

IN THE COUNTRY OF THE BLIND

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CHAPTER ONE

A dead body is a lousy way to end a first date. Of course Cynthia was so good looking that I would have asked her out even if I had known what was to come. Sitting down to dinner that night she looked so good I would have asked her out even if I'd had to face a pack of rabid wolves.

"So you're a real expert on beer, are you?" she asked as we waited for our appetizers.

"It's a hobby," I said. We were about to take a sip of Celis White. "Most people don't realize it, but there are almost as many variations in the style and quality of beer as

there are in wine, and it's just as much fun to study." I smiled at her and raised my glass. "Cheers."

She took a sip. "Mmmm, that's wonderful. It's very different."

"Different how?"

"I wouldn't know how to describe it."

"Try." She took another sip and swallowed slowly. "Where do you taste it?"

"In the back of my throat, mostly. It lingers there."

"That's the aftertaste, or finish," I said. "This is a wheat beer. Regular beers just use barley malt. This also has wheat malt. Do you like it?"

"Yes." She smiled at me. "Yes, I do."

"Good. I'm glad," I said, smiling back. We were having dinner at Josie's on the corner of seventy-fourth and Amsterdam. Three nights earlier I had gone with my friend Leo, an acting teacher, to an Off-Off-Broadway play to see one of his students. Leo introduced me to Alex, who was tall and angular, with easy blond good looks and incongruous dark circles under his eyes. We were joined by a petite woman in her mid-twenties who Alex introduced as his roommate Cynthia Hull, recently of Chicago. We made small talk for a few minutes, surrounded by the post-performance crush in the tiny lobby of the downtown performance space. Alex seemed preoccupied, and ill-at-ease with the praise he was getting from other audience members who kept interrupting us. Finally Alex pulled Leo off into a corner, and I was left alone in the crowd with Cynthia. I'm not part of the theater

world, so I didn't have much to say, and in any case I was a little tongue-tied by her beauty. She had shattering green eyes, a cheerleader's body, and the kind of Waspy midwestern aura that was both out-of-reach and forbidden when I was growing up on the upper-west side of Manhattan. We chatted, mostly about the penchant everyone at the party had for black clothing. By the time Leo and Alex rejoined us I was enchanted. The next day, ignoring Leo's oft repeated warnings about actresses, I had called to ask her to dinner.

"So how do you like New York so far? You've been here, what, three months?"

"Yes. So far, I don't know. It's not home."

"Which is . . .?"

"Originally Pittsburgh, although I haven't really lived there for almost seven years."

"You don't sound like you're from there. Picksberg, and all that."

"Oh, I can revert," she said. "Yinz gohn dahntahn?" I laughed, and she joined in. "Lots of work to get rid of that accent. I was the bane of the speech coach at Aldridge. That's where Alex and I met."

The waiter came with our appetizers, a marinated and grilled portobello mushroom for Cynthia, and black bean crab cakes for me.

"How's yours?" I asked after a few bites.

"Exquisite. Would you like a taste?"

"No, no thanks. I've had it. I eat here all the time, but try this." I cut a small piece and fed it to her. When she closed her eyes, I took the opportunity to stare.

"That's great," she said. I took another bite of crab cake.

"So what brought you to New York?" I asked.

"Looking for an acting career. After college, I went to Chicago. Alex got his master's a year before I graduated, and he'd ended up there with a theater company that he really liked. I auditioned for them and got in."

The waiter brought our next round and I poured for her. "You and Alex are . . ." I didn't know quite how to ask. She let the silence grow before she let me off the hook.

"Roommates. Just roommates."

"Ah."

"Well, not just roommates. Best friends. When I got to college I was incredibly naive. Didn't know a thing about the world or the theater. Just that I had this burning desire to act. Alex took me under his wing. I don't know why, exactly."

"I do."

"Thank you, but I was pretty mousy in those days. And it wasn't anything romantic. Before we met he had been seriously involved with a girl from his hometown. They'd gotten engaged, and then . . ." She gave a little shiver. "Anyway, he was really just like a big brother to me."

I tried to reconcile the image she was painting with the man I had met. He had seemed like a loner, intense, pained and very insecure.

"Alex came here last year, and when his roommate moved out, he asked me if I wanted to be roommates again. After three years with the Chicago company, I was ready to give New York a try."

"You were roommates in college?"

"No. I was an undergraduate and he was in the MFA program. We weren't roommates until I got to Chicago."

"What happened to his fiancée?"

"She killed herself."

"Jesus. That's tough." That explained the suffering I'd seen in his eyes.

"Yes. It is. I don't think he ever recovered from it. He was brilliant in school. Really brilliant. I first saw him in a play called "Two Rooms," and he completely changed my ideas about the kind of acting I wanted to do. He played a hostage in Beirut, and he was always alone on stage, talking to himself or the audience, never with the other actors. I'd never seen anything so powerful. But something always keeps him from making his mark. You saw him the other night. What did you think?"

"I think I'm on the spot."

"You just answered my question. It's like he can't allow himself to succeed because he's weighed down by this loss in his past. His agent's dropped him. He just got fired from his job."

He can't get anything together for himself. It's the memory of her death, sure, but it's more than that. He lost his family, too."

"He lost his family?" I asked. "That's terrible. Some kind of accident?"

"What? Oh, uh, no." She seemed startled. "No, no. He didn't lose them, not like that. They're still alive, his parents and brothers. They're just . . . not in touch. It's a long story."

"Ah." We were interrupted by a food runner, busboy in tow. They cleared our appetizer plates and set down our dinners. Then they did the pepper grinding thing. "You seem very devoted to him," I said when they were gone.

She nodded and took a bite. "My family, they're all lawyers and bankers, very straitlaced. They disapproved of my following an acting career. He encouraged me. The more I followed my dream, the further away my family drifted, so he became my family, and I guess I became his."

We ate silently for a few minutes. She seemed lost in thought, and I was content to let her find her way back in her own time. From our table by the window I could see darkness coming on earlier, and a sudden wind from the north whipped leaves and the pages of a newspaper past the ankles of an old woman as she pushed her grocery cart up the avenue. I felt the drop in temperature through the plate glass, and a desire for layered blankets, a fire, and hibernation stole over me. Cynthia spoke again, pulling me back to the table, and we

chatted amiably through the rest of the meal. The dance of our conversation amused me, two people getting to know each other, alternately revealing intimate details and then prattling about inconsequential. As she drained the last of the Celis, I noticed her French manicure. They make me crazy.

"Let's get another one of these, or is there something else I should try?" she asked.

"No, we can stick with the Celis." I signaled the waiter for two more. "You'll have to come over to my place sometime when I'm brewing a batch of my own."

"You're kidding."

"Nope. Brewed my first batch about two years ago. It came out great, and I've been hooked ever since."

"I'll have to try some."

"Anytime," I said, and pictured how nice it would be to sit next to her before a fire, popping open a 22 ounce unlabeled bottle of my favorite Scotch ale. I could already see the firelight dancing in her eyes, smell the wood smoke in her hair as she leaned her head against my shoulder, Antonios Carlos Jobim playing softly on the . . .

"Zach Brandis! I heard you'd wandered in."

I was pulled abruptly from my fantasy and looked up into the round face of the restaurant's substitute manager, Carter. I groaned inwardly as he pulled up a chair. He wasn't here often, but when he was, he was always intrusive.

"Hello, Carter."

"Zach, listen, I gotta get some advice from you. We're having a bitch of a time, me and a bunch of other tenants in my building. The building's going to go co-op, and they're giving us the runaround with the red herring. I want to know what you think."

"I think you should get yourself a lawyer."

"Well, yeah, I know. But we don't want to spend that kind of money. I thought maybe you could tell us what you would do."

"Oh, what I would do?"

"Yeah."

"That's easy. I'd get a lawyer."

"Come on, Zach, help us out here."

"I am helping you out. I can't do it. I never handled that kind of thing. And I can't explain how to do it yourself, 'cause it's too complicated. What I can do is see if I can find somebody whose got a small practice, and who might be interested in doing it on the cheap."

"There's no way we can do it ourselves?"

"I wouldn't. I'll call you tomorrow with some names."

"All right. Well, thanks," he said, getting up. No free dessert for me tonight.

"No problem."

"I didn't realize you were an attorney," Cynthia said when Carter was gone. There was an edge to her voice, and I recalled her mentioning the lawyers in her family.

"Does that bring me down in your estimation?"

"That depends on what kind of lawyer you are."

"Can I take the Fifth?"

"No."

"I sense this is a loaded issue."

"Your honor, I request that the witness be directed to answer the question."

"How about 'retired'? Does that get me off the hook?"

"Maybe." She finished her second beer. "If it's true, and if it's for the right reasons."

"Well, it's true," I said. As she waited for more of an answer, our waiter drifted past and glanced at me in inquiry.

"Another?" I asked, "or is it getting too late?"

"Well, I'd like to, but I have to behave. I have an audition tomorrow. I've already been bad. If I have another, or don't get enough sleep, my eyes will be puffy."

I signaled for the check. "What's the audition for?" I asked.

"Don't change the subject, we were talking about you."

"It's complicated. Do you want the long, soul-baring version, or the short, embarrassing version?"

"Since you just sent for the check, I'll have to settle for short and embarrassing and save long and soul-baring for the next date." Her mention of a next date spurred me on.

"When I was a kid we spent our summers at a resort in the Catskills. There were lots of activities, but you know kids. They can find a way to be bored at Disney World. One summer, I was 11, there was a young newlywed couple, and the wife was starting her teaching career. She must have been a little

nervous about it, so she bought me a copy of To Kill a Mockingbird. For ten days we met every morning and she taught the book to me. It was the greatest book I had read, which doesn't say much, I was only 11, but I still feel that way. I had a serious case of hero worship for Atticus Finch, and somehow I made the mistake of thinking that he was the kind of man he was because he was a lawyer. I didn't realize that his passion for justice and his wisdom came from some other source. That planted the seed for Law School. I wanted to see if I could attain that for myself. The illusion hung on for a long time, but when it fell apart, it fell apart fast."

"What happened?"

"Suffice it to say that one day I realized I hated it, and I hated what I was becoming. I had a chance to get out, and I took it."

"So what do you do now?"

"Now? Now I have no visible means of support. Ah, here's our check. Saved by the cash register bell, and a good thing, too. I don't want to spill all my secrets in one night." I gave her what I hoped was an enigmatic smile. "I don't have that many to tell."

"Somehow I doubt that," she said as I left cash on the table. I helped with her coat, we headed out the door and I offered to see her home.

"Isn't it out of your way?"

"I'm going see a friend who tends bar downtown. We can share a cab."

"Great." We caught a cab heading east on 74th and I told the cabby we had two stops to make. We turned south on Columbus, which turned into Ninth going past Fordham, and Cynthia took my arm when we hit turbulence going over some construction. As we pulled to the curb at 51st Street, red strobe lights flashed off the windows of the Cuban rice and beans joint on the opposite corner. Down the block we saw three police cars, one of them unmarked and facing the wrong way on the one way street. An ambulance sat behind the police cars, its emergency lights off.

"That's my building," Cynthia said.

"I'll come with you." I tossed a five to the driver, and said "Keep it." I followed Cynthia down the sidewalk to a uniformed cop who was blocking pedestrians.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Who are you?"

"Nobody. This young woman lives in that building."

"What apartment?"

"Four R," Cynthia said.

"Can I see some ID?"

"What's going on, Officer?" I asked again.

He ignored me. "Can I see some ID, please, miss?" he repeated. She fished for her wallet and pulled out her license. The officer studied it and then her. "Wait right here," he said. He walked over to a man in jeans and a baseball jacket who was leaning through the window of the unmarked car, speaking into the car's radio mic. He pulled his head out the window and

the uniform showed him the license. Baseball jacket sized up Cynthia and said something to the uniform, who nodded and walked back to us. He handed Cynthia her license.

"Wait right here," he said. "Detective Cleary will be right with you." I started to ask what was going on again, but Cleary hung up the radio mic and walked over.

"Good evening, Miss Hull. I'm Detective Cleary. You live in Apartment 4R?"

"Yes. What's going on?"

"Do you know a man named Alex Penworth?"

"Yes, he's my roommate."

"Uh-huh. And where were you this evening?"

I interrupted. "We were together all evening. On a date. What the hell is going on, Detective?"

Detective Cleary looked from me back to Cynthia again.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this, Ms. Hull," he said, "but your roommate is dead."