

Chapter 1

Eileen was in pain, disoriented. Every step felt like an enormous weight on the rustling leaves, as she hobbled across the dark, densely wooded trail, as fast as her limping feet could carry her.

Jesus Christ! What the hell is happening?

Just last week, Eileen had planned out her long-awaited trip to Scotland where she had spent much of her childhood in a little farmhouse north of Edinburgh. That was twelve years back, but she remembered it all so vividly - the rolling hills, the open countryside, her long walks by the lagoon munching on grandma's delicious scones. Her British Airways ticket was ready, leaving right after Labor Day - just three weeks away. At twenty-seven, this would be her first big vacation, her trip down memory lane, and, hopefully, one of many more to come.

But that was last week.

Right now, Eileen was running for her life. Breathless, her heart pounding a mile a minute, and lungs just about to explode.

The fluid from her bleeding hands had created wavy and uneven dark red streaks down the length of her pink sweat pants, oozing on to her socks and on the graveled path, forming an orderly trail for her captor to follow. The pain was excruciating. And getting worse by the minute.

Perhaps if she kept moving, she could reach the end of the trail to Shady Grove Street, across the creek, and flag a passing motorist for help. She knew the jogging trails of Trabuco Canyon like the back of her hand, and could easily find her way, even in the

dark. But could she make it that far in her condition? Eileen had jogged to the creek a million times. An easy ten-minute jog. But today, it seemed miles away.

She frantically turned back to see the progress of her captor, straining to hear footsteps over her loud panting and hammering heart.

Nothing. Just the wind whistling through the canyon, playing tricks with her ears.

Had she lost him? Had he given up?

Unlikely.

The moon hid behind the clouds again, sweeping the woods into a creepy darkness, making it harder for her to watch her step.

Oh God! How much further? I'm not going down, she thought. No, not like this.

Suddenly, Eileen heard the sound of gushing water ahead. The creek. She pushed herself harder. *I can do it.*

Then she saw the bridge some thousand or so feet away. Finally, a scintilla of hope. She picked up the pace and limped rapidly.

Faster, faster, she said to herself. She was almost there, just around the corner. *I'm going to live. I'm going to make it.* The silent words in her head egged her on.

Just five hundred feet away.

But as luck would have it, in the next instant, with the whole world just within her reach, Eileen stepped on a pine cone, lost her footing, and tumbled full length to the ground with a loud thud, her back taking the brunt of the fall, as a piercing pain shot throughout her body. She wanted to scream, cry, howl at the top of her lungs, but no sound came out. Unable to move, she closed her eyes and breathed in the foul odor of blood - her own blood - mixed in with sweat. When she finally tried to hoist herself up, she couldn't. It hurt. It hurt like bloody hell.

In the distance, a pair of bright headlights moved in her direction. A car. *Here! Right next to the creek. Please!*

But the motorist wouldn't see her, not with all the brush around her. *Or did he?* For a tiny hopeful moment, it appeared as if he was slowing down. Stopping, maybe?

No. It was just in her head. If only she had made it to the road, if only she had the slightest strength to draw his attention. She sighed as the red lights of the vehicle faded away into the darkness.

Her heart suddenly jumped at the sound of the leaves crackling nearby. Her captor. He had hunted her down and was moving deliberately in her direction, a triumphant smirk on his face. His eyes sparkled as he took his time to get to her side. Even in the dark, there was something very telling about his expression. Anticipation, the thrill of the kill.

His lips moved, but Eileen was too panicked to make out the words. Suddenly she felt faint. The trees, the moon, everything around her was slowly fading away, except a dim silhouette in the distance. *Mom?* Was she hallucinating? She shuddered. A chill went down her spine even as the warm Santa Ana winds blew through the canyon.

Eileen remained frozen. Helpless, scared out of her mind, she watched her captor raise his arm.

No, no, no. Please! It was no use. *This is it, she thought. Oh, God! This is the end.* She closed her eyes for the longest second of her life, and then she felt it. The immense blow on her head, heavy and hard.

The next instant, the whole world disappeared into darkness.

Chapter 2

I didn't know what woke me up - the blinding glare peering from the small opening in the drapes or the nauseating rumbling from the pit of my stomach.

I wasn't much of a drinker, but probably had one too many at the firm's holiday party the night before. At around 11:30 p.m., Jake had led the rowdy crowd from the Rainbow Grill in Newport Beach to the jam-packed Charisco's Bar, down the street. After that, much of the night was just a distant blur.

A red light on the nightstand caught my eye. Emails, this early? *You've gotta be kidding!* I reached for the BlackBerry, hoping to God it was just spam.

It was. Orbitz announcing last minute getaways, one email from Nolo Press, marketing some legal publications, and another from Groupon.

The only email of interest to me, nestled somewhere in between the spam, was a notice from Judge O'Shea's clerk of the Federal District Court in the Central District of California continuing the Case Management Conference in the *Nicholas Hotel* case to January. That was after the holidays, and that suited me just fine.

Moaning, I finally stumbled out of bed, slowly dragging myself toward the bathroom, the rumbling feeling getting stronger every second. Sprawling over the toilet, nausea consumed me and I thought for a moment I was going to spill out my entire guts. But fortunately, the feeling passed.

I stared at my image in the mirror. Ordinarily, a good-looking thirty-four year old, today I looked like I'd been hit by a bus.

I took my time in the warm shower and just as I got out, my cell phone buzzed. The caller ID said Jake Stark, which instinctively brought a smile to my face.

Jake had joined Stone & Associates as a law clerk a few years back, just when I had opened shop after my decade-long service at a prestigious downtown law firm. I had taught him the ropes, painstakingly at first, but it got easier - mostly because of Jake's natural flair for litigation and his unbeatable can-do attitude. He had stuck with the firm, even after passing the bar two years back, and I knew I could always count on him any time - day or night.

"Hello Jake, you're up bright and early today," I greeted.

"Bright and early? Looks like someone's been sleeping in."

I looked at my watch. 11:05 a.m. already. "Holy shit! I didn't realize it was this late."

"Better believe it, Alec. You're doing okay? You didn't look that great when we left last night and I was a bit worried."

"Well, I'm still not looking great. Thanks to you," I moaned.

"Hey, don't blame me. I wasn't the one ordering the kamikaze shots."

Kamikaze shots? Me? A wine-and-beer guy? Jesus Christ, what was I thinking? Of course, that explained the queasy rumbling and my bigger-than-Godzilla headache.

"Look, just get a bite to eat, gulp down a tumbler of orange juice. You'll be as good as new," Jake advised as if he were a pro. "Trust me, I've been there. And if that doesn't work, just pull out your litigation files and that'll surely wake up your workaholic mind."

Jake was right. For me, weekends were usually all work and no play.

"Thanks Jake. I think I'll survive."

"Take care, boss. I'll see you on Monday," said Jake. "Bright and early," he added with a chuckle.

Food definitely sounded invigorating - the empty refrigerator, not so much. So I jumped into my car and drove up to the plaza a few blocks away, pulling up in front of a crowded Benny's Bagels.

The young man at the counter greeted me with a cheerful smile.

"Good morning, Mr. Stone. What'll it be?"

"Good morning, Tommy. The usual." I replied. The "usual" was a garlic toasted bagel with jalapeño cream cheese and regular coffee. I should have taken Jake's suggestion and ordered orange juice, but some people just need the caffeine.

After briefly chatting with Tommy, I grabbed my food and the *Orange County Review* from the counter and headed toward the only empty table on the patio. I settled down next to the elderly lady, a regular at Benny's, engrossed in her crossword puzzle - who immediately shot a leave-me-alone glare from the corner of her eye. I willingly obliged.

I sifted through the newspaper, looking for the Sports Magazine that was buried between the numerous holiday sale advertisements at department stores. With just fourteen shopping days left, the stores were on a rampage to push their merchandise. Clothing and electronics topped the list again this year, and in the toy world, Rocko, the ugly rabbit with outrageously gigantic ears, was in the running for first place in the nation's newest craze award.

Being quite the online shopper, I had little interest in the ads, and I didn't have a big shopping list either. No siblings and not much by way of family, at least not anymore. After my mother had succumbed to breast cancer when I was barely one, my father, Arthur Stone, an English professor at the University of California in Irvine, had practically raised me single-handedly. We shared a special bond and still talked about old times, at least in those instances when my father actually recognized me, which were few and far between. It was hard for me to see him suffer through dementia - but mostly to see our bond dying a slow death each passing day.

Although, my father *had* seen happier days when he had remarried. Twelve blissful years with Angela. Until Angela's horrible accident.

I scanned through the newspaper as I nibbled on my bagel. Just as I was turning to the Calendar section, a headline at the bottom right corner of the newspaper gripped my attention.

ORANGE COUNTY SERIAL KILLER PLEADS GUILTY

By Katrina Ripley

One of Orange County's most sadistic serial killers, who terrorized the community with his torturous slayings, pleaded guilty at his arraignment hearing Friday to three counts of first degree murder.

Jeffrey Canter, 34, nicknamed, the Rose Collector, was arrested in November 2010 at his home in Garden Grove, California, for allegedly stalking Jennifer Price, Pauline Morales, and Eileen Robertson, and then brutally killing them.

For a long moment, I stared blankly at the newspaper. *Eileen Robertson!* The name brought back a gush of unsettling memories. The story had traumatized all of Orange County, while the serial killer had gone berserk with his three-month killing spree. But for me, the story hit even closer to home.

The news piece described how Canter stalked his victims in the night, and then sadistically slaughtered them, but not before taking his time to crush their knuckles into smithereens with a heavy object that police surmised was a hammer. After apparently watching for several minutes the pain in the victims' eyes, and enjoying their screams muffled beneath the duct tape, he brutally killed them by finally smashing the hammer into their foreheads.

On each victim's bare neck, Canter placed a red rose, which looked even redder - with blood dripping from the petals on to the long stem that extended down from each victim's cleavage to her belly button. The police had not discerned the import of the rose, but it had immediately become the impetus for Canter's moniker.

Pictures of the naked bodies had splattered all over the media. All mutilated, bathed in blood, with faces too disfigured for a positive identification. Police had resorted to dental records or fingerprints, that is, if the fingers were still intact.

I stopped reading. The queasy feeling in my stomach had returned.

Only this time, not from the hangover.

Chapter 3

It was a hectic Monday morning at Stone & Associates. So what else was new? Business as usual. Two things I loved about my firm: The loyal and ever-growing stream of clients - recession or not - who had no qualms about my hourly billing rate. And my goofy, but equally loyal, staff without whom I wouldn't last even a minute.

Speaking of goofy, Jenny trotted into my office with the mail, all meticulously date-stamped and logged into the firm's docketing system. I took a quick glance. Hmm. Nothing unusual. Bills and junk mail. I handed the stack back to Jenny and, as she started toward the door, she turned back and remarked, "After the party last Friday, I didn't think you would be back in business so soon."

Jenny had worked with me for the past three years and she was what you would call a "super assistant." Without her, the place would be a whole lot of chaotic nothing. She kept everyone on their toes, including me, and managed the office like she was the new sheriff in town.

"No more partying. You know what they say, lawyers gotta keep billing," I said.

"Good mantra, Alec. I'll be sure to chant that to Jake and Allison. Seems to me they need it more than you do," Jenny said, as she walked back toward her cubicle.

I smiled to myself. I could just picture her chanting around the office, especially to Allison Chang, the newest software-engineer-turned-law-clerk, who was green and seemed genuinely terrified of getting in Jenny's way.

After the 9:00 am Monday morning staff meeting, I locked myself in my office to enter my time for the past week and catch up on the firm's billings. December 13 already and I had still not mailed out the monthly invoices.

An hour into my work, I was interrupted by the buzzing of the intercom.

It was Jenny.

"Alec, there's a Mr. Robertson here to see you. Do you know who he is? I don't show him on my calendar."

"I'm not expecting anyone. What's he here for?"

"Won't say. Says he knows you. His name's Ken."

Ken Robertson? I knew of only one Ken Robertson. But why would he want to see me?

I had met Ken Robertson precisely twice, both tragic occasions.

The first was two years back in the Presbyterian Hospital when Angela, my step-mother, had the fatal accident. A drunk driver, driving the wrong direction on I-5, had collided with her car head on. Ken had hurried to the hospital upon hearing the dreadful news about his sister, but he had been too late.

My second encounter was more recent, just a few months back at Eileen's funeral service at Forest Lawn, a private ceremony limited to just a small group of family and friends. I remembered awkwardly murmuring words of consolation to Ken, who was appropriately dressed in a black suit and grey tie, visibly distressed and choked up with emotion. It had been just too much for him – first his sister and then his niece, his last blood relative.

And now here he was in my office. For what? I couldn't say.

"Why don't you show him to the conference room?" I told Jenny. "He may be here for some legal help, some small routine matter probably."

Little did I know that the 'small routine matter' would turn my world upside-down and hurl me into one of the wildest, heart-pounding, roller-coaster rides of my life!

Chapter 4

I immediately recognized the short man in his fifties, who warmly greeted me in the conference room. Round face, receding hairline, and a slight bulge in the tummy.

“Ken Robertson,” he said, holding out his hand to me. “I don’t know if you remember me.”

“Of course, I do. Please have a seat.”

“Pardon me for barging into your office without any notice. It took me quite some time to locate you. I came as soon as I learned of your whereabouts.”

I wondered why it would be so hard to locate a lawyer listed in the phone book and whose website popped up as the first Google hit when searching for ALEC STONE. Maybe web-surfing wasn't his thing. I let it go and simply said, “I had the morning open, so things worked out.”

Just then, Jenny walked in with a bottle of Perrier for Ken and a cup of coffee for me. After we settled down at the conference table, Ken opened up.

“It’s been difficult these last few days, Alec. May I call you Alec?”

“Of course. We're almost family, you know.”

I searched for some conviction in my voice. I barely knew this guy and here I was calling him family. Of course, all these years, Ken had been close to Angela and my father, and the trio would occasionally hang out at the bowling alley or, more often, the *Huntsman’s Irish Bar*, reminiscing about the past, planning out their retirement...

“How’s your dad?” he asked politely.

“Hanging in there. Some days are better than others.”

Ken nodded. "I visited him during my last trip here. Can't say he recognized me. But maybe it's better for him this way. He was close to Eileen and I know this would've killed him. It's hard enough losing her, but under these circumstances, it's simply horrendous."

Ken was right. Perhaps my father was better off not knowing the truth about Eileen. After his marriage to Angela, he had grown quite fond of Eileen, the baby in the family, always cheerful and vigorous, while I was the mature one. My father felt blessed to have Eileen, a daughter he never had.

As for me, I never had a chance to really know Eileen. Or Ken for that matter. I was either away at college in Michigan or later serving my employment sentence at the law firm, and my occasional encounters with Eileen at family events and holiday gatherings had been, let's just say, unremarkable.

Still, she was my step-sister, my family, and her abysmal death had left me in shock. *How could it not?* Hearing about the tragedy at the hands of a serial killer and deciphering every atrocious detail through the press, over and over again. The media has such an uncanny way of harping on the goriness, the brutality.

Ken talked for a while, first about my dad, then about Eileen, and it was obvious he had still not made peace with her horrible fate.

"It's all just unspeakable," I said. "But at least, they caught the son of a bitch."

"Yeah, and it looks like he'll rot in the slammer, too. I met with the assistant district attorney a few days back. Nice young fella. He was hell-bent on getting Canter confined to his cell for the rest of his miserable life. He's looking to get back-to-back life sentences."

"Life sentences? Why no death penalty?"

"Seems to me that was part of the plea agreement."

"Good for him," I said. "People like Canter have no business walking around on the streets." Ken swallowed a surging tear, as he shook his head in agreement. A bit embarrassed with his show of emotion, he wiped his face with a tissue, blew his nose, and quickly composed himself.

I was still waiting to hear why Ken had come to see me all the way from New York, where he lived. It came finally.

"I know you're a busy man, Alec. So let me get to the point. As it turns out, Eileen appointed me as the executor of her estate, which, I'm finding out, is quite an undertaking. Cleaning up loose ends with her assets and affairs isn't as easy as it sounds. Anyway, one of her assets is the Trabuco Canyon family home, where Eileen lived in her last few years, thanks to Angela and your dad. They always looked out for her, bless their hearts!"

He paused to take a sip of his Perrier.

"You may know this already," he continued, "Eileen only had a life estate in the home. Upon her death, the fee estate in the property transfers to Arthur's surviving child, free and clear."

I nodded, knowing what was coming.

"What I'm saying, Alec, is that you're Arthur's only surviving child and now the sole owner of the home." Ken fumbled through his briefcase to pull out a set of silver keys.

There was a long pause in which I tried to take it all in. The house had a lot of sentimental value for me. It was the same house in which my father had spent some of his happiest days with Angela. And now, it was mine under the most dreadful, unimaginable circumstances.

I got up to refill my cup. More than the coffee, I needed a moment to compose myself.

"I've known about the deed, of course," I said as I took my seat again at the table. "It's just that, I'd really expected to inherit the property in my sixties or seventies, if at all. Not so soon, not like this."

"What can I say, Alec, you never expect things like this to happen. But they do. First, the drunk driver and now this bastard. Such is the call of fate."

“Indeed,” I said, feeling quite lost for words. I didn’t want harp on the topic any longer, afraid it would further upset Ken – and me - so I hurriedly picked up the keys Ken had laid on the table.

“You need help with your executorship issues?” I asked him.

“I think I'm under control so far. I could use a hand, though, in navigating through the legal mumbo jumbo to get real estate deed recorded,” pleaded Ken.

“Of course. That shouldn't be a problem,” I said.

“Another favor, I ask of you, Alec, if I may. All of Eileen’s stuff is still at the house. I sure would like your help in sorting through her things. I tried to do it, but it was just too painful for me.”

The pain was still apparent on his face and I tapped Ken's hand lightly, with an assured gesture. “Look, why don’t we leave the home as is for now. There's no reason to disturb anything just yet. It’s not like I plan to dispose of it and disappear somewhere. Tell you what. I'll go up there in the next week or so and take a look around. Then we can talk and see what needs to be done. That work for you?”

“It does, it sure does.” Ken seemed relieved.

Chapter 5

The rest of the day was less eventful and, by late evening, I was caught up with the client billings, but thoughts of Eileen and Ken lingered.

At about eight, I decided to call it a day. Jake was still in the office finishing up his motion to dismiss to be filed by the end of the week.

“Don’t work too hard, Jake,” I said, as I passed his office.

Jake looked up over the ton of legal treatises he had laid randomly on his desk. “Okay, just remember those words when you’re reviewing my draft.”

I laughed as I began to walk away. It was no secret. I was a real stickler for perfection, especially when it came to court documents.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” I turned back. “Tomorrow, I want you to check out a property profile. The address is 14850 Springdale in Trabuco Canyon. We need to check out the deed and see if it needs to be changed and re-recorded.”

“Is that for the guy who showed up this morning?” I nodded. “What was that all about?” he asked.

I told him. Jake already knew about Eileen, but it was the first time he had heard about Ken and the Trabuco Canyon home.

“It’s an odd feeling,” I said. “Feels like I’m profiting over someone’s ill fortune.”

“I don’t see it that way. Your father meant for you to have the house in the end. Besides, it’s not your fault what happened.”

“I know. Still ...”

“So what do you plan to do with the house?” Jake asked.

"Don't know. Nothing right now, anyway. I'll drive by there this weekend to check it out. Maybe the plants need watering or something."

"You think you'll move in there?"

I pondered about that. I loved the place, but it still felt like Eileen's home.
"Someday, maybe."

"By the way, how's your dad?" Jake asked.

"As well as anyone can be in that condition. I'm seeing him tomorrow evening."

"A weekday visit? Is all well?"

"Oh yeah, he's fine. I bought a Christmas tree for him yesterday and wanted to deliver it to him before it's too late," I said.

"You sure he knows it's that time of the year."

"Probably not. But I do. Anyway, don't count on me reviewing your motion to dismiss tomorrow evening."

"Got it."

"Goodnight, Jake."

"Goodnight, Alec."

Chapter 6

Doing a balancing act with a Christmas tree and a plastic container filled with ornaments, I knocked on the door marked 425 of the Oakley Assisted Living Manor.

I heard a grunt from inside and took that as my cue to enter. "Hello dad!" I said, smiling at the sixty-two year old man, still handsome, despite the grey hair and wrinkled brow.

He looked at me mindlessly without any trace of recognition.

"It's a lovely morning, isn't it?" I asked him as I put down the tree in the corner of the room.

"The TV's broken," he croaked in a gruff voice.

He stared at me, as if wondering why I had a tree instead of a toolbox. Of course, with my talent, a toolbox wouldn't have done any good either.

I smiled. I wasn't surprised that he hadn't recognized me. That didn't happen much these days. "Well, we're going to have to check that out then, dad."

A second or two later his gaze turned quizzical, and I guessed he had finally caught the "dad" reference.

Here we go again, I thought, but I knew the drill by now. I quickly gestured toward the neatly arranged family photos on the wall behind the dining table. His picture with Angela, when they'd eloped to Las Vegas; a younger me, holding up a huge salmon from one of my fishing trips with dad; Eileen's college graduation. And more. Beneath each one, I had neatly written names in large print, and a small summation to revive his memory, at least momentarily.

My father looked at the photographs and then back at me. I thought I saw him smile. Had he connected the dots? I couldn't tell for sure, but for one split second, his expression softened – as if he remembered something joyful from his past. And then it was gone.

I wished my father could remember more - like our sea-kayaking adventure in Alaska; our gallant, *albeit* failed, endeavor to hike up Mount McKinley...

Wishful thinking! He could barely remember what he ate for breakfast that morning.

But that didn't stop me from rambling on about my life, as I began setting up the Christmas tree in the family room by the fireplace. My life, my clients, my goings-on... Minus Eileen and Ken, of course. He helped with the ornaments, silently listening to my banter, baffled every now and then about why the TV repairman would be decorating his tree.

The next hour was game time. Doctor Gupta had said memory games could stir up emotions and help revive long-term memories. So far, I had seen neither.

Later, I took a stab at fixing the TV with marginal success. My father watched, as I hopelessly fiddled with the wires moving them from one colored socket to another, not really expecting any of it to actually work. I couldn't help chuckling when I sensed his annoyance at the apparent incompetence of the hired help.

By the end of the visit, my father had still not recognized me.

Chapter 7

The motion to dismiss took a lot longer than Jake had anticipated. The roadblock was - who else? - the client. A partner in my prior law firm had once told me: *You can manage your time, your people, your work. But never your client.* I didn't understand it then, but I sure as hell did once I began practicing on my own.

Thanks to electronic court filings, we were able to file the motion on Saturday afternoon, which was a relief even though it cut into the weekend.

I was more relaxed on Sunday as I drove on Hwy 241 toward Trabuco Canyon, with my top down, listening to Alicia Keys on the radio.

After a scenic 30-minute drive, I wheeled into the driveway of a brown two-story home, located at the end of a quiet street with a beautiful view of the hills on the west side. Unlike most of Orange County, the community had a rustic rural look. Wide streets and huge live oaks creating a tunnel effect. The ranch-style homes, some with horse stables, were well hidden behind the shady trees and hardly even visible from the street, something I never saw in the tract communities of Anaheim Hills, where I lived.

There wasn't a soul in sight, not uncharacteristic for a Sunday morning. Probably in church or just sleeping in, I thought. No cars on the street either, except for a Jeep Landrover parked in front of the lot to the right - with a sticker in the back that said, "Think Green."

I walked toward the home, set back from the street on a large lot and marked 14850 on the mailbox next to the wooden entry fence. It brought back sweet memories of the times when my father and Angela lived there. Happier days, I mused.

I recognized the wind chimes by the porch, my housewarming gift to Angela that, unbelievably, still swayed merrily with melodious dingdongs.

I unlocked the door and walked in to the same warmth and coziness it had held so many years ago. It almost looked the same, as Eileen had retained most of the interior decor. And, why not? Angela had such excellent taste in conventional hardwood flooring and traditional furnishings.

Scattered throughout the house were several silk plants, different colors and species. Thankfully, I wouldn't need to water any of those.

Several manila folders and a couple of *People* magazines lay scattered randomly near the fireplace in the family room.

In the adjacent kitchen, washed dishes were piled up in the rack next to the wooden knife-set holder with one empty knife slot. The missing knife lay on the cutting board on the far end of the dark granite counter. A large non-stick saucepan sat on the stove ready to get cooking.

The house felt alive in a creepy kind of a way, as if Eileen was still there, living her merry life, still carrying on her daily chores.

A sound in the yard distracted me. I stepped toward the french doors and saw the culprit. A squirrel hopping down from a tree, trampling the overgrowth of weeds. I made a mental note to talk to Ken about the gardening.

I slowly ventured toward Eileen's bedroom. It was on the far left side of the home with European furnishings, the kind you would see in Ikea. A queen bed with a nightstand, a dresser by one wall, and a small bookcase. It was the only room that deviated from the home's traditional décor.

Two things jumped out of the light blue wall facing the bed.

One was the oversized flat panel TV.

And the other was a cluster of pictures, some with my father and Angela. Eileen with her high school soccer team, college field trips, running at the 5K charity marathon in San Francisco... In the center was a wooden frame with a faded photograph of a much younger Eileen with an elderly woman - her grandmother, I guessed - sitting by

the banks of a large mass of water. Eileen was wearing jeans and a warm jacket with a red scarf loosely hung along the sides of her neck. Handwritten notes at the bottom of the photograph said: "May 1995, Hunt for Nessie."

I grinned. I had heard about Eileen's childhood fascination with the legendary monster, said to be swimming around in Scotland's Loch Ness for years. A tourist scam, no doubt, but it sure seemed to have worked, at least with Eileen. I remembered Angela telling me how it had begun with Eileen's school camp to the Scottish Highlands when she was seven and still believed in the tooth fairy. "After that, it was Nessie everywhere," Angela had said. "Her bedroom décor, her arts and crafts projects, her cereal boxes. I mean, everything."

Still grinning, I turned my attention from the picture frame to the bed on which lay a stuffed toy resembling a three-humped light grey serpent. Oh brother! Nessie strikes again, I thought. Apparently, Eileen had not outgrown her fantasy. Ugly little thing too. Not exactly my idea of a snuggle-up toy.

On the nightstand I noticed a silver iPod Touch that, after all these weeks, was still plugged in. I unplugged it, wondering if there was such a thing as an "overcharged battery."

I was just leaving when I heard a knock on the door. I wasn't expecting anyone and wondered who that could be.

Chapter 8

I walked out to the entryway and opened the front door.

Standing on the front porch was an attractive woman, thirtyish, with long brown hair, wearing jeans, a seasonal red shirt and a leather jacket that matched her boots. She looked like she fit right into the community, although, she could have certainly used a cowboy hat, I thought.

"Hello there, you must be Alec," she said.

"I am," I said, a bit stunned that she knew my name. "I'm sorry, have we met?" I was certain I wouldn't have forgotten such a pretty face, but I had to ask.

"No, actually, Ken told me about you. He said you'd be visiting here. I'm Kate Larson." She held out her hand.

"Nice to meet you, Kate. You live around here?"

"Unfortunately, I can't afford any of these beautiful homes. No, I live in a condo just outside the Springdale development," she said, pointing up the street. "I saw a car parked in the driveway and guessed it was you. I have some of Eileen's mail to drop off."

She handed me a small pile of envelopes.

"I threw out the newsletters and mailers," she said. "Didn't think you would be needing those. Ken has forwarded her mail, but there's always some isolated package that can fill up the box. I had promised Ken I would check her mail periodically. Mind you, I've been holding on to some of these letters for weeks."

"That's very nice of you. Would you like to come in?"

"Thanks, but I have to head back soon."

"Did you know Eileen well?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, we often hung out. Shopped, swapped music, stuff like that. I miss her terribly. It was such a tragedy."

"Yes, it was," I said somberly, reluctant to discuss Eileen's circumstances with a complete stranger. She didn't press it.

"I take it you know Ken, too?" I inquired.

"Can't say I know him. He must have gotten my number from Eileen's phone book. He talked to me and some of the neighbors here, just so we would know who he was. Guess he didn't want to give the impression that he was a prowler of some sort."

Ken looked like anything but a prowler. But I kept my opinion to myself.

"So you're clearing out Eileen's stuff?" she asked.

"No, for now, I think we'll leave it as is. But I may come by on and off to check on things."

"Look, if you need any help with anything, just call me," she said, handing me a piece of paper with her name and telephone number.

"You sure you want to volunteer? I may actually take you up on your offer."

"Eileen was a good friend. That's the least I can do."

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

"Well, I gotta head back. I guess I'll be seeing you."

"You need a ride back?" I asked. "I'm just leaving myself."

"No, it's just a brisk ten-minute walk up the street. Anyway, I need the exercise now that I don't jog much." She paused for a second, then continued. "We had a routine, you know. Around six in the evenings. We would get set with our iPods and run up the trails like there was no tomorrow. I miss that."

I figured she was referring to Eileen.

"I take it you were not with Eileen that day."

"No, I was out of town that week. I can't tell you how many times I've thought about that. Weird twist of fate."

“Yeah, well, if you start your routine again, I would stay clear of the trails.”

“I hear you.” Kate waved, turned back and began walking away.

I watched her for several seconds before I closed the door.

Chapter 9

I went back into Eileen's bedroom, retrieved my car keys that I had left on the dresser, and began heading back when I suddenly bumped into a container on the floor - a white and brown Bankers Box with a label on top. I bent down to take a closer look. The label was from the Orange County Sheriff's department. For a couple of seconds, I just looked at it wondering what it was.

I can't say why the box intrigued me. It just did.

After momentarily debating about it in my mind and fighting the voice in my head screaming it wasn't any of my business, I finally opened the lid. Almost immediately, I regretted my decision.

A nasty stink reeked from within as I stared down at some dirty apparel, a Ziploc bag holding a gold-band Seiko watch, Nike running shoes with muddy soles, and a pair of stained white ankle-length socks with purple stripes on the toes. The clothing consisted of sweat pants and a matching tank top with a fancy bra and panties, all heavily soiled with mud, and covered with so many dark dried-up blood stains, it was hard to recognize the fabric's original color.

This is what it came down to, I thought to myself. This was all Eileen had left to show. Twenty-seven years of her life all crammed into this little Bankers Box. Why on earth would the Sherriff's office return these personal effects back to the victim's home? Weren't they supposed to be maintained as evidence in the archives somewhere?

Then I remembered California's Constitutional Amendment passed a few years back. Marsy's law, they called it. Had to do with victims' rights, allowing families to

retrieve the victim's personal property when it was no longer needed. Maybe that was it. Maybe Ken had requested that Eileen's things be returned.

I surveyed the contents for several minutes, thinking of the unimaginable horror Eileen must have gone through. Gruesome images emerged before my eyes. This wasn't about some Jane Doe on the evening news. *We're talking about Eileen. Same Eileen with whom I had shared holiday dinners. My own family.* Who could do something so atrocious? A sick monster, that's who. I suddenly got sweaty. My stomach turned and I had a sudden urge to use the bathroom.

I removed my jacket and sprinkled cold water on my face, which soothed my nerves. Sitting on the edge of the bathtub, I stared at my pale image in the mirror. Eileen was just twenty-seven. Dear God! I had never lost anyone close to me, barring my mom, but that was when I was just one, and I can't say I felt or comprehended anything. Eileen wasn't close to me, but even then, this sure felt like the back alley. Surreal.

A few minutes later, I was ready to put the contents back in the box, just the way they had been.

Right before putting on the lid, I peeked in again and momentarily hesitated. I paused. Something didn't feel right. Something was out of place. But what?

I took another brief moment to study the contents again. *What is it Alec?* Not the blood, not the foul odor. No, something else.

No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't place the reason for my uneasiness.

After another long look, I finally dismissed it and replaced the contents in their original state, before heading out.

On my drive back, I called Ken, told him about the weeds, and filled him in on the deed situation. I considered talking to him about the box in Eileen's bedroom, but decided against it. I didn't want him worked up over something that was probably just in my head.

Before returning home, I took a slight detour for a quick visit to my dad. He was happily watching a re-run of *Bonanza* on the TV, which was apparently fixed and

working beautifully, much to my relief. Dad always enjoyed those classic shows and he sure was going to love the Christmas gift I had for him - DVDs of *Mackenna's Gold* and *Gone with the Wind*, along with a brand new DVD player. Yes, he would relish those DVDs. Of course, I would never know for sure. Few words exchanged between us nowadays.

That night, as I got ready for bed, I thought of my father and then Eileen. I had no real family left, not even a dog. I suddenly felt alone. I wished I had someone with me, someone to hold. I thought of Tricia with whom I had broken up a few months back. There was a time when I'd thought she was it, she was the one. But then, it had all fizzled out, almost as quickly as it had started.

Just as I closed my eyes, my thoughts drifted slowly to Kate.

A few minutes later, I was fast asleep.

Chapter 10

The streets of Westwood were alive, even at 11:00 p.m., much like the Vegas strip - but different. Quite different, Gustav Rossi decided. None of the blinding lights, the zero mile-an-hour traffic, and yes, let's not forget the shitload of tourists, scuttling like bugs everywhere. Drunken bugs at that. He couldn't believe he had lasted three years in that place. Boy, was he glad to get out of there.

Not that he had much choice.

The action had gotten way too hot in Vegas. At least for Rossi. That's the thing about Vegas. It's all well while the going's good. But when the stakes are high, there's no room for error. Rossi had screwed up big time and there was no way the guys were going to take him back.

He had two choices: get out of town, or take a ride to the desert. Rossi knew all too well that the desert was a one-way ticket to hell. Literally! Indeed, he had escorted many poor souls through that ride himself. He had seen the graves there among the sand and the cactus, some he had dug himself. Just like that movie, *Casino*.

He chose to get out of town.

Good thing about his line of work, you don't need a lot of face time. In fact, the less face time, the better. He had built up enough contacts to keep a steady workflow coming. The Chicago guys kept him busy, too, with small-time jobs. Annoying, but they

paid the bills. Others were bigger and exciting, ones in which he could really put his target practice to good use. Now those got Rossi's adrenaline pumping. And his pocketbook, too.

So, why Southern California? Well, why not, Rossi thought. It was loaded with rich idiots, luxury cars, and pretty girls. Lots of pretty girls, the kind that wore tank tops, even in winter. What could be better? This was the place to be. Especially for a charmer like Rossi - with his new hairdo and a neat goatee. He even had a new name.

New place, new look, new alias. Life was peachy. Yes, Southern California was going to work out well for Gustav Rossi.

Besides, he had some unfinished business to take care of there.

Some loose ends to tie up.

Chapter 11

“Good morning,” I greeted Jenny cheerfully, who was already up and about when I got into the office.

“And what’s so good about it?” she asked in a terse tone. “No, I’ll tell you. Christmas is done and over with, and that’s good.”

Uh-oh! Jenny was in one of those moods.

“‘Tis the season to be jolly, Jenny.”

“No, ‘tis the season for family reunions. And you know how they go.”

I didn’t know. I hadn’t had a family reunion in years.

“All weekend long, my sister bragged about her big house in San Francisco, her rich oncologist husband, her blah this, her blah that. And then she had the nerve to pooh-pooh the gift I got for her one-year-old.” Jenny grimaced as she continued grousing.

I burst out into laughter.

“I’m sure you got him something ghastly,” remembering the hideous pink paperweight she had given me for my birthday two years back.

“It was no such thing. I got him the latest Rocko. Do you know what I went through to find that sucker? It’s out-of-stock everywhere. Even online. And can you believe the crazy buying frenzy.” Which Jenny had fueled, too, but I wasn’t about to point that out to her.

“What *is* this Rocko? I’ve been reading about the ridiculous racket it has spurred. Seems like every kid wants one.”

“Rocko Rabbit - it’s the cartoon character from the hit TV show, *The Adventures of Rocko Rabbit*.”

“Never heard of it.”

“Yeah, well, you need to be a kid or a kid’s mom to have heard of it. Anyway, next Christmas,” she continued, “I’m taking off to the Caribbean, away from my family, away from the commotion.”

“You’re assuming you’ll have approved leave next Christmas,” I said jokingly.

Jenny tossed a paper clip at me in retort. I ducked and strolled into my office, still smiling. I wasn’t my usual stressed-out self that morning. It would be a slow, laid-back holiday week anyway, what with clients and judges taking off on vacations. Even Jake was out, visiting his family in Fresno for their traditional reunion, followed by a family ski-trip to Badger Pass in Yosemite National Park. Hopefully, his family reunion was better than Jenny’s.

As I shuffled through my phone book for Ken’s number, my eyes fell upon the stack of envelopes that Kate had handed me. I smiled, remembering her pretty face. None of the mail looked terribly important. A Wells Fargo bank statement, an AT&T U-verse bill, and a white envelope with a faded red “Returned Undeliverable” stamp on it. I looked, for a second, at the handwritten address: *Attn. SAM, P.O. Box 490, Irvine, California 90062*. It didn’t mean anything to me. After another look, I discarded it with the rest of the mail in my bottom credenza.

Then I called Ken about Eileen’s Wells Fargo Bank account, which was old news for him. He had already been in touch with the bank to transfer over the balance appropriately. He had also arranged for a gardener to be on the property at ten on Sunday morning. I agreed to meet him there.

I wrapped it up early in the day and so did Jenny.

Despite the slow day, I was in no mood for any elaborate cooking for dinner. Or *any* cooking for that matter. Anaheim Hills, however, didn’t offer the widest choice of good gourmet takeouts, so I went through the menus in my kitchen drawer and considered my options. Hmm, Chinese or Thai? Neither one sounded appetizing, but I

finally settled for Charm Thai, called in my order, and was about to step outside toward my car parked in my driveway, when I ran into Rachael from next door, who was off on her evening walk from the look of things.

Oh no, not snotty Rachael again. I made a quick move as if to avoid her. Too late. She had seen me already.

She smiled politely, removed the headphones from her ears, and waved over to me, wishing me Happy Holidays. In years past, Rachael had brought over holiday cookies and brownies for me – but, with my lack of reciprocity, the goodies had stopped. It wasn't as if I was antisocial. I just had no patience for her endless bantering, all centered around her work, her cat, her trip... You get the idea.

Thankfully, Rachael didn't linger around with her prolonged stories. After a couple minutes of small talk, she walked past me, putting on her headphones again. I waved at her, got into my car, and began to back it out of the driveway.

Something suddenly occurred to me and I stopped the car. My gaze turned to Rachael walking away in the distance, listening to her music on her headphones. My recent conversation with Kate echoed in my ears and, with my car still halfway out of the driveway, a light bulb went off in my head. I glanced in Rachael's direction again.

And then it hit me.

The box in Eileen's room.

It wasn't what was in the box that had bothered me. It was what wasn't.