with it?"

He was a twit, but he was not stupid and I did not at all buy that he would have given me his only copy of the notes. It was a weak excuse and I was not falling for it.

"We'll see," I said.

He was smirking, I could feel it. "Is somebody playing hard to get?"

"No, Alex, I'm playing too busy to get." Kip was staring at me. I lowered my tone. "Look, I do plan to get some work done, but I have to buy a bed and see my aunt first."

“Didn’t you see your aunt yesterday?”

“Yeah, and she dumped a kid on me. Can I go?”

He sounded almost disappointed. “Yeah. Fine.”

“So, okay. Um, bye.”

I hung up on Alex, but keyed in Aunt Charlotte’s number while I had the phone in my hands. She picked up on the second ring. “Hello?”

“Charlotte? It’s Helena. I hope it’s not too early to be calling...”

“It’s ten in the morning, Helena. What can I do for you?”

“Well, I was hoping to arrange a time where we could get together.”

“Get together? Let me see. I’m not sure I...”

She was so not pulling this on me. “Why don’t I leave you two to get acquainted, and we can meet again tomorrow, maybe...” I quoted. “Remember?”

“Ah, right.”

“Anyway, I have some questions...stuff we need to clarify...

”  
“Fine.”

“And I was hoping I could drop Kip off at some point so that I could...”

“You have him now,” she said.

“Yes. And you’ll have him too—for a couple hours at least. I’ve got to get some work done, and it’s not the kind I can take him with me for.”

“And you don’t have anyone else you can leave him with?”

With Teresa pulling a ‘not in my backyard’ on me, I really didn’t. Poor kid, nobody wanted him. “No, Charlotte. I really don’t.”

She didn’t sound happy about it. “Fine. Come by at two, and I’ll keep him until suppertime.”

Two until suppertime. That was maybe three hours, and in that time I had to squeeze in two professors and whoever I needed to talk to for Daniel’s little story. And I had to fish for a feature lest Alex Calvin steal it from under my nose. It was going to be a busy day.

Chapter 5

When I hung up the phone, Kip was standing in front of me

with an expectant look in his eyes. An idea suddenly occurred to me. I had been so wrapped up in the things the news article suggested that I had forgotten I had a source of information right in front of me. Now that the boy was getting used to me, he was growing more reactive. He had spoken, albeit very briefly, when we were at Geschlepp's. And he was reacting to things I said to him.

I was kicking myself for not thinking to wonder until now just where Kip had been while all this was going on. The article had mentioned he missed several days of school. Had my father already been dead by then? Had Kip seen it happen? Was the whole not talking thing some kind of post-traumatic stress reaction, or had he always been this way?

I sat down on the bed and motioned to Kip. He smoothed the unmade sheets with his hand before perching on the edge of the bed leaving a metre of space between us. I nudged myself a tiny bit closer to him.

"So," I said.

I was clearly holding his attention, but he was did not otherwise react.

"I was hoping we could talk about a few things," I continued. "Like firstly, if you're doing okay. You haven't really said

much since you got here.”

He twirled his toe into the rug.

“I mean, I know you can talk. You did it yesterday, with Teresa. You can talk, right?”

I heard him clearly answer. “Yes.”

“So...so why don't you, Kip?”

And we were back to the non-verbals: he answered with a non-committal shrug.

“Did something happen? Something that...I don't know, that made you not want to talk?”

He shook his head. I decided to drop this point for now.

“Do you know what happened to your father, Kip?”

He turned over a piece of Lego in his hands, then slowly nodded.

“Do you want to tell me?”

It was barely a whisper. “He died.”

“Yes, he did. Do you...do you know how?”

“He died at home.”

“Were you there when that happened?”

He hesitated so long I was afraid he had ditched the talking again. But finally he answered. “Yes.”

“Was anyone else there when it happened?”

The Lego snapped in his hands, and he mutely shook his head. But whether that was from agitation, or a negative answer, I couldn't be sure.

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I called the university and made an appointment to see Melissa Saatchini in the legal aid office. I also learned that Professor Malafanto would be having office hours this afternoon from 4:30-5:30. I was unable to locate Michaela Yost, but as things were shaping up, I had enough to do so I was content to let her wait a day or so.

I spent the rest of the morning looking over the news clippings that Alex had brought me. I wanted to be as clear as possible on just what the sequence of events had been before I spoke with Aunt Charlotte later. She was being prickly about this, though I suppose I couldn't blame her. Her brother had died. I know she and him were close. They were only a few years apart in age and had pretty much



raised each other after their two much older brothers, Raymond and Graham, had died in a car accident. They had been high school football stars. There had probably been alcohol. The family had been devastated. Their parents pretty much checked out at that point, leaving 14-year-old Charlotte and 12-year-old Doug to their own devices.

It surprised me a little that in light of her history, Charlotte never liked Teresa. Both were born copers. Charlotte had risen above abysmal circumstances to give my father the June Cleaveresque mother figure she thought he needed. She spent the study halls of her junior high career in the school library, reading *The Joy of Cooking* and *Hints from Heloise*. She married young, and well, to fund my father's education—then raised three daughters by herself when her heel of a husband first strayed, then left. I could see why she would be wary of jumping on the child-rearing train again. But she had been no better equipped than I was, and she had risen to the occasion. It seemed she expected me to do the same.

At noon, I reheated one of Teresa's take-out containers and shared a grilled cheese and chips with Kip. Then while he played Lego I went on-line and looked up furniture. I phoned in an order to the local IKEA for a bed, some shelving and a few closet organizers. By then, it was time to leave for Aunt Charlotte's.

She lived in the suburbs—or, in local parlance the township, a pair of subdivisions and strip malls about half an hour's walk from the downtown. It was barely a ten-minute bus ride. Aunt Charlotte was waiting for us in her little yard when we got there, and she greeted Kip with a perfunctory hug, then sat us down on her porch. The cushions on her whicker chairs had been freshly fluffed, and an old-fashioned TV dinner table had been set up with a pitcher of lemonade and some cookies.

"I have a present for you," she chirped to Kip. It was a soccer ball, with one of those little net-like leashes so that he could kick it without the ball actually going anywhere. He immediately moved onto the lawn and commenced kicking. It was like, like everything else he seemed to do, a tiny bit creepy: he kicked meticulously and precisely in a way that bordered on robotic.

"Well," said Aunt Charlotte. "Now we can talk, Helena."

I pulled out my notebook. "I have a few questions. Like, firstly, how did he die, Charlotte?"

"What do you mean 'how' did he die? He died at home, Helena. In an accident."

"Yes, but...Charlotte, honestly. What happened here? He just keeled over, or did the neighbours hear, or did Kip..."

“Kip found him.”

“What?” I fumbled through my notes, looking for the newspaper clipping. “It said in the article that he had been found by child welfare authorities who...”

“Well, that’s true too. It’s...how to explain this. Poor little guy. Doug had been dead for almost two days until they found the body. Best they can tell, he died the Saturday before they found him, and Kip...he froze, poor kid, had no idea what to do. They didn’t find out until Monday when he took himself to school and they saw at once that something was very wrong.”

“So at that point they tried to call home, didn’t get an answer and sent someone to investigate.”

She nodded. “I didn’t even have to maneuver to keep Kip’s part of it out of the papers. They decided on their own that it was just too horrible a thing to print. I mean, who wants to sit there over their morning coffee and think about a six-year-old boy huddled away with the body of his dead father for two days, waiting for someone to find him?”

I bumped the Gazette reporter up in my list of people to talk to. Perhaps there were other details he hadn’t printed?

I watched Kip at play, his legs kicking mechanically at the

soccer ball with preternatural accuracy, his features blank even of exertion, or of particular feeling. And I finally put into words the suspicion I had been nursing.

“Do you think it maybe...maybe affected him somehow?”

“Did what affect him?”

“Well, the...the death. The accident. Whatever it was.”

“What, Kip? Well, it was certainly an upsetting situation, Helena. How could it not be?”

“I know. I don’t mean that. Just...well, I guess I’m just wondering if he’s always been this way, or...”

“What way?”

Dear lord, she really didn’t see it. “Charlotte, you’re telling me you haven’t noticed that he’s kind of...odd?”

“I’m not sure ‘odd’ is the word I would use. He’s quiet. Obedient.”

“Yeah. But not just quiet, Charlotte, he’s borderline mute. And also completely incapable of social interaction, and a tiny bit obsessive compulsive. Charlotte, I really think there’s something wrong with him. Has he always been this way?”

She began picking at one of her cinnamon cookies.

“And how about this whole school thing? Which school does he go to, anyway?”

“Mission El, I think.”

That surprised me: Mission Elementary was in MY neighborhood. “Kind of a drive from Belmont, isn’t it?”

“It’s close to the university. It was easier for your father that way.”

“Well, do we know who his teacher was? Cause we should...”

“We have to re-register him. Show proof of guardianship.”

Which brought me directly to question number two. Just who actually was in charge here?

“Did my father leave any instructions about that?” I asked.

“In a matter of speaking. It’s kind of between the two of us. And I think—well, I’m not sure either you or I can do it alone. I was talking with the lawyer, and he proposes we try to work out a shared arrangement.”

The next twelve years sharing my life with cold, distant and

dreary Aunt Charlotte? Was she serious?

"We could go to the courts, I suppose," she continued. "But I am amenable to arbitration, and his attorney is empowered to notarize the offer. I have drawn up some papers, and if they are agreeable to you, you can sign them now and we can have this all taken care of by Friday."

She passed me a document that broke down my father's estate thusly:

One of us (i.e. me) would be named primary guardian and maintain 'custody' of the boy. One of us (i.e. her) would be named secondary guardian and would maintain 'care' of the boy for whichever working hours the boy was not occupied by school, with other times negotiable by mutual agreement. Decisions about health care, education and power of attorney would be jointly decided, with the attorney of record for my father's estate serving as tie-breaker in the event of a dispute. Whichever one of us took the kid would be awarded my father's royalty rights as their share of the estate. The other would get whatever was left of his bank account when the debts of his estate were settled. In other words: one of us gets to be a parent, and the other gets to be a babysitter.

"As you can see, I am more than willing to pull my own weight," Aunt Charlotte was saying. "And I will certainly help

out monetarily when I am able. And I am prepared to concede the royalty rights if you agree to the..."

I wasn't sure how much in royalties a book on Shakespeare would pull in. Then again, I didn't think Aunt Charlotte would be coming out with a ton of money on this either and truthfully, I didn't care. Teresa was not the only one still in shock here. I was still getting over the fact that my father was dead.

"This is a lot to process," I said.

She nodded, clearly trying to pretend patience.

"I suppose I have to ask it. What about his mother? Does she..."

"No."

I tried to process how that could happen. If she was not a factor, he must have legally divorced her. Did her divorce agreement waive custody? Or...

"She hasn't died, has she?" I suddenly wondered.

"Good lord, no!"

"Then..."

“He had her committed, Helena. She’s not mentally competent to manage her own affairs. She hasn’t seen Kip since he was two.”

“Oh.”

“Postpartum depression, it somehow...triggered something that must have been there all along...”

“That’s so sad.”

“Yes, I suppose it is.”

One parent dead, one parent gone...it didn’t really matter how it happened, did it? The end result was still the same. I had seldom so keenly felt the loss of my own mother as I did at that moment, when Kip’s loss—when my own loss—suddenly hit me. I had lost a mother too. I had lost a father too. Who else in our lives could really understand that? In my head, I decided it then. I would check things out of course. With—well, not Teresa, she had made her feelings on that quite clear. With Melissa at MCLA, then, when I saw her about my story for Daniel. I would check things out, but I would take him in the end. And I would rise to the occasion, just like Aunt Charlotte had with my father, just like Teresa had with me. And we would all be better for it. I was sure we would.

Chapter 6

I left Kip with Aunt Charlotte and headed to the bus stop,



planning to catch a ride back downtown. But as I crossed Gerrard and Claymore, I saw the 360 drive by and impulsively broke into a run to meet it. The 360 was the only bus you could get outside the central depot that crossed the township lines. I still had an hour before I had to be on campus. My conversation with Aunt Charlotte had me thinking that I ought to check out the apartment where my father had been found.

The house was an old Victorian: a step up from the student ghetto in Mission, but not by much. The property was neatly maintained, but the back, near the basement entrance, was overrun with scraggly weeds and had a distinctly depressing smell. Kip had lived here. My father had lived here. What had happened to lower him so?

I had my finger on the window when I heard a voice behind me.

“Can I help you?”

I turned, my finger leaving behind a streak on the window. The woman behind me was elderly, in a rumpled, dandruffed suit of blue linen, with white hair tied in a loose bun. This had to be the landlady. I held out my hand. “Oh, sorry. Beatrice, right?”

She glared at my outstretched palm. “Who wants to know?”

“Oh! I probably should have called first. Um, this was kind of an impulse thing...I’m Helena Snowden. My father was...”

“Oh, dear!” At the mention of my father, she softened immediately. “You must be here to...only your aunt had already been by.”

It took me a minute to realize what she was getting at here. “Oh, I wasn’t here for his stuff. I was just...I wanted to see...”

“To see where it happened?”

To see where he lived. To see just how low he had sunk. How much he had endured. It seemed suddenly important to know just what sort of end he had come to.

“We’ve already cleaned it up a little,” she explained as she led me down the stairs. Trying to rent it out again, you see.”

I could smell the faint tinge of antiseptic. The interior was dull, gray, spartan. I walked up to the plain, blank walls and looked for picture hooks, nails, tack marks, some sign he had brightened the place up for himself.

“I know it’s not fancy,” Beatrice was saying. “Truth be told, I never would have rented it out if it hadn’t been for my son.

Makes him feel better to think I have some money coming in. I do get pension but it isn't much..."

I nodded absently, drifting into the lone bedroom. I could still see detritus of litter, clusters of papers huddled in clumps beside a limp orange futon.

"We haven't got in here yet," Beatrice said.

"Let me help you." I knelt down and started gathering the papers. "May I take these?"

"Of course."

"Are there...are there other rooms?"

She shook her head. "He left the boy the main room, I think. When your aunt was here, she took his things—a mattress, some toys..."

"Kip slept on a mattress? On the floor?"

She let me wander, past the small, open space of the main room, into the tiny strip of a kitchen where a paint-spattered bridge table still had not been cleared away and a bathroom where shaving cream bottles—and a tiny child's toothbrush with a picture of Mickey Mouse on the handle—still lay propped against the faucet of a dirt-streaked sink.

This had been his world. Where was the colour? The poetry? The passion? Had he left those behind in his burned, ruined house, or had they atrophied somehow when I deserted him and left him with only the child who could not play into his fantasy world? I remembered sitting on his knee when I was small, delighting in paging through his giant books while he whispered stories in my ear. He was a classicist through and through. He did Shakespeare best, simply because he knew so much about him. But anything canon was fair game, and he relished seeking out my tastes with me. I hated Blake, but I loved Yeats. I hated Allighieri, but I loved Milton. I hated Rider Haggard, but I loved Conan Doyle. He took me to Stratford one year, and the play we saw was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I was awed at the costumes, at the pageantry, at a character named after me. It was his favourite play and by the time I was seven I could recite Puck's closing speech by heart. Think but this and all is mended. Ironic, now, that this should be the one I still remember best, the one where the unhappy stuff is whisked away by magic, nothing more than a bad dream the players all can wake up from. There was none of that now, here. While I could see Kip sitting passively, obediently still for such a literary experience as I had, I couldn't really see him participating. How would my father have handled that? He had been devastated when he lost Teresa. It would have been the same. He just could not maintain his passion without an audience. Was this

awful hovel of an apartment our fault, then? Had we reduced him to...this?

"It was over here they found him," said Beatrice, gently guiding me over to the window. "Just under the ledge here, sprawled on a beanbag chair. It was covered in vomit. The detective told me he might have died by choking on it. They were going to run tests."

"Oh."

"The police took it away. The beanbag chair."

"Oh," I said again. She was treading so gently with me. I briefly wondered if Beatrice Evans would be less nice if she knew I had abandoned my father and not bothered to even check up on him in seven years. At the time, I thought I had my reasons, but now that he was gone, I was remembering the good things. Feeling maudlin. Feeling guilty. This place of his was messing me up. I had to get out of here.

I turned, ran too quickly, fell to my knee on the first stair. She ran after me.

"Wait! You forget your papers..."

Trance-like, I grabbed them from her hand and stuffed them into my cavernous bag without even looking. Then I cleared the steps in one fluid jump, and I ran.

I was out of breath when I reached the bus stop, and the wheezing didn't stop until I had cleared the Belmont city limits and was heading toward the university. I had to get a grip on myself; it was getting ridiculous already. I had enough to process right now. I didn't need guilt too. I resolved to put my father out of my head at least for long enough to cobble together what I needed for Daniel's stupid little story.

Melissa Saatchini at Mission College Legal Aid was an old acquaintance. She had gone to journalism school with me, and shortly after graduation, turned to the dark side: she had gone corporate. She was a public relations shark for MCLA now, and it suited her. She looked fabulous in tailored clothes and shiny back-length ringlets. She was so sweet you wanted to gag, and it made it very hard to get nasty with her. That worked in a field as potentially messy as legal aid.

When I got to her office, the receptionist buzzed me straight through, and I found Melissa waiting for me in a small meeting room. For the second time that day, I found myself faced with a pitcher of lemonade and a plate of cookies.

"I heard about your father," she said, nudging the plate

closer. "You poor, poor thing! Can I get you anything?"

It was on the tip of my tongue to say 'yes, a cookie' just to see what she would say. But I behaved myself.

"I actually wanted to ask you something about that," I said.

I filled her in on the situation with Kip, and she agreed to have Aunt Charlotte's papers looked at. "And if there is anything else I can do..."

"I find work is the best therapy," I lied. "Which is actually why I came here. Daniel wants a law student to talk to about the free tax clinics."

"Uh huh. So did you want to meet with one now, or will you be waiting until the actual event?"

"Daniel will want pictures. It'll have to be at the event."

"Done. But please tell me you didn't come all the way down here just for that? I have been absolutely swamped, and this little pow-wow was the break I have been looking forward to all day."

I did not point out that 'all the way down here' was a six minute walk from my apartment.

"Well, I'm giving you guys free press what with the tax story.

So I was actually hoping you might be able to give me something too.”

“The tax story isn’t worth that much.”

I leaned forward eagerly. “Why? You’ve got something juicy?”

She hesitated, and I felt an inner glow I seldom got in my beat. She had something, and it was something good.

“I didn’t say that,” she said.

“Oh, come on, Melissa, I am a red-blooded heterosexual female. I am immune to your womanly charms. You have game face on, and you wouldn’t have it if you didn’t have something big.”

She picked up a cookie and took a dainty bite. “You didn’t hear it from me,” she said.

“Great. Fine.”

“And this is not a leak. In fact, it is not even a tip. Or a pointer. Or a suggestion.”

“What is it, then?”

“It’s a piece of information you unearthed using your good



old-fashioned journalistic skills. As I was telling your friend Alex Calvin the other day..."

Crap. Good old-fashioned journalistic skills meant everyone would assume I had slept with someone to get it. And Alex Calvin working the story with me? They would assume it was him. The last thing I needed was that self-important little twit getting his paws on that idea. It was just the sort of mind game he enjoyed...

She was chewing on her cookie again.

"Well," I said.

"Okay, okay. Word has it...from people who would know ...that there is another shake-up looming at the office of the city health inspector..."

Well, that actually was big news. Go, Melissa! In one of those weird municipal quirks that every small town has, the PHO, the public health inspector's office, was actually one of the more controversial public offices. Mission was a university town, and that meant it had an unusually high percentage of real estate devoted to restaurants, coffee shops and fast food. It was a job to keep it all running smoothly, and the heavy workload made turnover very high. Add to that the high public visibility...one guy a few years back was practically run out of town when he closed

down a popular laundry café for hair net violations. It wasn't just a question of pissing off some frivolous students: probably half the town had jobs in food services. Add up the high school kids who work for pocket money, the university students who work for tuition money, the Mission College graduates with their econ degrees who fall in love with the area and open up entrepreneurial businesses and the former beauty queens raising their teenaged stepdaughters after their divorces, and you have a lot of money at stake here.

"Do we know who? When? Wh---"

"Down, girl. It's all in the notes I gave Alex. Did you want a copy too?"

The little bugger. All of his taunting about the precious notes and they weren't even his. It put me in an awkward position. Did I lob the ball back at him, pretend I got some extra stuff and hope I beat him to the punch? Or did I be the bigger person, agree to work together with him and live with a shared by-line? Half-pay was better than no-pay, wasn't it? And I still wasn't sure just how much time would be sucked away from my life by having a kid in it. If I gambled on scooping him...well, part of gambling is never betting what you could not afford to lose. I wasn't sure I was at that point yet. I said my goodbyes to Melissa. It was time to go get Kip.

Chapter 7

The bus back out to the township was running late, and I spent most of my waiting time feeling sorry for myself for being distracted with the Belmont thing and not leaving time to meet with Dr. Malafanto. I was divided on whether it was better to wait so I could call ahead and make an appointment with him, or to just show up and hope I caught him. Calling ahead had the advantage of getting me guaranteed face time, but on the other hand, it allowed him an opportunity to prepare, and that could be a bad thing. Just showing up would assure me a spontaneous response, but it also ran the risk of assuring me a door slamming shut in my face. I was growing increasingly convinced that there was more going on here than people seemed to think. Maybe he had gotten drunk and aspirated on his own vomit, as the early evidence seemed to suggest. But that didn't mean something hadn't happened. The infamous Paul Bernardo had murdered his sister-in-law by drugging her until she aspirated, and he had managed to pass that off as accident for years before finally confessing. I wasn't prepared to say just yet that I believed my father had met with foul play per se, but it was just too many big events—Kip's mother, the fire, the book, the slum apartment...granted, not all of those could be chalked up to anything more than bad luck or coincidence, but when you put them all together into a kind of big picture, something just didn't feel right about the whole scenario. My reporter's intuition had been dulled by three

years of nothing but tax seminars for the elderly and Northern Homemaker magazine, but my eye for a story had not quite been blinded yet. I had an instinct, and it was telling me something.

I could hear in my head what Teresa would say about this. On the one hand, my initiative would delight her. I was fooling no one with the safe, insulated little life I led. I was capable of better than this, and I had thus far failed, in my still-new career, to either challenge or distinguish myself. But on the other hand, I had gotten where I was thanks to distancing myself from the depressive, stale world of my academic father. And while I was starting to feel like my freedom had a cost, there would have been a cost had I not left him too, and that cost would have been to me. To go backward, turn my energies toward his life...did I really want to go there? Did I want to let myself be pulled back in to a world of losses, a world of tragedies, a world populated by as many poor, dead people as in his beloved plays?

Then there was Charlotte and Kip, who, with me, comprised my father's sole living relations. When I turned my back on him, I left them behind too. And I had not experienced a single moment of guilt or remorse about that. Charlotte deserved him. She loved him and they had long ago made a pact to throw in their lots together. But Kip—what had his life been like? Had he felt safe? Had he felt happy? How much of his current—well, oddness, for lack of a better

word—was from his inherent nature and how much was from some kind of hideous emotional scarring? He had been a part of my father's world, and now he was a reminder of how selfish I had been. I had gotten out, I had let Teresa pull me out and I had somehow assumed that would be it. It had not occurred to me that there might be other people I would be abandoning too. He had been born almost a year after I was gone. He was my golden opportunity to go back, to reconcile, to make amends. And I hadn't done that. Would we ever be able to move forward unless I put my father's demons to rest? Would I ever be able to look at Kip without shuddering if I didn't make my own peace with the way my father's life had ended?

I willed myself to snap out of it. I had practical issues to attend to, and the first of these was retrieving Kip from Aunt Charlotte and getting him squared away in my apartment. I was relieved to find, when I arrived at Charlotte's, that he was not still stuck on the same activity as when I had left him. He was comfortably settled at Aunt Charlotte's kitchen table with a sketch pad and a box of markers, the soccer ball resting under his feet.

"Everything go okay?" I asked Charlotte.

"Of course. Why wouldn't it?"

"Right. So..."

“Did you sign the papers?”

“I left them with my friend at MCLA. She’s going to get back to me.”

She blinked, seeming a little hurt at my caution. “Right. Well, when will I see you again?”

I had to talk to Alex first, get the situation with the story squared away. I told Aunt Charlotte I would get back to her tonight and let her know.

She knelt down beside Kip, who was already packing the markers away. “Do you want to take your drawings home with you?” she asked him.

He nodded.

“All right, I’ll get you a grocery bag to put them in.” To me, she said “I suppose we’ll have to get him some sort of travel bag. Would you like me to take care of that, or do you...”

“You can.”

“Well, all right. He had a peanut butter sandwich and some carrot sticks about an hour and a half ago. He should be ready for supper at...”

"I can handle it, Charlotte."

"Well, all right. Good bye, Kip."

He let himself be patted and kissed. And we left.

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When I got home, there was a note on my door from the building super that he had let the IKEA guys in. This was going to be a production, I knew it was. Before I could set Kip up, I'd have to clear out some closet space for him. I'd have then find a place for the stuff of mine that I inevitably have to clear out. And then I would have to assemble things and put things away and assess what kind of stuff I had to buy him, and how much of that I could pawn off on Aunt Charlotte to do. On a related note, I had to get back to her anyway on my plans for tomorrow, so I figured I would start with some procrastination and call Alex Calvin.

He was surprised to hear from me. "Can it be?" he teased. "The almighty Helena, actually talking to me...voluntarily?"

I grazed from Teresa's take-out cartons. We were down to burgers and breakfast foods now. Ick.

"Don't flatter yourself," I told Alex. "I have a kid now, I can't just pick up and go spelunking for tidbits any time I want. I have to get back to Aunt Charlotte by dinnertime about

what my child care needs for tomorrow will be, so...”

“So how does that involve me? I thought you didn’t need me. It’s your story. No shared by-line for you...”

“Well yes, that was the plan. Until I realized that your source at MCLA is actually the same as my source and that we would both be working off the same set of notes.”

There was a pause. “So you figured that out, then.”

“Yeah.”

His voice turned teasing again. “Worried you can’t beat me to the scoop?”

“Not so much worried as wondering what’s the point? I mean, why duplicate efforts here? We work for the same paper...”

“So you’ll work with me. Shared by-line.”

“Yes. But I get to do all the art.” Daniel paid extra for pics. A big glossy one might compensate for the pay cut I would take for sharing the by-line with Alex.

“Done. So should I bring Chinese or Italian?”

“What?”



“When I come over. What time do you want me?”

“Whoa. Whoa, whoa, whoa. I haven’t even...look, I have a kid here.”

“So? He can’t watch a video or something while we talk?”

I didn’t think Kip even had videos. “Look, I just got a pile of IKEA stuff for him, and I need to...”

“I love IKEA.”

“Alex...”

“Aw, come on. Let me come over, Helena. I’ll help you put your IKEA crap together, and we can go over our game plan for the story.”

I looked glumly at the pile of boxes. I could use the help, I supposed. And if he was bringing food...

I covered the phone with my hand. “Kip! Do you like Italian or Chinese?”

He stared blankly back at me.

“Chinese,” I said into the phone. And, thinking of the slim pickings my recent re-stocking had already been reduced to, I added “And stop off at Geschlepp’s to buy a grilled

cheese for my brother.”

“Done.”

And that was that. I had a niggling feeling that I should be worried about how quickly Alex agreed to all of this. But screw worrying, I had too much to do.

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I led Kip into the kitchen and sat him down at the table.

“You’re going to stay in here, okay?”

He nodded, his little face blank and solemn.

“We’re setting up a space for you though. You’ll be all...all taken care of...”

He reached for his Lego box, and I left him. I’d better see where we were at before Alex showed up.

I figured Kip and I could share the closet for now. I wasn’t sure how much space a little kid would need, but it couldn’t be much. And the bed came with boxes to fit underneath it. I would let Alex handle those.

The most pressing task, then, was simply clearing out the space, and unless I wanted Alex pawing through my closet,

I had best finish that before he got here. I went into the alcove and assessed my options.

Half an hour later, when the door buzzer finally rang, I was knee-deep in piles, and something interesting happened. In the time it had taken me to mutter an expletive and attempt to free my feet from a turquoise pashmina scarf that had somehow wrapped itself around them, Kip had pushed back his chair, picked up the phone and pressed the number sign to buzz Alex in. By the time I got to the door, my brother had already opened it.

Alex gently dropped the bags of take-out on the floor and knelt down to Kip's level. He seemed much more interested in him today.

"Well, hello there," he said.

Kip did not answer. Alex shrugged, then stood up.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey."

"Not much of a talker, is he?"

"You are not the first to notice."

"Well, nice to meet you," he called to Kip's retreating form.

When we got the kitchen with the bags, Kip was already at the table engrossed in his Lego.

“So should we eat now, or do you want to get some work done first?”

“Work.”

“Fair enough. Just show me to the tools...”

I led him into the alcove and showed him the space. He took one look at the pile of clothes on my floor and burst into giggles.

“What?” I snapped.

“Just...I love girls. Everything they own is so...frilly.”

“I am so not frilly!”

“Aw, come on, it’s adorable.” He picked up a random item from the top of the pile, a lime-coloured silk tank top with see-through panels and cut-outs on the sides. It balled in his hand to the size of doll clothes.

He let it fall again with a smirk, and I snatched it defensively off the floor.

“I bought this in university.”

“I bet you did.”

“Stop smirking!”

“That’s not what I’m doing.”

“Oh? What are you doing?”

“Thinking how hot you would look in see-through?”

“Please! There’s a kid here...”

“Sure, in the kitchen, like, two rooms away. I don’t think he’s paying too much attention to us anyway.”

“I didn’t think so either, until he let you in just now. Teresa has her own key. He must have seen me put in the buzzer code when you came by yesterday...”

“Oh, that’s right. Where IS Teresa? I figured she’d be over helping you get all this stuff set up.”

I so did not want to talk about this. “She couldn’t make it,” I said.

“Ah.”

“She does have her own life, you know.”

“Sure she does. Geschlepp’s is her place, isn’t it?”

“You know it is.”

“So let’s talk about that.”

“Alex…”

“Ease off, Cujo, I’m not prying. Just realizing that she’ll probably be feeling the impact of the hustle at the health inspector’s office that’s the basis of that whole story thing we’re doing…”

Crap, I had forgotten about that. “I don’t think I’m ready to talk about this,” I stalled.

He looked down at the piles of clutter with a smug nod, seeming to conclude that they were the source of my distraction. Fine. I would wait until he holed up in my alcove to hang the shelving for Kip, then I would sneak a look at the notes while I sorted clothes.

I did not at first realize that this plan would prove difficult to implement. Alex needed space to put the bed frame together, and he set himself up in the only place there was, which was practically on top of me. Kip was still engrossed with his Lego. He did not make a peep.

Finally, Alex had the bed frame together. As soon as he had jumped in to the alcove to plan his next move, I pulled

out the notebook and tried to sneak a look.

When I next looked up, there was a smarmy, smug little grin staring back at me.

“If you wanted to know,” Alex drawled. “All you had to do was ask...”

I blushed and snapped the notebook shut.

“Sorry. It’s just...”

“Your father died, and you now have a kid?”

“Look, if you think I can’t handle this, mister, let me tell you...”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You just caught me at a...”

“Helena!”

“What!”

“I’m not saying that. I’m not saying anything. You notice how I’m not saying anything? Geez, even I wouldn’t joke about something like this.”

I steadied my breathing. “Sorry. Okay.”

“Okay. So why don’t I save both of us any further charade and just brief you over dinner?”Chapter 8

We set up Kip in the kitchen with his grilled cheese, then spread packing paper over the newly assembled bed frame like a table cloth and arrayed the food like a buffet.

“So, there are three things I learned from Melissa,” Alex began once we were eating. The first thing is why Mary Weir-Fiorio is leaving the PHO. The second is who is replacing her. And the third is where that will be taking the rest of us.”

“Start with Weir-Fiorio.”

“Right. The short answer? She was way over budget, Helena. Like, three million over. Want to know where all that extra money went?”

“Isn’t it obvious? She was running the health inspection program. So wouldn’t it be...inspections?”

“Yes. But not all inspections are created equal. Remember that food poisoning scandal they had in Cliffgate a few months back?”

Cliffgate and Belmont were the two towns that bordered on Mission. I dimly remembered the case that Alex spoke of. It



was about a nine months ago. A busload of Japanese tourists just passing through had hit downtown Cliffgate for dinner. Half of them went to a sub sandwich franchise and half of them went to a mom-and-pop diner, where they all ordered the house specialty: pepper-crusted burger deluxe and onion fries. All 45 of those people spent the night cluttering up the local emergency room with food poisoning, and two little old ladies died. It had been a political nightmare.

“So you’re saying they stepped up the inspections after that,” I said, following Alex’s train of thought.

“Not all of the inspections, Hel. Just the ones for non-franchises.”

“That doesn’t seem fair. Is it even legal?”

“Small town like this, we have latitude on how we run things. As long as you don’t do anything stupid or anything over budget, the county pretty much leaves you to your own devices...”

So Weir-Fiorio had committed the ultimate sin: she had drawn attention to herself by giving the mucky-mucks something to nit-pick. But with the alternative—a busload of dead and sick tourists—looming over both the public and the press, I can’t see what else she could have done but

step up her precautions. Teresa had always been indifferent on the subject of Weir-Fiorio, but even for her there was something to be said for the devil you know.

I helped myself to another egg roll. "So how do they figure someone new is going to do better? It costs what it costs, doesn't it?"

"Well, sure," Alex said. "Unless you find a way to fundraise the difference."

I paused mid-chew. "You mean tax the difference."

"Yes. For certain people."

"Oh...the non-franchised ones?"

"Got it in one..."

Teresa, in other words. Crap. She did okay for herself, but even a local fixture like Geschlepp's was only so lucrative.

"There is a perception," Alex continued. "That a franchise needs less supervision than an independent. That the franchisee's parent company imposes its own minimum standards on its people, trains them accordingly and follows up to that effect."

"And is this a correct assumption?"

“To an extent. My sister’s fiancé owns a Subway franchise, and he did have to go through corporate training before they let him open. But does head office rush someone in every time he hires a high school kid to work the counter? Heck no. And you know...I have no doubt he does his best to do things properly, but I have seen the man’s house. And if I had to choose between eating at his table or at your stepmother Teresa’s...”

I put down the egg roll. I felt nauseous, and I was not sure it was from the food.

“This is big, Alex. This could run the smaller places out of business.”

“Uh huh.”

“So what’s our game plan here?”

“Well, I’m staff at the Review, so that gives me a press pass and slightly better contacts. Let’s say I try and work the city hall angle, get the scuttlebutt on this new guy, Kincaid.”

“Fine. And me?”

“You hit the university, work your contacts there. That is your beat, isn’t it?”

“Yes...”

“So see if you can hit up some student groups. They hate Big Brother and they hate Evil Corporate. Best case scenario is they have some suggestions for you. Worst case, all you’ve done is get ‘em fired up and paying attention, and that’s not so bad either.”

And being on campus would give me another opportunity to stalk Yost and Malafanto. Two birds, one stone as Daniel often said.

I kicked a pile of clothes out of the way and scavenged through the clutter for the phone. “Okay. Let me call Aunt Charlotte and check in with her about tomorrow. We can talk details as we finish cleaning up here...”

“Awesome. Hey, you eating the rest of that egg roll?”

“Twit,” I mouthed as I dialed Aunt Charlotte’s number. Then I cheerfully passed him the plate. I was feeling charitable, even to Alex Calvin. Productivity empowered me.

★★

An hour and a half later, I had my mass of clothes arranged in three piles of descending size: clothes I would keep, clothes I would get rid of and clothes I could find a place for elsewhere. Some of these, like blazers and jackets, could go in the front hall closet once I got rid of my years-old ski

jacket that I never wore. Some of these could survive folding and be pushed into my dresser and shelves. The rejects, I would dump in the Goodwill box when I was on campus tomorrow.

I was shoving the last of the trashables into a garbage bag when Alex emerged from the alcove, practically glowing.

“Looks like someone had fun with all the big, manly tools,” I teased.

He glided over and gave me a chaste peck on the cheek. “Say what you will. I did good work in there. You ready?”

He pushed back the space-saver sliding door and I took it all in. The bed fit—just—in the spot between the wall and the door frame. Three of the milk cartons remained stacked at its head and all of Kip’s toys had been unpacked onto them. The bed had come with boxes that fit underneath it; Alex had assembled these for me.

Three shelves had been hung high on the wall, and a canvas shoe organizer had been hung underneath each of them. Most of the myriad little compartments were big enough to hold items other than shoes.

I opened the closet. Two thirds of it seemed still reserved for me. A nifty rack that added an extra low-hung rod hung a few inches in, beside a column of pink stackable storage

boxes. A matching set of blue ones stacked in a second column beside the first and marked off Kip's section of the closet. He did not have as much space around his hanging rod doo-dad but otherwise his section was set up the same way as mine was. God bless the shelf-makers and closet organizers of the world. They had turned what had once been a glorified cupboard into an actual room where my brother could live without embarrassing me.

I was almost overcome. I sat down on the new bed and took a shaky breath.

"Hey. Aw, man..." Alex sat down beside me. "You aren't going to cry, are you?"

"It's just..."

"Yeah, I know. Just don't get too attached to it, okay? As soon as the kid gets about 20 pounds on him and friends who want to come over, he'll outgrow this little nest and we'll have to do this all over again..."

My breathing quickened. Friends. I hadn't even thought of that. Ever since I had first heard the news of what happened, I had been so preoccupied with my father's life—and death—that it had not occurred to me to think of Kip's life beyond the physical reality of it. I was coming to realize I had a woefully inadequate picture here. Did my

brother have friends? Did he have hobbies? Were there people in his world who were important to him? I could not allow myself to believe that his father's death had ruined him. But was it somehow less tragic to think he had been this withdrawn, this fragile, this damaged even before? Had my father's last apparently pitiful years included meetings with teachers, or doctors, about Kip's strangeness?

"Helena?" Alex was peering down at me, looking concerned. "Hel?"

"I'm fine." I stood, brushed myself off and stepped out of the alcove. "I'm fine. Let's show him."

"Shouldn't we put everything away?"

"Yes. I meant that. Let's put everything away..."

He picked up a red scarf with purple fringe, twirled it around his neck and studied the hanging ends with a bemused little smirk. "So, would you look better in this than me?"

I was still too shaken to succumb to the teasing.

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Kip squeezed past us and into the bathroom while we hung my things in my share of the closet. By the time we were

done, he was washed and dressed and ready for bed. He seemed curious about the new little room. He touched each of the as-yet-unfilled pockets on the 'shoe' bags, opened up each of the under-the-bed boxes, stepped into the closet and measured out his share of it with his arms, then sat down on the bed and bounced experimentally. His exploring thus concluded, he climbed under the covers, faced the wall and whispered something.

I had heard Kip speak a grand total of two times, and neither of them had been entirely unprompted. This had to be significant. I crouched down beside him and leaned close.

"What was that, Kip?"

"Good night, sweet prince," he said, a little louder this time. "And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

Alex shot me a quizzical glance. "Is that Shakespeare? Did he just..."

"Yes. And it's kind of creepy." To Kip, I said "Let's not do that anymore."

I hustled Alex out of there. Suddenly, I wanted to be alone.

★★



I retreated to the kitchen as soon as Alex was gone. I had not yet adjusted to my reconfigured space, and it was feeling a little claustrophobic. The alcove did have a door, but it was a flimsy track one. Probably not very soundproof if I wanted to have a life while Kip was sleeping. Was he a light sleeper? I had no idea. If he did wake up, he probably would not deign to tell me anyway. He would soldier through it like the mute little robot that he was.

I very desperately did not want to read too much into that prayer of his, because the only conclusion I could draw was that the boy was grieving for his father. This did seem like just the sort of bedtime ritual a Shakespeare professor would have with his child. I myself had picked up numerous rote passages over the years, favourite quotes he would repeat to me. In high school, I once had a teacher who took particular relish in the whole 'perform a scene' assignment. My father had delightedly appointed himself my drama coach, and my rehearsals with him had been so all-consuming that even now, years later, I could still recite all of Act 1, Scene 2 from Twelfth Night on demand.

So, on its basest level, I could write off Kip's little display as a simple demonstration of the sort of trivia a child of an academic might casually pick up. But on a deeper level, the mere fact of this demonstration meant that he was missing his father. I had no idea how to handle that. I couldn't even process my own grief right now, let alone someone else's.

And on top of it all, I was nursing a growing fear that something was very, very wrong—and it was not just the fire, and the drinking, and the death I was talking about.

There was madness here, I knew there was. There had been indications as far back as his marriage to Teresa that he never had the clearest sights on the line between the real and the pretend. I had my own taste of this in my freshman year of college, when my roommate started dating a Simpsons fan. There was no situation in life that could not be related back to an episode of *The Simpsons*. There was no conversational gambit that could not be answered by a quote from an episode. After awhile, you started wondering whether the guy had anything of his own to say underneath it all.

Which gave me an advantage now, to my surprise. My father was dead—he was not here anymore to explain things to me. But Shakespeare was still with us, and he was talking. And I did not at all like the story his words were telling me. I already knew that my father's book was about the psychopathology of parenthood in Shakespeare's plays. In a nutshell: it was about dead mothers, bad fathers and the children who betray them. All of these, my father had in his own life. I was sure that if I looked up the quotes he had chosen to illustrate his points, I would find several very thinly veiled barbs at me.

And then, there was this little tidbit from Kip. Good night, sweet prince was a charming little sentiment on the surface, but I recognized the quote and it was from the tragedy of tragedies, Hamlet. If that were not enough, Hamlet even had something in common with my brother—a dead father and a crazy mother. And Kip's benign little prayer? Exclaimed over Hamlet's freshly gutted corpse by Horatio, who was, like Kip, the sole witness to the death and the sole survivor left to tell the tale. Chapter 9

I was up before nine to get Kip ready for the day. I was planning to try out this whole 'leaving him with Aunt Charlotte for a few hours' thing so I could see how much work I could get a benchmark for home much work I could get done in that time. But as I was quickly learning, it could be very tough to plan anything when a kid was involved.

It started with Aunt Charlotte beating my alarm clock to the punch just as I was turning on the coffee. I was still only half awake.

"Charlotte? Is everything all right?"

"Of course, Helena. I hope I didn't wake you."

Well, not entirely, but it was still pretty early. If everything was all right, why was she calling?

"I was just wondering if you had made any decisions yet

about the custody arrangements,” she said.

“Well, I was going to try leaving him with you today, for starters. Beyond that, I told you I was looking into it...”

“You need to look into it faster.”

“Charlotte!”

“Look, it’s not just your life that’s involved, Helena. Kip needs to get back into his routine. His school called...”

“Ah.”

“They were wondering when he would be ready to come back. And they would like to book a meeting with his guardian as soon as possible.”

“I bet they would.”

“So, anyway, I booked us an appointment with your father’s lawyer at three...”

“An appointment? Look, Charlotte, I do have plans for today, and...”

“And? As I was saying, my dear, there is a bigger picture now. You have to think of Kip. He has needs too, you know.”

“And one of these needs is food and clothing, none of which I can pay for if I don’t work. I’m prepared to do what I have to here, Charlotte, but not on six hours notice.”

“Well, when can you see the lawyer?”

“If he has evening hours, I’ll do it tonight. I have to be on campus anyway today so I can get the papers back from my friend in legal aid. If he doesn’t have evening hours, book us a spot any time later this week. Just give me as much notice as you can so I can book off the time.”

“Book off the time? You work from home, Helena...”

“Yes. And?” It was eight in the morning, and I had not had my coffee yet. Now was not the time to explain the realities of my profession to my aunt.

“Well...okay,” she finally stammered. “What time will you be bringing him by?”

“As soon as we’re ready. Should I call before we leave?”

She told me that wasn’t necessary. I hung up the phone to find my brother already dressed and ready to go.

★★

I dropped Kip at Aunt Charlotte’s. My inclination was to rush

back to campus and start there, but it occurred to me as I was heading for the bus stop that I had just come from that area. Campus was close to where I personally lived, but an annoying bus ride from where Aunt Charlotte did. I realized I would not always be making such a commute: once we got the situation with Kip's school straightened out, I could drop him off there in the morning myself and still be able to spend my day downtown. But for now, I had to make do, and since I was already in the township, it occurred to me that there might be work I could get done in this part of town.

I wanted a copy of my father's book, and I wasn't sure I was ready to brave the campus bookstore for it. Too many people there might recognize me, and if Melissa Saatchini was any indication, they would all feel very, very sad for me. It was too early in the morning for that. That meant I had exactly two other options for finding a copy: the Daltry's Bookstore Café downtown or the one up here, at the mall.

Daltry's was one of those mid-size regional chains, and they had been among the first to embrace the whole 'bookstore/café' idea. The branch downtown catered more to the student population by emphasizing the 'café' part. They hosted readings and open mike nights and they had outlets all over the place for students to plug in their laptop computers and veg. The township branch was a little more

upscale, definitely more into the 'books' than the 'café.' They were the more likely choice to stock my father's book and they were a mere six-minute walk from Aunt Charlotte's.

When I got to the mall, I still had an hour to kill before the stores opened, so I found myself a pay phone, then pulled out the contact list that Alex had made me. I cringed inwardly at the thought of piggy-backing on his work, but a start was a start, wasn't it? And there was no point in duplicating work that was already done...

I got a hit with my first call: Kerry Irwin at the Gazette was at his desk and answered the phone personally.

"Kerry Irwin, Gazette, good morning..."

I picked a cheery tone. "Mr. Irwin, hi, this is Helena Snowden from the Review?"

"Sure, okay."

"I got your number from Alex Calvin, and..."

"Alex! Love that kid. Hair to die for."

"Yeah. Anyway, he and I are working on a story together, and we were talking about a piece you wrote..."

I explained that I was interested in speaking with him about the story he had done on the death of Mission College professor Douglas Snowden.

“Not the kind of thing Alex usually goes for,” he mused.

“Oh, he’s not...”

He started sounding suspicious. “I thought you said you were working on a story with him?”

“I am, just not...not this story. Look, I’m just trying to follow up on some loose ends here. On behalf of the family.”

“Ah. Well, okay, let’s see, I’ve got some time around noon-ish—want to meet for lunch?”

“That would be great.”

“Where are you?”

“Right now, waiting for the mall to open. I have some research to do at Daltry’s...”

“Why don’t I meet you there, then? We can grab a bite in the café...”

That sounded perfect. I could hitch a ride back downtown with him when we were done.



Daltry's opened at ten, and I was one of the first customers there. This pleased me. I wanted to take my time, to really sit down with the book. I had a rare opportunity here to glimpse into the psyche of my dead father. I did not want an audience.

I found the book in the drama section. There were six copies, stacked cover facing forward and bearing the stickers 'local author' and 'autographed copy.' I felt my throat stick. His pen had touched this paper. His hand had touched this book...

I heard a voice behind me. "Can I help you?"

The clerk, young, blonde and pony-tailed, cannot have known what she was walking in on. My face felt watery. The book was resting on my palm, practically floating there.

"He was here?" I asked.

Her gaze flitted between my flushed, tense face and the book until she finally saw the sticker. "Oh, you mean the autographed copies? No, he wasn't here, he sent them from his office. We had a whole box of them. Guess those are the last few."

"I'm going to buy one."

“Okay...um, great. Have fun with that...”

She stepped away, moving carefully around me. I had freaked her out. Great. The last thing I wanted was a passel of nervous clerks hovering over the crazy lady because it was still early and they had nothing better to do.

I tried to find myself a quiet corner, then I sat, laid the book flat on my lap and opened it. There was the title page, my father's name in round script underneath the title. And on the next page, the dedication:

FOR HELENA AND CHRISTOPHER

Doubt thou the stars are fire;

Doubt that the sun doth move;

Doubt truth to be a liar;

But never doubt I love.

I felt the first prickle of tears; I scrunched shut my eyes and willed them back. He was reaching out to me. Even after I left him, even after I shunned him. And even in death. It was here, in print, on record. He was pleading for my love.

I slammed the book shut and tried to slow my breathing

down. Bookstores made me nervous. I had always associated literature—and all the passion, the fancy, the whimsy that went with it—with my father. And in spite of my anger, my issues, my loyalty and bravado, it had hurt me to leave him. Teresa always suspected that was why I had gone into journalism: that I had learned to love words and could not bear to leave them behind completely, so I had masked them in a safer clinical form. It had been seven years. I thought I was over it now.

I cracked the book open again and flipped to a random passage. We were still in the introduction here.

‘It’s an oddity of Shakespeare’s work,’ he wrote. ‘That parents so seldom appear in the plays together. Egeus petitions the court about his daughter’s marriage in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. But what of young Hermia’s mother? She is nowhere to be found. Shylock, *The Merchant of Venice*, has a daughter too, but no wife. Hamlet has a mother but no father, and the twins in *Twelfth Night* are orphans with no parents at all. About the only children in Shakespeare’s canon who do have two parents each are Romeo and Juliet and we all know how that one turned out!

Dead. It turned out that they all wound up dead. Did all roads keep leading back to this one? I tried to remind myself that the plays, tragedy and all, had been written

seven centuries ago. That they were works of literature and not some sort of fortune-telling oracle. Lots of people died, and Shakespeare had nothing to do with it...

My hand clenched around the edge of the pages, and I heard a far-away murmur. "Miss?"

The clerk, come to save her book from me. My grip tightened and I slumped backward, my chest contracting in concert with my fingers.

"Miss? Are you..."

It was coming too fast, a rush of thoughts, a rush of pain. I couldn't breathe, it hurt too much. And yet my breath seemed to be coming faster. My eyes blinked rapidly, trying to follow the dots...

Everything went quiet, then I felt a hand on my shoulder gently propping me up.

"Thank you," a male voice said. "I've got her from here..."

"Sir, the book..."

"My treat," the stranger said. "Two of them, please, she'll want one for later that isn't so mangled. Is that water? Thank you...Cassie, is it? Thank you, Cassie. Helena, can you hear me?"

I struggled for a second, then went limp. Too hot, too tired

...

"Here, drink this...there you go. Poor thing. Is that...yes, Cassie, just leave that there, thank you. I'll have her out of your way in a minute, as soon as she's awake enough to..."

"I'm awake," I managed, propping myself up against what appeared to be the back of one of those free-standing display cubes. My head hurt. There was a balding, squishy man in an argyle cardigan peering down at me. "Was I ever...not awake?"

"You blacked out," he said. "Just for a second. Panic attack, I think. Damn near scared this nice clerk here to death. I'm Kerry Irwin, by the way."

I gingerly felt out a giant bump on the side of my head. "I was supposed to meet you."

"Uh huh. I was giving the piece you had called about a second read when your name finally clicked for me. You're his daughter, aren't you?"

"Yes. So you just..."

"I came early. And a good thing too, I might add. This fine

young employee was about to call in the cavalry.”

“My head hurts.”

“Yup. You beaned it on a shelf when you blacked out. Looks bruised, but you’ll live.”

“So you’re a doctor too?”

“Heck no, a journalist through and through. But I spent some time in the Middle East with a U.N. team some years back. Picked up some field skills.”

“Well, thanks, I guess. Can we...”

“Right, of course. You still up for meeting? If your choice of reading material is any indication, you have some questions about your dad, am I right?”

I must have looked panicked again, because he flashed me a gentle smile then wordlessly helped me to my feet.

“Let’s go someplace more comfortable,” he said. “My treat.”

★★

His car was a brownish sedan with a little plastic Elvis hanging off the rear-view mirror.

“You like it?” he grinned, noticing my stare. “I like Kitsch. It

relaxes me.”

The little Elvis bobbed in the air as we drove. It was making me nauseous.

“Do you like the music though?” I asked.

“Well, he was a clever lyricist, I’ll give him that. And he has a style that was very distinctive. You don’t get that much now.”

“Uh huh. So, where are we going?”

His tone grew serious. “Back to the newsroom, kiddo. Number one because I’ve got my files there and number two because I need to keep an eye on you for the next three hours or so to make sure you really don’t have a concussion. So if you feel like you’re going to pass out again, please whimper loudly enough that I’ll hear you.”

“Gee. Thanks.”

“Aww, come on. Look, if you’re good, I’ll let you play with my Lexis Nexis database...”

Great, he had been talking to Alex Calvin. That’s what I got for dropping names.

“So do you want to tell me what happened in there?”

I shrugged. "Bookstores creep me out a little."

"A little? Helena, you had a full-on panic attack."

"I appreciate the concern. But to be perfectly honest, I'm really not in the mood to go into all my psychological baggage with a total stranger..."

"Tough."

"Excuse me?"

"I said tough. Whatever it is, you need to deal with it. Especially if you really are going to write a story about this. You know how they always tell doctors that it's a bad idea to work on their own family? It can be an even worse idea for reporters."

"Well, I'm not 'working' on it so much as...putting his affairs in order."

"Ah, I see it now."

"What?"

"Why journalism must appeal to you so much. Because you can use your pretty words to put a spin on things..."

"I'm not putting a spin! I don't want to sanitize here, I want



to find out what's really going on!"

"Of course you do. But will you be ready if you find out it was horrible?"

"Was it?"

"It might be. Truth be told, I didn't go too deep on this myself. It seemed like a fairly open and shut scenario at the time."

"And now?"

"It still seems open and shut...but then again, I never did have time for proper grunt work. But I have a cohort now to funnel that to, don't I?"

He reached into the backseat and his hand emerged a moment later with a large envelope.

"Well, kiddo? You in or out?"

I took it from him. "I'm in."Chapter 10

Kerry settled me in the break room with the file, and an orange juice from the office vending machine.

"Helena, I need a few minutes to return some calls. Will you be okay for a bit?"

It would give me a chance to look over the file before he came back to chat with me. I waved him away and started looking through his stash.

Apparently, the police reports had been updated since his little story had first gone to print. The autopsy detailed much that was irrelevant: his last meal (Cheetos and a can of soda) and a description of the clothes he had been found in, for example. But it contained a lot of medical information that surprised me. Although a great deal of alcohol and a stash of marijuana had been found in his apartment, the tox screen showed no signs of them in his system. They were unclear on just what had caused him to be sick, and to aspirate. But that was surely how he had died. He had signs of mild disease in his liver that were consistent with what the neighbours had said about his drinking, and he had scar tissue on his lungs—damage from the months-ago fire, perhaps?

I had assumed until now that he hadn't been home for that. I was picturing him coming back from somewhere with Kip and finding it over and done with somehow, the firefighters mopping up the last of the water already and thank god nobody was hurt. But what if it hadn't been that way? What if he was home, and he felt it happen, and he tried to save his books and his art before escaping? Or what if he tried to save his son? Should I be taking Kip to the doctor for a lung x-ray just to make sure he would not stop breathing on

me the way he had stopped talking? It worried me, to think that Kip might have survived more than just my father's death here. I still was not sure his odd behaviour was solely due to some kind of post-traumatic shock. I suspected there was something deeper going on here. But now, to have two traumas to choose from...

I needed to go further back here. When Kerry returned, the first thing I asked him was whether he had more about the fire.

"Good angle," he said, nodding approvingly.

"It's not an angle, it's an event. And it's one that might be a factor here."

"You're right. I'm sorry."

"It's fine. You said yourself we have to treat this like just another story. So we look at the facts. What have you got?"

"On the fire? Probably just an archive on whatever we printed about it. Might have just been a blurb in the round-up for something like this."

"He might've been home for it."

"That might have merited more ink."

“Great. You start with that, than. The fire.”

“Okay. And you?”

“I have some people at the university to talk to.”

“Not today, you don’t.”

“But...”

“But? Nice try. You passed out in the middle of a bookstore and took a hard bang to the head. If you think I’m going to let you go off gallivanting...”

“It wasn’t the middle.”

“What’s that?”

“I said it wasn’t the middle of the bookstore. It was actually more of a secluded corner.”

“Fine. You passed out in the middle of a secluded corner.”

I was beginning to see why this guy and Alex Calvin were friends.

“Look, you should stay with someone tonight.” he said.

“No.”

“I could drop you off somewhere...”

“The only place I need to go is to my aunt’s, to get my little brother.”

“So maybe you could stay with her?”

That was out of the question.

“Or maybe you have someone else who can come check in on you?”

Well, I supposed I could ask Teresa. But I was still mad at her about yesterday. I was on my own now, damn it. Isn’t that what she had pretty much said?

“No,” I told Kerry.

He shrugged. “Suit yourself. But a word of advice from someone whose done it before? You need to learn to rely on people, Helena. Now that you have a kid...well, it takes a village and all that...”

“I’m fine. Kip’s fine.”

His brow arched. “Really?”

“Yes, really. Why? What do you know?”

He sat back with a smug little grin. “I don’t remember saying

I knew anything. Why? What do you know?"

Crap, he had bluffed me. He had tricked me with his journalistic wiles. When I calmed down and stopped wanting to smack him, I would have to get him to teach me that trick.

\*\*

Kerry dropped me off at Aunt Charlotte's just after three. She gave a little shriek when she saw my head.

"Helena! Good lord, what on earth..."

"I fell," I said.

"But that's..." She pointed to the hall mirror, and I had my first look at the injury. A long moon-shaped line of bruising snaked the hairline on the right side of my face, from just above the nose to just past my eyeline. I looked like one of those Star Trek aliens with the row of spotted make-up. I was glad I hadn't called Teresa. She would freak.

On the plus, there was no blood among the evidence of trauma. If I had not hit it hard enough to bleed, I probably did not have a concussion...

I let Charlotte ply me with Tylenol, then I collected Kip. As we headed down the driveway, I saw that Kerry had waited

for me.

"I'm on my way back to the newsroom," he called through the open window. "You guys want a ride?"

My head was still throbbing. I didn't argue.

\*\*

The ride home did not find my mood improving. I was learning that most adults found small children fascinating, and Kerry was no exception. Throughout the short drive downtown, he kept up a constant stream of chatter peppered with 'sport' and 'kiddo' and such. Then as we approached my apartment, I saw with a sinking heart that Alex Calvin was waiting there.

Kerry was positively gleeful and greeted Alex like a long-lost brother. I watched their back-slapping with weary resignation.

"Is that a secret handshake? Please tell me you guys didn't just secret handshake..."

"Kerry was the first editor I ever worked for," Alex explained. "He taught me everything I know. Shit, Helena. What happened to your face?"

"I banged it on a bookcase. And you are here because..."

He looked a little hurt. “We’re working on a story.”

“Oh?” said Kerry. “So are we!”

There was more back-slapping. Great. Two stories, two Alex Calvins. Just what I needed. I snuck past them while they were distracted with their manly bonding, and slipped inside with Kip. My head was killing me. I had to lie down.

★★

I awoke to the beep of the microwave. It was dark outside, and I smelled coffee. Only one person I knew did that.

“Teresa?”

She was watching me suddenly from the kitchen doorway. “I didn’t just come over, your friend Alex called. He ordered delivery.”

“Ah. Is he...”

“Not here.”

“And Kip?”

“I fed him dinner awhile ago. He’s playing in his little room now. You did a good job with that, by the way.”



“Thanks. Are you...”

“You missed breakfast,” she said. “Two mornings in a row.”

“I’ve been busy.”

She finally approached the bed, sat down beside me and gingerly traced the bruise. “I see that.”

It suddenly all came out: the grief, the guilt, the confusion. I didn’t have to say anything. I wept quietly, and she just held me until I was calm again.

“It caught me off-guard too, you know,” she said after a moment.

“It just feels so...so complicated...”

“Oh, Helena. I know it does. Did you really think I wasn’t going through it too?”

“Teresa...”

“No, I need to say this, because I think you were mad at me. Helena, I never said...I never said I was perfect. I never said I would always handle things well or handle things right...”

“But I thought...”

"I was hurting," she said. "I was hurting, and you pushed me away..."

I blinked back tears. "I thought I was alone. You told me I was alone."

"No, sweetheart. I was alone."

She stepped past me, walking pointedly past Kip's closed door on her way back to the kitchen.

"You go eat," she said. "I need some air."Chapter 11

I worked mechanically through my dinner, badly shaken. Teresa had been right, I was not alone. I had Kip, if no one else, and I understood as perfectly as another human being could what he was going through. But could I say the same about Teresa? I had been so caught up in being defensive about what I needed from her that I completely forgot to consider what she might need from me. That had to change now.

I started by grabbing a blanket and an extra mug of coffee on my way out to the fire escape. Teresa was very tactile about her feelings. It came from her background as a dancer. She would deal with her stress by moving, by breathing, by aligning herself just so. By matching her body to her mood. It would make perfect sense to her to treat despair or grief or sadness with the miserable bite of chill

coming off the lake.

I sat down on the metal rung beside her and wrapped the blanket around her shoulders. She was shivering so much that it took me two tries to get her wrapped tightly enough that she would not tremble out of it. As she finally eased into composure again, I moved closer.

"Tell me what it's been like for you," I said.

That finally shocked her out of her mood. "What?"

"Tell me," I repeated. "I know what I heard. I know what I saw. But to understand...to really understand..."

She exhaled slowly. "God, Helena. Where do you want me to start?"

"Start with where it started changing."

"Oh, honey, it started changing long before your father came along. There was a boy...I'm not sure I'm ready to go there just yet, even with you. But there was a boy..."

I realized that I had never asked Teresa about her relationships before my father. It seemed suddenly important to know how they had been for her.

"Did he hurt you, Teresa?"

“Not in the way I suspect you mean. But he made me cynical. He made me...he made me hard. He broke my heart in a way I thought it could never be broken. And it changed everything. I moved away, I started working—and kept on working right up until I met your dad. Douglas. He was so old-fashioned. So romantic. I badly needed that. I was starved for it. Something profound. Something complex and wonderful and not dreary. He was such an eloquent speaker. A sensitive poet. It was like living in a dream.”

“So what happened?”

“Same thing that always happens to a dream that goes on too long, it becomes frightening. Surreal. Things happen that don’t always make sense to you. Things move, things shift, things change and you can’t find your anchor. You just want to wake up...”

I had felt it too. You would have a conversation with him, and he wasn’t really there sometimes.

“And after awhile...well, after awhile the poetry just stopped being enough, you know? I wanted something real. And then you started growing up, started talking about the future, and I could see it so clearly. You were going to go off into the world, and you were going to leave me there, in some sort of eternal Elizabethan purgatory full of pretty words and pompous men in powdered wigs...”

“So you told me you were leaving him, and you asked me if I wanted to come with you.”

“And you came, didn’t you? You must have thought I had done the right thing...”

Is that what this was about? She thought that my grief for him was some kind of indictment on her?

“I still think you did the right thing, Teresa, that hasn’t changed. I guess I just thought it would be the right thing for him, too. And now...maybe it hasn’t been. And I wonder if I was selfish to only think of me, of us. If we had been there...”

“If we had been there, we might have made things worse instead of better.”

“Yes. But I have to find out which it was.”

“And if you find out you might have changed things?”

That was a tough question to answer. I wasn’t sure I knew that yet.

\*\*

I let Teresa crash on my couch with one of my BBC America dvds while I finished up my day’s to-do list. I had never

seen her this unhinged—halfway through the first episode of Red Dwarf, she was still huddled in the blanket and noticeably shaky. I had already forgotten our fight. She would come around on Kip, I saw that now. But I also saw that, for all her pretension at strength, she was still badly unsettled. I had already ignored one parent reaching out to me. I would not ignore another.

I knew that Kerry and I had some serious legwork to do. But I also knew that it would be foolish not to start with what I already had. I had to face my father's book.

I slipped out into the hallway where I would have some quiet, and took a moment to enjoy the silence. Blank white walls stared back at me, the antiseptic fluorescent casting no reflection. There was no better place to be free of distractions. I placed the book on my lap, flipped the cover open...then my cellphone rang. With a grateful exhale, I flipped it open.

"Hello?"

"Helena! It's Charlotte."

Crap, I had forgotten about that. "Right. So, lawyer meeting..."

"Yes. Does tomorrow at two work for you? It's Scott Olerud's office, on Primrose just off university..."

I pulled out my day-planner and obediently jotted down directions.

“Perfect,” I said. “I’ll drop Kip off in the morning, and you can just bring him with you and hand him off to me at the meeting.”

“Very well. Did you...did you need me to bring you anything? Provisions? Anything like that?”

“I think Teresa brought over some stuff when she came tonight.”

I could almost see Aunt Charlotte grimace. “Teresa. Right. Well, if you change your mind and decide that you want the boy to eat meals that are not deep-fried and that contain actual vegetables, I am happy to take you shopping...”

There was nothing I could say to that. I thanked her politely, then hung up.

★★

I returned to the book again, deciding that, in light of today’s events, I had best go slowly. I flipped to the table of contents.

The book seemed to be divided into two sections: one

covering bad parents, King Lear being the high point, and one covering good parents with Hamlet the centerpiece. Smaller chapters covered other plays.

I decided to dive right in with Hamlet, figuring I would be better braced by starting with the good play. It was ironic that my father had somehow found a way to turn Hamlet into the happy example...

'Hamlet is not only arguably Shakespeare's most famous play,' the chapter began. 'But it is also his most famous study of parenthood. Teachers and editors frequently offer 'Hamlet avenges his father's death' as pithy summary. But such a distillation ignores the role that Hamlet's father himself plays in the tale. The man has crossed the boundary between life and death to communicate with his son. That is certainly a nobler promise than we see in Hamlet himself, who spends much of the early play moping.

Well, yes. But Hamlet's father is not exactly selfless: he comes with a specific purpose, for Hamlet to avenge his death. It's not about Hamlet, it's about him...

Is that what I was doing here? Reading into my father's text his buried feelings, coming at me now from beyond his death? He loved me. Of this, I now had proof. He was reaching out to me, and my only chance to reach back



would be to resolve his affairs. Unless I was reading the whole thing wrong, of course...

I flipped forward to the section on Lear. This was clearly the book's centerpiece, and opened with an epigraph in elegant, curlicued font:

Who is it that can tell me who I am?

I slammed the book shut. I could endure no further.

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It was nearly ten by the time I finished sorting through my notes so far. I had shamefully neglected my paying work for Daniel and Alex, and tomorrow would be cut short by the lawyer meeting. I had assumed from Kerry that I would share a by-line and get a freelance rate should anything come from my work with him, but it wouldn't hurt to check that at some point, and to see about getting compensation for any expenses. In the meantime, I set my plan for tomorrow thusly: speak to Melissa about getting Daniel's tax story out of the way as soon as possible, and get the deal with Kip straightened away with her before I saw the lawyer. While I was there, I would hit campus to drum up a student group who might have some leads on my PHO story, and finally I would try to track down Yost and/or Malafanto while I was there. I also decided to take Aunt

Charlotte up on her offer of chauffeuring a grocery run, and I would talk to Teresa about tossing in some carrot sticks with the leftovers she brought me from Geschlepp's.

Thus organized, I tiptoed back inside expecting to find both Kip and Teresa fast asleep. The boy, I had not heard a peep from all night and I assumed he had long ago taken care of himself. But Teresa was curled up on my couch in a tiny less-comfortable ball than when I'd left her, staring glassily at a Star Trek re-run. The dvd had run out. Apparently, she had not gotten up to change it.

I went in guns blazing, knowing that gentleness was not the way to snap her out of this.

"This isn't you," I said.

She trained her stunned, vacant eyes on me in wordless answer. Great. Not her too.

"Come on, Teresa. I've never seen you act this way. You want to tell me what's going on? It's okay to grieve for him, you know. To love him for what he meant to you, and when he meant it to you..."

"I know."

"So, what, then?"

“With Kip...I need you to understand, it's not about you. I just can't do it again, not another boy I love, not another man who lives in his head and shuts me out of it...”

Her eyes were tearing, but she clenched her fists and kept her breathing smooth and meditative. If she could get the flow just right, she could hold it all back...

I was sick of it, sick at last of strength, or bravery, of a beautiful woman so knotted up from stress, from work, from me that the local salon charged her double for massages. Damn you, Teresa, it didn't have to be so hard...

“Let it out, Teresa,” I said.

Deep breath in, and hold. Deep breath out...

“Stop. Just stop and get it out of you once and for all, will you?”

She closed her eyes and upped the tempo. Panicking.

I climbed onto the couch and rested my body practically on top of hers, using my hands to pry apart her iron posture.

“Be strong tomorrow,” I said.

She let go on a primal, human level, and I felt her grief palpably. I rode out my usual anxiety at seeing her this way

and I stayed with her this time. Chapter 12

I woke up in my own bed, in the clothes I had been wearing the night before. I smelled coffee, and I heard tiny teeth crunching cereal.

I padded barefoot into the kitchen. A placid Kip was working his way through a bowl of cheerios while Teresa, still a bit pale and delicate, but looking a hundred times better, reheated some pancakes and sausage on the stove.

"Hey," she grinned. "Morning, kiddo."

"You look well for someone who slept on a couch."

"Are you kidding? It's an awesome couch. I used to have one just like it."

I was so relieved I could barely speak of it. The joke was an old chestnut for us—the couch had been a hand-me-down from Teresa, and we teased each other about it every time she spent the night. Her little catharsis last night had been good for her. Teresa was back to normal.

She sat down at the table with a mug of coffee. "So, Helena, what are you guys up to today?"

"I have some errands to run on campus, then a lawyer meeting with Aunt Charlotte about Kip..."

Her cheer deflated a little. “Oh.”

“Why? What is it, Teresa?”

“Just that it’s been awhile since we’ve been climbing, and I still have the keys to Rock My World...”

Rock my World was a local indoor climbing gym. It was run by the son of one of Teresa’s exes, who had a soft spot for her. She still had keys, and an open pass. It made sense to me that she would want to follow up last night with something empowering.

“I’ll talk to Charlotte at the meeting today,” I promised. “See if she’ll take Kip...”

Teresa headed out just after breakfast to check in at Geschlepp’s. The breakfast rush there tended to hit a little later than at most places. The student crowd descended at 10, just after early classes. I walked to the end of the street with her and hopped a bus to the township.

I would be glad when Kip started school again. It was not a terribly long bus ride out to Aunt Charlotte’s, I supposed, but we were heading into the coldest part of winter and it was an annoyance. Mission El was a much shorter commute. Let Aunt Charlotte worry about schlepping into town to get him.

Kip was quiet for the bus ride over, but I was starting to notice more signs of alertness in him. He peered out the window as we plodded up University, and was first out of his seat when we reached our stop. Perhaps I had jumped the gun a little in assuming there was something wrong with him? Perhaps he just had to get used to me?

Aunt Charlotte had a gift for him today: a travel bag with all sorts of little pockets in it. When I left them, he was delightedly opening them up one by one and exploring them.

I was halfway back to the bus stop when I heard a car honk.

“Helena! Helena, Babe...”

Alex Calvin. Great. I approached the window but made no move to get into the car.

“Alex. What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you. Seems to me like you got a little distracted yesterday. Working on a thing with Kerry?”

“Yeah. So?”

“So...I thought I'd tag along today, make sure you get some work done on the story you're doing with me.”

I had three things to do on campus today, and only one of them involved Alex.

“No deal,” I said firmly

He hung his floppy curls out the window and made a puppy dog face. “Aw, come on...”

“Oh, yeah. That’s persuasive.”

Then I remembered that I had forgotten to ask Aunt Charlotte if she would watch Kip so I could go climbing with Teresa. I turned on the sweetness.

“Tell you what,” I told Alex. “I’ll make you a deal.”

“Oh?”

“You can come with me—for awhile, anyway. But you have to baby-sit Kip for me tonight while I go climbing with Teresa.”

“Fine. But I get dinner at Geschlepp’s first.”

I climbed in the car, wondering how I could find an hour’s worth of stuff to do that I didn’t care if Alex saw.

We arrived on campus too late to find a parking spot. Alex used his press pass to get into a faculty lot, then turned to me with a delighted grin.

“Well, hotshot? Where to?”

“MCLA,” I said. “On business for Daniel. You can wait here if you’d like.”

“And miss my chance to see you at work? I don’t think so. The deal was I come with.”

“Fine. Come with, and marvel at the pure talent and skill involved in a feature on tax seminars for the elderly.”

“Daniel still has you doing those? Wow.”

“Yeah.” We were there already. I walked up to reception. “Melissa Saatchini, please.”

They showed us into the boardroom. “Can I get you a drink while you wait?” the receptionist asked.

“No,” I said.

“I would love a drink,” said Alex. “Coffee, please. And one of those little biscotti cookies you guys had last time if those are still around.”



He settled into one of those plush boardroom chairs looking like king of the world.

“Enjoying yourself?”

He shrugged and tipped his feet onto the table. When Melissa came in and saw, she shot me a dirty look. Great. Now the little twit had got me in trouble with my contact.

I pulled her aside while Alex was occupied with his drink and cookies.

“Any word on that thing I talked to you about?” I asked.

“Oh, you mean about your brother. Well, I checked it out and as far as I can tell, as long as both of you agree to it, it’ll be fine. The judge might make a few minor tweaks...I am assuming you have a lawyer involved?”

“Scott Something. On Primrose just off University.”

“He’s a good guy. You’ll be fine.”

“Great. So about the law student...”

She looked momentarily confused by my switching gears, then remembered. “Right, the tax seminar. I thought you wanted one on the day?”

“Change of plans. I’ve got a really full schedule all of a sudden. I’d like to put this one to bed ASAP.”

“I understand,” she said. “I’ll get you one right now. They’re doing prep work in one of the conference rooms as we speak.”

This was excellent news. Once I got this interview done, all I’d have left to do was show up on Saturday, snap a few pictures and nab a few sound bites from people in the crowd.

The law student was named Marco Gries and he was very earnest. I did my thing, then finally turned my attention back to Alex.

“We can go now.”

He grinned through a mouthful of cookie crumbs. “I gathered.”

“You’re really having fun with this, aren’t you?”

“Well, I admit, it’s perhaps not the most thrilling story he’s got you chasing. But that’s the great thing about being a freelancer, you always have your extra-curriculars.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that if the mystery story you’re working on with Kerry isn’t much more interesting than that little fluff...well, I’d have really misread you, wouldn’t I?”

“I’m not telling you what I’m doing with Kerry.”

He grinned again. “Of course you’re not.”

★★

I let Alex tag along with me to the student centre, where I hit up the MPIRG office for some students. PIRG stood for Public Interest Research Group, and every college campus I knew had one. When I had been in school, they were into boycotting soft drink manufacturers and the whole Free Tibet thing. I was happy to see that in the few years since I had left, they had undergone an image make-over. Gone was the granola-crunching Birkenstocks. In its place was a tongue-studded goth who, upon learning our mission, told me I wanted to see “Ash” and directed me to an extremely petite spiky-haired brunette in a very expensive-looking black pantsuit.

“Ashley Meltzner,” she introduced herself. “Excuse the monkey suit, but I just came from a job interview...”

“Oh?” said Alex. “With whom?”

“Olerud, Mayer And Flint. I’m in third year law.”

Alex whistled.

“Hey, I recognize that name,” I suddenly realized. “Scott Olerud is handling the...well, some business of mine. I’m seeing him this afternoon.”

“Seemed like a good guy,” the kid said. “Anyway, what can I do for you two?”

Alex let me take the lead, and I gave her a brief recap of the situation with the PHO: how Weir-Fiorio had been ousted, how this new guy Kincaid was slated to take his place, and how he planned to tax the city’s independent operators to fund a new regime.

There was silence for a moment when I finished speaking.

“Well,” said Ash. “Did you come here just to get a soundbite, or do you actually want to help these people?”

I traded glances with Alex. “Can we do that?”

“Well, you won’t get your story,” Ash said. “Or at least, you won’t get this story. But you’ll do some good, and isn’t that more important?”

“Yes,” said Alex firmly. I wasn’t sure if he believed that or if this was one more attempt to flirt with me by leveraging my

concern for Teresa. But I was all ears as Ash explained her plan to us.

“They need a union,” she said. “If the objection is simply that free agents are unregulated, the simplest way to counter it would be to regulate them. Start a union. Then they won’t be lone wolves anymore, will they?”

In my excitement, I allowed Alex Calvin to clasp my hand. “Can you help us?”

She nodded. “Indeed, I can.”Chapter 13

At around noon, on the pretext of ‘lunch,’ I ditched Alex and headed at last over to Gatlin Hall, home of the Mission College English Department. I decided to start with Dr. Malafanto. I already had his office number written down from my earlier sleuthing, and when I passed by that hallway, his door looked open.

Heathcliff Malafanto was bigger than I thought he would be—both taller than his picture, and fatter. And shiny, very shiny from his sweaty blubbery skin to the bald spot amidst his comical curlicues of hair. When I knocked on his door, he was skimming through a sheaf of journal clippings, highlighter in hand.

“Well, who is this?” He stood, then walked around me in a circle, staring. Finally, he stood aside and let me in.

“You’re Helena.”

“Yes.”

He sat back down at his desk, picked up his highlighter again.

“I was hoping I could talk to you,” I said.

He nodded without looking up. “I gathered.”

“So...”

He sighed and pushed back his work. “So you have come to settle his affairs, is that it?”

“I would like to know a little more about the affairs before I settle them, Sir.”

He picked up his pen again and started fiddling with it. “You broke his heart, you know. You and the vixen.”

I bit back a rude remark about his slight on Teresa, then said “He broke mine too. Then and now. There are two sides, Professor.”

“That is indeed true. Very well, my dear. I shall begin with you as I might with the driver who causes a horrible accident and wakes up later from her alcoholic haze

unaware of the damage she has wrought. What is the last thing you remember?"

"I remember sitting down with him to tell him I was going with Teresa. It was the start of summer session. His favourite time of year."

"Ah yes. What revels are in hand? Is there no play to ease the anguish of a torturing hour? He always did *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in summer term."

"I think he knew the whole play by heart. He was trying to update his lecture notes that afternoon, but he kept getting distracted by his favourite bits."

I winced, the memory coming back to me. "Teresa had told him that morning that she was leaving him, and I think he had thrown himself into work as some sort of therapy. He kept quoting Oberon's lines to Titania. Why should Titania cross her Oberon? Pining away for his fairy queen...and as my own words slowly started sinking in, he tried to use the play to woo me back. Stay, gentle Helena, hear my excuse. My love, my life, my soul fair Helena. He didn't seem to understand that this was exactly what I was running away from."

I blinked back tears. "I was trying to tell him about the most important decision I would ever make in my life, and it was

all being filtered through this elaborate fantasy haze...we were just lines to him. Characters. It didn't help that this was the play that actually had my name in it. The more impassioned he got, the more out of touch he seemed to be..."

"And the more right your decision seemed to be?"

I nodded bleakly.

"When did you and Teresa leave?"

"He was busy with a conference that weekend. We were gone by Sunday. Teresa did try to keep in touch at first—she heard he sold the house and moved over to Belmont, built himself a home office and moved all his books from school back there. He came to visit Teresa at Geschlepp's one time. It was uncomfortable. She didn't talk to him again. I heard infrequently from my Aunt Charlotte after that, but otherwise, I don't know much."

"So you don't know about Catherine."

"Kip's mother?"

"Yes. A delicate, dainty young thing. Met her through my wife, actually. Effie was an artist. She taught adult education classes at the high school, and it was there she came upon Catherine. Catherine was bright. Educated. A



sensual ray of sunshine. Showed some promise as a painter...”

The artist meets the poet. This didn't sound good...

“Doug had been unhappy ever since you and Teresa left. He didn't talk about it much. Didn't talk about it at all, actually. But we all noticed he was working harder, longer. Took the books home, as you said, so he could work even longer and harder than that. Then he got drunk one time—at a faculty Christmas party. It was really quite embarrassing. Started quoting scads of Lear. A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Effie and I were talking about it afterward and we concluded that it was simply a matter of getting him some outside interests.”

“Such as Catherine, the ray of sunshine?”

“Yes. And it worked—for awhile, anyway.”

“Until Kip?”

“That's the official story. But Catherine had problems even before Kip came along.”

“Was my father still married to her when he died?”

“No, I don't believe so.”

“Did he visit her? Did Kip?”

“No, and no. I am not sure how much the boy knows. But I was your father’s department head and I knew of his comings and goings. I don’t think he went to her.”

“And you? Your wife?”

“No, and no—on my account, because I am much too busy and don’t really care, and on my wife’s account because she is deceased.”

There was an awkward pause. “I’m sorry to hear that,” I said.

“As was I, at the time. Will that be all, then? I have papers to grade.”

I sensed there was something he wasn’t telling me. But a dead wife was not the point to pry on.

★★

I went to the food court to make notes about the meeting. I wasn’t sure I had learned that much, but I wasn’t sure I had learned not that much either. Obviously, Heathcliff Malafanto and my father had been closer friends than I thought. Close enough, anyway, that he had been mad at me for what I’d done. Part of me wanted to go back and

question him again, ask him who else my father knew. But I suspected that, as long as he saw me as Helena the delinquent daughter, he would never really open up to me.

On the other hand, I suddenly remembered that I did have an associate now. If I got together some background of Malafanto and gave Kerry's suitable briefing, I could send him after the professor for me.

I realized that I probably should have done the background work before I'd gone to meet him. I journalist never goes into an interview unprepared—at least not a good journalist, anyway. So either I was a total hack, or Kerry was right and I still was not treating this like a proper story. I had gone to see Malafanto as a daughter, not as a reporter. If I wanted to crack this, I would have to toughen up.

As I was scribbling notes, I heard Alex slide into the seat across from me.

"Hey," he said. "Enjoy your lunch?"

I briefly looked up. "Yeah. Sure."

"So...where to now?"

I checked my watch. "I have to meet Aunt Charlotte at two."

“Great, I’ll drive you. And we can talk about our plans.”

“Plans? You’re watching the kid for me. That’s not really...”

“Well, yes. But I get dinner first.”

Crap, I had forgotten about that. I had no idea how long I would be at the lawyer’s with Aunt Charlotte, and I suspected Teresa would not leave Geschlepp’s until the dinner rush was done.

“Seven,” I told Alex. “You can meet me at Geschlepp’s at seven.”

“Isn’t that a little late if we’re going climbing?”

“You’re not climbing, you’re watching Kip.”

“Well, you didn’t say where I had to watch him. Rock My World does have a kiddie play wall—unless you’d rather I hang out in your apartment with him?”

Damn him, the little troll did know how to play me. No way I wanted him alone...well with Kip, so essentially alone...in my home...

“Seven,” I insisted. “Teresa hates climbing during the busy times.”

He readily agreed. If I hadn't had so much else going through my mind just then, it might have worried me that he had caved so quickly.

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Alex dropped me off in front of Scott Olerud's office at just before two. Aunt Charlotte and Kip were already ensconced in the waiting area. I sat down beside them.

"Hey. You guys have a good day?"

"Yes," Charlotte said. "He had a hot dog and celery sticks for lunch."

I was coming to realize that food reports would be a mandatory part of the Kip hand-over. I nodded in feigned interest, then turned to Kip.

"We're going climbing tonight," I told him.

He looked vaguely interested, and Aunt Charlotte looked up from her knitting. "Oh? With whom?"

"Me with Teresa. Kip with Alex Calvin." To Kip, I said "They have a kids wall there. You'll like it."

Aunt Charlotte looked like she was torn between commenting disapprovingly on either the safety of the

activity or my choice of companion, or commenting approvingly on the idea of me getting comfortable doing things with Kip. Fortunately, we were bailed out by the arrival of an assistant who showed us in to Scott Olerud's office.

It was a comfortingly old-fashioned space: lots of high, full shelves and dark wood and framed photographs of various local celebrities. I thought I caught a glimpse of Mary Weir-Fiorio in one of them...

Scott Olerud, on the other hand, was not quite so stuffy as his office would suggest. He was dressed neatly but casually in a button-down shirt and blue Dockers, and he had plain dark hair slicked down with something. He had the relaxed musculature of one who is fit from sport and not from gym.

He put some folders down on the deep, heavy desk, then smiled.

"Charlotte, Christopher, good to see you again."

"Scott," Charlotte said.

"And this must be Helena..."

I made appropriate greetings.

"Well, we have some work to do," Scott said. "Minor tweaks, really. Now, the first thing is the hours. Charlotte, they're going to want a number here. How many hours will you take the boy each week?"

"Well, he'll be in school."

"Which ends as about three," I said. "I work full-time hours."

"So, let's make it 5 pm, and assume travel time to go and claim him...that rounds it up to 6 pm...so three hours a day, you'll take him for?"

"Fine," Charlotte said.

"Does that include weekends?" I asked. "Like, babysitting, if I want..."

"It's a fair question, Charlotte," Scott said.

"Very well. She can have one Saturday or Sunday each week. I'm a reasonable woman, Helena," she said to me. "These are just minimums, is that right, Scott?"

"Yes."

"So if you do have something special from time to time, I am flexible to a certain extent. That's fair, isn't it, Scott?"

“Of course, my dear. Now, on the subject of money...”

“We agreed on the division of his estate, such as it is,” Charlotte said.

“Yes...but there is still the matter of division of expenses. If you get to share in the decisions, Charlotte, they’ll want you to share in the costs too. So I need to mark down some kind of percentage here. On matters such as healthcare, education and general well-being, how much are you willing to contribute?”

“Well, Helena does have the royalties from the book, whereas I...”

“I need a number, Charlotte.”

“Thirty per cent,” she said.

“Fine. Now, we do need to appear before a judge to ratify this. If you could both book off a week Monday...”

“That soon?” I marveled.

“I put in for a court date as soon as I learned of his death,” Scott explained.

“And in the meantime?” Aunt Charlotte asked.



“In the meantime, I’ve got Helena an interim custody order that gives her standing to act with the boy’s school and handle anything that might come up before the court date. If the two of you both agree to this arrangement—which it seems you do—the court date is just a formality to rubber stamp the whole thing. My advice to you would be to proceed from here as if it was already done.”

“What about Kip’s mother?” I said.

Charlotte shot me a dirty look.

“What about her?” Scott said.

“Did my father...do we...have any obligations toward her?”

“He paid a pittance in alimony which went toward her medical care. That obligation ended with his death.”

“But...”

“She has her own resources, Helena. She is well provided for.”

That seemed to be that. Neither Charlotte nor Scott seemed inclined to continue on the topic, least of all not with Kip right there. I obediently let it go—for now, anyway.

Chapter 14

I still had a few hours before we were meeting Alex, so I took Kip home and fired up the computer. My impromptu and woefully under-planned meeting with Heathcliff Malafanto had produced the beginnings of answers, but it had produced quite a few questions too. I wanted more before I handed the professor off to Kerry.

The university homepage was a good place to start. I typed his name in the search box and came up with several hits: a faculty web page and several news-type things from the alumni magazine. I started with the faculty web page. Amidst the usual tabulation of degrees held, articles published and assorted professional accomplishments was a class schedule. Dr. Malafanto was currently teaching a freshman literature course, an upper-year seminar on Victorian poetry, and two of what appeared to be my father's Shakespeare classes. Interesting. As department head, he would of course be responsible for re-assigning those to other instructors after father's death. But he could have assigned them to anyone—why keep them for himself? This was a very full course load for any professor, never mind one who was also a department head.

I skipped back to the search results and clicked on the next link. It was a page of photographs from various department mixers. I scanned briefly for any pictures of my father and to my surprise, did not find any. Was my father just an antisocial who hated these things? I could see how that

might be. But on the other hand, there were clues I was starting to pick up that my father was not entirely okay. Had the party mishap Malafanto had mentioned prompted lasting consequences? Had his position at the college been less secure than I thought?

I skimmed again for any pictures of Malafanto himself. He was present in nearly all of them. I wondered if he enjoyed these mixers or was merely there out of duty. He certainly didn't look very comfortable—except in one picture, where the smiling department head had his arm around a woman I recognized from Alex's clippings as Michaela Yost. I jumped back to the search page and typed her name into the little box. Not as many hits this time: just the photo page I had already accessed, and her faculty page, which I clicked on.

I saw at once why I had so much trouble finding her when I had been on campus: I had been looking for her in the wrong department. Michaela Yost was not, as I had assumed, an English professor too. Rather, she was a member in good standing of the department of sociology. Among her many credentials were a PhD in social work and an MD with credentials in psychiatry. She was a part-time instructor, the same as my father had been, and a glance at her other affiliations indicated why: in addition to her teaching post, Dr. Yost had staff privileges in the psychiatry department at the local hospital and had office hours at a local clinic. She was also on the board of directors for both

a women's shelter, and a psychiatric hospital. Busy lady. In addition, the good doctor had published 34 peer-reviewed journal articles in the last five years. Wow again. I wondered how she had hooked up with my father. There was certainly no shortage of pathology in his life: nearly every significant person in this growing drama was seriously disturbed. My father had lost three wives and one child, then lost his home in a sudden, brutal and terrifying fashion. The child he had held on to most likely had his own problems. Had my father become involved with Dr. Yost over Kip? Or over Kip's tragic, disturbed young mother?

I immediately bumped the good doctor up on my list of people to see. According to the schedule on her faculty page, she would be at the clinic tomorrow. It was on Lower Elmore, at the edge of downtown and heading toward the lake. In other words, near the police station—I could hit up the detective Kerry had quoted in his article while I was down that way, then swing by downtown on my way back home and ask Scott Olerud about Weir-Fiorio. I should not forget which story was paying my bills here.

I called the clinic and inquired about seeing Dr. Yost. It was a walk-in type of place used mostly by homeless people who were out of anti-psychotic medication. They also took the occasional referral from the hospital or the police.

"I have an orphaned brother," I told the gatekeeper.

"Oh? And is he having a psychotic breakdown? Or possibly a post-traumatic stress reaction?"

Actually, he probably was. My impulse lie had hit a little too close to the truth there.

"Yes," I heartily assured her.

"Poor thing. Well, did you want to bring him in, then?"

"Actually, I want to get a feel for what the options are first. I was hoping I could have a consultation of some kind? Talk to a doctor about what the options might be?"

"Well, okay. But it's strictly walk-in here, so I can't promise that Dr. Yost will be free."

"What time do you open?" I asked. "I'm prepared to come first thing..."

"We open at six. The homeless people aren't exactly on our schedule..."

That was a little early, even for me. I told the secretary that I would come by as early as I could, and that I was prepared to wait. That done, I called and left a voicemail with Detective Hugh Girardi. Then I put my work away for

the evening. I needed this night out, even if it did mean sitting through dinner with Alex Calvin first. God bless Teresa for realizing that the stress of the last few days had been catching up with all of us.

I made Kip a snack, then showered and chose my outfit carefully. I needed something practical enough to climb in, yet still presentable. Not that I cared about impressing a twit like Alex, of course, but I didn't want him making fun of me either. I settled on black stretchy jeans and a striped tank top. I hated climbing in sleeves.

I made sure that Kip was dressed for a night of tussling, then headed out with him. We were still a little early, but I figured this would give me a chance to get caught up with Teresa. I was therefore alarmed when I walked into Geschlepp's and found Alex already perched on a stool by the counter. He grinned impishly when he saw me approaching.

"I came early," he said. "Figured it would give me a chance to get caught up with the lovely Teresa."

"Shut it," I snapped, lifting Kip up onto one of the stools.

"Aww. Come on, Hel, relax. Don't ruin my night out by being a pill..."

"Your night out? Alex, you're..."

“Yes, yes, I know, indentured labour, blah blah blah. Doesn’t mean I can’t enjoy myself...”

“Fine. Enjoy yourself, but leave my stepmother alone. And speaking of my stepmother, where is Teresa, anyway?”

“In the kitchen, fighting with Jack. He printed the wrong specials insert and now she’s got a pile of hamburger meat and a crowd who all wants cheap grilled cheese.”

I peered over him, toward the doors of the kitchen. “Should I maybe go after her?”

“Little hellcat like that? Better wait until she retracts her claws.”

“Thanks for the tip, hot shot. Kip, you want a drink?”

He pointed to a can of coke in the display case. I briefly hesitated. There was no Teresa to leave him with, but I supposed that if I was to leave him in Alex’s hands all night here, I had better get used to leaving them alone together.

I picked up an extra coke for Alex and another for me just in time for a red-faced muttering Jack to some swooping out of the kitchen to pounce at me.

“Just what do you think you’re doing?” he snapped,

“Hi, Jack.”

“Outta here, you. If the new PHO flunkie saw non-staff mucking around behind the counter...”

Ah. It sounded like Geschlepp’s had been hit by a friendly little visit from the incoming new regime. That certainly explained why a seasoned manager like Jack had made such a stupid mistake with the specials—he had probably been as thrown by the PHO power trip as Teresa had been by the news of my father. Poor Jack. And to be yelled at by Teresa now...

I dropped off the drinks at the booth Alex had snagged, then, ignoring a new glare from Jack, slipped into the kitchen to calm Teresa down. I found her, to my surprise, not panicked at all. She had her Geschlepp’s t-shirt on over a pair of black yoga pants, and was using the rod of an empty pot rack as leverage for a back stretch.

“Helena! You ready to go?”

I gently eased her away from the kitchen implements before crabby Jack saw her playing with them. “I did hope we could eat first.”

“Well, okay...if you aren’t ready to take me on, that’s...”

“It’s early, Teresa. There’ll still be college kids there.”



Her face zig-zagged almost manically from giddy to disappointed. “Oh.”

“But you’re off already, right? So you can join us for dinner.”

The frown deepened. “Us?”

“Only person I could find to watch Kip was Alex Calvin, and he’s making me feed him first.”

“Oh. Well, you’re all having hamburgers.”

“Great. Fine. Why don’t you come sit with us?”

She practically bounced after me.

★★

Dinner was a quiet, uneventful affair. Kip was predictably silent, and Alex was being a downright gentleman. He complimented my brother on his manners, Teresa on the food and me on my lovely purple tank top. I was just starting to relax a little when Teresa slipped out to use the bathroom, and as soon as she was out of earshot, Alex whistled.

I put down a half-eaten french fry and stared. “What was

that?"

He shrugged. "Your stepmom is hot, Helena."

"What?"

"Not really my type, and no offense, a little old for me, but damn."

"Alex!"

"I'm sorry I won't get to see her climb. Those arms look killer."

They were. And once she got going, you could see the muscles in her legs flexing even underneath her clothes. But this was Teresa we were talking about. If Alex thought he could get away with this...

"Shut up," I told him with all the force I could muster. "And what do you mean she's not your type, anyway? How would you know what kind of type she is?"

"I have been here before, you know. I went to Mission College too..."

I had almost forgotten that Alex had a life outside of annoying me. He was an independent citizen with the run of the town. To think that he could come in here and gawk at

Teresa any time he wanted to..."

"Hey, relax," he said. "Like I said, she's not really my type. But I do know someone she would be perfect for..."

"Really? Who?"

He grinned impishly. "I'll tell you later. If you're nice to me."

"Alex!"

"Hey, I gotta have something to bargain with here, don't I? You're as spunky as she is..."

I wasn't sure if I should take that as a compliment or not. But Teresa was too important to me. I had to make Alex understand...

"Look, she's having a rough time right now. I'm not sure she's ready..."

"Didn't say it had to be right now."

"And she's...god, how can I explain this to you, she's...more sensitive than you might think she is. But yet tougher also. She's had a hard life, Alex."

"All the more reason she deserves a decent, honest man to take care of her."

“And she’s got baggage, I know she does. Some of it even I don’t know about.”

“A woman of mystery. What guy wouldn’t eat that up?”

“And she works long hours, odd hours. Nights, weekends...”

“Mornings off for breakfast in bed, and all the take-out a guy could want, he’ll manage.”

“And she has obligations. To me, and to...well, mostly to me...”

“Awww. And who doesn’t love you? You’re adorable.”

“Alex...” I studied his face, looking for signs he was playing a trick on me. He held the grin steady, looking nothing more than entertained.

“Alex...” I tried again. “Are you...are you actually doing something selfless here?”

Kip tugged my sleeve, holding aloft an empty drink. Duty called.  
Chapter 15

An hour later, we were using Teresa’s key on the employee entrance of Rock My World.

"I don't know why we always sneak in like this," I said. "We have to check in at the desk anyway to get the harnesses. It's not like they won't know we're here."

"Humour me," Teresa said. "This is my night off, and I intend to kick butt with it."

"Funny," Alex said. "Most women use their night off to relax."

She was bouncing on the balls of her feet, trying to get her muscles warmed up. "That's why god invented sleeping. We don't leave here until I feel like I've worked a six-hour shift at Geschlepp's."

It occurred to me to wonder if Teresa was suddenly feeling like it took bone-numbing exhaustion to get herself to sleep. She had been through a terrible shock these last few days...

"You okay?" I said.

She stopped bouncing. "Hmmm?"

"Just...you aren't, you know, having trouble sleeping or anything..."

"Jesus, Helena."

“Sorry.”

“No, just...I suppose it is a legitimate question. And to answer it...well, I won't deny that the last few days have been hard for me. But Helena, if there's one thing I know how to do, it's manage my stress.”

She resumed her impromptu warm-up, making her movements bigger, adding in arms. “Don't worry, kiddo. I'll work through it.”

Garrett Michaelson himself, owner of Teresa's key and son of her ex-boyfriend Howie, was manning the equipment desk when we got there. Teresa had her own shoes, but for insurance reasons Rock My Word required you to use their harnesses. I signed those out while Teresa kibitzed with Garrett.

“Stuck in the trenches today, are you, G?”

“Hey, I've got to keep up with you, don't I? How many nights is it I've come into Geschlepp's and seen you waiting tables?”

“Not tonight, little friend.” She flexed an arm. “Suit me up.”

“Impressive. Working that whole ‘you are strong, you are invincible, you are woman’ thing tonight, are you?”

He unwrapped a knot of harnesses, then pointed to Alex. "One for him too?"

"He's with my brother," I said. "At the kiddie wall."

The kiddie wall was a round cave-like construct with climbing holds on both the inside and outside walls. It was barely two feet high and surrounded on every side by thick foam padding. You did not need a harness there. Garrett counted out the two harnesses.

"Mike's on the floor today," he told us. "He'll watch your first few climbs to make sure you aren't rusty."

"Garrett, you're the best."

"I know, I know. Tell me that again when cute little Jeff Mulvaney is in."

Teresa frowned. "Accountant? Early 30's, drives a green convertible that badly needs a car wash?"

Garrett nodded happily. "A hand washing really is the most thorough, don't you think? I should hold one here. Raise money for charity or something. Jeff is a regular here, so..."

"So he would happen by and see you in a tight muscle tee all drippy with sudsy water as your manly climbing muscles

worked over the cars with a soft cloth?"

"Something like that. Carpe diem, Teresa. You find one you like? You gotta go after them."

"I did that once," she said, tensing up a little. "And I wound up dating your father."

"Well, yeah. But you got me out of that, didn't you? A best friend and a lifetime pass at this fine establishment..."

She gave him a chaste peck on the cheek. "Speaking of which...many thanks, and..."

"Go, have fun, I see customers. Kisses, hon!"

As we walked away from the desk, Alex whispered "I'm glad that worked out. For a second, I was worried he was putting the moves on her."

\*\*

We headed out to the gym floor surveyed the choices. This was a converted factory we were in. The walls were high and full but there were different colour-coded "trails" spaced out on them every couple feet. In the centre of the room was a tube-like tower known as The Pike that climbed straight through the warehouse's second floor of offices until it ended at a juice bar known as "Top of the World"



that could only be accessed by finishing the climb.

Newer gyms had walls that were self-belaying: you could control your own harness. Rock my World was still run the old-fashioned way. One person climbed and the other held the rope and kept it tight. I grabbed the nearest clip.

“Well?” I said. “You want to climb first or belay first?”

“Climb.”

I clipped the carabiner onto her harness then gave her a thumbs up. She put her right foot on the first hold and pushed off.

It was a pink climb—second level, not rank beginner but not yet intermediate either. A perfect warm-up level for someone of Teresa’s experience. She was at a leisurely halfway up before she was in the groove enough to allow herself the distraction of talking to me.

“So? What are you working on these days?” she called down to me.

I hesitated. She was seven feet off the ground, hanging on to the wall by a slip of rope and her bare hands. This did not seem the time to tell her about mucking around the PHO with Alex or mucking around my father’s death with Kerry...

She froze, hands and feet splayed, spiderman-like, against the concrete.

“Helena? You are working on something, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Just...can’t talk about it yet.”

She resumed climbing. “Oh? That’s new. Usually, your stories aren’t really that secret.”

Of course they weren’t, because I was usually a pitiful hack covering childish university politics and student car washes for charity. Even the PHO piece, while potentially interesting, was not a story the way a dead professor was. It had all the news values: there was the fire aspect, and the innocent, traumatized child, and the sensitive and very insane artist wife locked away somewhere...

In fact, watching Teresa grunt and push her way to the top of the climb like some sort of glory-bound amazon goddess, it occurred to me that Teresa was the only wife my father had who had actually broken the pattern. Malafanto had implied that there had been something wrong with Catherine even before my father had married her. My mother too had been not quite right. She had been frail. She had been delicate. A waif straight out of the Elizabethan era, forever swooning in the background and resting with a wet cloth over her eyes. And now I was

learning that Catherine had been fragile too. I did not blame my father for my mother's death, of course. And while I suspected that he probably did not help things as far as Kip's mother went, there had been more to it there. It was looking more and more like he had an unfortunately dangerous type he enjoyed. It was looking like there was something about a woman who was slightly...slightly off ...which attracted him. Perhaps it made him feel less odd about his own rich inner world? Perhaps that's why he hadn't gelled with Teresa—she stayed sane and alive long enough to stop wanting to play into the fantasy?

I made a mental note to look into the idea of other girlfriends my father might have had in the intervening years. Would that be something to probe Malafanto on? Would Scott Olerud know? I would start tomorrow with Michaela Yost. If she was nothing more to him than a colleague, I trusted my instincts to be able to tell.

"Helena?" Teresa shouted at me from the top of the climb. "I'm letting go..."

She leaned back into the harness and gave the wall a gentle tap with her foot. I pulled in the rope as she slowly fell back down to me.

We switched places, and she passed the harness clip to me. I reached for the first handhold.

“Lead with your legs,” Teresa mothered. “There is more power there.”

“Yes, boss.” I flexed my right foot and looked for the next grip.

“To your right, 3 o’clock,” Teresa said. She pulled the rope tighter. “Then lift your left leg...”

I twisted, trying to reach the handhold. I was barely off the ground.

“Left leg,” Teresa said.

I moved my left leg off the wall then fumbled blindly for somewhere to put it. It was always scary to me, that brief moment of faith where you lift your hand away so that your foot can move, but you have nothing to hold on to...

I laboriously worked my way up the wall, my body twisting, but not as easily as it usually did.

“Just rest for a second,” Teresa called up to me. “Find a stable hold and rest, take a deep breath, find your focus...”

I looked down. I looked up. I judged the distances. Then I let my tight, pinched fingers go. “I’m coming down,” I yelled.

“Helena...”

“I’m coming down, Teresa.”

She spread her feet a little, then pushed down on the locking mechanism with her brake hand. She slid the rope through her other fingers and I rappelled myself to safety.

Teresa unclipped me once I had my footing. “What happened up there?”

I shrugged. “I had a lot on my mind.”

“Right, the mystery story you won’t tell me about. We have to have a conversation about that. You know that, right?”

I nodded.

“I think...I think maybe the problem was that wall was too easy for you. A tougher climb, you wouldn’t be able to zone out. You’d have to focus.”

“Teresa...”

She was looking up The Pike, a gleam in her eye.

“Oh, Teresa, no...”

“I’ll have Mike and Garrett belay us. We can both climb together.”

“But...”

“Last one up buys the smoothies.”

She chalked her hands and bounced on the balls of her feet, warming up again. I had taken so long with my pathetic little climb that she had already cooled down.

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Twenty minutes later, I reached the Top of the World red-faced, raw-handed and sweating a lovely spiral stain onto my t-shirt. Teresa, looking fresh and invigorated, was already sipping a smoothie.

“I beat you by almost 8 minutes,”

“Yeah.”

We grabbed a tiny wrought-iron table and I went up to the counter to order my drink. When I rejoined her, she had put her half-empty glass on the table and was doing stretches.

“Had enough?” I teased.

“I beat you by eight minutes, Helena.”

I let it go. I knew what she was doing here.

She rotated her backward and pulled gently with her other

hand. "So tell me about this story you're working on."

"Well, there's two of them. Three, if you count a fluff piece I'm cranking out for Daniel on Saturday."

"Habitat for Humanity?"

"Tax seminars for the elderly. Anyway, once that's done, I have a profile on the new PHO guy in the works..."

She swapped arms, stretching the left one now. "Jack had a visit from him today. Didn't like him much."

"I bet. Want some free publicity? I could get a quote from you or Jack..."

"Sure, sure. Um...Teresa Callaghan, owner of popular downtown hangout 'Geschlepp's' said...what do I say, Helena?"

"Said that...she is confident the new health inspector will enjoy Mission?"

"Right, cause...ummm...we have a large student population so we're always used to new people coming and going. We maintain really high standards so that we can always make a good first impression."

"Great. Fabulous, Teresa. I might come down at some point

to talk to Jack, if that's okay. Off the record if you want. Just trying to get some first impressions off people who have met with the guy."

"You won't be meeting him yourself?"

"Not right away, I got stuck with Alex Calvin on this one. He's got dibs on anything city hall."

"Ah."

"Ah? What does that mean? Was that a gleeful 'ah' or a sympathetic one?"

She picked up her drink again. "You need sympathy?"

"You know perfectly well how I feel about Alex Calvin..."

"Oh, sure. Well enough to leave him with Kip all night."

"It's not 'all night' and we're in the same building!" I had to get her off this tack immediately. "I'm also working on Dad," I blurted.

She nearly dropped her drink. "What?"

"Looking into what happened with him. How he died. Teresa, I don't think it was entirely accidental."

I explained to her about the fire, and what I had learned so



far about his work and about how Kip came to be.

“So that’s what I have so far,” I finished. “What do you think?”

“I think I need another juice,” she said. “Can you...”

I picked up her empty glass and waved it at the bartender. He brought over a pitcher and refilled her drink. When she picked it up again, her hands were shaking.

“Teresa?”

“I’m all right, Helena. That’s...that’s quite a story.”

“Uh huh. Just felt I owed to Kip to find out what really...”

“Hmmm.”

“Do you want me...to not talk about this with you?”

“Oh, sweetie, no. Just...you need to learn that you can’t keep springing these big huge things on me and just expect me to be all oh, that’s nice...”

“I need to find out what happened to him, Teresa.”

“Of course you do. He was your father, Helena. I get that.”

“But?”

“But my relationship with him was a very different thing. Do I still have issues? Yes. And not all of them are strictly his fault either. Do I still have questions? Do I still have regrets? Yes. But this is not the way for me to work through them, Hel.”

She bobbed to her feet again. “You ready to rappel back down?”

I wasn't sure that was my preferred way to deal. But as I had long ago learned thanks to my father, you couldn't make someone do something, say something, feel something or be something that they weren't. How hard it is to hide the sparks of nature! So much for Teresa, then. It was just me and Kerry Irwin now.

★★

On the way home, I asked Kip if he had a nice time with Alex.

“Yes,” he said.

“Yes?” I repeated it back to him, stunned that he had replied in words.

“Yes,” he said again.

I stopped, knelt down beside him. "What was fun about it, Kip?"

He tensed, the moment broken, then shrugged an answer. I didn't even hear him say his little prayer when I tucked him into bed. Chapter 16

I woke up yet again to the shrill of the telephone. It was Aunt Charlotte, calling to check up on me. When was I bringing Kip by? Had I had any chance to make arrangements with the school yet? Had I been shopping yet for all of the things Kip needed?

That last one threw me a little. "What things does he need?" I wondered.

Aunt Charlotte replied in the sour tone of one who is being excessively patient. "He has three outfits and exactly one toy, Helena. You don't think those are rather sparse accoutrements?"

"I hadn't noticed."

"Evidently not. If you could trouble yourself to take a quick inventory before you bring him over, I'm happy to take him shopping today and get him squared up."

It would be so easy to say yes there. To say yes, and have Aunt Charlotte spend the time and more importantly spend

the money. But it had started to sink in that Kip was with me for the long haul now. I had to start getting to know him, getting to know his quirks and interests, his likes and dislikes. I could think of no better way to do that than to turn him loose in a toy store and tell him to pick out whatever he wanted.

"I'll handle it," I told Charlotte.

"I was thinking too about the finances," she said. "I thought perhaps we could open a joint bank account and each of us deposit a set amount into it each month to cover his expenses."

"That sounds like a great idea," I said.

"Can you spare some time today? I'll need you with me to sign the papers..."

"Why don't you meet me down here?" I suggested. "We could go to my bank. I could set it up so they automatically transfer the money each month from my account."

"What time shall I meet you?"

I glanced at the clock. Aunt Charlotte was an earlier riser than I thought. Ten-ish still gave me two hours.

"9:30?" I said. "First thing, before there is a line-up?"

“Splendid.”

“And you can just take Kip back with you when we’re done,” I chirped.

There was a slight pause. “Yes,” Aunt Charlotte said. “I suppose I could.”

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I was pretty pleased with myself for arranging the morning so that I could skip the bus ride to Aunt Charlotte’s. But for the long term, I knew that my best bet for avoiding both a morning and evening commute to the burbs was to get Kip enrolled again in school. I called Mission El, and found myself transferred to guidance counselor named Mr. Hubert who was positively delighted to hear from me.

“We were very concerned after the Tragedy, of course,” he said.

“Um hmm.”

“The teachers took up a collection for the poor little fellow. Bought him a card too.”

“Wow. Thanks.”

“They will be delighted to hear that the boy is getting

settled again.”

“Yeah.”

“So you’ll have guardianship, then?”

“That’s the theory. His aunt will be contributing as well, but I’ll be the main person. We have a court date in about two weeks to rubber-stamp it, but I have interim papers in the meantime.”

His tone turned suddenly brisk. “Bring them with you, along with the requisite identification and an address and phone number for the aunt. Are you free at noon? Christopher’s teacher has her lunch then. I will reschedule my own appointments accordingly...”

This was sounding very complicated. I wondered if this great interest the school seemed to have in Kip was something I should worry about.

“So...you’ll be at the meeting too?” I clarified.

“Oh, yes. Yes, absolutely I will. And the principal and Dr. Goldfine if I can get them.”

“Dr. Goldfine,” I repeated blankly.

“Yes, the psychiatrist on call to the school board. Noon,

then? You can come? We are very anxious to get a plan established for Christopher as soon as possible. I'm sure you'll agree that's the best thing for him."

"Oh, sure. Yes, absolutely. The best thing."

As I hung up the phone, I was already scribbling notes in my day-timer about what I would tell Aunt Charlotte.

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By the time I got to the bank, I had cooled down enough to realize that perhaps the pow-wow about Kip's education should wait until my afternoon pick-up. After all, I didn't know anything yet. I would have the meeting with the people at the school, then talk to Aunt Charlotte once I had the information. It wasn't like anything I knew right now was terribly earth-shattering. The boy was odd. He didn't like talking, but was capable of it when he wished to. He was the product of a mentally psychotic mother, and a hideous chain of traumatic events that included fire and death. Did that somehow make crazy? I wasn't sure it did. But did it leave an impact? Yes, probably. The big question was, had Kip been like this before the fire and before my father's death. I wouldn't know that until I talked to the school and had a look at his permanent record.

Our transaction at the bank went smoothly, with Aunt

Charlotte and I each seeding the joint account with \$500 neither of us could particularly afford without hurting, and agreeing to add \$200 a month each. I could use this money when I took him to the mall, but if I ran out I was on the hook for the balance. The joint account contribution would, barring some catastrophically expensive unforeseen expense, be Aunt Charlotte's sole official contribution to Kip's expenses.

I was already downtown, so it was an easy walk to the clinic where Michaela Yost worked. It was called The Lower Elmore Mental Health Clinic, and the sign indicated drop-in hours as I had been told on the phone. Inside, it looked as sterile and functional as a doctor's office, but a little scruffier. Mismatched bridge chairs comprised the waiting area, the walls were scuffed and a sheet of bulletproof glass enclosed the reception desk. I identified myself to the headsetted girl within and asked to see Dr. Yost.

"She's in group right now," the girl said. "Would you like to see another doctor?"

I explained that I really preferred to see Dr. Yost.

The girl nodded. "You must be a Mission College student. A lot of them, they ask for her cause they've seen her name on campus."



I explained that I was here about my brother, and I thought he might have worked with Dr. Yost already. This was a bit of a lie—I was here about my father. But as I said it, I realized that it probably really was true that Michaela Yost had probably had some dealings with Kip. I wondered if perhaps I ought to ask her about this Dr. Goldfine person I was to meet with later.

“Group gets out in about ten minutes,” the receptionist told me. “You can wait if you want to, make sure she doesn’t get snatched up by someone else when she comes out.”

I said I would do that, then I grabbed the nearest bridge chair and pulled out my day-timer. I flipped to the notes page. Again, I had done no research at all on my prey before approaching her. But that didn’t mean I couldn’t be organized...

QUESTIONS, I wrote.

1. HOW DID YOU MEET MY FATHER?
2. WAS HE YOUR PATIENT?
3. WERE KIP OR HIS MOTHER YOUR PATIENT?
4. DO YOU KNOW WHAT’S WRONG WITH KIP?
5. HOW DID MY FATHER FEEL ABOUT ME?

I squinted at the list. That last one was totally self-serving. It would not help me solve the puzzle here. So why was I

having trouble scratching it out?

“Interesting list,” a voice said.

I spun, looked up and saw her smiling down at me.

Michaela Yost was one of the many women who looks much better than she photographs. Her bad dye job had grown out a little since the picture I had seen, and it framed her face in a competent blow-dry. She had not overdone the hairspray and she had learned to pick a better shade of eyeliner. She was large, but more in a soft middle-aged way than an obese way. Her blue pinstripe pants suit was neither cheap nor high-end.

She held out a hand in greeting. “You must be Helena,” she said.

“Yes.”

“So, let’s talk.”

She showed me into her office, an IKEA of ten years ago hodgepodge of white particle board and ‘funky’ desk accessories. I sat on a bridge chair and looked up at her expectantly.

“I met your father through Dr. Malafanto,” she finally said. “We work together, Dr. Malafanto and I. Or rather, we...we have worked together...”

“Oh? In what capacity?”

Her generous smile faltered a little. “I cannot divulge that to you.”

So did that mean Dr. Malafanto was her patient, than? I realized that she probably wouldn’t tell me even that much, but it might be something for Kerry to leverage when he went for Malafanto himself.

“Was my father your patient?”

“No, he wasn’t. Not directly. He...he was having problems at home. Catherine. You’ve heard that story?”

“Post-partum depression that set off something more?”

“If by something more, you mean homicidal psychosis, yes. Cliffie—Dr Malafanto, I mean—was there when it happened. He was going over some timetabling stuff with your father and Catherine was upstairs with the baby. They didn’t hear a sound. But your father had a feeling...he went upstairs to check on them and found Catherine smothering the baby with a pillow.”

I was speechless. I was not expecting this.

“Thank god for the paramedics. He was deprived of oxygen

for maybe a minute or so...”

I thought of his eerie silence, his scrawny build, his disinterested, mechanical movements. “A minute,” I mused. “Long enough to maybe scramble his brain a little?”

“The thought did cross my mind as I watched him over the years. The baby did seem to bounce back though, so Catherine was more the going concern at the time. It was clear she needed treatment. Doug had no idea where to go for that.”

“So his buddy Cliffie dug up your name?”

“Something like that. I got Catherine a placement, followed up with the doctors there to get your father updates. It became obvious after several months that she was not getting better. That there was something underlying it all which her psychotic break had triggered. She got out on weekend passes a few times, came home. But there were compliance issues with the medication whenever she got away from the doctors. He couldn’t trust her with baby. He couldn’t trust her with herself. So he made a difficult decision.”

“Declared her irretrievable, locked her up and threw away the key?”

“That’s a rather harsh way of putting it.”

“He wasn’t much better, you know. He had his own little haven from reality.”

“But he knew where the line was. He might have chosen to infrequently cross back over to this side of it, but he knew where the line was.”

“That didn’t help me. It didn’t help my stepmother.”

“I know.”

“And I suspect it didn’t help Kip either.”

“Oh, that you don’t have to suspect. That you can know for sure. It was the one sticking point I had with him. I had been telling him for years that the boy needed help and he was in steadfast denial of it.”

I could not resist the opportunity to probe a little. “Have you observed Kip recently?”

“No.”

“No?”

“You have to understand, your father and I, we were not friends. I dealt with him in a professional capacity as far as Catherine was concerned. That ended when their divorce

became final about six months ago. He wrote her off, Helena. Got her to sign away her parental rights to Kip, gave her a stipend to ease his guilt, then wrote her off. And I...I did something unforgivable then. I wrote him off just like he had done to her. He was the irretrievable one. He was ...he was the non-compliant one.”

“Kip?” I guessed.

“This was just after the fire. I had heard the news from Cliffie, and I worried very much about how a person like Doug would deal with this. I was worried for the boy too, frankly. And I saw that tiny hovel of an apartment, and the look of deadened spirit in his eyes...I asked him how Kip was faring. He forbade me to see him. He literally took Kip by the elbows, shoved him into the bathroom and told him not to come out until he said so. I was terrified. This was child abuse, I told him. The boy needed help. He had needed it before, and he needed it even more now that he had undergone the shock of losing his home in such a frightening way. I told him I wanted one session with Kip. Just one. No charge. And he told me Kip was fine but that he appreciated my concern.”

“And that was that?”

“No, that wasn’t that. I reported him. Not to Child Protective Services, I didn’t think Kip would manage that kind of

trauma. But to an associate of mine who works with the school board.”

“Would that be Dr. Goldfine, by any chance?”

“Yes. Are you...”

“I have a meeting with him and Kip’s teacher today. This has all happened so fast, and I’m not...”

“Yes, I imagine it would happen fast. Dr. Goldfine has been dying to get his hands on that boy for months. But your father stalled them, he and that shyster lawyer.”

“Who, Scott Olerud? He’s the one that helped me get this all worked out.”

“Maybe so. But he has another side to him, my dear, and I have seen it. Dr. Goldfine has seen it. And you’d best be careful.”

“Thanks for the tip.”

She stood, clapped her hands together, and then beamed me a smile. “I’m glad you came,” she said, the meeting clearly adjourned. “It gives me closure to know that boy is getting taken care of.”Chapter 17

I had almost an hour to kill before my meeting at the

school, so I decided to stop by the newsroom to check in with Daniel. I had not heard back from Hugh Girardi at the police yet and I wanted to see Scott Olerud too, but he was a very expensive lawyer and unless I wanted to pay for his time, I would need a better excuse to go see him. I was not quite ready to spill the whole investigative journalist thing on him. People tended to get nervous when I played that card, and I figured I should wait until the situation with Kip was resolved. The school meeting would actually give me a good excuse to go see him again. I would play it by ear.

I managed to sneak all the way up to Daniel's office door without running in to Alex, which actually disappointed me a little. Not that I cared even the tiniest bit about where he was or what he was doing, but I did like my routines and verbally sparring with him was part of my job, wasn't it? Daniel was on the phone when I knocked, but he waved me in and I sat while he finished his call.

"So," he said, finally putting down the phone and turning his attention to me. "Heard you were having some family issues."

I tensed defensively. "I can handle it. You'll have your story by deadline."

"That's not why I mentioned it, Helena."



Poor Daniel. He had been trying to be nice to me and I completely blew it off. “Thanks, Daniel,” I said. “I appreciate it, really I do.”

“Alex tells me you have assumed guardianship of your young brother?”

“Half brother. Yes.”

“I’m proud of you, kid. That takes guts. If there’s anything I can do...”

“Thanks.”

“So what have you got for me, then?”

“Well, I have the tax seminar piece mostly wrapped. Just need to talk to a few more people and snap some pics at the event tomorrow. I can drop everything off on my way home from the mall...”

“No rush. It’s not slated until next week.”

“And Alex and I are working on a feature together, a profile of the new health inspector with a sidebar on some of the issues he’ll face.”

He smiled. “You and Alex, working together?”

“He knows some people at city hall. I know some people on campus and downtown. It seemed reasonable to collaborate.”

“Fair enough. Thanks for updating me, Hel. Let me know if you need anything, and if I get any stories coming in with flexible deadlines, you’ll be the first person I call.”

When I left him, he was already on the phone again.

★★

It was a short walk back to Mission Elementary School. I had a brief wait before a secretary emerged from the principal’s office, scanned my i.d. and the interim custody order I had gotten from Scott, then showed me into a conference room.

“They will be with you in about ten minutes. They have to wait until the children go to recess before Mrs. Rahim can get away. But they told me to give you this to look at until they get there.”

I thanked her, then opened the plain brown folder, which I saw at a glance contained Kip’s permanent record. The first page only had basic demographic info, but even that yielded clues. Beside his name (SNOWDEN, CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE) they had pencilled ‘Kip’ in quotation marks. And in addition to my father’s name

(which had been ineptly whited out shortly before my arrival, if the smudge marks were any indication) they listed his mother's name too: CATHERINE LETSKY (SNOWDEN) [NC]. I wondered what the NC meant. Non-custodial?

As emergency contacts, they listed Aunt Charlotte and Scott Olerud, the lawyer. Poor little guy, he really had no one. There was a sticky note in the top corner of the page indicating my name, with a question mark beside it.

As for his school reports, I was severely hampered here by Kip's age. I was looking for hints as to whether his odd behaviour was recent, or whether he had always been that way. But he was only six. This was his first year of formal schooling, apparently, so there were no prior report cards to look at save for a short evaluation the school had done when he enrolled. It tested him on motor skills, shapes, numbers, colours and a few other things he would have learned in kindergarten. He passed all the tests, but the tester did note his use of nods and gestures in lieu of words.

The rest of the file consisted of a series of copies of letters the teacher he had now had sent home to my father. "Christopher appears tense in front of other children," one letter noted. "When he is spoken to, he prefers not to answer with words." About the only area he did seem to excel in was sports. Watching his dispirited but technically

sound behaviour with the soccer ball, I could believe it.

I was coming to the end of the stack of letters when the teacher, and her entourage descended. The principal, a Mr. Dacon, briefly introduced himself and then left. The guidance counselor Mr. Huber, and the promised Dr. Goldfine remained behind, however. The secretary was summoned in to take notes. This was official stuff here.

While Dr. Goldfine gave himself a refresher course with the permanent file, Mrs. Rahim, brown eyes twinkling with tears, expressed her relief that Kip would finally be getting the help he needed.

"And what sort of help do you think he needs?" I asked, feeling my guard go up.

"Well, clearly there is something wrong with him," she said. "Anyone can tell..."

"Now, Mahalia," Dr. Goldfine said, not even looking up from his reading. "You know that 'wrong' is not the word. Christopher is not 'wrong.' Rather, he is having difficulties."

Oh yeah, 'having difficulties' was a much better thing. I felt it was important to proceed methodically here. "I'd like to be as clear as I can on that," I said. "I mean, I'm not denying he is a little odd, and I admit it's aroused my concern. But when I talk to him, he seems to understand me. He seems

to be fine as far as health goes, and even you guys say his motor skills are on target. All he isn't doing is talking."

"Well, that's kind of an important thing, isn't it?" Mrs. Rahim said.

"It's something to work on. My point though is that he does seem like he has the capability to improve that. He might not be 'wrong' so much as 'traumatized.' I mean, he survived a fire and his father's death, then the upheaval of the custody arrangement with my aunt and me. Wouldn't you be shook up?"

"Well..."

"I guess the thing we have to determine," I said, "Is whether he was like this or not before all that happened.

I sat back, satisfied at having said my piece, only to find them all staring at me.

"You mean," said Dr. Goldfine slowly. "That you don't actually know if he was?"

"Well, I didn't really know him then. I only just got him, didn't I?"

Apparently they had not realized that. Mrs. Rahim looked like she was about to cry. She turned to Dr. Goldfine. "They

just handed him over to a...a stranger?" she moaned.

"But you have had experience with children before," Dr. Goldfine said.

"Yes," I lied.

"See, Mahalia?"

Mr. Huber cleared his throat. "The only important matter right now is that this young lady is at least willing to look into the problem with us. Which is more than can be said for her departed father."

That seemed to placate Mrs. Rahim. "All right," she said. "I want him tested though. Psychologically tested, I mean. With Dr. Goldfine. The full diagnostic spectrum."

"Why? What do you all think is wrong with him?" I asked.

Dr. Goldfine put down his pen and looked me gently in the eye. "My dear. Has the word 'autism' ever been mentioned to you in the context of this boy?"

"I...I don't know. It's still so new to me..."

"Well, we'll take care of him. We'll have him tested."

"Does that happen here?" I asked.

“Yes. They take him out during class time. We should have a diagnosis to work with within a few weeks.”

“Is there anything I can do with him in the meantime, to...to speed things along a little?”

“Try and be relaxed with him. Mrs. Rahim has noticed that when she has commented on his speaking, it tenses him up. Be natural with him.”

“Okay...”

“And see if you can’t find some common ground with him. Some way of reaching down to him, on the level he is at. When he actually has spoken to you, has there been a pattern to what he’s said or when he has said it?”

“Answers to direct questions a few times. Once to ask about the bathroom. And a Shakespeare quote.”

Dr. Goldfine looked intrigued. “Shakespeare? Really?”

“Good night, sweet prince. My father taught Shakespeare, it must be something Kip got from him.”

“That’s good, work with that. Perhaps there is other Shakespeare he knows? Your goal is to get him accustomed to talking with you, to talking around you. If it means a couple weeks of quoting Shakespeare to each

other, I say go with it. As he relaxes, he will hopefully open up to other topics.”

Mr. Huber, the guidance counselor, tapped on the permanent record folder. “One thing we don’t as yet have for him is any sort of medical history. Your father did not see fit to provide us with the phone number of a pediatrician. Normally, it’s something we insist on, but my predecessor was rather lax...”

“I have no idea if he’s ever seen a doctor,” I said.

“Well, is there anything you can tell us about his medical history at least? Any allergies? Any injuries or conditions we should know about?”

I hesitated for the briefest moment, then shared with them a condensed version of the story Dr. Yost had given me about Kip’s mother. Mrs. Rahim practically started hyperventilating, but Dr. Goldfine got a glint in his eye of absolute fascination. “Potential autism spectrum with a family history of mental health problems, evidence of post-traumatic stress and possible brain damage too? This will be a tough one, won’t it?”

That didn’t sound promising. That didn’t sound promising at all. They gave me release forms, and I dully signed my name to them. I didn’t remember much else about the



Back on the street again, I pondered my busy morning. My head hurt. I wanted to get some work done on my PHO profile before I had to go get Kip, so I pulled one of Daniel's famous 'two birds, one stone' moves and stopped in at Geschlepp's for a quick bite. Teresa was frantically busy, but classes started at Mission College just past one. All the students would be gone by the time I finished eating, and Teresa would be able to stop by and chat with me.

I was just polishing off the last of my all-day breakfast when Teresa, a travel mug of coffee in her hands, slid into the second bench of my booth.

"Missed you for breakfast again," she said.

"I know. Early deal with Aunt Charlotte, then a meeting at Kip's school. The good news is that he should be back there again tomorrow so I'll have a regular schedule again. No more schlepping out the Aunt Charlotte's..."

"And the bad news?"

"Seems I'm not the only one who thinks he might be a little odd. They want to test him."

I filled her in on what I had learned about his mother, and the soupy mix of potential causes for Kip's withdrawn

behaviour.

"It sounds to me," she said quietly when I was done. "That at the very least, the boy could use the therapy."

"Yeah. Poor kid. But you think...you think he can be okay, right?"

"If there is something like autism or brain damage underneath it all? Maybe not completely. But if you're right that some kind of post-traumatic stress issue is clouding up the whole thing, then he should theoretically improve once that's been dealt with."

This was the first sensible advice she had given me since I had sprung the news of my father's death on her. I couldn't help but ask. "So does this mean you're coming around a little?"

She picked up her mug and eased herself out of the booth. "Lunch hour rush. I'd better get back to it..."

I looked around at the rapidly emptying diner. "Yeah," I said. "You'd better get back."

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I cornered Jack as I was leaving and asked him for his impressions of Kincaid, the new public health inspector.

“God damn franchise nazi,” he snarled. “Small little twit. Corrupt, power hungry bureaucrat. Scum-sucking pit dwelling suit...”

“Right!” I chirped. “Off to the library then. Bye!”

Obviously, I would need a quote that was a tiny bit more balanced than that. I wondered if I knew anyone who could hook me up with Mary Weir-Fiorio?

I spent the rest of the afternoon at the library, using their Lexis Nexis subscription to get myself properly backgrounded on the scuttle at the PHO. There were recaps of the Cliffgate fiasco, which didn’t tell me anything I didn’t know, but there were also several articles that quoted Weir-Fiorio in various contexts, and this I did want to see. I wanted a handle on what kind of woman she was. Was she sensible? Did she perform her job well?

I concluded that her public face, at least, had been impeccably friendly. Under her reign, the PHO had one of the most liberal appeal policies in the district, allowing local business owners fair rights to defend or improve their standing. Alastair Kincaid, the new guy, was of course critical of this particular aspect of Weir-Fiorio’s reign. “My primary concern,” he boomed from one news clipping. “Is the well-being of the innocent public—not the well-being of sloppy restaurateurs.”

I had to scroll through several clippings before I found a picture of him. He was tall, massive and bald, like an unhappy collision between Patrick Stewart and a tragic dose of steroids.

Worse still, he had been recruited from New York, where he had been CEO of his own consulting firm, and in that capacity, had worked with the city on some kind of civic pride campaign. After six months, he had raised property values in four lower-class neighbourhoods by doubling the fines for littering, loitering, graffiti, noise violations, lewd behaviour and a half dozen other petty acts. He had done it within budget too by forgoing the capital to police these areas with actual police, and instead offering cash rewards to neighbours who snitched on each other. My little friend Ashley in the MPIRG office would have a field day with this guy.

I scribbled down some quick notes, mindful of a line-up for the computer terminals. As I gathered my stuff, the line moved forward and a voice behind me crooned “That next link has the piece you’re looking for.”

I nearly dropped my notebook. “Kerry?”

“One and the same. Humour me and click on one more search result, will you? This one here...”

He clicked the advance button on the computer mouse and opened up a new page. Mary Weir-Fiorio's smiling face peered down at me from the headline "Ousted PHO chief mulls public office."

"And this is good news?" I said.

"It is. Public office means she's staying with the people here. And she's probably already got a campaign HQ set up somewhere, where concerned voting citizens make their voices heard, if you catch my drift."

"Thanks."

"This the piece you're working on with Alex?"

"Uh huh."

"Well, I have some news on our side project."

"So do I," I said. I filled him in on my meetings with Yost and Malafanto.

"Interesting," he said. "Where do you want to proceed from here?"

"Interesting, eh? That's all you have to say about it?"

"We have to treat it like any other story, Helena."

"I know. And I'm not flaking out on you or anything just because it's my father we're talking about, Kerry. He and I were not even that close."

"Okay. So where do you want to proceed from here, then?"

"Well, I was going to dig up some more background on this Malafanto guy, then hand him off on you to tackle. Number one, I don't think he'll open up to me. he still seemed kind of mad about how I had abandoned my father and all. And number two, I think he's hiding something. That story with the wife...I mean, his wife dies, my dad's goes insane...the vibe I was getting, there was something fishy there."

"Well, I trust your vibe. I'll handle Malafanto."

"But I was gonna..."

"Use the same sources I was to dig up the same dirt I'll find. There is absolutely no point in duplicating efforts here, Helena. I'll handle it. What about Yost?"

"Well, she seemed on the up and up. Not sure we'd get much more out of a second visit, but between you and me, I'd love to know what she was seeing Malafanto for. Might be something to probe him on when you see him."

"So your vibe was more than just co-workers at the university?"

“Definitely. They were in different departments, for one thing. And ‘Cliffie’ seemed like a somewhat familiar way to refer to a colleague. There is also the whole issue of if he’s not her patient, she would have just said so, same way she denied seeing Kip. But instead she told me she couldn’t divulge that—which means that something more was going on there that she either wasn’t allowed or wasn’t willing to tell me. He’s either her patient, or he’s up to something, and she’s trying to protect him.”

“Okay. We’ll keep her on the back burner until I’m done with him, but she’s definitely made it onto my list of interesting people. All right, so I’ve got Malafanto. What’s next on your list?”

“There was a detective quoted in your article...Girardi, I think?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve been trying to reach him. Daughter of the bereaved and all that. He might be able to tell me something. I was thinking it might be worth it to do a canvass of his old neighbourhood too. If he was different before the fire, this will give us a better picture of how.”

“Sounds good, Helena. Good work so far.”

"Thanks." I checked my watch. "I have to go get my brother. Did you..."

"Oh, right. I did another canvass near the house where they found your father, talked to the landlady again. I didn't get much—he was a private man, didn't have any visitors. But I figured I'd tell you so you could cross it off your list."

I made a copy of my notes from Malafanto's meeting for Kerry in our way out of the library, then stopped at a payphone and left messages with Alex Calvin and Scott Olerud. Then I bussed it to Aunt Charlotte's to pick up Kip. She was on me as soon as she opened the door.

"Well? You were at his school today?"

"Yup. He starts back tomorrow. They want to do some work with him..."

I filled her in on my meeting. Then it occurred to me that she might be able to fill in some of the missing pieces here.

"Did you know about this thing with his mother?" I asked her.

"Well, I knew she had problems. She had two visits home from that sanitorium. She went off her medication both times. She and Doug had fantastic fights about it."



"But did you know she tried to kill Kip?"

"I don't know if I would call it 'trying to kill him,' Helena."

"She smothered him with a pillow!"

"Well, she didn't mean to. She had a breakdown."

"Look, Charlotte, the school told me they had been trying to work on this for months but my father was in such big denial that they couldn't get near Kip. I...I have him now, and I want to help him. Can you see that something isn't right? I need you on board with this I need to make sure, before we go before a judge and give you a say on this, that you're going to be on board. Otherwise..."

"Otherwise what? Are you threatening me?"

"This shouldn't be about being threatened, this should be about the two of us behaving like adults and making the best decisions we can for this kid. So I will ask you one more time, are you or are you not on board with this?"

"I am on board," she said.

"Good. So what else can you tell me that might help here? Does Kip have a doctor, for instance?"

"I'm sure that he must. I was not privy to that level of detail

about my brother's day to day logistics, Helena."

"Well, did he have a day-planner or address book or anything like that? Anything you took out of his apartment when he died?"

"The only things I took out of that apartment were those that obviously belonged to Kip, and a small box of books and papers, which I turned over to Scott along with what was retrieved from his office at the university."

"To Scott? Why?"

"He was one of your father's best friends, his attorney and the executor of his estate. I assumed he would do whatever was needed with them."

I would take this angle up with Scott when I spoke to him. I was glad now that I had left the message before I came here.

"You said 'one of' my father's best friends. He had other ones?"

"Well, he had a co-worker he saw a lot of. Fellow with a funny name. Ma...something."

"Malafanto? Dr. Malafanto?"

“Yes. The fellow’s wife had been good friends with Catherine. And then he lost her too...”

“How did he lose her?”

“She died, I don’t know. Why are you suddenly so interested in all of this?”

“Just...just trying to figure out what happened here. How he ...how he died.”

“Well, that was spelled out clearly enough in the police report, wasn’t it?”

I had enough of Charlotte for today. I collected Kip and headed home, my thoughts drifting over the growing cloud of inconsistencies. There were too many coincidences here. Too many accidents. Something was going on here, I knew it was. And I wondered, considering Kip’s odd behaviour, if it wasn’t continuing to go on. Chapter 19

Saturday morning. For once, there was no phone call from Aunt Charlotte to wake me. I slept in until the now-delicious hour of 8:30 then rose to equip myself for the day. I didn’t think the tax seminar would take long to cover. A few sound bites from the old people, a few clicks with my trusty Minolta and I’d be set. I packed my laptop computer and my camera gear and was ready to go.

Kip would come with me, I decided. I would take him to the bookstore first and buy him a book, with which he would quietly occupy himself while I did my thing. Then I would do Aunt Charlotte's shopping trip with him.

We hopped a bus to the mall, and I unloaded my heavy bag onto the floor then turned to face Kip.

"I have to do some work here," I explained to him. "So I'll need you to sit quietly and wait for me. Do you understand?" He nodded, and I saw his little shoulders tense up. It wasn't until about half an hour after we'd gotten to the mall that I realized why: Kip was an old people magnet. I had settled myself at the end of a long registration table. The line went in one way and out just where I was nested. I could catch the participants just as they emerged from their one-on-one consultations. Kip was seated on a chair beside me, playing with a Snoopy pop-up book. The old ladies just adored him.

"Oh!" squealed one ancient dame. "Is that your little boy? He's adorable! So quiet, so studious, so well-behaved!"

I did not explain that he was not so much 'well-behaved' as 'frozen with fear' and that a Snoopy pop-up book was hardly great studying. I could see what the teacher had been talking about now, how he seemed to be anxious around people. He must have realized he was in for this as

soon as I told him where we were heading. Score one for comprehension, at least. Whatever else might be wrong with him, he had no difficulties in that regard.

It was almost noon and I was focusing my lens of a few last-minute pics when Alex Calvin suddenly wandered into my viewfinder. I nearly dropped the camera.

“What on earth are you doing here?”

He plopped onto my recently vacated chair with a shrug. “I got your message from yesterday. Daniel said you’d be here, so...”

“So you thought you’d just drop by?”

“Any reason why I shouldn’t have?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but yes. I was going to finish up here, then take my brother shopping for clothes and stuff.”

“Great. I’ll join you.”

“I didn’t invite you.”

“Aw, come on. A girly-girl like you is going to buy clothes for a boy? You need me here.”

“No I don’t. I have excellent fashion sense.”

He took in my black jeans and striped blazer with a dismissive nod. “Um hmm.”

“These are working clothes,” I said. “I’m working right now. You can’t judge by these.”

“Right. Sure.”

“Anyway, I don’t know how long we’ll be. I wouldn’t want to bore you.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that.”

I loaded up my camera and hefted my bag onto the table. “I have plans, Alex.”

“And I have a car,” he smirked, playing his trump card. “You’re telling me you really want to schlep that bag around with you all afternoon when you can tuck it safely away in my nice, convenient, available car?”

He beamed a smile over at Kip. My brother smiled back at him and gave a little wave.

“Fine,” I said. “Come if you want.”

He lifted my bag off the table with one smooth, pretty hand

and did not even bother to conceal his smirk of triumph.

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We hit the clothes stuff first, and I had to admit, it really did help to have a man around for this. I could handle jeans and t-shirts and hats with sports team logos on them, but when the clerk asked me whether I wanted boxers or briefs, I froze. Kip was so self-possessed, so independent. I had never helped him with this kind of thing in the few days I had him. I had barely even touched him.

Alex must have seen the look on my face, because he swooped in, lifted back the waistband of Kip's pants and peeked inside for a second before pronouncing "boxers" to the clerk. I decreed these our last clothing purchase. I had spent more than half of the joint bank account already.

We stopped at the food court where Alex treated us to soft pretzels and juice. I decided he deserved an overture after his help today.

"I wanted to thank you," I said. "For the shopping and the pretzels and stuff. I know I was kind of a pain about it, but..."

"But you're still new at this."

"Right."

"You aren't used to having me around so much."

"Right, because I'm not...what a minute, what? I thought you were talking about Kip."

"Fine. That too."

"That too? That too? Alex Calvin, you have got to be the most self-absorbed, narcissistic, self-important little..."

"Wow," he said. "That's some thank you."

I tried to cover my blush with a pretzel section. "Sorry. And thank you. Really."

I reached for my juice, but Alex pushed it away. "That's it?" he said, leaning closer.

I batted his hand impatiently. "What do you mean that's it?"

"Thanks so much for the favour, Alex. If there's anything I can do to repay you..."

I rolled my eyes. "Oh, please. It wasn't that big a favour..."

"Helena..."

"Fine. What do you want?"



“Three uninterrupted hours to do whatever I want with you.”

“Are you nuts? I have a kid now...”

“That can be dealt with. I want a night, Helena. One night that includes no talk of work, and that involves food which is not from Geschlepp’s and an irrefutable display of my manliness.”

I frowned. “I am not having sex with you.”

“There are other ways to be a man. It’s only a date, Helena. A very...a very small date.”

I suddenly realized what an idiot I was. It was only just occurring to me, as he was saying the words, how nice Alex had been to me lately. He had brought over the packet of news clippings, unasked, on the night I learned of my father’s death. He had let me tag along on what had been his story, and share the by-line with him in spite of the fact that I had thus far done shockingly little work. He had babysat Kip for me. He was still a twit, of course. That would probably never change. But he was a twit who was making an effort, and I found this suddenly meant something to me.

“But who will watch Kip?” I said. “It’s too late to call Aunt Charlotte...”

“Well, there must be a friend you can call on,” he said.

“Like who? The only non-Charlotte, non-Teresa non-lawyer people I’ve talked to lately have been you, and Kerry Irwin.”

“Well, there you have it. Kerry Irwin. Why not?”

“Are you nuts? Has he ever even watched a kid before?”

“Probably not.”

“So...”

“So we get a girl to help him. A girl like...your really hot ex-stepmom?”

Then the magnitude of his plan sunk in for me. “You had this all arranged already! You probably have him waiting around by the phone for the thumbs up!”

“Yeah, a little.”

“Kerry Irwin? That’s who you were going to fix Teresa up with?”

“He’s a good guy, Helena.”

“I know he is. But...for Teresa?” I tried to picture them together, amazon goddess girl Teresa and argyle-sweatered Kerry with the little Elvis on his dashboard. He

would enjoy the kitsch of Geschlepp's. He would enjoy the ...the realness of it. And Teresa needed a man like that.

"She deserves a good guy," I said. "She deserves a really, really good one, Alex. If you screw up with me, I'll forgive you. But if you screw up with her..."

"A match made in heaven," he swore.

"She's not really into the whole Kip thing yet," I said doubtfully.

"She doesn't have to be. She's a woman, Helena. What woman won't fall for a poor, helpless man with a kid?"

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I sent Alex off to make his plans, and took Kip on our last stop of the day, the toy store. I walked up and down the aisles with him, making sure he got a good look around, then knelt down beside him.

"Go nuts," I said.

He moved slowly up and down the rows, touching things, putting them back. Then he went for the Lego.

"No," I said. "We already have that."

He walked two shelves over and picked up a box with pictures of gears on it. The gears snapped together, like Lego. “No,” I said again.

He held up a 5000-piece jigsaw puzzle that fit together to make a tableau of...Lego. “Fine,” I said. “That one you can have.”

I could see the muscles of his shoulders inch microscopically downward. I hadn’t even realized he had been tensing, but I was slowly and surely getting a better read on my brother’s signals. Dr. Goldfine had said I should take advantage of moments like this.

I saw a toy on one of the nearby shelves that caught my eye. It was one of those gag microphones that distorted the voice and added sound effects.

“Hey, look at this,” I said out loud. I moved a little closer to Kip, knelt down beside him. “You talk into this, and it makes funny noises. Watch.”

I pressed one of the buttons and said the first thing that came to mind. “Good night, sweet prince.”

Kip jumped.

“Here, it’s okay.” I held it out to him. “You try.”

He took it, pressed down one of the buttons and held his mouth near the mouthpiece. And...he blew. No talking. No words. Just a tinny, whispery fluff of air. Even the distort setting couldn't do much for that. I took the toy back from him and added it to our cart anyway. This could be something to work on.

I trailed after Kip and scanned the shelves, wondering if there were other toys here that could stimulate talking. One of those books with the musical buttons up the side, maybe? Some sort of role-playing thing perhaps, like a doctor bag or G.I. Joe? Scrabble Junior?

On the other hand, perhaps instead of trying to push him into talking, I needed to play to his strengths here. He would probably be excellent at Charades. Twister, maybe? Or would all the physical contact tense him up the way he had cringed when all the old ladies had come at him?

There was a display of dolls up ahead of us, and I wondered if those would catch Kip's eye. I remembered reading that therapists often used dolls in their work with young children. A child too young to put their traumas into words could often be prodded to demonstrate. And they could often gain some measure of comfort from being able to defend the doll, to comfort it in a way they themselves had not been comforted. I certainly was not going to try and do 'therapy' with Kip, of course. That sounded

dangerous. But perhaps his own little guy to take care of could be good for him. Perhaps it could bring out his human, nurturing, bonding with people side.

“Look, Kip,” I showed him. “They have all kinds here, people kinds, and teddy kinds...”

He followed my gaze, then seemed to home in on one little critter, which he picked up, his eyes huge and wondering. It was a tiny stuffed dog, about the size of two adult fists. It had white fur and two round, brown spots on its back. Its paws were stubby and poseable. And it had tiny little doggie glasses perched on its nose and a baseball cap that it wore backward. It was the kind of stuffed animal that even a boy would not be embarrassed by.

“That’s a great choice,” I said, speaking gently and giving the moment the reverence it deserved. “Do you want to hold that while I keep looking?”

He nodded, then followed me up to the cash desk to pay for our loot.

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We met Alex back in the café at Daltry’s. They had plugs in the tables there, and he had his laptop with him. He had told us he would wait for us there. He closed down the screen when he saw us coming.

“Well?” he said.

“A puzzle, some markers and colouring books, a basketball hoop that hangs over the door, a microphone that makes funny noises, Scrabble Junior and a small stuffed dog,” I reported.

Kip held the dog aloft for inspection. “Classy,” Alex said. “Quite a haul.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Does the dog have a name?” he asked Kip.

“Crab,” Kip said.

“Crab,” Alex mused. “This isn’t another Shakespeare thing, is it?”

“You know, that’s entirely possible. Hold on, I’ll check...”

I walked a few yards over to the literary criticism section, picked up one of those “Shakespeare Encyclopedia” tomes and looked up “Crab.”

Sure enough, there was an entry: Crab, the mongrel hound who was Launce’s companion in *Two Gentleman of Verona*. Launce complains memorably about his dog’s loyalty,

industry and personal habits. But in the end, he takes the blame for one of Crab's misdeeds and shoulders the ensuing punishment himself to spare his errant but beloved pet. Why would Kip choose such a name? This was arguably the most famous dog in Shakespeare's canon. Was it simply that it was the only dog from Shakespeare he was familiar with? Or had he somehow put himself in here? Was he Crab, the scraggly, unappreciated yet true at heart creature—or was he Launce, the selfless master, shouldering the blame...for whom? For my father? Did he know something about the circumstances of my father's life that he was covering up?

It's just a coincidence, I told myself. I had to believe it was just a coincidence. It was simply the only dog from Shakespeare that he knew. Wasn't it?

"Helena?" Alex called from over at his table. "Did you find anything?"

I put the book down. "Let's go."

"But did you..."

"Let's go, Alex. Do you want your date or don't you?"

He shot Kip a curious glance, then picked up my bags for me and walked me to the car. Chapter 20



Alex dropped Kip and I at home with all our stuff, then told me he had to leave for a few hours to go make his preparations.

Why? What preparations?" Even his vain little ringlets wouldn't take hours to primp, would they?

"It's a surprise," he said. "All I can tell you is wear clothes that you can move in."

I had the sneaking suspicion he had been planning this for ages. "Fine."

"Fine? It's a date, Helena, not a funeral."

I made fussing noises about the story for Daniel, and almost shoved him out the door. Then I pulled out my laptop and made the last of the edits into my story before emailing it to Daniel with a note that I would stop by later with the pics. I knew Daniel always worked late on Saturdays. The Sunday paper was the highlight of the week. It wouldn't hurt to check in while I was already out with Alex.

Business thus attended to, I started getting ready for my date. Most of my clothes were in the closet that was now Kip's room, so my first stop was there to peruse my choices.

Kip was seated on the bed, the day's purchases neatly spread out before him. The toys had all been stowed on one of the milk crates. My nail scissors, which he must have found in the bathroom, were lying atop the shelf, discarded. He must have used them to snip the tags out of his clothes, because they didn't have them now, and he was neatly folding his things into piles. Pants, shirts, socks ...

That was one fastidious kid. I knew that autistic kids tended to like order and structure and things being arranged a certain way. But so did obsessive-compulsives, and neurotics and retail employees and people who were just annoying. This didn't mean there was something wrong with him...

But on the other hand, there was something to be said for two wrongs making a right, especially in a context like this one. One odd habit was just an odd habit. But two were a coincidence, and three...well, three were a cause for alarm, and so far he was pretty much only talking in Shakespeare quotes, he tensed up when people came near him and he was obsessive about his clothes, his person and his belongings.

I sat down on the bed, waiting for him to finish putting his things away. Then when he came back over, I pulled him into my lap. He tensed a little, but I held on, quiet, but

clearly waiting. After a moment, I felt him relax.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ve got a little job for you.”

His large, wide eyes stared back at me.

“I’m going to go out with Alex tonight, Kip. Now, I know I don’t need to lecture you on being quiet and staying out of Kerry’s way. But...look, the thing is, I think Kerry might be good for her, you know? And I don’t want anything to...well, scare her off.”

I paused and tried to collect my thoughts. I couldn’t exactly send my six-year-old brother off for the night with instructions to try and be less creepy, could I? But Teresa was so important to me. I needed her to come around on Kip a little. And with Kerry there to distract her, to relax her, to maybe take away the taint of my father a little...

I pushed Kip gently off my lap and headed for the closet. I pulled a lemon-coloured chiffon tank top with ruffles at the waist off of its hanger and held it aloft.

“Well?” I said.

He shook his head and back to the drawing board I went.

★★

I was just coming out of the shower when Scott Olerud called.

“Hey, Helena. Just got your message, is everything okay?”

I told him about the meeting I had at Kip’s school. “Does this change anything with Aunt Charlotte and me?” I asked him.

“It shouldn’t. Medical issues are a shared expense under your custody agreement, but it’s by percentages. Whether it’s a small expense or a big expense you’re facing, it works the same way. She pays her share, you pay yours.”

“Does this sound like it’s going to be a big expense?” I whined.

“That depends. The school does have a legal obligation to educate him, Helena. If he does have special needs, they have to accommodate him. But any frills—and I mean any frills, any treatment or therapy or diagnostic testing he needs that does not directly relate to his life in the classroom...that, they can ding you for.”

“I do contract work, Scott. I don’t exactly have benefits...”

“Your father’s plan had a six-month cushion—he’s covered for six months after the policy terminates, which I am assuming it did upon his death. I would suggest, my dear,

that you might want to use those six months to find yourself a more permanent sort of contract..."

This was not news I wanted to hear. As a freelancer, I got paid by the word. The more I wrote, the more I earned. As a staff reporter, I would be on salary. I could work harder, but still earn the same flat rate. And I would not be allowed to moonlight, either—at least not with any publications that were local. I would probably earn less this way.

"Look, let me talk to some people," Scott said. "We'll find a way around this, Helena. Do you want me to come over tonight, go over your father's policy with you?"

"I can't."

"Oh?"

I was just starting to fill him in on my plans for the night when there was a knock on the door. Crap. Alex was early.

"Look, Scott, I have to go. Can we..."

"Yes, yes, of course. Helena, if you need anything..."

I thanked him, hung up the phone and flipped up the latch to let Alex in. He took in my robe and towel with a quirk of his eye.

“I had a phone call,” I said.

“I bet.”

The boy could make anything sound dirty. “Look, there’s drinks and stuff if you want to help yourself. Well, okay, not so much ‘drinks’ as one of those Brita things and some sugar-free ice tea mix, but...”

He plopped himself on the couch and picked a book up off my coffee table. “I’ll manage.”

“I bet.”

He beamed me a delicious grin. “You know, that’s one of the things I love about you. You can make almost anything sound dirty.”

I flounced into the bathroom, not even bothering to dignify that with a response.

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Twenty minutes later, I had decided on a red crushed velvet baby tee, black boots and the stretchy jeans I had worn the other night with Teresa. My hair was still damp, but I pulled it loosely back with a scrunchie and let it be. Alex wasn’t the only one with curls: when I left my straight, brittle hair to its own devices, it softened, and wove down

my back in elegant but somewhat sloppy waves. It drove me crazy. The strands were forever falling in my eyes, or shedding on my clothes as I snarled them on the straps of my backpack. But I would look pretty tonight if it killed me. No way would I go out with a boy who was better coifed than me.

I emerged into the living room with a dramatic pirouette, expecting immediate, fawning attention. But Alex didn't even notice me. He was reading from a large book that I after a moment recognized as my Riverside Shakespeare, while Kip looked on with rapt attention.

"Now should I kiss my father; well, he weeps on. Now come I to my mother: O, that she could speak now like a wood woman! Well, I kiss her; why, there 'tis; here's my mother's breath up and down. Now come I to my sister; mark the moan she makes. Now the dog all this while sheds not a tear nor speaks a word; but see how I lay the dust with my tears..."

He broke off, suddenly noticing me. "Helena, Wow. Wow wow wow. You look..."

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Shakespeare. Two Gentlemen of Verona, I think."

"Act two, scene three," Kip affirmed.

"But that...what? What did he just say?"

"Act two," Kip said again. "Scene three."

"He was showing me his dog," Alex said. "And he started quoting something...so I looked it up, and we kinda started reading..."

"What do you mean he started quoting something?"

"Well, I asked him to tell me about his dog, and he said..." he fumbled back a few pages, looking for the quote. "'I have taught him, even as one would say precisely, 'thus I would teach a dog.' And we started reading, and he...well, he likes it. He even knows some of the lines."

"What lines?"

"Oh, I don't know, random ones, I think."

This was freaking me out. I remembered seeing a documentary years ago about kids with autism, and apparently prodigious feats of memorization were a common hallmark. They could recite perpetual calendars, train schedules, prime numbers, whatever it was. There was no context, of course. It was just numbers or sounds or letters. I had to see how far this went with Kip, if this was just him living with a Shakespeare scholar and picking up a



few bits and pieces, or if this was some kind of harbinger of god knew what...

I picked up the Riverside Shakespeare and flipped to a random page. "A Midsummer Night's Dream, Act 3, scene 2, line 323!" I barked.

"O, when she's angry, she is keen and shrewd! She was a vixen when she went to school; and though she be but little, she is fierce..."

"King Lear, Act 1, scene 1, line...240!"

"Love is not love when it is mingled with regards that stand aloof from the entire point."

"The Comedy of Errors, Act 1, Scene 2, line...35!"

"I to the world am like a drop of water that in the ocean seeks another drop, who, falling there to find his fellow forth, unseen, inquisitive, confounds himself."

"Hamlet, Act 1, scene 4, line 40..."

"Angels and ministers of grace, defend us! Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd, bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell, be thy intents wicked or charitable, thou comest in such a questionable shape that I will speak to thee."

I joined Alex on the couch and practically collapsed there.  
“Oh god...”

“Now, Helena...”

“Don’t! You don’t know, Alex, not on this, you don’t know...”

“And may I suggest my dear that you perhaps don’t know either?” He smiled gently. “I saw the same documentary you did, Helena, I know what you’re thinking. But when we talk to him, he seems to understand us, doesn’t he? Maybe they aren’t just random words to him. Maybe he really does understand the contexts.”

He turned to Kip with a gentle, encouraging nod. “The moment Lady Macbeth starts to unravel.”

He blinked, as if surprised to be sprung with such an easy one, then infused his little voice with dramatic conviction.  
“Out, damned spot! Out, I say!”

“Julius Caesar,” Alex said. “One word, amigo. The word Cassius uses to first describe Caesar to us.”

Kip scrunched his brow. “Colossus?”

Alex clapped hands with him. “My man!”

“The Tempest,” I said, citing my second-favourite play.

“When Prospero gives us all our happy ending...”

He stepped bravely up toward me, his little body trembling, then sat down beside me and rested his head on my shoulder.

“We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep...”

I fluffed his hair, took a fortifying breath, then turned to Alex. “Well, it’s still creepy.”

“Yeah. And maybe a little...maybe a little...”

“Pathological?”

“Quirky. I was going to say quirky. If he has the comprehension, this could be not so much autism as some kind of photographic memory thing...”

I thought of that squalid little cave of an apartment, and the meager stimulation my father had stashed there. If I was a bored, socially awkward six-year-old with a photographic memory, would this simply have been a question of any port in a storm?

Kip was watching me, his tiny shoulders poised to tense again. “It’s all right,” I told him. “It’s all right, Kip. Just...no Shakespeare when Teresa’s there, okay?”

I wished I was the praying type. Me with Alex, Teresa with Kerry, and with Kip...that was a lot of pairing off for one night. And a lot of potential for nearly every single person in my life to get themselves hurt in one convenient batch.

## Chapter 21

Kerry Irwin made his home in the lower floor of one of those old Victorians that crumbled their way across Mission's downtown core. Most of these had degenerated to the point of slum homes, but Kerry was about a block out of the student ghetto on one of the nicer streets. It didn't look like a slum, and it didn't entirely look like an apartment either. It was like a dignified quasi-bungalow complete with fireplace, home office and a largish cozy area with big-screen TV and tartan-print couches.

Teresa was already settling in when we got there. A bottle of wine was open on the coffee table and they appeared to have already worked through half of it.

"Helena!" She rose unsteadily when she saw us. "We were just..."

"Having a good time?" I suggested.

Kerry had already introduced himself to Kip and with Alex's help was corralling the boy into the kitchen for some snacks. Teresa did a quick check to make sure that they

were out of the way, then confided “Yeah. I am having a good time. Who would have thought? I mean, now of all times...”

“You deserve it,” I said. “When did you get here?”

“About an hour ago, I guess? First thing he asked me was did I want to see the library,” she chuckled. “I said no! So he asked me if I wanted to see his record collection instead. Records, Helena. With a turntable! He was practically salivating when I told him we have a real jukebox at Geshclepp’s.”

“I can see how he would be.”

“And you...you and Alex?”

“It’s just a date, Teresa.”

“Yeah, but...Alex?”

“You know, he can be kind of sweet sometimes. True, he can be a massive pain in the you know what too, but he’s making an effort.”

“I didn’t want to tell you this before,” she said. “Because you seemed so...so adamant about him. But I think he’s kind of adorable.”

“That’s exactly the problem, Teresa. Everyone thinks he’s adorable. He himself thinks he’s adorable.”

She grinned. “You’ll have a great time.”

“Says the one already half passed out on a quarter of a bottle of wine.”

“Hey, I was nervous. I process things differently when I’m nervous.”

“Are you still nervous?”

“I’m a little sleepy. A little happy. A little...is it wrong to say, hopeful?”

“No, it’s not wrong. Just don’t say it to Alex Calvin is all. Last thing I need is that boy smugly lording his matchmaking skills over me until the end of time.”

“Helena?”

“Hmmm?”

“I love your hair that way.”

On that happy note, I went to hunt down Alex so we could get this going already.

We were coming straight up against the secret back entrance of Rock My World, and he had a key just like Teresa did.

“You know Garrett Michaelson too?” I marveled.

“I know Jeff Mulvaney, the gay accountant that Garrett was fawning over last time we were here. After you, Hel...”

We checked in at the desk and got our shoes and harnesses.

I did some stretches while Alex got suited up. “You know, I feel good today,” I told him. “I think I can handle a blue wall.”

“That’s nice,” he said. “But we’re actually not here to climb...”

He pointed to The Pike, and I saw that it was roped off, a little sign declaring that Top of the World was closed for a private function.

“That’s us?” I said.

“That’s us.”

“But that’s...”

“Incredibly touching? Incredibly romantic? Incredibly virile?”

“Incredibly show-offy,” I said. “But kinda sweet too.”

“I’ll take it. You ready?”

“Hit me.”

“You climb,” he said. “I’ll belay.”

I had assumed it would be a race to the top, as Teresa and I had done. That two of the floor managers would handle the belay...

Alex clipped the caribiner onto my harness, then tugged with his guide hand, pulling though the slack.

“Any time,” he prompted.

“But...”

“You’re not scared, are you? Of having me spot you?”

I shouldn’t be, I knew that. This wasn’t rocket science, it was physics. The way the belay was set up, a child could do it. You could run the ropes with someone half your size. But even so, there was an element of trust involved. If you fell, the rope they held was the only thing to break your descent. On an emotional level, it didn’t matter that as long



as the slack was maintained, the rope snapped into place automatically. It didn't matter that the harness did all the work...

"I've got you," he said. "The belay is on, Helena."

He was using the official terms, hoping it would relax me. I stepped up to the wall and reached for the first handhold. And I pulled.

He didn't call up to me, but I saw Alex shake his head. I should lead with my legs, not with my arms. Make the stronger muscles do the work. Why make things harder than they had to be?

I braced my right leg, then stubbornly reached up with my left hand. I heard Alex call up to me. "Three o'clock, just above your right knee. I've got you, Helena..."

I lifted my foot off the wall and swung it upward, trying to find the hold. The Pike was the longest climb here, and I'd tire myself out if I led with my arms. I focused, took my hand away and lunged upward with my foot. I climbed steadily, pausing every three or four steps to look up and remember where the footholds were. The wall was harrowing for its blind spots—footholds you could feel but not quite see. There would be that moment of faith where you would pull your foot away, your entire body weight resting on your

opposite toe and on two straining fingers while you tried to wedge your foot onto the safety you knew was underneath you...

I hauled myself up over the railing at Top of the World, then called down to Alex. "The belay is off. You're up..."

He clipped the caribiner onto his belt, then nodded to Garrett, who had come to belay him. "Watch me, Helena. See how it's really done..."

He hopped up the wall like a spider on drugs, weaving over and up, all nimble and sticky and fast. Led with his arms too, in a few places. He was probably doing that on purpose, to show off his biceps. And...it worked. So much so that when he finally landed on top, gave the thumbs-up to Garrett and said "So, what do you think?" I realized I hadn't even noticed what he had done up here.

He had managed to clear a space somehow, pushing other tables back an inch or two here and there and the single table he had left as the centerpiece had been set with an elegant linen cloth and real dishes. A bottle of wine lay in ice at the ready and two domes covered the waiting plates like they used to have in movies.

He pushed out the chair for me, and I sat down, taking it all in.

"If I make some sort of cheesy 'I feel like I'm on top of the world' joke right now, you'll hate me, won't you?" he said.

I was still too stunned by his gesture. This was by far the most romantic thing that had ever happened to me, and it was coming from Alex Calvin...

Then he reached for the centre platter and pulled off the silver lid to reveal a single rose.

"And none but thou shall be my paramour," he said.

I frowned, the mood slipping away from me. "Is that Shakespeare?"

He shook his head. "It's Marlowe. Come, Helen, come, give me my soul again. Here will I dwell, for heaven is in these lips, And all is dross that is not Helena. 'The Face That Launch'd a Thousand Ships.' I figured you were sick of Shakespeare."

"I am," I heartily assured him. And I was starting to find creative use of rhyming verse that had my name in it just a little creepy, but it was such a sweet gesture...

"And how would you know if my lips are heaven or not?" I teased

He bent over the table and he kissed me. Not bad for a

twit!

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Dinner was cold salmon roasted with garlic and lemon. There was tossed salad with a simple vinaigrette, herbed crusty rolls and a rosé in his wine bucket. And chocolate mousse. As I sopped up the last of it with my finger, he edged his chair closer to me.

“So, you had fun?”

I looked up from my plate-cleaning. “Hmm? Oh. Yeah, I did.”

“Enough fun for a second date?”

I edged my chair back a little. “We really need to play it by ear, Alex.”

“We do?”

“I had a lovely night. And this was...this was such a gesture. But...”

“But you’re still feeling out what’s behind the gesture. Whether I can act like a gentleman when there’s no act involved.”

“Darn it, now you’re being all sensitive and incisive. You keep this up and I’ll have to agree to go out with you again.”

He shrugged. “If you do, you do. If you don’t, you don’t.”

“What that supposed to mean? You don’t care about me?”

He settled back in his chair, just as he had at the MCLA office, smirkingly triumphant. “Well, that answers that.”

“What?”

“If you didn’t want me to like you, you wouldn’t care so much that I don’t.”

“You don’t?”

“Now, don’t be annoying. Most women only get Shakespeare, you know. I did Marlowe for you.”

“Alex...”

He put on his serious face again. “All right. Perhaps a joke was inappropriate there.”

“Really? You think?”

“Look, I’m trying, Helena. I’ve just...never gone out with a woman who was serious before. One who had, like, a life

and a personality and stuff."

"You know, I'm not sure if that's really sad or really juvenile."  
"

"So cut a guy some slack, will you? I'm trying...I'm trying to ...well, to try. And I know you and I are coming from different places here. And there has to be an element of me rising to the level. But there should be an element of you liking me for who I am too, shouldn't there?"

I gave him the dignified answer he deserved. "Yes, Alex. There should be."

"So...is there?"

I initiated the kiss this time, and I made it gentle and easy. "I like the man who put tonight together. That's all I can give you right now."

"We can work on that."

"I think we can. I've never been with a guy who...who has tried, you know?"

I blinked back tears and fumbled in my bag for a kleenex. Then my hand hit something hard, and I swore, the mood instantly broken.

“Crap!”

“What?”

“I forgot, I was supposed to drop off my film cartridge with Daniel on our way out. He’s probably been waiting for it.”

“Well, we’re just about done here. Want to borrow my cell, see if he’s still there?”

“Thanks. You’re the best.”

“I know I am. Here, hon.”

He tossed me the phone, then picked up his harness and began suiting up for the descent. I called Daniel and got a machine. I left a message apologizing for missing him, and told him I would be home in an hour or so if he wanted to give me a shout. I called Kerry to tell him we were on our way over, then stowed his phone in my bag and got my own harness set up. Garrett was already belaying him down when I got to the wall, and I myself was on terra firma mere minutes later.

It was a short walk to Kerry’s, and he was waiting for us on the stoop of his little house.

“Enjoying the bitterly cold night air?” I teased.

He stood, put a finger to his lips and opened the door. We followed him into the living room, and I had to bite back an awww.

Teresa had conked out on him. She was curled up on the couch, underneath Kip's Snoopy blanket, the TV still going in the background. Kip was sitting at the table with his colouring book and markers. He had started putting them away as soon as he saw me come in, and as he gathered his stuff and headed for the door, he stopped by the couch and adjusted Teresa's blanket. Awww,

"He was an angel," Kerry whispered. "She brought over a Disney thinking he'd like it. He didn't seem to much care one way or the other, but I tried to turn it off when she fell asleep and he told me to let it play for her. Didn't want her to miss the ending."

"He talked?"

"Little bit. Told me what he wanted to drink with his dinner, played some Hangman with Teresa..."

"Hangman? But that's, like, talking every minute or so."

"Only one or two words though," Alex pointed out.

So maybe there was something to this whole small steps thing. Get him relaxed enough and keep the talking short



and sweet and maybe he really could open up...

Alex leaned in close and whispered to Kerry "But didn't you get any nookie at all?"

I turned on him, eyes fierce. "Alex!"

"Sorry, Helena." Then, to Kerry, he whispered "Even I got kissing..."

"Alex! Little ears!"

"We had a lovely time," said Kerry diplomatically.

"Good answer," I said. "Shall we?"

We made a clean getaway before Alex had a chance to say anything else that was stupid.

\*\*

Alex walked Kip and I home, and I had one more surprise waiting for me when we got there: Daniel's car, parked directly in front of my front door, Daniel himself leaning against the hood and watching us approach.

"This does seem to be my night for men sitting on front stoops in the freezing cold for me," I observed.

"Got your message," he said. "Figured I'd try and catch you."

And no, I have not been sitting outside this whole time.”

“You sat inside the car until you heard us coming?”

“Something like that.”

I handed him the film container. “You should have everything now.”

“Great. It’ll go in on Monday.” He squinted as the beam of headlights caught his eye, then moved onto the curb a little.

“Kip?” I called. “Are you...”

The car was coming fast, and it wasn’t stopping. I saw Kip get hit in the face with the swath of light, and stagger a little. I saw Daniel give him a hard shove, and then I heard the smack of a body hitting the pavement. I was too blinded by the glare myself to see whose body it was. Chapter 22

I don’t remember what happened next. At some point, someone propped me on the curb and at some point both Kip and Alex curled up beside me, one on my left side, one of my right side. The light never stopped blurring in my eyes: headlights, as the car that hit us peeled away, then amber spotlights as police and ambulance arrived. My eyes hurt. My head hurt. And dimly, it started sinking in that Daniel had been hit.

“Ma’am?” A man in a uniform was kneeling down beside me and pressing a styrofoam cup of coffee into my hands.  
“Ma’am? Do you need medical attention?”

I shook my head, pushed the styrofoam cup away, blinked yet again trying to block out the light.

The officer stood. “All right, we’re good here,” he called out to someone else. “You want to take the boy, get him looked at?”

Kip tightened his grip on my arm, and I wrapped my arms protectively around him. The officer knelt down beside us again.

“Hey, it’s okay, little fella,” he said to Kip. “We’re not going to hurt you. We just want to make sure you’re all right.”

He shook his head, then buried it in my waist. Trauma was making him affectionate.

“Alex...Daniel...” I managed.

“The one on the road’s been loaded into the ambulance there,” the officer said, pointing. “The one on his feet is in that there squad car with my partner, telling her what happened.”

"Daniel got hit."

"Yes, we see that. Ma'am, we want to have a word with you on that. Can we get out of the cold for a second, maybe go over things..."

I hugged Kip tighter. I could see that the officer's patience was waning. He was getting annoyed with me, and for no good reason, that made me want to cry.

"Helena!" I heard a familiar voice, then brisk footsteps. Kerry and a pale Teresa, who immediately plopped down beside me on the curb and enveloped the bundle that was Kip and I into a hug. With me thus taken care of, Kerry went straight for the cop with a brisk "Evening, Detective Girardi."

I perked up.

"Kerry," the detective said. "These people friends of yours?"

"Yes sir. In fact, they just came from my place. I was cleaning up when I heard her address pop up on my scanner."

"Looks like a hit and run. Don't think these folks are culpable, but I do need to speak with them. The boy too."

“The boy might be a problem. The girl, I can give you. But perhaps not tonight.”

They moved off a little, whispering. I wiggled out of Teresa’s embrace a little, straining to hear them. A moment later, Girardi came back, kneeled down again.

“Ms. Snowden. I understand this has been a difficult night for you.”

I nodded dumbly.

“I would like to have a paramedic look over your brother. To set your mind at ease that he is uninjured.”

I nodded again, and stood shakily, bringing Kip up with me. “Sure. Okay.”

“Perhaps we can talk while they look him over?”

“Can I...can I stay with him?”

The detective looked briefly unhappy about this, then acquiesced with a tight smile. “Okay. We’ll just get him set up...”

So, while Kip sat on my lap on one of those ambulance bed thingies, I chatted with Detective Girardi. It was not a long story. I had needed to drop something off with Daniel, who

was my boss. I had called him before leaving Rock my World with Alex and not gotten him. But he had received my message and met me at home. I passed off the canister of film, and boom. That was it.

The detective noted this down, then turned to the paramedic. "Well?"

"He's got a scrape on his left cheek. I'm dressing it now."

"Daniel pushed him out of the way," I remembered. "Is Daniel..."

"He's been taken to the hospital. No word yet." He closed his notebook, regarded me gently. "It's been a tough month for you."

"Yeah. I..."

"I've been meaning to return your call about your father," he said. "It's just...been a tough month for me too, I guess. No rest for the wicked."

"Yeah."

"So...no rest for me either. I do remember your father. My niece goes to Mission, she was in a class with him two years ago. Said he was a little odd. Nice, and an excellent professor, but a little odd."

“Odd how?”

“Loved his work a bit too much was what she said.”

I remembered the fight we had just before I left him, how he used the words of his beloved plays to speak with me.

Loving his work a bit too much was one way of putting it. I had never seen one of his actual classes, but I had gotten enough dry runs of them at home...

“The case was fairly open and shut,” he shrugged. “Not sure what else I can tell you. He choked to death.”

“Maybe,” I said.

“No, not maybe. It’s all in the autopsy report.”

“Well, yes. But doesn’t it strike you as a bit odd, that he had so much...so much going on? I mean, the fire, and...”

“The fire,” Girardi repeated. “Now that, that is still an interesting question. There is a lot about that which is suspicious to me, I am not denying it. But how that relates to a man choking to death, I couldn’t tell you.”

“Is there anything new about the fire? Any progress made in your investigation?”

He shrugged. “Best I can tell you is, it’s inconclusive. We

put the crime scene through its paces, I promise you that, and...maybe it was arson. Maybe it was accident. Who knows? It was an old house. You wouldn't even need accelerants. It would just...burn. Our final verdict was 'inconclusive.' We just don't know."

"So you rubber-stamp it and turn it over to the insurance company to do with as they please?"

"Well, what else could we do? No rest for the wicked, you know? We get a dozen new cases coming in every hour. If something is open and shut, well, we shut it. What else can we do?"

The paramedic finished her ministrations with Kip and told Girardi we were clear to be released. He nodded, then moved away from us. What else could he do?

\*\*

Ten minutes later, we were all reconvened in my apartment, warming up to Teresa's coffee. The shock was starting to wear off a little, and I was angry—not just about what happened to Daniel, but at the brush-off I had gotten from Detective Girardi.

"Useless!" I whined to Kerry. "No, worse than useless—indifferent! He wasn't even willing to pretend to look beneath the surface..."



“No, he wasn’t. Because that’s our job, my sweet. God bless the fifth estate...”

“Well, I can cross that one off my to-do list at least.”

“That’s right. Think positively.”

Alex, meanwhile, was sucking this all in with unholy fascination. “So that’s the story you two have been working on? Helena’s father?”

“Well, let me lay it out for you, Alex. You tell me if you think there’s a story...”

I didn’t want to hear it again. I left them in the kitchen and joined Kip and Teresa on the couch. She had one hand around her mug and with the other was absently stroking circles onto Kip’s back. She looked up when she heard me approaching.

“Poor little thing,” she said. “He had such a scare...”

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t even know until we got here...Kerry was in the kitchen cleaning up from dinner, and then he comes out and wakes me and says we’re going for a walk...”

"You would have worried. If he'd told you, you would have worried."

"It's sweet that he would think of that, isn't it?" She sighed, and settled back into the cushions. "I know it's a little early to get my hopes up, but...it's sweet, isn't it?"

"Yeah. I hear you on that one."

She tried a smile, not quite unexhausted enough to pull it off. "You and Alex?"

"We went to the Top of the World. He had it all roped off..."

It took her a moment to make the connection. "Climbing? He took you climbing?"

"He did Garrett a favour. And...it was sweet too, like Kerry was. But it was so...so big, you know? It was like..."

"Like poetry? Like art? Like theatre?"

Of course. How could I have not made the connection earlier? That's why Teresa was holding back. That's why, to a lesser extent, I was holding back. Our dates had been picture-perfect—a little too picture-perfect. Kerry was a flawless archetype of old-fashioned gentleman: from the tubby argyle sweater to the cozy couches on which you could doze after a night of white wine and home cooking.

And Alex—he was theatre in motion. The playboy curls, the pretty boy persona. He had used his charm on Garrett, on Kerry, on Teresa. Used his charm to concoct a perfect evening, which played out for him exactly according to script...

“There is more to them,” I assured Teresa. “There has to be more to them...”

“Kind of a catch-22, isn’t it?” She mused. “I don’t want him to try too hard. But if he doesn’t try enough...”

“Yeah. Maybe the best thing for both of us is to take things one step at a time, you know? To just live in the moment...”

“And see if they join us there?”

“Something like that. You want to spend the night?”

“I think I’d better. This is an awesome couch, you know. I used to have one just like it...”

She was already half-asleep. I picked Kip off of her, sent him to get washed up, then tucked both of them in to their respective nests.

“Good night, sweet prince,” I whispered to Kip, pulling the blanket around his bony shoulders and picking up a spare one for Teresa.

“And good night, sweet friend. See you in the morning, hon.”

Then I went to kick the boys out. I needed sleep too.Chapter 23

Sunday morning, I woke with the sun to find Kip and Teresa still sleeping. I snuck through Kip’s little alcove without waking him, locked myself in the bathroom and had the longest shower I’d had all week. I washed my hair, twice. I conditioned it and did the hot oil thing. I came out half an hour later wrapped in a fluffy robe and feeling restored.

Teresa was up and about by then, and she was making pancakes and eggs. There were definite perks to having a relative who worked in the restaurant business. She looked much better today, less pale and better rested. Perhaps I had underestimated the stress she had been under this past week or so.

“So,” I said.

“Yeah. Oh, here, this is for you, Alex left it.”

It was his cell phone, with a note affixed to it via yellow sticky note, telling me he had some work to catch up on, to call him at the newsroom when I got finished with mine, and we could meet up later and go visit Daniel.

“So, how about you?” I asked Teresa. “You have any special plans for today?”

She added some oil to the pan and cracked another egg in it. “I don’t know. I told Jack I’d run the dinner shift. And Kerry might come by and check on me. He seemed kinda worried about me, after the way things ended last night...”

“Yeah. So, you’re going to meet him at Geshclepp’s?”

“Actually, I was sort of hoping I could meet him here. My computer’s still in the shop after that whole chocolate donut incident, and I need to check some stuff on-line.”

Teresa kept her computer in the kitchen so that she could download recipes from the internet. She had been in the process of double-checking the next step in a chocolate donut experiment and somehow her hand mixer’s on button got jammed and sprayed batter everywhere. Even a new keyboard hadn’t helped. She had somehow shorted out something.

“Sure, you can hang out, but I have errands to run. Do you mind if Kip stays here with you?”

She peeked into the alcove, where he was perched on his now-made bed and carefully studying the box of the jigsaw puzzle we had bought the other day.

"Hey, why not?" she said. "Looks like he has own plans. You have fun."

I loaded up my plate with breakfast goodies. I didn't tell her that my plans involved canvassing my father's old neighbourhood looking for clues as to his sanity.

\*\*

My father's old house had been in the older part of Mission, on the other end of the university and near the lake, which stretched to the other end of downtown along King Street. It was a short walk through campus, and I was there by eleven.

I didn't think it was too early to knock on doors on a Sunday. Most of this crowd was professors, and they tended to be workaholic early risers. I briefly wondered if I would run into Drs. Yost or Malafanto here.

I had grown up in the house my father had here. My mother had lived and died in it. As I neared the actual site of it, I felt my heart quicken. I should have brought someone with me. Alex? Kerry? But it was just another story, wasn't it? Just another angle I was pursuing in just another story...

Who was I kidding? it had stopped being just a story as soon as Kip was involved. As soon as I had seen Teresa cry. As soon as I had read the dedication in that cursed

albatross of a book and realized that my father still had loved me. Well, fine. It wasn't just a story as long as I still had grieving to do, and what better place to have my cathartic moment than the husk of the former life my father had been a part of?

I crossed to the west side of King and turned the corner onto Birch, my old stomping grounds. I wondered if I still owned this house. If the fire investigation was still tied up in insurance, he couldn't have sold the lot before he died. Maybe this would be an asset in his estate, for Kip and me? As I drew closer, I could faintly make out the stench of smoke, even now, months later. And I saw it: the burnt shell of a house, the frame still upright but barely, the exterior smudged like a charcoal drawing. Empty holes where the Windows had blown out. Drainpipe still clinging to the inky roof. And the front porch, oddly untouched by the singe the wood buckling from the waterlogging the fire hoses had subjected it to. As I stood, open-mouthed, still taking in the view, a man walked up beside me.

"Damn shame," he said.

I turned to him. "Excuse me?"

"I said it's a damn shame. Eyesore like that, stinking up the street for damn near four months..."

“They’re still investigating.” I said. “Can’t tear it down until they’ve done.”

“What’s to investigate? It was a gas leak, or faulty wiring, or a lit cigarette, who cares? Wreck like that, all it does is attract prak-playing kids, or homeless people.” he looked me up and down. “Or gawkers.”

“I’m not a gawker. This was my father’s house.”

“Oh yeah? I was never too big on the whole neighbours nonsense. Kept to myself. That’s how it should be.”

“So you never saw anyone come here? Anyone...I don’t know, suspicious, or interesting, or...I don’t know...”

“Wow, that is some terrible questioning. What are you, a cop? A journalist? Man, I don’t know. Karen Altman, you should talk to her. Two doors down? Damn busybody, if you ask me.”

I dimly remembered an Altman from days of yore, but her name had been Patricia. Perhaps this was a relative? I thanked the surly man for his time and followed his direction to a neat little bungalow a few doors away. I knocked, and a short, cute gilr about my age answered.

“Yes?”



“Karen Altman?”

“That’s me. And you are...”

“Helena Snowden. My father was...”

“Oh! I remember you. You used to live here, didn’t you? My mother bought girl scout cookies from you every year.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry, I don’t remember you.”

“I used to love with my dad, I was only here for weekends and Christmas. Then my mom got sick a few years back ...cancer. Nasty stuff. Anyway, I moved back in to help out with her, and...”

“Guy I talked to said you’re the eyes and ears around here?”

“Yeah, not much else to do when you’re cooped up all day with an invalid, right? It’s pretty much house, yard, porch except on the days when help is here. What can I do for you?”

I explained that I had some questions about my father’s life, and I was hoping she might be able to fill in a few missing pieces for me.

“Like what?”

“Well, it’s actually been a few years since I’ve seen him. And I’m sorry about that now. I had my chance to...to reconcile, I guess, and I kinda missed it. And...well, the picture I’ve gotten about how his life ended was pretty bleak. He lived in a slummy apartment with my little brother, kept to himself and drank a lot.”

“Really? Wouldn’t have pegged him for a drinker. Seemed to have plenty of people over when he lived here. A skinny man in a nice suit, and, oh, a woman...”

“Oh yeah?”

“Thin black hair, very skinny...”

That ruled out Michaela Yost, and Aunt Charlotte. Effie Malafanto, perhaps?

“Did the woman come alone? Or was she with a fat balding man with a ridiculous comic book moustache?”

“Sometimes she came with the man. Sometimes she came alone.” Karen laughed. “I figured she was either his sister or his mistress.”

Mistress was beginning to sound more and more likely. “But he did have a sister though,” I told Karen. I described Aunt Charlotte. “Do you remember her?”

"Oh, sure. She came on Sundays, like clockwork. Never saw her but for that."

I briefly described Michaela Yost, and for good measure, Teresa. No response on the latter, but she did remember a woman who looked like Yost. "She never came by herself though. She came with a man sometimes. Attractive, nice suit..."

Scott Olerud, maybe? That was a twist.

"And she came with that woman too. That maybe-an-affair woman."

Michaela with Effie Malafanto? It made sense, I supposed. Yost had seemed very familiar on the subject of Healthcliff Malafanto, calling him Cliffie, for example. Maybe it hadn't been the mister that she saw professionally? Maybe she had been seeing Effie? I was curious at this idea of some sort of twisted knights of the round table I was formulating with the players here. I could link Michaela with Catherine. I could now link her with Effie too. And Scott Olerud? I supposed a woman like Michaela might need a lawyer, what with all her charity involvements. Perhaps my father had referred her to Scott? Or perhaps she had referred him? There was something I was missing here. What wasn't I seeing?

I changed tacks. "Do you remember the fire?" I asked Karen.

"Oh, sure. Kind of a once in a lifetime event, that one."

"Uh huh. So was anything...I don't know, different? Did anything odd happen that week?"

"Well, the one thing I did kind of notice, the guys were around so much. Usually it was just the women who came. But the guys, moustache guy and nice suit guy, they were around a lot. And they came without the women."

That made sense. The book was coming out around that time. He would need Scott for that. And Heathcliff? That I wasn't sure about, but I was growing increasingly convinced that he was the key to this whole thing. I suddenly couldn't wait to talk to Kerry.

"Were any of them here the day of the fire?" I asked her.

She looked suddenly apologetic. "Mother had an MRI that day. I was at the hospital with her. When I came home, the trucks were already here..."

I thanked her for her time and wished her luck with her mother.

"Yeah," she said. "It's rough, but you know, talking to you

...you missed your chance with your dad, and I've still got my mom. That's something, isn't it?"

I headed for downtown, dialing the newsroom on Alex's phone.

\*\*

When I got to the hospital, I found both Alex and Kerry already ensconced in the waiting room. Kerry was paging through a file folder and making notes on a steno pad. Alex had his laptop computer open and was playing solitaire.

I returned the phone to Alex, then said to Kerry "I need to talk to you."

"Oh, hi, Helena."

"How's Daniel?"

"Unconscious, but stable. They told us we could see him if we wanted to, but there didn't seem much point in that."

"Not much point? He might still be able to hear us, you know. Or...or sense us. Even if he's not awake."

"So, do you want to go see him?"

I sat down queasily. "No. Not really. When he's...when he's

awake, maybe.”

“Good call.”

“So anyway, I wanted to talk to you. I went by his old house today, and...”

I filled Kerry in.

“Interesting,” he said.

“Interesting? Kerry, you’ve got to lean on Malafanto. He’s the key, I’m sure he is.”

He smiled. “Perhaps. But perhaps, my dear, you might be fixating on the wrong Malafanto? I did some background on the missus, and get this. Effie is a short form.”

“Short for what?”

He handed me a piece of paper. It was a flyer for an art gallery event that Effie Malafanto had been featured in. Her full name was printed prominently in bold gothic font.

Ophelia.

No way the Shakespeare professor wouldn’t fall for that. My grip tightened as I felt my breathing speed up.

“Now, we’ll have none of that,” said Kerry. He gently pried

my fingers off the paper, took it from me and stowed it back in his file.

“We should talk,” he said.

“Uh huh.”

“All of us. Alex too. A little group pow-wow, what do you think? Go over everything one more time and see if we can’t fill in a few blanks here.”

“Yes.”

“All right. Your place, then? Shall I pick up pizzas on the way?”

“I’ll ride with Alex,” I said.

He took in my shell-shock with a paternal grin. “I had assumed as much. Shall we?”

I let myself be led away. Chapter 24

I took Alex home with me and paced while we waited to Kerry to arrive with the pizza. Teresa had left a note that she’d had to leave for Geschlepp’s but she had taken Kip with her. That was fine. My world was spinning, and I was in no mood to play mother now. Alex snacked on cheesy crackers and watched me with concern or interest.

“You’ll wear out the floor, you know.”

“It’s a rental. I don’t care.”

He chomped another cracker, looked like he was going to say something snarky, then appeared to change his mind.

“Suit yourself, Helena.”

That almost made me break stride. “Suit myself? That’s all you’re gonna say about this?”

“Well, is there anything I could say right now that would actually slow you down?”

That was a point. Still, I was feeling defensive. “I have a lot on my mind, you know.”

“Uh huh.”

“And even if we do figure out what he was up to—a breakdown, or an affair, or whatever—we can’t print anything we can’t substantiate...”

“There you go. Now you’re thinking like a reporter again. Kerry will be proud.”

“Can I tell you a secret, Alex? I’m actually not that great a reporter.”



“What? Sure you are!”

“Oh, sure I am. Which is why I never left Mission after I finished school, right? Why I took the only beat Daniel would give me where I wouldn’t need to drive? Why I’ve spent a year and a half on fillers and profiles? Face it, Alex, I’m a hack—and this is a real story. Do you know how scary that is?”

“You have a unique mind with its own perspective, Helena. And Kerry...”

“He can handle the rest of it?”

“He can bring his unique mind and unique perspective to the story also.”

I resumed my pacing. “But what does that mean, anyway?”

“United we stand? Divided we fall?”

“It’s just so frustrating! I can feel that the pieces are all right in front of me, I just...don’t know how to put them together...”

“We’ve all been there.”

“So what do you do when that happens?”

"I get together a buddy or two, order a whack of pizzas and talk it all it until it makes sense to me. Or, sense enough that I have a next step, anyway."

"That's good. We're doing that."

"Uh huh. So are you gonna sit? Because you'll freak Kerry out if you keep that pace..."

I obediently sat.

"Great," said Alex, pushing away his bowl of cheesy crackers. "Now, while we wait, let's talk about MY story."

"Right. Um, not much to report on my..."

"I was trying to dig up dirt on Kincaid." Alex interrupted. "No luck so far. So whatever you've done, you're further ahead than me."

"I actually haven't worked on it much since that time you came to campus with me," I admitted. "Just some backgrounder stuff at the library."

"That'll be useful when we get the profile together on him. Let's not forget that, noble as our goal of helping the underdog might be, we do actually have a story to write."

"I was thinking we might want to hook Teresa up with our

friend at MPIRG,” I said. “If she needs a photogenic face for her union...”

“Who more photogenic? Good enough. Can you handle that?”

“Fine. And you?”

“Still on the hunt for Weir-Fiorio...word is she’s trying to get on the ballot for the bi-election in ward 6 now that Dunleavy’s stepped down.”

“But that’s next week!”

“Yes. And if she wins, isn’t this just the sort of constituent advocacy she’d eat up with a spoon? The poor downtrodden underdog against the evil empire?”

I had to admit, the plan made sense. I suspected one couldn’t just ‘start’ a union. Having an ally on the city council just might help grease the wheels before Kincaid did too much damage...

I started pacing again. “Where’s Kerry? Shouldn’t he...”

On cue, my phone rang and I buzzed Kerry up. I was getting goosebumps. We were close, I was sure we were...

“So?” I demanded.

Kerry juggled two pizza boxes and a bag of sodas. "Down, girl. Let me put this down first..."

The boys ate. I paced, and fretted, and went over my notes.

\*\*

Ten minutes later, Alex was still munching pizza on the couch while Kerry was wiping his fingers and spreading out his reams of paper on the floor in front of him.

I jumped straight in. "So am I right that the fire and his death are connected somehow?"

"One step at a time, Helena. If we begin with a chronological recap, what would you say the five key points are?"

"One, the fire. We know he was different before that happened. Karen Altman said he had people over..."

"Do we go further back?" asked Alex. "Say that point one is Helena and Teresa leaving?"

I thought back to how I had asked Teresa to explain it: to start with the moment everything changed.

"Yes," I said. "Point one, we leave."

“Okay. Now, I’d like to put Catherine at point two, because meeting her changed things, and I don’t just mean via Kip. Meeting Catherine brought Yost into his life, and I think it brought Effie in to.”

“He knew her through Heathcliff.”

“Yes. But she was friends with Catherine, wasn’t she? So that would bring her to his house, to his life...”

“Back up for a second,” Alex interrupted. “What about Yost? Was she just a colleague to him? A therapist? Or was she, like Effie, something more?”

“We can ask her that when Helena sees her again.” To me, he said “Can you track her down tomorrow?”

“I...I guess so. I mean, if we need...”

“I have a few things I would like to clarify. She might be the one to do it. Remember, Helena, that even once we have a theory, we will need to back it up.”

“What about this man Karen Altman said she saw Yost with all the time? It didn’t fit Malafanto’s profile, and the only other man my father really knew was Scott Olerud...but I didn’t get the vibes they were friends, you know? I mean, he’s a lawyer...”

“All right,” said Kerry. “One step at a time here. We’re putting Catherine as point two. I’ll concede the fire as point three, then. Let me tell you what I know about that.”

He recapped the police report for Alex, then pulled out another official-looking photocopy. “Now, here is where things get interesting. You know what this is?”

“What?”

“It’s the coroner’s report on the death of Effie Malafanto. Guess when she died.”

“Kerry...”

“Two days after your father’s house burned down. And guess what she died of.”

“Fire?” Alex guessed.

“Smoke inhalation. She had some scrapes and bruises too, consistent with landing on the pavement after jumping at great speed. They supposed she had been in a car accident and jumped out of her burning car.”

“They never made the connection with the fire at my fathers?”

“They wouldn’t have, because the hospital she was

admitted to was fifty miles away and two days after the fact.  
”

Alex leaned forward on his elbows, reading over Kerry’s shoulder. “That’s interesting,” he said. “And suspicious.”

“And how. Seems she was simply dropped off. A doctor went out for his break and found her lying in the ambulance bay, unconscious. She never woke up. They tracked down her husband thanks to a missing persons report he had filed for her, turned her over to the coroner, who then released her back to him...”

“So she was there for the fire. She didn’t jump out of a car, she jumped out of a window, because she was there.”

“So it would seem.”

“So...was the fire an accident, or wasn’t it?” Alex wondered. I mean, I can think of motive now. She was having an affair with him. He could have set it to get rid of her, or Malafanto could have set it to get rid of them both...”

“I’m not sure I would peg Malafanto for that. When the topic of his wife came up, he didn’t seem angry so much as...”

“Yes,” Kerry corrected. “He did.”

“He did?”

He rifled through his papers and came away with the copy I had made him of my notes from the visit I had with the professor. "You broke his heart, you know," he read. "You and the vixen.' Now, you assumed he meant Teresa here. What if he meant his wife instead?"

"That might also account for the changes after the fire," I mused. "The drinking, the depression...if he was grieving not just the fire itself, but the loss of his mistress..."

"Too bad he didn't leave behind any journals or papers or anything like that," said Alex. "Might give us an insight into what was going on here..."

Then it hit me, like a Riverside Shakespeare straight to the head. He did leave some papers. And I had taken them from his pit of an apartment in such a fugue that I hadn't remembered...

I lunged for my bag, dimly aware of Alex and Kerry saying my name in a worried tone. I took my laptop out, then upended the bag, pawing through the pens and the lip gloss and the bus tokens and the candy bar wrappers until I found it: a sticky clump of balled-up notebook paper, messy at the ends from where it had been ripped from a steno pad. I held them aloft like gladiator spoils.

"I found these," I said.



“Okay,” said Alex. He gently retrieved the mottled clump from my fingers, separated the pages and laid them out before us. “Let’s see...”

They were scraps, little torn-off corners and bits of larger pages. Were we missing some? Hard to tell. But the handful we were able to decipher were almost incomprehensible melanges of sentence fragments, some in regular English and some in Shakespearian.

ME, ME, ME. Remember: He's mad that trusts in the tameness of a wolf, a horse's health, a boy's love, or a whore's oath read one of them. Then underneath it, both scribbled and underlined, in a different pen: We that are true lovers run into strange capers; but as all is mortal in nature, so is all nature in love mortal in folly.

I picked up another fragment, the rip marks lining up with the section I had just put down:

I loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers could not, with all their quantity of love, make up my sum.

I sat back on my heels. “Wow. So he was having an affair with her.”

“Yes,” said Kerry. “And it looks like he felt pretty conflicted about it.”

“Doesn’t seem like he entirely trusted her,” Alex said. “Or trusted...her husband? This ME, what if it’s not a pronoun? What if it’s initials?”

“M is for Malafanto, E is for Effie...look at this one, margin note is MY...”

Two quotes on this one: I am a man more sinned against than sinning, then:

There is no following her in this fierce vein.

“Fierce vein...well, she was on him about Kip,” I said. “More sinned against...he was depressed?”

“He’s having this affair, and...well, can we guess that Heathcliff knew? He’s mad that trusts in the tameness of a wolf, a horse’s health, a boy’s love, or a whore’s oath. He told you the vixen broke your father’s heart. He knew?” Kerry guessed.

“I think we can safely say Malafanto knew. But this persecution complex here...the references to madness, to trust, to sin, to mortal folly and capers...I’m just not seeing Malafanto being mean enough. I mean, yeah, he was a jerk to me, but it was out of protectiveness for my father. He was mad at me for hurting him.”

Kerry picked up the next piece, and even I heard his sharp

intake of breath. "But he really wasn't fooling, Helena, look: your father was trying to work out the fire too..."

A single quote in a large, empty page:

Fire that's closest kept burns most of all.

"Hate to throw a wrench in your theory, but that sounds like he's implicating Malafanto, doesn't it? The legitimate one, the husband, keeper of the lady..."

"Maybe not," Alex interrupted. "If the vixen turned out not to be Teresa, maybe the mad man isn't who we first thought it was either. Maybe it isn't himself he's talking about."

In spite of the drinking? The slumming? And the Elizabethan fantasy world, the dead wife, the left wife, the mad wife, the mad son...was there really someone else here, someone even more out of touch, someone that scared even a wreck of a man like him?

"But who? Why am I not seeing, it Alex? Who?"

The two men traded glances, both reaching the conclusion together. Who was to say that my father had been Ophelia Malafanto's only sideline? Was there another lover waiting in the wings?

Kerry folded shut his file, eyeing us solemnly. "So who's

left, Helena? Who, out of our little cast of characters hasn't been accounted for?"

I shut my eyes, willing it not to be so. "Scott. Scott Olerud."  
Chapter 25

I hopped to my feet, already pacing again.

"What do we do?" I asked Kerry.

"Nothing, Helena."

"What?"

"It's Sunday. You're going to track down Yost and ask her what she knows? You're going to track down Scott and ask him if he tried to kill your father?"

"Come on, Helena," Alex said. "Like anyone's going to take a pile of half-psychotic poetry as proof of anything?"

I felt like I had been slapped. "This is my father you're talking about!"

"Helena..."

"Get out, right now. Both of you, get out."

Kerry reached out his hand toward me. "Helena, if we can just..."

“It’s not...just...a story...”

“Of course it’s not. Why don’t we...”

“Look, just go, all of you. I need to think about this. I need to figure out what I’m going to do...”

“Nothing, repeated Kerry as firmly as he could given my increasingly unsettling hysteria.

“And you get out most of all,” I shouted, poking Alex Calvin in the arm. “You think they won’t believe me? You think I can’t really pull this all together now, that I can’t make it something? I am not a hack!”

Kerry gripped me firmly by the shoulders. “Helena, listen to me. It doesn’t matter how smart we are. You know how this works. Underneath the...the confusion you’re feeling right now, you know how this works and you know what we have to do.”

“Get out, right now.”

“I will get out, after you understand how we proceed here. It’s Sunday night, Helena. You’re going to go to your stepmother Teresa’s to pick up your boy, and you are going to have a nice Sunday dinner with her. Maybe you’ll spend the night if she’ll have you. Then you’ll wake up in

the morning and take the boy to school.”

“Kerry...”

“I, in the meanwhile, have an appointment scheduled with our buddy Malafanto.”

“I should...”

“You should leave him to me, because you’ll be far too busy meeting with Professor Yost while this is going on. When that’s done, you find a pay phone, and you give me a call. That is the plan, Helena. Do you understand it?”

“I can borrow Alex’s cell phone,” I said.

“Oh? I thought you were mad at him.”

“I am. But he might earn some brownie points by loaning me his cell phone.”

“Nice try. Let’s go, Helena. Your brother is waiting for you...”

I was dismayed to find, when we got to Geshclepp’s, that Alex had apparently called Teresa and warned her about me. I found Kip happily ensconced in one of the corner booths, with a basket of French fries and a colouring book. And I found Teresa, already changed out of her

Geschlepp's uniform, sitting watch with him, waiting for me.

"I thought you were running the shift?" I asked Teresa.

"I traded with Jack."

"I thought he traded with you. And that's why you were supposed to run the shift."

She shrugged. "I traded back."

"They called you, didn't they? Told you I'd run off and do something stupid if you didn't keep an eye on me?"

"Something like that."

"Well, I won't," I said. As I sat down, I realized that this was not a lie. The stress of tonight's revelations was catching up to me. Glassy shock was settling in. I was in no mood to run off anywhere.

"Hey..." Teresa brushed back my hair with her fingers, all motherly concern. "You want to talk about it?"

"I want to talk about anything but 'it' if that's all right." I stole one of Kip's fries. "Are we still trying to use up the hamburger, or can I have a grilled cheese?"

She snapped her fingers, summoned a waiter and ordered

for me. I snagged another chip. “So, have you been in the mood these days to dole out an ass-kicking to Big Brother?”

I filled her in on the spikey-haired girl at MPIRG, who planned to thwart Kincaid’s anti-independent inspection tax by uniting the independents into a union. “This girl Ashley kicks butt, Teresa, she’ll do all the work. She just needs a figurehead, a well-respected entrepreneur who will have her name on the paperwork and look fiery for the media.”

“I can handle that,” Teresa said. “Could be fun. I do like playing with the media...”

“Teresa!”

“What? You haven’t given me enough grief this past week that I haven’t earned a little teasing?”

She ruffled my hair. “I love you, kid.”

I fluffed her ego back, then had my sandwich and took Kip home. I was tired. It had been a long week.

★★

I got up early the next morning and printed off Michaela Yost’s schedule off of her faculty page. Thank goodness I was a Mission College alum and could get into the faculty



timetables with only a password. It happened that her schedule jibed perfectly with mine today: she would be getting out of a first-period lecture about ten minutes after I finished dropping Kip off at school. I could sprint from Mission El and be there just in time to accost her on her way back to her office.

If Michaela Yost was surprised to see me, she hid it well. After an initial blink to collect her thoughts, she put on a warm smile. “Helena! I was just going to call you...”

“Oh?”

“I have a cheque for you...from the collection we took up for Kip.”

“Wow, thanks. Um, can we talk?”

I followed her into her office and shut the door for her, smiling sweetly. She looked back at me, baffled, then suspicious.

“What about?”

“Just that I was going through my father’s...affairs...”

At that, her face crumpled, and I rolled my eyes. “I actually meant that in the more prosaic, traditional sense. But since you’ve given me such a neat segue...”

She sighed. "What can I tell you? Your father was a ...complicated man."

"Complicated in a certifiable psychiatric way, or just in a regular way?"

"Oh, it wasn't insanity that governed him at all, Helena, it was guilt. He felt horribly guilty—for driving Teresa away, for driving you away. I didn't say this before because I didn't want to hurt you, but your leaving him, both of you leaving him, it marked him. Profoundly. Sadness, yes, at losing you both. But guilt too, because he knew that Teresa had been right. He never really had lived in her world. He had failed to connect with her. So he tried again, and through no fault of his own, he felt Catherine slipping away from him too..."

"Dr. Malafanto told me she had problems even before Kip was born."

"Yes. And your poor father...never was there a husband less equipped to deal with them. I tried to work with him on that. We were friends through Effie, Cliff's wife. She was a college roommate of mine and we had stayed in touch."

"And who better than the mistress to see that he was in over his head?"

“You say that so harshly. Effie was, for all her faults, a really kind spirit. She wanted to help him. It tore him up that he was feeling so...so disconnected.”

“Not like with her?”

“But that’s what tore him up the most. Here he was, finally experiencing the passion, the bond that he had lost Teresa for not giving to her. And he couldn’t even enjoy it. He was plagued by guilt that it was pushing Catherine even further somehow. That she...she sensed it. She knew. And the universe was punishing him for it by taking her away just as it had taken Teresa.”

“The universe didn’t take Teresa away from him.”

“I know, but Helena, the psyche doesn’t always process reason. And he was hurting just as badly as Teresa had.”

“And Kip?”

“Well, he didn’t come along until later. But I think part of the reason your father was so resistant to getting him help was simply relief. If Kip was locked away in his own little world somewhere, your father had a free pass. He didn’t have to connect, because there was nothing to connect to.”

“What a heartless way to raise a child.”

“Oh, but he didn’t look at it that way. He wasn’t ‘raising’ a child so much as ‘keeping’ a child. Making sure this one didn’t get away too.”

The level of delusion here was staggering. How had she not gotten him help?

“So where did it all start changing?”

“Where else but with Catherine? She had her breakdown, as you know...and Effie got spooked. Not that it was her fault, the way your father thought it was his, mind you. But I think it hit a little too close to home for her. She had inclinations to...to psychiatric challenges...”

“You speak as though Catherine was contagious. First my father, then Kip, then Effie...”

“It’s not that it’s contagious so much as that it’s a horrible thing, the way mental illness impacts more than just the sufferer. Effie got scared. She tried to pull away from him.”

And he saw yet another woman he couldn’t hold on to, and it drove him over the edge? I couldn’t see it. I was growing to love Kip. I knew in my heart that my father had loved him too. And his dedication, in the book, to us—that was sentiment. Nostalgia. That wasn’t insanity. In the scary outpouring we had found last night, there had been hysteria, true. But there had also been a measured attempt

to find some real answers. There was definite truth in the story Yost was telling me. But it also felt too easy to blame Catherine for being sick. Too easy to blame my father for being dead. Who was still alive that she was protecting?

It hit me then: so obvious that I couldn't believe I had missed it. If Effie Malafanto could cheat with more than one lover, who is to say that either of those cheaters would be any more faithful than she had been?

I leaned forward, keeping my face blank and controlled. "So, tell me about Scott Olerud, Michaela."

Score one for the hack.

"Quite a game of musical partners, wasn't it?" I said. "Effie with Heathcliff, Effie with Doug...then Effie with Scott and Scott with you. Did poor Catherine ever get to play?"

She was practically bawling. "No."

"Tell me you didn't scheme with any of these losers to get that poor, sick woman out of the way."

"Goodness, no! Catherine really was sick, Helena. She needed help."

"And tell me you didn't scheme to get Effie out of the way either?"

“Goodness, no! I tried to help her, Helena. I was the only one who...”

“Who tried to save her life? Who saw her jump out of that burning window and left her at the doors of the emergency room so that she’d have a fair shot?”

“No, it didn’t work that way! I wasn’t the villain, I was the hero! I tried to save Effie. And I was the one who saved Kip, did they tell you that part? I wrapped him in a wet blanket and carried him out the cellar door!”

“Right. Cause you just happened to be there the day the fire spontaneously started of its own free will? Come on, Michaela. Who was the brains behind this whole thing? Cliff?”

“Goodness, no! Cliff was much too afraid of...of...”

“Of Scott?”

She seemed to lose forty pounds in an instant. “It’s not what you think.”

“No?”

The door latch delicately clicked open. “No,” said a voice. “Not what you think at all, my dear.”

Scott Olerud let himself in, gave Michaela a tiny peck on the cheek, then pulled a gun out of his waistband and leveled it at me.

"Got a call from Cliff about a dozen minutes ago. Seems your associate was nosing around about me."

"Kerry? Is he..."

"I haven't the foggiest. Cliffie is harmless as a fluffy bunny, and about as bright as one too as far as his people-reading goes. So unless your friend has been hit by a bus ...am I to assume we should expect him soon?"

"He knew I was coming here."

"Then I shall have to kill two people instead of one, which would be a shame. I really did like you, Helena."

"And you didn't like Effie? Or my father?"

"It's not that I didn't like them, so much as...well, they just weren't good people, do you understand? They were dysfunctional. They were disturbed. So I had to...to take care of them. To stop them before they hurt someone else."  
"

"Right. Cause you just care about people so much?"

"It's why I became a lawyer, Helena. So I could help people. So I could do good for them. I know your father's death has thrown you a little, but can't you see that you are better off without him? That your world will be stronger, safer, more secure without the threat of your father coming along to screw it up again?"

"You're saying you did this for me?"

"I did it for everyone. There are people out there who are just drains on everyone around them. They are cancers. Quicksand. It would be wrong of me to let these people go around and keep ruining lives..."

"There have been others?" I squeaked.

"Only a few. I must admit though, I have never seen a life as tough to cleanse as yours. Both of them, I missed on the first try. I did get your father later..."

"Wait, both of them? You mean...you mean Kip?"

"First that idiot Effie chooses to save her worthless hole of a lover over herself and your father gets away. Then that altruistic boss of yours pushes Kip to safety..."

"The hit and run, that was you? But Kip's just a kid..."

"Oh, yes. A kid who is not quite...not quite there, is he?"



He'll need therapy. He'll need expensive medication. He'll be a drain on your life and your wallet until the day you die.

”

“You don’t get to decide that for me!”

“Don’t I?” He picked up the gun again, waving it around.

“You know, if you could only bring yourself to see the wisdom of my work...I’m doing a noble thing here, you know. If you could see it...really see it...I might not have to kill you. I really do like you.”

“You sick, raving son of a bitch...”

I heard a pop as he flicked the trigger, then sirens. Then Kerry was beside me, his tape already handed over to the police, the microphone he had used to eavesdrop lying abandoned on the floor like a dead body.

Epilogue

Two weeks later, I sat in Geschlepp’s in my Sunday best, the paper in front of me. I had just come from the courthouse with Aunt Charlotte to finalize Kip’s custody arrangement. I had to miss Scott’s arraignment to do it, and I had been whining about it Teresa all morning.

“I bet they sent Alex Calvin to cover it, too,” I seethed. “That twit...”

She brought me another coffee. “So, he’s a twit again? I

thought we liked him...”

Weir-Fiorio had won the bi-election and he had been busy cleaning up the PHO story for days. He had sent flowers to congratulate me on bagging a scoop and narrowly escaping Scott's poorly aimed bullet. But I hadn't talked to him since my near-death experience, and he had yet to apologize for refusing to trust in my journalistic skills. Never mind that they had come through on sheer dumb luck this time, they were there and he had slighted them, and he was not getting back into my good graces until he groveled.

I explained this to Teresa as she nodded patiently, then drizzled more syrup on her pancakes. “Yeah. Well, big day for you. I'm just sorry Charlotte couldn't join us for the celebration.”

“Yeah, I bet you are.”

“What was it she had? An errand to run?”

“Lawyers. Something about the insurance claim on the fire, I think. And don't think I don't know what you're doing. You just want her here so you can show Kerry off.”

“Well, we went to the mall together. That's a step, isn't it?”

“Depends. Did you buy him anything?”

“Two polo shirts. I’m hoping to slowly but surely wean him off the argyle.”

“Then it’s a step.”

“So what’s happening with your lawyer situation, anyway? Wasn’t he kind of trumped up of criminal charges this very morning?”

“Well, yeah. But our buddy Ash at MPIRG has just been hired on for her articling gig at the same firm, and she’s agreed to take on my poor orphaned brother and me pro bono. Aunt Charlotte isn’t thrilled about getting a newbie, even a supervised one, but she couldn’t really argue with ‘free’ exactly.”

“No, I bet she couldn’t.”

I was helping myself to a slice of bacon off Teresa’s plate when Jack came over with the mobile phone and plopped it in front of me.

“Hello?” I said.

“Helena? It’s Kerry. How’d it go today?”

“Great. Kip’s all squared away, just having some brunch with Teresa...”

“Oh, yeah?” I held the receiver away from my ear as he made smooching noises into the phone.

“Listen, Hel, I just came from some meetings, and...well, it looks like Daniel isn't coming back. I talked to him yesterday, and he wants to transfer to a rehab place near his parents. I think he's looking for a change...”

“Do you know when he leaves? I was gonna stop by...”

“You have time. Helena, they've named me editor.”

“But you already have a job. With another paper.”

“This is a better job.”

“Right.”

“Which leads me to the point of this little conversation. I'm doing some restructuring, and I want you on my team. How does being part of the inaugural Mission Review Investigative Team sound to you?”

“I make more money freelancing.”

“Yes, but there's a health plan. And three weeks paid vacation.”

It sounded tempting, but there was something about his

phrasing that worried me. "Team means there'll be other people, doesn't it?"

"Well, other person, anyway. It's really more of an investigative duo, if you want to get technical."

"Do I even want to know who the other person is?"

"Oh, come on, let's not be immature about this. You do work well together, you know. Even if he is a tiny bit of a twit sometimes."

"Kerry..."

"You pick your own assignments, and you still write filler for me, at your regular freelance rate, any time you want to. And I'll buy you a cell phone."

"As if no were ever an option. Thanks, Kerry."

I hung up the phone and turned to Teresa. "Either the universe is punishing me for ever coasting, or I've just been promoted."

"Helena!"

"I know, I know, yay me. No mushy, Teresa. Did I mention the part about who my new partner is?"

“You didn’t have to. He’s got his nose pressed up to the window waiting for you to give him the thumbs up.”

I stalked out of Geschlepp’s and railed on him. “Just what do you think you are doing?”

Alex bounced in unrestrained smugitude. “Coming to pick my new partner up for the first day of our illustrious reign?”

“Apologize first,” I demanded. “For ever doubting me.”

“You are so adorable when you stomp.”

“Alex!”

“All right! I apologize for ever doubting that in the absence of factual evidence you would manage to pull dumb luck out of your adorable behind and nail the story.”

“Alex!”

“You can do it again, can’t you? I mean, the next time we have to go off to confront cold-blooded insane killers half-cocked, and with no backup?”

“Shut it, Alex, I have a partner now. I’ll always have back-up.”

“Aww. Did you just get mushy with me?”

“Do you want me to smack you? Do you actually want that to happen right now?”

“Look, I really am sorry, Helena. And for what it’s worth, the finished story was anything but dumb luck. It was genius, babe. You really are good.”

“And this surprises you because...”

“Because you’re so god-damned adorable?”

I sighed. “All right. I forgive you. Tabula rasa, clean slate, it’s all good.”

“Blank slate.”

“Excuse me?”

“Tabula rasa. It means blank slate, not clean slate. Looks like somebody’s not as good at their Latin as they are at their Elizabethan.”

“Okay, can we just set a ground rule right now? No Shakespeare. No poetry with my name in it. And no show-offy stunts with foreign languages, are we clear?”

“That’s three ground rules.”

“Be that as it may.”

“So, we have a story to dig up,” he said. “Any hot tips?”

“I’m still in my court clothes. First, I go back to my apartment, and change.”

“But I like you just the way you are.”

“And no song lyrics either!”

“Whatever. So, I have my car around back. You want a ride?”

It was still early, and the streets were empty and calm. I looked up at the sunlight, taking it all in. My new burdens. My new life. My new boundaries.

When I looked at Alex again, my smile was confident this time.

“Thanks,” I said. “I think I can find my own way home from here.”

THE END

(Quotations from Shakespeare Used in the Story)

## Chapter



Quote

Source

6

Think but this, and all is mended.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Epilogue

8

Good night, sweet prince,

And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.

Hamlet

Act 5, Scene 2

9

Doubt thou the stars are fire;

Doubt that the sun doth move;

Doubt truth to be a liar;

But never doubt I love.

Hamlet

Act 2, Scene 2

11

Who is it that can tell me who I am?

King Lear

Act 1, Scene 4

13

What revels are at hand? Is there no play to ease the anguish of a torturing hour?

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Act 5, Scene 1

13

Why should Titania cross her Oberon?

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Act 2, Scene 1

13

Stay, gentle Helena, hear my excuse. My love, my life, my soul fair Helena.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Act 3, Scene 2

13

A man may see how this world goes with no eyes.

King Lear

Act 4, Scene 6

11

How hard it is to hide the sparks of nature!

Cymbeline

Act 3, Scene 3

20

Now should I kiss my father; well, he weeps on. Now come I to my mother: O, that she could speak now like a wood

woman! Well, I kiss her; why, there 'tis; here's my mother's breath up and down. Now come I to my sister; mark the moan she makes. Now the dog all this while sheds not a tear nor speaks a word; but see how I lay the dust with my tears.

Two Gentlemen of Verona

Act 2, Scene 3

20

I have taught him, even as one would say precisely, 'thus I would teach a dog.'

Two Gentlemen of Verona

Act 4, Scene 4

20

O, when she's angry, she is keen and shrewd! She was a vixen when she went to school; And though she be but little, she is fierce.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Act 3, Scene 2

20

I to the world am like a drop of water That in the ocean  
seeks another drop, Who, falling there to find his fellow  
forth, Unseen, inquisitive, confounds himself.

The Comedy of Errors

Act 1, Scene 2

20

Angels and ministers of grace, defend us! Be thou a spirit  
of health or goblin damn'd, bring with thee airs from  
heaven or blasts from hell, be thy intents wicked or  
charitable, thou comest in such a questionable shape that  
I will speak to thee.

Hamlet

Act 1, Scene 4

20

Out, damned spot! Out, I say!

Hamlet

Act 5, Scene 1

20

We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep...

The Tempest

Act 4, Scene 1

22

Good night, sweet friend...

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Act 2, Scene 2

24

We that are true lovers run into strange capers; but as all is mortal in nature, so is all nature in love mortal in folly.

As You Like It

Act 2, Scene 4

24

He's mad that trusts in the tameness of a wolf, a horse's health, a boy's love, or a whore's oath.

King Lear

Act 3, Scene 6

24

My only love sprung from my only hate...

Romeo and Juliet

Act 1, Scene 5

24

I loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers could not, with all their quantity of love, make up my sum.

Hamlet

Act 5, Scene 1

24

I am a man more sinned against than sinning.

King Lear

Act 3, Scene 2

24

Fire that's closest kept burns most of all.

Two Gentleman of Verona

Act 1, Scene 2