

IN THE COUNTRY OF THE BLIND

BY

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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. 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 Cassie’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 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 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 inconsequentials. As she drained the last of the Celis, I noticed her French manicure. They drive 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 twenty-two 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 who’s 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?”

“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 eleven, 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 eleven, 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 Seventy-Fourth 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 Fifty-First 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.”

CHAPTER TWO

Aside from screwing up a first date, a dead body causes other problems. It forces us to look at our own mortality and, if the body didn’t achieve its deadness by natural causes, it threatens the larger societal illusions of order and civility. In response to that threat, a vast army is mobilized to analyze, classify and categorize its cause. This army consists of policemen and forensic technicians, prosecutors, defense lawyers and judges. It is presided over by politicians and policy makers who live off the community's fragile perception of order and safety, and thus

must safeguard that perception at all costs. The primary benefit of this system, perhaps the only benefit, is the elimination of the blood feud, the twelve o'clock high shootout in the middle of the street. In order to avoid such affronts to the community's dignity, we submit to the lazy and inefficient machine that passes for a justice system. Thus death cranks up a bureaucracy that rolls like a Panzer division toward the Maginot line of privacy, crushing everything in its path, including the truth. I didn't know it at the time, but I was going to be standing in front of those tanks.

In the days following Alex's murder, Cynthia's grief was compounded by this bureaucracy, where what appeared to be an extreme lack of sensitivity and care was merely the workings of a system in which violent death is simply routine. This was blatantly clear immediately following Detective Cleary's announcement that Alex was dead. Before Cynthia had a chance to grasp what Cleary had said, we were startled by a shout. We turned to see one of the coroner's assistants fall down the stoop. He had stumbled and was reaching wildly and unsuccessfully for the iron railing. He had been holding one end of a stretcher carrying a black nylon body bag. The bag slipped off the stretcher and caught on a sharp protrusion from a baluster. The weight of the bag, combined with its momentum, caused it to tear open, and it spilled its contents at Cynthia's feet.

In life Alex Penworth had been a handsome young man. In death he was unrecognizable. His face was a deep purple, darker around his protruding eyes, one of which was discolored from a burst blood vessel. His swollen tongue bulged from his mouth, and his nose was flattened and off-center. A piece of fabric cinched in a tight slipknot cut into the skin around his neck. A frayed end of this makeshift noose peeked out from behind his right ear. The one hand that had escaped

through the tear was covered in a plastic baggy secured with tape at the wrist. He looked like an overstuffed blood sausage, an unhealthy carnage about to burst from a translucent membrane.

I turned too late to block Cynthia's view. As I grasped her upper arms, a low moan escaped her lips and rose in pitch to a high keening wail as she struggled to look over my shoulder at the remains of her dear friend. Gently, I guided her toward a stoop across the street. The uniformed cop followed at a respectful distance. Behind us I heard Cleary shout about preservation of evidence, and tell the Coroner's assistants to get the fucking body back in the bag. I sat down on the stoop with Cynthia as she clung to my neck and sobbed. I waved the uniformed officer over. As he approached I read his nametag.

"Officer Sikorski, could you find us a blanket, please?"

"Sure," he said. He retrieved two from the nearest squad car, and as he returned he was intercepted by Detective Cleary, who took the blankets from him.

"Here," he said, handing me the blankets. The stoop was cold, so I pulled Cynthia up just enough to slip one of the folded blankets underneath her. She still had her arms wrapped firmly around my neck, and I fumbled with the other blanket. Finally Cleary helped to tuck it around her. He straightened up and shook his head as the coroner's assistants loaded the body into the wagon, backed up to get around a squad car, and drove away. As they rounded the corner they hit the siren, and Cynthia, whose sobs had begun to subside, erupted in a loud cry again.

"Idiots," Cleary said, and sat down next to me, clenching and unclenching his fists.

"We're gonna need to speak to her," he said to me. "Ya think she'll be okay to talk in a while?"

"This is our first date. I uh . . . I don't know."

"Where did you guys meet?"

“At a little theater downtown,” I said, “Why?” I was slightly incredulous that he would make small talk at a time like this.

“It would help us get a fix on the time.”

“Oh, you mean tonight. I picked her up here, at around seven-thirty.”

“Was her roommate home?”

“Yes. I didn't spend any time there, just picked her up, but I saw him.”

Cleary nodded. A man holding a camera with a flash jogged out the front door, down the steps toward a black van parked behind the squad cars. He pulled open the van's rear doors, retrieved a small black suitcase and ran back into the building. I heard a crackling sound and Cleary pulled a small walkie-talkie from inside his baseball jacket.

“Yeah.”

A voice crackled back. “I think we can wrap it up here, leave the rest to the techs. It looks like he had a roommate. I'm posting someone in case she comes home.”

“She's here.”

“Oh, great, we can . . . hold on a sec.” The walkie crackled, was silent, then spat again.

“The doc wants to talk to her. I'll bring him down.”

“Right.” Cleary put the radio back under his jacket. “Her upstairs neighbor is a doc at St. Luke's. He discovered the body. Maybe he can give her something.” I nodded and tucked the blanket back under Cynthia's chin. The tide of tears that was rocking her body had begun to ebb, but I continued to hold her while we waited on the stoop. The rhythmic flashing of the squad car lights had a soothing quality, in counterpoint to the intermittent crackle of the police radios. Two men came out of Cynthia's building, one of them in hospital scrubs underneath an eggplant

colored Patagonia ski jacket. Although tall and lanky, he had to trot to keep up with the much smaller man who moved briskly towards us across the street. At five foot four, he exuded the intimidating energy of a small man trying to make up in output what he lacks in size. He was black and clean shaven, with a high-domed balding head and a fringe of hair trimmed very short and graying at the temples. He was dressed in earth tones, loafers, tailored slacks, cashmere sweater and a thick leather coat with a shawl collar. I stood as he approached. He glanced at Cynthia.

“Is that her?”

“Yeah.”

“Who’s this guy, her boyfriend?”

“No, no,” I interjected, “We met a couple of days ago. We were just having dinner.”

“You knew the roommate?”

“No. I mean I met him too, the same time I met Cynthia, but we never spoke more than a couple of words to each other.”

“So you wouldn’t know anything about this?”

“No.”

“Okay, so why don’t you take off. We got it from here.”

I frowned. “I’d like to stay, if it’s okay. She seems pretty upset.”

The black cop, who hadn’t introduced himself, shook his head and glanced at Cleary with a smirk. “First date, you said.”

“That’s right.”

“Well, her neighbor here is a doctor. I’m sure he can give her something to calm her down, and then we’re gonna need to take her inside to talk to her, unless you’d rather do it all out here in the cold. So why don’t you go home and get some rest?” He turned away from me to say something to Cleary.

I touched him gently on the arm. “Excuse me,” I said. “You need to talk to her tonight?”

He looked at my hand on his arm, and then at me. “Yes.”

I took my hand away. “Is she a suspect?”

He rolled his eyes at Cleary. “Yeah, she’s a suspect, okay? That do it? Date’s over. You’re not getting laid tonight. Go home.”

I had what I wanted. “I’m her attorney, and if she’s a suspect I’ll stay. That is if it’s okay with you, Detective . . . ?”

He stared at me for a moment and then glanced at Cynthia, who had begun to follow the conversation. “Is that true?”

She nodded. “Yes,” she said. Good girl. “Yes, it is.”

The black cop glared, then released a breath. “Shit.” He turned to the neighbor. “Why don’t you see if she needs anything. We need to talk to her, and I want her calmed down. But don’t give her anything that knocks her out, okay?” The neighbor nodded. “All right. You all wait here.” He turned away and I called after him.

“Detective?”

He stopped and turned, irked. “What do you want?”

“I still didn’t get your name.”

“Jenkins,” he snapped. He walked with Cleary to the squad car, leaned against the hood and jabbed a finger in my direction while they spoke.

The neighbor crouched and took Cynthia’s hands. “Jesus, Cynthia, you’re freezing. Are you okay?” She shuddered, pulled away, and wrapped herself more tightly in the blanket. “Cyn, do you need anything?” She glared at him with red-rimmed eyes and shook her head. He stood and took in the squad cars, their lights still flashing.

“I’m Zach Brandis,” I said.

“Oh, right. Cynthia mentioned you. Hank Chernin. I live upstairs.”

“What happened here?” I asked.

“I don’t know. When I came home their door was ajar. I knocked and nobody answered. I was worried that Maxie, that’s their cat, that it’d get out, so I looked in and there was Alex. He was . . .” He trailed off and shook his head. We were silent, waiting for the detectives to tell us what was going to happen next. Then Cynthia spoke.

“What did you see?” she asked.

Hank said, “What do you mean?”

“What did you see when you opened the door?”

“Cyn, I don’t . . . he was dead. That’s all I know.”

“Bullshit. I’m not asking you what you know. I’m asking you a simple question.” She raised her voice, and the detectives looked over at us. “What did you see when you opened the door?”

“Cyn, I don’t think now is the . . .”

Cynthia stood up and spoke sharply. “There is no good time to talk about it. My best friend is dead. Now tell me: What did you see when you opened the door?”

Hank looked to me for help, but I had none to give. She had to deal with this in her own way. Right now she wanted simple information, and I waited with her for his response. He took a deep breath, and then spoke in the clinically compassionate voice he must have used to deliver bad news in the emergency room.

“Alex was hanging from the water pipe running across the kitchen ceiling. It appears that he hung himself. However, in the case of an apparent suicide, homicide detectives have to investigate, and an autopsy is required.” When he finished speaking, Cynthia remained still, crying silently. I tried to put my arm around her, but she shook it off, instead wrapping herself more tightly in the blanket before sitting back down and rocking herself. I tugged Hank a few steps away.

“Do you think he killed himself?” I asked.

“I don’t know. It looks that way, but the police seem to be asking a lot of questions.”

“Like what?”

“Well, they were canvassing the building, asking people if they had heard sounds of any struggle. They asked me, but like I said, I was coming home from my shift at the ER, so I wasn’t there to hear anything. They’ve got Mrs. Dubin below them, but she can’t hear a thing, and the Christins across the hall are still away.”

“The police think it might not be suicide?”

“I don’t know. They’re asking a lot of questions.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Once I saw he was dead I didn’t do or touch anything. I just went to my apartment and called 911. Jesus,” his voice skipped, “I didn’t even cut him down.”

“Don’t worry about it, doc,” said Jenkins, who had approached silently, “he’d been dead for a good long time before you got there.”

“Remind me to commend you to your lieutenant for your sensitivity, Detective,” I said to Jenkins.

“Any time,” he said with a sarcastic smile. He jammed his hands into the pockets of his coat. “Do you have a problem, counselor, if we ask the young lady to view the crime scene?”

“Detective,” I said, lowering my voice, “her best friend and roommate just killed himself in that apartment. Do you really need her to go in there right now?”

Jenkins got right in my face. I didn’t back up. “Listen, cute boy,” he said, “I’m sorry your romantic evening was cut short. I’m really sorry your new squeeze is having a tough night. I’m really sorry I’m missing the Knicks game because I had courtside tickets. But I’m also sorry that this young man is dead, and I’m mostly sorry that it looks a little hinky, ‘cause if it didn’t, I could write it off as a definite suicide pending a coroner’s inquest and still get home before my wife is asleep and we miss her ovulation window again and I have to put up with her crap for another month. So I need your new flame to look at the apartment because we don’t happen to live there, and she might be able to tell us if anything is missing or out of place. That in turn will give us a clue as to whether this is a murder, and if it is, where we might start looking for the killer. Is all of that clear? Is all of that all right with you, counselor?”

I looked at him and thought of a lot of things to say. None of them were witty, so I didn’t say anything. I walked back to the stoop and told Cynthia what the detectives needed.

“Do you feel up to it?” She nodded and stood, and we followed Jenkins to her building. Hank and Cleary took up the rear as we trudged silently up the three flights of stairs to Apartment 4R. When we got there, another uniform in front of the door stepped aside for us to get by in the cramped turn of the stairwell. Jenkins shoved open the apartment door and stepped inside. Cynthia paused on the threshold, took a deep breath and then crossed over. I started to follow her in, but Jenkins put up a hand to stop me just inside the door.

“You wait here while she looks around.”

I nodded, and Hank stood by my side. Cleary squeezed past, and he and Jenkins followed Cynthia through the archway between the eat-in kitchen and the living room. She paused there, impassive, and slowly surveyed the room. Then she headed down the short hallway towards the back. Jenkins and Cleary remained in the hallway as she disappeared to the right into one of the two bedrooms. I caught a glimpse as she came out of that bedroom and drifted into the second one further back. Then she returned, squeezing past the detectives back into the kitchen. Jenkins cleared his throat.

“Well?” he asked.

“Everything looks fine. It doesn’t look like anything’s been stolen.”

Jenkins looked at Cleary. “Shit.”

“There’s something wrong, though. I think.”

“What do you mean?” asked Cleary.

“It just feels weird. I can’t explain it. Do you know the comedian with the line about waking up in the morning to discover that everything in his apartment has been replaced with an

exact replica? That's how this feels. Everything is just a little off, like we got a new cleaning lady. Have you guys been moving stuff around?"

"Nothing's been moved," said Jenkins, "except the body." As he spoke, I caught sight of the severed end of the piece of fabric, still knotted around the water pipe directly above Cynthia's head, a macabre Halloween twist on mistletoe. I winced, and Cynthia followed my gaze. She saw the cord, and again a low moan began deep in her throat as she lifted her arms in supplication. I saw it coming, and when her knees buckled, I caught her before she hit the floor.

CHAPTER THREE

When the phone rang the next morning I thought it was inside my skull. I opened one eye and looked at the clock. 11:30 A.M. I had gotten home around four. After Hank had revived Cynthia, we had prevailed upon Detective Jenkins to postpone his interview with her with a promise that she would show up at the station to answer questions the following day. Hank had given her something to calm her down and help her sleep, and then we had bundled her into a

cab and taken her to a friend's apartment in Chelsea. From there, I walked to the restaurant in Times Square where my friend Michael worked. It was a large establishment, with an immense bar that required three bartenders. Even though the place was popular with tourists and with the bridge and tunnel crowd, the food was still excellent, I could always find a single seat in Michael's station, and he had a generous spillage allowance. All of this made it the perfect place to unwind, alone in the crowd. When Michael's shift ended, we went to an after-hours club in the village and drank into the wee smalls while I told him of the evening's events.

The phone rang again. The only way to stop the assault on my senses was to pick it up. I reached for the phone with one hand as I pulled a pillow over my head with the other, dragging the receiver under the covers, hoping somehow to protect myself from the onslaught of light and noise.

"Mmrrmphoe," I said.

"Zach?"

"Mmrrmph."

"Zach, it's me, Cynthia. Detective Cleary called me. We're supposed to meet them at the police station at 1:00."

"Mmrrmphkay," I said.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Late night. I'll see you there."

"Okay."

I hung up and tried to come to grips with the fact that I was going to have to get out from under the comforter and subject myself to the day. Slowly I pulled pillow and quilt away from

eyes and body. My skin felt as though it had been peeled, every follicle a prickly point of irritation. Somehow I made it down the ladder from my loft bed and into the bathroom, stopping only to set up the coffee. Once inside the shower stall I let loose a barrage of water as hot as I could stand.

I stood under the deluge and thought about the events of the previous night. I have seen my share of dead people, even a few murder victims, but I had never had any personal connection with any of them, even one as tenuous as my link to Alex. I recalled Cynthia talking of Alex's trouble with his family, his loss of a grip on his talent as an actor, his recent run of bad luck. It was over now. If it had been some cosmic design that had been targeting him, it had taken its last and best shot. If it had instead been some chain of chaos theory algorithms set in motion by the random appearance of a neutrino in a galaxy light years ago and away, it had achieved its final and irrefutable effect. I have no clearly defined philosophy on death, its purpose or lack thereof. Nor do I have one on life. For most of mine, I had sped down a particular track with all the apparent purpose and power of a steam locomotive. Then one day, at one instant, for reasons that remain a mystery to me, I had realized that I had given no more thought to the ultimate purpose and goal of my journey than such a locomotive could have done.

My awakening, depressing as it was, came at a time when I had a unique opportunity to get off the track down which I had been racing. I had taken that opportunity, but whether I had derailed myself, or simply pulled into a switching station, I did not know. The moment had seemed like an epiphany at the time, but how would it look through the reverse telescope of time? Perhaps for each of us the defining moment, the defining act, is one that seems off-hand and random when it occurs. When had been the moment, what had been the choice that had been

the final causal link between Alex and his death? Was there only one? Can our destinies be traced finally to one point in time when a chance or a decision sets in motion the chain of events that will lead us to our end? And where was I at this moment? Had I already unwittingly taken a step that predetermined my fate? I pondered these and other inane questions as the water washed away the effects of the last night's excess.

I finished my shower, the jackhammer in my head now somewhat muted. The coffee had finished brewing. I stood by the window to drink it and looked down onto the intersection of Seventy-Fifth Street and Columbus Avenue. I did this every morning, to take the temperature of the city. It was a beautiful crisp New York day, and the corner was busy. Roller-bladers sped toward the park to take advantage of the roads closed to traffic, and young men and women smartly dressed for business walked quickly and talked intensely. A pair of lovers window-shopped. Another couple pushed a baby carriage. A man was having an argument with a mailbox. I recalled, as I often did, a remark made by a friend visiting from a small midwestern town: "If all these people are out on the street, who's doing the work?" I had explained that in New York City there are so many people crammed into such a small space, we have to eat, sleep, work, and do everything else, in shifts.

Coffee finished, I grabbed my black jeans off the chair where I had left them the night before. I put on my Doc Martens, a logo t-shirt, a frayed gray sweater and my leather coat. Now that I didn't have to wear the litigator's uniform, I had reverted to the same attire I wore in college, even high school. At times I look with envy upon my friends who, with no apparent effort and without drawing undue attention to themselves, dress as if they are appearing in a GQ spread. I don't know if it's laziness or lack of personality that prevents me from following their

lead, but I look with disdain upon people who have such a definitive style. If you wear the up-to-the-minute clothes, don't you have to drive the latest car and sit on chic furniture in a stylish apartment in the hottest neighborhood? And when the style changes, as it frequently does, don't you then have to buy new clothes, trade in your car, sell your furniture and move? It just takes too much time and effort. But more than that, I think I enjoy the anonymity. I want people to have to spend time with me before they can draw a bead on what I think about anything.

I made a few phone calls, grabbed my wallet, checked it for cash and left my apartment. In the hall, I bumped into my neighbor George, who was struggling with the topmost of the three locks on his door. He was closing in on eighty. Bent over with his face two inches from the door jamb, he was trying to fit the key into the slot, but he wasn't getting it anywhere near the hole in the security plate.

"George, let me help you with that." He jumped when he felt my hand on his shoulder. He's hard of hearing.

"Oh, Jesus," he said turning around, "Oh Zach. Oh. Oy." He put his hand on his heart. He's very melodramatic. "Oy, Zach, I'm glad you're home. I wanted to talk to you. Could you get the locksmith in here to fix this thing? I keep telling you, it's sticking all the time."

"George, I keep telling you. It's your lock. The building provides the lock on the door handle," I pointed, "and the one above that," I pointed again, "but any other locks that you install are your responsibility." I spoke loudly and with much emphasis so that he could hear and understand.

"And I told you, I didn't install this one. It was on the door when I moved in."

“I know. It was installed by a previous tenant. But you don’t have to use it. The building provides you with the two locks. If you want to use the third one, or a fourth or a fifth, that’s fine, but it’s your problem. I’m sorry, but if I start to maintain that lock, then every tenant is going to want another lock, and those guys at Realcor are going to start looking at me cross-eyed when I start bringing in receipts for all kinds of locks when they’ve already got two good ones on every door.”

“All right, all right, it was worth a try.” He looked at me cannily, and I wondered again how much of the deaf-and-doddering thing was an act. “You know, it’s not so easy to pull the wool over your eyes as it was with Mrs. Jacobson. Things have changed since you took over.”

“Yeah, I know, George, but first of all, I don’t believe for one second that you ever tried to take advantage of her. You only try to take advantage of me, because now the building is owned by a big corporation, you figure who’s to hurt? But you’re wrong, George, I’m telling you, because this is my livelihood here, and those guys watch me like a hawk. They’ve got little teeny accountant men with big thick glasses and no hearts who double check every receipt I bring in, and if I don’t keep the numbers down, I’m pounding the pavement looking for another job with no reference from this one. And secondly, things have changed around here. They’ve changed for the better. Did Mrs. Jacobson keep the place as neat and clean like I do, and did she personally go buy a can of WD-40 like I’m going to do right after my lunch and come schpritz your lock for you on the very same day that you complained about it?”

“Ah, thank you, thank you, that’s what I wanted to hear. You are the best manager this building has ever had.”

“I’m the only manager this building has ever had,” I said from halfway down the stairs.

“And that’s why you’re the best,” he shouted after me. He laughed and shut his door. Two of the locks snicked into place, and then I heard the third one catch a few times. I paused on the third floor landing, and finally heard a muffled “Achh, bosha moy” from behind the door. I laughed and headed down one more flight, past the second floor apartment, through the front door and down the stoop to the sidewalk. I waved at Mrs. Pooley through the front window of Pooley’s Chinese laundry, which took up the ground floor of my building. She waved back over the shoulder of the fat woman who was picking up a large bundle of shirts wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. She was speaking loudly in the strange combination of Cantonese and pidgin English that she and her husband used to communicate with their clientele. I laughed to myself, as I always did when I heard it. They’d had me to dinner in their tiny apartment behind the laundry shortly after I had taken over the building. The food made every Chinese meal I had ever eaten before taste like McDonald’s, but they had spoken perfect, nearly unaccented English. They told me their fluency was bad for business, and so they had maintained the fiction for many years. As I headed down the block I marveled again at their perseverance and good spirits, which were always apparent. It still amazed me that a cardio-thoracic surgeon and a history professor could have survived such terrors, do what they were doing, and still maintain a positive attitude and an obviously healthy marriage. It made me feel like a schmuck for ever worrying about anything.

I turned right down Columbus into the crisp October breeze, passing children dressed as goblins and super heroes on their way to school pageants. The air had a peculiar redolence of dog shit and freshly baked bagels. In other words it smelled like New York. But underneath, if you were a native and you were paying attention, it smelled like winter coming on. I could feel the

city gearing up for the marathon of commerce that began with Halloween and lasted like some retail triathlon through Chanukah and Christmas, with a last belated gasp at Valentine's Day thrown in for good measure. Thoughts of Chanukah coming on reminded me of the High Holy Days just past. An empty chamber opened in my chest and I heard the hollow receding echo of footsteps. I quickly slammed the door shut on images of my family, bent my head into the wind and quickened my pace. It was time to meet Cynthia, and face Jenkins and Cleary.

CHAPTER FOUR

At the police station, I told the uniformed officer at reception that I was there to meet a client of mine for an interview with Detectives Jenkins and Cleary. He made a call, and then told me my client wasn't there yet, but that I could wait in Interview Three. As he was talking a woman walked in who looked about 19 years old, with straight black hair cut above her shoulders, no makeup, very blue eyes and a scattering of freckles. Under her pea coat she wore blue jeans, black high top Keds, and a red pocket t-shirt. A badge in a holder stuck out of one pocket, and a Glock 9 millimeter sat on her hip. The gun looked big and heavy. I was a little worried it might pull her pants down, but not too worried.

“Sally,” the uniform called out. “Can you take this guy up to I-3?”

“Sure.” The gate buzzed and I followed her up a flight of stairs. We passed frosted glass doors stenciled with squad names, and then the hallway opened out into a large room with eight metal desks arranged in pairs. Three of the desks were occupied. At one an officer in plainclothes was speaking into the telephone, repeating “uh-huh” at rhythmic intervals. At another a detective typed with two fingers, filling in boxes on a preprinted form while an elderly woman wearing a pill box hat sat in a client chair and wept silently into an embroidered handkerchief. A third detective sat with his feet up on his desk, staring at the ceiling, where a murder of pencils was stuck into the acoustic tiles. His eyes locked on mine and followed me across the room.

“Here ya go,” Sally said. She opened a door, no frosted glass, stepped out of the way, and shut the door behind me.

This was not a happy place. Disinfectant spray fought a losing battle against the smell of fear, cruelty, boredom and cigarette smoke. There was no window. I looked at myself in the mirror set into one wall. The harsh light provided by the single fluorescent bulb overhead combined with the green institutional paint to give me a death cast. Lovely, I thought. The only furniture was an industrial gray metal table with a rubber top and five padded metal chairs scattered around it. The metal sliders on the chair legs had left many telltale dents and scrapes in the cracked linoleum tile, and no amount of scrubbing would ever remove the twilight of black scuff marks left by the crepe soles of comfortable cop shoes. I put my bag on the table and sat, facing the door. I could hear the occasional passing of feet outside the door, the continued pecking at the keyboard, ringing phones. I waited.

After fifteen minutes, when I thought I had been forgotten, Sally poked her head in the door.

“Detective Jenkins called in to say he was running a few minutes late. You want some coffee?”

“Sure. Black, please. One sugar.” She looked at me for a long moment without a trace of amusement.

“Follow me,” she said, leaving. By the time I was out of the room she was halfway down the hall. I trotted to catch up and she led me into a room similar in feel to the other, but with no door, a smaller table with four chairs, a selection of outdated magazines, a stained, pillowed orange couch covered in cigarette burns, and a coffee station in the corner. Here, the smell of burnt coffee did what the disinfectant spray couldn’t.

Sally poured herself a cup, grabbed a donut from a box next to the coffee maker and gestured for me to help myself. Then she sat on the sofa, put her feet up on the coffee table, and watched intently as I poured.

“I know you,” she said as I stirred in my one teaspoon of sugar.

“You do?”

“Yeah. I think we went to school together.”

I laughed. “I don’t think so.”

“What’s so funny?”

“Well, it’s just . . . I think I’m quite a bit older than you.”

“Yeah. So do most of the skulls I bust. You went to Fordham, right? Lincoln Center?”

“Yes, I went to law school there.”

“Yeah, I know.” She reached down to scratch her foot, and the cuff of her jeans rode up, revealing an ankle holster and another gun. This one was more her size. “You don’t remember me, do you?”

She definitely hadn’t gone to law school with me. She was too young. “No, I’m sorry. I can’t place you.”

“I was one of the jurors in your fake trial. They pulled us from John Jay.”

“One evening, eight years ago? You’ve got quite a memory.”

“Yeah, it comes in handy on the street, I’ll tell ya. You were good. I voted to convict your guy anyway.”

“You were the one.”

“Yep. I was the one.” Her smile made her look fifteen instead of nineteen. “So what are you doing here?”

“A friend’s roommate killed himself last night. They want to ask my friend some questions.”

“You here for moral support?”

“Yes.”

“This the guy they found hanging?”

“Yes.”

She stood. “Well, I got some reports to file,” she said, adjusting the Glock on her hip, “but you can wait in here instead of I-3. It’s a little more pleasant. Tell your friend not to worry. Jenkins and Cleary are good. They’ll get to the bottom of it.”

“Wait a minute,” I said, as she started to leave. “Get to the bottom of what?”

“When they get here, I’ll tell them where you are,” she said, and walked away. From the doorway I watched her sit at one of the eight desks, insert a form into a typewriter and start filling it in. What was there to get to the bottom of? I thought today was routine. I only came because Jenkins had pissed me off, and I could be a white knight for a hot girl. The cop under the pencils was giving me the eye again, so I retreated to the couch. I tried reading a copy of U.S. News and World Report, but it was even more boring than it must have been two years ago. I closed my eyes and massaged the back of my neck to work away the tension before my monster headache returned.

“Late night, counselor?”

I started. I must have drifted off. Jenkins was standing in the doorway, Cynthia behind him.

“Good morning, Detective.” I stood. “Before we start, I’d like to have a few minutes alone with my client in I-3. I’ll come get you when we’re ready.” I squeezed by him without waiting for his permission, took Cynthia by the elbow and led her to the interview room. Cynthia dropped her bag on the table and went over to the mirror to examine herself, as I had.

“I look awful,” she said. I disagreed, but I kept my mouth shut. Her face was drawn, her eyes a paler shade of green than the night before, but she was still a sight to see. She leaned closer to the mirror, as if she was looking for something. “When I woke up, it took me a moment to figure out where I was, to remember what had happened last night. It’s like things are short-circuiting, colliding inside me, and I can’t identify any of them. I keep wondering what it is I’m supposed to feel.”

“There’d be something wrong if you knew what to feel right now.”

“I suppose.” As she continued to look at the mirror, I wondered if Jenkins and Cleary were watching from the other side, listening to us. “It hasn’t sunk in at all. It doesn’t make any sense to me.”

“I don’t think it makes sense to the police, either.”

“What do you mean?”

“I get the feeling from the way they were treating the crime scene and from their attitude that there are some things that don’t add up.”

“Don’t add up? About Alex killing himself? How would they know? They didn’t know him. They didn’t live with him, for Christ’s sake. I’m the one who should have seen it coming. I’m the one who should have . . .” She stopped and her eyes fluttered around the room like a frightened bird with nowhere to land.

“Should have what?” I asked.

“I should have seen it coming.”

“Maybe there was nothing to see.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you can’t start taking responsibility for this. You have no idea what happened, why he did it, what he was keeping from you.” I wanted to say something that would help her, but I had the feeling whatever we were about to learn from the police wasn’t going to make things any easier on her.

I pulled out the chair at the end of the table closest to the door. “Sit here,” I told her. She sat, and I took the chair next to her. “Did Jenkins or Cleary speak to you before they brought you to me?”

“No. I bumped into them in the lobby downstairs. They said good morning and all, but nothing about last night.”

“All right. When they come in, they’re going to start asking a lot of hard questions. If it gets rough or you start getting upset, let me know, and I’ll get us out of here.” She nodded. “Are you ready for them?”

“Yes.”

When I opened the door, Jenkins was standing at the desk of the pencil cop, speaking to Cleary. Cleary saw me and interrupted Jenkins. Jenkins looked my way and then said something to Pencil, who laughed. Then Jenkins headed in with his partner, and I shut the door behind them. Cleary sat on the far side of the table, facing us. Jenkins leaned against the wall behind Cleary, who placed a manila folder on the table. He cleared his throat.

“Thank you for coming down to speak with us, Ms. Hull. We know that last night was difficult for you.” Jenkins snorted and scowled. Cleary paused, took a deep breath, and continued. “There are a few questions that we have about . . .”

I interrupted him. “I’m sorry, detective, but before we go any further with this, I want something clear. I’m here as Miss Hull’s attorney. I have instructed her not to say anything, and not to answer any questions you might have. I have so advised her in light of your partner’s assertion last night that she is a suspect in this matter. Perhaps we got off on the wrong foot and she is not a suspect. If that’s the case, I would be happy to revise my instructions, and I’m sure she would be happy to cooperate with your investigation in any way that you might require.”

“Counselor, I’m sure you can understand, it was late, we were tired, coming off a long shift, and a questionable crime scene always makes us a little tense.”

“What I’m looking for, detective, is an apology, and a determination from you as to whether my client is the focus of any investigation.”

“Look, Mr. Brandis, I’m sorry if it seems that . . .”

“Detective, I don’t have a problem with you. But your partner is a rude son of a bitch.” Jenkins came off the wall and took two steps towards me when I characterized his lineage, but Cleary held up a hand to stop him. I continued. “He clearly stated that my client is a suspect. Until that assessment is revised we have nothing to say. We’re leaving, unless she is arrested and charged.”

Cleary stared at me, his hand still raised, Jenkins next to him, clenching and unclenching his fists. I was relaxed, my legs crossed, one hand resting on the table. Cynthia played it like a trouper, and met Cleary’s steely stare with a level gaze. Finally Cleary smiled and laughed.

“You’re right. He is a rude son of a bitch. But he’s also a good cop, and the best partner I’ve ever had, so I let it go most of the time.” Jenkins pulled the corners of his mouth back in what might have been a smile and resumed his stance against the wall.

“My client?”

“Is not a suspect.” He nodded at Cynthia. “As a matter of fact, it doesn’t even look like a homicide has been committed, and that’s all we really care about.”

“Then what is it we can help you with?”

“It’s just paperwork now. It wasn’t a murder, so we just have a few questions to help us decide whether to classify this as an accidental death or a suicide. Had Alex been--”

Cynthia interrupted him. “Alex wouldn’t have killed himself.”

“No?” Cleary asked.

Cynthia looked down at her hands clasped on the table in front of her. “No. He’d been through so much.”

“Uh huh. Maybe he’d been through enough.”

“No. Don’t you see? He’d been through it.” She looked at me. “I mean, sure, things had been going badly for him, but he always used to joke about it. He’d say, ‘I been down so long it looks like up to me.’”

“Cynthia,” I said, “you were telling me only last night how depressed he’d been lately.”

She looked back at her hands. “He just wouldn’t have done it.”

I looked at Cleary and shrugged. We both knew that suicide is not easy for survivors to accept.

“How long had you known him?” Cleary asked.

“About six years.”

“Why don’t you tell us about him?” Cleary suggested. Cynthia looked to me, her eyebrows raised. I nodded, and she filled them in with what I had heard the night before. As she spoke, I could hear in her voice, in the little details she recounted of their life together, the obvious affection she had for this man. Adding up all the factors - the suicide of his fiancée, separation from his family, lack of career, loss of job – Alex’s suicide was not an unlikely result. When she was done, Cleary nodded and opened the thin folder in front of him.

“You say he had just lost his job?”

“Yes.”

“Where was he working?”

“He was bartending at two places, Tempo and Hentai.”

The two cops exchanged a look.

“Hentai,” Cleary said. “And what happened?”

“He was fired.”

“From both? Why?”

“They have the same owners, and they accused him of abusing his buy-backs.”

“What does that mean?”

“You know. Someone’s at the bar, buying a lot of drinks, every house has a policy. If the customer seems to be a big spender, or if he’s a regular, after so many rounds, the bartender can buy one. It varies. Some places the bartender has a lot of discretion. Anyway, sometimes a bartender abuses the system.”

“How, exactly?”

“Well, unless the manager is keeping a really close eye on the bar, there’s no way to keep track of who the bartender is giving the buybacks to. You’re supposed to enter them into the system, but the manager only sees the totals at the end of the night. The bartender can cheat by giving the free drinks to friends instead of to the good customers like he’s supposed to.”

“And that’s what Alex was doing?”

“No, that’s just an excuse they gave for firing him.”

“How do you know?”

“Cause Alex hated that place.”

“Which place? Hentai or Tempo?”

“Both. They’re not the crowd he ran with at all. And Alex didn’t want his friends coming in anyway. It was strictly a money gig for him.”

“The money was good?”

“It was really good. Alex only worked three nights a week to make what he needed. Of course, he didn’t need all that much.”

“Was he upset about being fired?”

“Enough to kill himself?” Cynthia’s voice ratcheted up a notch. “No, he wasn’t upset enough over losing a fucking bartending job to kill himself. Why are you asking all these stupid--”

I put my hand on her arm. “Cyn, relax. They didn’t know him. They’re just following threads, trying to get a picture. Just answer their questions. This could go on for a while.”

She looked down, and after a few moments her hands released their grip on the arms of the chair. “Yes, he was upset. He liked only having to work a few shifts a week, and good bartending jobs are hard to come by. Also, since he was fired, and not laid off, he had some trouble with his unemployment claim. He had a big fight with one of the managers over it.” She looked up at Cleary. “But he still wasn’t upset enough to kill himself.” Cleary looked over at Jenkins, who shrugged. Cleary looked at the open folder in front of him and scanned a couple of pages. “Let’s move on,” he said. “Did Alex have any unusual sexual proclivities?”

Cynthia was taken aback. “What? What are you talking about?”

“Well, there’s no easy way to say this. There are some details, some irregularities, that make it look as if this wasn’t necessarily a suicide.”

“Like what?” I asked. “You think he might have been murdered?”

“No, it doesn’t really look like that either.”

“Then what? It seems to me that it has to be one or the other.” Cleary looked uncomfortable. He cleared his throat again.

“It might have been an accident.”

Cynthia jumped in. “What do you mean ‘it might have been an accident?’ You think he was, what, rehearsing a stunt for a play or something? That’s ridiculous.”

“No, no, no, not rehearsing . . . It’s just, well, there was no note, and . . .”

Jenkins piped up. “We think he might have been a choker.” There was a moment of silence. I was stunned. Cynthia was clueless.

“A choker?” we said in unison.

“Why the hell would you think that?” I asked.

“Wait a minute.” Cynthia was looking at all three of us, trying to catch up. “What do you mean? What’s a choker?”

Jenkins leaned against the wall and shook his head. Cleary continued to look uncomfortable. They left it to me to break it to her. Cowards. I turned to Cynthia, took both of her hands in mine. “What they’re trying to say is this: They think Alex might have died an accidental death due to autoerotic asphyxiation.”

CHAPTER FIVE

The phrase “autoerotic asphyxiation” hung in the air, so to speak.

“I don’t know what that is,” Cynthia said. Cleary and Jenkins were stone-faced. I had no idea what information they had, but there must have been something about the autopsy or the crime scene that led them to this conclusion. They wouldn’t raise this casually. Homicide cops tend to take the determination of cause of death very seriously. I reviewed what I remembered about the body and the apartment, trying to understand the cops’ train of thought, when Cynthia spoke again.

“I said I don’t know what that is. Somebody tell me what’s going on.”

I waited for the cops to explain themselves. Jenkins simply leaned against the wall with an expression of distaste. Cleary continued to look uncomfortable. He held the folder angled away so that I couldn’t see the contents and flipped a page.

“What time did you say you two left for dinner last night?”

“I picked Cynthia up around 7:30.”

“And where did you go?”

“We went to Cassie’s, on Amsterdam. We walked, got there about 8:00.”

“And after that you came straight back to the apartment?”

“Yes.”

“Did you see anyone you know at either place?”

“Why?”

“It will make it easier to confirm.”

“I know that. I mean why are you trying to figure out where we were . . .” Then it dawned on me, and I realized why they were treating us with such disdain. “Wait a minute. You guys think we sanitized the scene? That’s ridiculous.”

Jenkins spoke up. “You brought it up, counselor, not us. And I think it’s really interesting that you’re familiar with the concept.”

“I’m a smart guy,” I said.

“You sure are,” he said.

Cynthia interrupted. “Hey! What the hell is everyone talking about? What is this auto-whatchamacallit? Didn’t Alex just kill himself?”

“I’ll explain in a minute, Cyn. Are you guys done?”

“You didn’t answer the question,” Jenkins said. “Did you see anyone you know?”

“I can’t believe you’re putting her through this.” I tried to swallow my anger. Better to just give them what they wanted, so I could get Cynthia out of there. “They know me at Cassie’s. I eat there all the time, so anyone will be able to tell you we were there, and I spoke with the manager at one point. His name is Carter”

“Okay,” Cleary said, starting to rise. “After we check it out we’ll get back to both of you.” He picked up the folder and Jenkins spoke.

“If those times don’t check out, counselor, you might consider getting a lawyer of your own.”

“What are you driving at, officer?”

Jenkins came off the wall and leaned in towards me, putting both of his hands flat on the table. “When it’s the family, I try to be sympathetic. But as a general rule,” he leaned in closer, “I don’t like anyone fucking around with my crime scene.” He gave me what was supposed to be a hard look. It was pretty good. Then he strutted out of the room. From the doorway Cleary turned back to us.

“We’ve notified Alex’s parents of his death. That’s required. They’ll probably contact you about what they want you to do with his stuff. I don’t think we have any further need for it, but if I were you, I wouldn’t touch it until you hear from them,” he said and left.

I sat there, stunned, fighting the urge to follow them and make threats I couldn’t make good on. They were doing their job, and while their methods were seriously curtailed by trivialities like the Constitution, they were given wide latitude as far as their theories and manners were concerned.

“Will you tell me what the hell just happened?” Cynthia asked.

“Let’s get out of here first,” I said. On the stairs down to the lobby were three black teenagers wearing handcuffs, t-shirts, immense parkas and radically oversized jeans that stayed up in angry defiance of gravity. Plaid boxer shorts covered what would otherwise have been their exposed buttocks. Their outfits were every bit as much a uniform as those worn by the cops who escorted them, and everyone in the group wore an identical expression of sullen boredom, all partners in a grim marathon dance competition, not enjoying the steps, but unwilling to show any weakness by quitting. We stood to the side to let them pass, then hurried through the lobby and out into the fresh air.

“What the hell was that all about?” Cynthia asked.

I didn’t answer, but walked quickly west towards Ninth Avenue. I needed to calm down, to try to figure it out for myself so I could explain it to her. Cynthia trotted to keep up.

“Zach, what the hell was that all about?” she asked again. Again I didn’t answer. I was enraged, and almost incapable of speech. Capricious authority has always had that effect on me. I have never known what to do with those feelings, except allow them time to fade. At the corner, Cynthia still a couple of paces behind, I turned north on Ninth Avenue, crossing Fifty-Fourth Street. Partway up the block a Siamese standpipe was sticking out of a building next to a laundromat. I stopped and sat on it. Cynthia came up beside me. She must have sensed my mood, because she waited silently, her arms crossed. I could feel a pulse in my temple and I tried to regulate my breathing, to bring my temper under control. Finally I looked up at her.

“Okay,” I said, “let me try to explain this. Apparently, if you deprive your brain of oxygen during sex you can increase the intensity of your orgasm. Some people like their partners to strangle them a little bit. Other people devise ways to strangle themselves during masturbation. That’s autoerotic asphyxiation. They don’t mean to kill themselves, just cut off the oxygen to their brains a little bit, maybe get themselves to the edge of passing out. But sometimes people screw up, and accidentally strangle themselves. It looks like the police think maybe that’s what happened to Alex.”

“That’s disgusting.”

I nodded, but didn’t say anything. I wasn’t sure what she was referring to; the peculiar sexual practice, the fact that the police thought that’s what had happened, or maybe the fact that I knew anything about it. This was a hell of a way to get to know a girl.

“Why on earth would they think that?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“It doesn’t make any sense.”

“It does to them,” I said. “There’s something they know that we don’t, and it’s led them to think this. They wouldn’t just pull this out of a hat and accuse us.”

“What do you mean, ‘accuse us’? What did they accuse us of? I didn’t understand any of it. What are you so angry about? What are they so angry about?”

“They think we cleaned up the crime scene.”

“What do you mean?”

“One of the reasons it’s hard for the cops to know if they’ve got a case of accidental death by autoerotic asphyxiation is that sometimes relatives or friends, who are usually the ones to find the body, clean up the scene to hide the way the person died. It’s embarrassing, but to some people it’s not as embarrassing as suicide, so they try to make it look like a regular suicide. Or maybe, since they probably don’t know any better, they think it was a suicide, and they just try to clean up the sexual aspect of it to avoid further embarrassment.”

“But we weren’t there. We didn’t touch anything. Why do they think we did?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why do they think Alex died while he was doing this . . . this thing?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why did you get so angry?”

I didn’t want to give her the long answer, so I gave her the short one. “It’s a very serious thing to be accused of, tampering with a crime scene. I could lose my license.”

“But you don’t practice anymore.”

“I still don’t want to lose it.”

She nodded and gnawed on her lower lip, standing over me. I remained seated on the standpipe. People hurried past and glanced at us as if we were in the midst of a lovers’ quarrel. Had we been homeless, talking to ourselves or potentially dangerous, we would have been ignored, but miss a soap opera? Never.

“Well,” she said, “where do we go from here?” I wanted to ask “What do you mean ‘We?’” but I felt stuck, now that I had gotten myself into this.

“I don’t think we have anything to worry about. I can’t believe I’m even saying these words, but our alibis will check out. The autopsy should give them a pretty clear indication of the time of death, they’ll check with Carter, and they’ll know where we were and when.”

“So then what?”

“I don’t know. There’s something about the crime scene,” I caught myself, “I’m sorry, your apartment, or maybe about Alex’s body, that’s making them think there’s something hinky about this. Also, you telling them there’s no way he killed himself adds fuel to the fire. Unless we find out what they’re thinking, what information they have, there’s no way for us to know what’s going on. Unfortunately, you’re not next of kin, and neither of us is charged with anything, so we don’t have any standing to get any information.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean if either of us was formally charged with anything related to this, then we’d have access to information so we could prepare a defense. As it is, if they don’t charge us with tampering, they don’t have to tell us anything.”

“So we just do nothing?”

I shrugged. “There’s nothing for us to do. Alex is dead. Accident or suicide, it doesn’t change anything, except to his memory. Even if the ME rules it a death by misadventure, no one else will know anything about the sexual--”

Cynthia interrupted. “What do you mean ‘death by misadventure?’”

“That’s what they’ll call it if he died of autoerotic asphyxiation.”

“Oh.”

“Anyway, he’s not a public figure, so it’s not going to get any play in the newspapers. As far as your friends are concerned, he’ll have died however you tell them he died. And since we know where we were when it happened, and there are plenty of people to back us up, today was probably the end of our trouble with the cops. Any questions they have about whether it was a suicide or . . . this other thing will probably go unanswered. So what if there are irregularities? They happen all the time.”

“So that’s it? That’s the end of Alex?” She looked at me, tears brimming in her eyes. I realized that in some way, dealing with the police and the unanswered questions was a way for her to keep Alex alive, but at the same time it denied her any closure. She was still scrambling for a way to process these events. I thought of something that might help.

“Do you know how to get in touch with his parents?” I asked.

“I don’t want to talk to them,” she spat. “They never gave a shit about him.”

“You’re going to have to talk to them. You need their permission to deal with his belongings. Also, if it’s true that they didn’t give a shit about him, then maybe they’ll let you claim his body. There are funeral arrangements to be made, all of those details, and maybe you

want to handle that rather than having his parents do it. That way, at least it's being taken care of by someone who loved him."

Cynthia nodded, hugging herself. Her hair had been blown over one eye and she shook her head to toss it back into place. A tear escaped and ran down her cheek. She swiped at it with the back of her hand.

"Great, now I have to deal with those assholes. I don't have time for this." She stood and looked away, up the street. "I'm going away," she said suddenly.

"What do you mean?" I asked, confused by the non-sequitor. "Where are you going?"

"My agent called this morning before I left for the police station. I got a job at a theater in Springfield."

"Congratulations," I said, nonplussed. "When do you leave?"

"Rehearsals start tomorrow, so I'm supposed to go up there today or tonight."

"Short notice," I said.

"They had the role cast already, but the actor got another part, something better, so she backed out." An ancient man with an even older dog hobbled past. "I don't know what to do," she said.

I thought "uh-oh," but I didn't say anything. "What do you think I should do?" she asked.

"What do you want to do?"

"I need to take this part. I have to take this part. He would have wanted me to take this part."

"I'm sure that's true," I said, "but you also have to deal with this so you can put it behind you. That's going to take some time."

“Maybe getting away is the best thing for me right now.” She had already made up her mind.

“Do you think you’ll be in any shape to work?”

“I’ll have something to focus on,” she said, “and I won’t have to go back to the apartment and look at his stuff all the time.”

“That’s true,” I said. “Then maybe you should get in touch with his folks before you go, just to ask them what they want done with his stuff in the meantime.”

She nodded. “Could you do me a favor?”

“Here it comes,” I thought. “Sure,” I said.

“Could you come back to my place with me, just be there while I pack. I’m pretty creeped out about going back in there.”

“Sure. That’s understandable.”

“Could I give you an extra set of keys to my place, so if they need to get in there or anything while I’m gone, the cops or his family or whoever, you could be there? I don’t want them crawling around in there without someone to keep an eye on things.”

“Sure.” I stood.

“Could you sort of coordinate that for me while I’m gone?” she asked, as we headed south, back towards her apartment. “Would you mind?”

“Not at all,” I said. I wondered how much I was going to do for this beautiful woman who I hardly knew. As we walked, she took my arm, and I thought to myself, “Well, you’ll probably do a lot more than you should.”