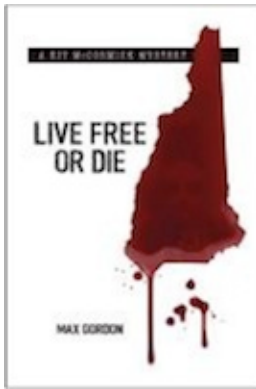


A KIT MCGORMICK MYSTERY

**LIVE FREE
OR DIE**

MAX GORDON





Life is a humdrum three stars out of five for travel writer Katherine "Kit" McCormick. That changes forever when a dead body turns up in her office. As the ex-lover of the murdered developer's wife, Kit becomes the prime suspect and the killer's next target. Kit works with the closeted Detective Kasey Chakarian to unravel the knot of corruption and shameful secrets, but every clue leads to further entanglements...and mortal danger.

Live Free or Die

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LIVE FREE OR DIE



1 AREN'T BIRTHDAYS A BITCH?

When you're about to die, people say, your life flashes before your eyes in perfect clarity. Apparently, I was not about to die, since what flickered into my head as I hung upside down by my seatbelt in a glassless sedan was a tired cliché: *bad things happen in threes*. Looking back, my usual logic kicks in: that couldn't be true. If it were, having my brakes fail without warning on a backwoods road would have counted as number three, and my run of bad luck would have come to an end right there on that deceptively pleasant early October morning, miles from anywhere.

Instead, it was just beginning.

I could have started counting about six weeks earlier, when I was gimping around on an ankle ripened to the approximate size and color of an eggplant—a souvenir from what started as a friendly game of co-ed volleyball with just one too many former jocks primed by televised beach games and a keg at the unofficial town picnic.

Number two? That would have been three weeks after that: just as my crutches had started to gather cobwebs in a closet forested with fishing rods and grass-stained lacrosse twigs, I slipped off a friend's dock and left a face-shaped imprint on the only rock around. That graceless move had broken my

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nose and liberated a thumbnail-size piece of bone from the exact center of my forehead.

And now, with the stitches out—thirteen of them, of course—and the cut healing into a silvery half-moon that would never tan, number three: me, suspended in near silence between a savage-looking scotch pine and a guard rail, unhurt but definitely upside down.

It was not turning out to be the best birthday of my life.

I knew I should panic, or at least fret, but I was dazed enough that I let habits take over. With a determined nonchalance I turned off the ignition, though the car had long since stalled, and managed to shove my keys into the back pocket of my cargo shorts. I switched off the radio—it was mumbling now since the antenna had been bent back and buried six inches into the door panel—and snapped shut the glove compartment, which had disgorged most of its maps and travel brochures in a dramatic fan. I unbuckled my seatbelt and fell unceremoniously into the piles of windshield diamonds.

Maybe the basic near-death experience launches *everyone* into ill-timed philosophizing. Or maybe it was just me, and my reluctance to move too much until my head stopped spinning. Or it could have been just some cranial afterburn cooked up by my private carnival ride moments before. For whatever reason, it seemed like a really good time to review my life.

I gave it three stars out of five.

To review, I had a pretty good gig—regular columnist and frequent feature writer for a small but high-class glossy travel print and online magazine, a reputation as a dependable freelancer for a dozen or so other reasonably respectable publications. The money was okay, the hours more or less mine, and the creative bennies of self-employment still outweighed the month-end panic attacks. I adored my little house, a 1930-ish bungalow tucked onto a small rocky spit on a clear, beautiful New Hampshire lake. I had a few close friends, a cat who loved me, and my health. In all, it would seem I had a pretty good life. So what was missing—besides brakes that worked, that is?

While I waited for my inner gyroscope to catch up to my body, I pondered. I had moved back east four years before, leaving behind L.A. and more than a few painful memories. Back then I'd thought that settling into a low-stress job in a quiet town back in the Real World would be exactly what I needed: a professional change to heal some personal disillusionments. I saw the move as a way to get myself back on track, though on track to what, I wasn't sure. With my luck lately, it was a one-way trip down a dead-end switch into the path of an oncoming train.

No, strike that. I'm not usually so sulky. Since my mood may have had something to do with the pain of bare knees on broken glass, I scrambled out of a gaping window frame and into the prickly brush. I probably should have been sniffing for gas leaks, or trying to rescue my gym bag and other arguably valuable possessions. Instead I sat down on a cool, moss-covered hump of granite next to the still-ticking engine, and decided I needed just a little time off. Take a break from traveling for just a few months. Give up the stressful life of winging first class to exotic locales and being wined and dined (read: bribed) by various tourist bureaus and civic leaders, and spend some time reassessing my life. Maybe enjoy the end of the leaf season. Stay home, recharge, relax.

Before I could change my mind and clamber back into the precariously leaning sedan for my cell phone—my lifeline to who's where and when's which—I heard a low, tortured groan and a final death rattle. The last thing I saw was my beloved black Subaru, my symbol of mobility and independence, as it retired prematurely in a halo of brilliant white flames and a pillar of very black smoke.



A wreath of anxious faces stared down at me, then gradually focused into just one. Pale blue and khaki uniform. Big black belt. Holster. Earrings.

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“Don’t get up just yet.” She hunkered next to me, hands splayed across her knees. A silver ballpoint and the chewed eraser end of a yellow pencil poked out from a front pocket. “How many fingers?”

I counted three and said so. A notebook appeared in her hands. “Name?”

Katherine Anne McCormick. My friends all call me Kit. Forty-five years, eleven months, thirty days and, um, a few hours. Loon Island, Rockbridge, New Hampshire. Travel writer, photographer, researcher, editor—just your basic self-employed all-American entrepreneur.

She wrote quickly, watching me, not her hands. I watched them for her. They were smooth and spotless, large and tanned, with clean unpainted nails pared to the quick. No rings.

“I’m Detective Chakarian,” she said. “You hurt? Got an ambulance on its way, get you checked out.”

I shook my head. *Ahrgh*. Just a resonating headache, which I didn’t bother to mention. My face felt sunburned, tight, and hot, and when I touched it gently, my hands came away coated with a glaze of blood and bits of dirt and windshield. The realization that I probably had no eyebrows made me more than a little self-conscious, but the only intense pain I could pinpoint was where I sat. My car’s last breath had blown me butt-first onto my own car keys, an embarrassment I was not inclined to announce. I leaned up slowly and stared at the steaming husk of car.

“What happened?” she asked, ready to write—as if I had a ready answer.

I squinted, replaying the slo-mo version in my head. “The curve was coming up—I know this road, drive it three mornings a week for volleyball at the gym—so I was getting ready to slow way down. But when I crested the hill I saw something...no, someone...standing in the middle of the road. She, I think it was a she, was just standing there, almost at the bottom, facing away from me. I pumped the brake pedal, but nothing happened. The car just kept going,” I said. “I don’t get it. It just passed inspection.” To me, that’s like a notarized affidavit, sworn testimony. I have to trust mechanics

since my own knowledge of cars is pretty limited. Once my “check engine” light came on, so I did: it was still in there.

“Nobody else around heah now.” A big plainclothes cop, a few silvery bristles short of bald, had been talking with an even taller man in a glistening safety-yellow raincoat and muddy black gum boots. Now the officer eased closer and stood next to where Chakarian crouched. Behind him the skeleton of my car hissed under a spray of water from a pumper, sending a ghost of steam curling up into the chilly air. He leaned down and handed me what looked like a damp, black patio brick—the soft case that held my iPad. A grimy coating rubbed off on my hands as I unzipped it. Amazingly, it appeared unscathed. The big cop held up my worn purple canvas duffel. “That fell out, along with this gym bag.”

“Great. I could use a sweatshirt if my things aren’t too soaked,” I said, rubbing my bare arms, suddenly chilled. He graciously unzipped the bag and pulled out my faded Syracuse sweatshirt, which was wadded into a tight little blue and orange ball. As he tossed it to me, a dark metal object spiraled out and landed squarely between the two officers. Everyone stared, but no one moved. It was not my gun. It was in *my* bag, wrapped in *my* ratty old sweatshirt, in *my* car, but it was not my gun. Honest.



At 6:00 a.m. the next morning, I heard the distant iron bell that meant I had a visitor at the mainland dock. Who the hell? Fogged in with the wispy remnants of a dream, I slipped into the jeans and wrinkled “Hate is Not a Family Value” T-shirt that lay in a forlorn heap next to the bed and sleepwalked to *Woodstock*, my little metal dinghy. It couldn’t be anyone who knew me well. My friends know better than to shake me out of bed that early, especially on a weekend. When I spotted Detective Kasey Chakarian leaning on the dock rail clutching a large Dunkin’ Donuts coffee in one hand and that damn little notebook in the other, I had a feeling she wasn’t stopping by for blueberry pancakes and a get-to-know-you chat.

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I pulled up alongside the weathered mainland dock. Chakarian, only slightly better dressed than I in her jeans and a loose-fitting pale blue RPD sweatshirt, pointed at my bare feet with her notebook. “You’ll need some shoes,” she said by way of hello. “We need you downtown.” Even half awake, I laughed. Downtown? Downtown Rockbridge was smaller than the ten-acre island I called home. Maybe she watched too much TV.

Of course, I’d assumed that by “downtown” she meant the old brick schoolhouse that now housed the town’s police department. The station’s hand-painted sign had never given me a warm, fuzzy feeling of security. As it turned out, she meant Boston Road, the built-up, eight-mile stretch of strip malls and office parks that littered what had once been rolling green farmland. At just past 7 a.m. we pulled up at the ugly cement cube that housed, among other things, the editorial offices of *New Hampshire People & Places*. The parking lot was uncharacteristically crowded for an early Sunday morning. Several uniformed officers stood just inside the main doors eyeing our approach over the rims of pink and orange cups.

Chakarian and I rode the elevator up to the fourth floor, pushed through the double doors, and headed toward the closet-sized room assigned to me. It’s not much of an office, but it’s comfortable enough, especially since it’s really just a big mail stop—I do most of my work at home or on the road. My office nameplate is only laser-printed, presumably to remind me that nothing lasts forever. Below it (Kit McCormick, Field Editor) I had tacked up a yellowing *New Yorker* cartoon of two scarecrows conversing in a cornfield: “B.A. in English literature,” said one. “How about you?”

The acrid smell of institutionally burnt coffee tainted the halls. Near the copier stood the capriciously volatile office manager, Maris Bellamy, blithely answering the questions of a young blonde officer. Maris treated us to one of her withering looks as we approached, but I don’t wither easily. I flashed a 100-watt smile. It dimmed as I turned the corner and saw, emblazoned across my office door and completely obliterating the aforesaid cartoon, a frenzy of yellow tape: *Crime scene—Do not enter*.

We stopped at the office door. Glass shards littered the hallway. The doorknob was covered with a black, floury powder. Had I been burgled? It's not as though I have secret files in there—brochures on cog railways and cruise timetables for Lake Winnepesaukee aren't exactly the stuff of international intrigue or corporate espionage. It's not the kind of thing that needs to be locked up. Or burgled: Concord gives the stuff away by the truckload.

Chakarian handed me a pair of disposable booties, slid on a pair of her own, and donned latex gloves. She pulled a key from her jeans, turned it in the lock, and pushed the door open, letting it swing slowly into the room. Calendar listings and file folders, usually stacked in leaning piles around the desk and on the bookshelf, lay strewn about on the slashed carpet like leaves after a windstorm. Pictures tilted on the walls, and drawers pouted from the desk. Everything was covered with a dusting of the same black powder. My books and papers, violated. My carefully controlled clutter, chaos. Although I wanted desperately to back out and away, I followed her lead and ducked under the tape. "I'm usually a much better housekeeper," I managed to say, about to draw a question mark on the dust-blackened top of my desk.

"Don't touch anything. Try putting your hands in your pockets," said Chakarian. I did. It worked.

Behind us, the bristle-headed officer, Detective Walters, filled the doorway. He stood without speaking, tapping his own little notebook with a silver pen, watching me watching him, his copper brown eyes unreadable, unblinking. The silence pressed against my eardrums.

"This has something to do with that gun you found, doesn't it?" God, I'm quick. Like they would just drive me to work on my birthday for the sake of good public relations. On a weekend.

Walters just leaned into the office and pointed dramatically with his pen at the picture window that dominated the front wall of the office. I turned and looked. The beige Venetian blinds were closed tightly, the slats covered with some dark black crusty stuff that had dripped down the pasty wall and onto the carpet. Shiny black scales, brownish at the edges, maybe even red-

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dish. Damned if it didn't look like blood. Sketched lightly onto the carpet with what reminded me of blue billiard chalk was the outline of a large, uncomfortably contorted human body, surround by a scattering of number tents. My ears started making that weird whooshing sound you hear when something jumps out at you and sets your adrenaline flowing. Clammy palms. Sudden urge to laugh hysterically. Chattering teeth. Palpitations.

It wasn't the blood that bothered me. I'm pretty good with gore and broken bones, and very good in crises. No, it was more that I had an instant and oddly complete vision that my life *was* about to undergo a little change of pace. But my hopeful thoughts of a mini-vacation, a relaxing play-date with my inner child, and all that hopeful self-help self-discovery crap had not involved strange handguns. And certainly not dead bodies—one of which apparently had spent some time in my office very recently. I took three deep breaths to steady myself. Maybe *I* was watching too much TV.

"A man was shot to death in your office. Unless you know something we don't," said Chakarian, pausing for a moment, "we're thinking that this has a *lot* to do with your gun."

Whoa. "It's not my gun!" I spat back, glad to feel something besides that overwhelming sense of impending disaster. Anger kept me from envisioning further mayhem. "First off, I hate guns...ask anyone who knows me. And I've never—" I was prepared to continue spewing forth my anxiety-revved indignation at their implications, but Chakarian cut me off with an impatient wave of her hand.

"Follow me. Please."

She led me down the hallway past the elevator lobby to the conference room and motioned me into one of the chairs. Sitting down opposite me, she hunched in silence over her notebook, writing diligently, while Walters sat with one generous haunch hefted onto the end of the table. He, too, sat without speaking, with his precious pen tapping tapping tapping tapping. There were fourteen Spam-colored linoleum squares from one end of the room to the other, twelve in the other direction, and seven by four popcorn-pebbled

drop-ceiling tiles. Two banks of fluorescent lights, one humming a monotonous tune. One table, six unmatched chairs, three windows. How much wood could a wood chuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?

I was about to ask for something to read when finally Chakarian let her gaze slide slowly up until her dark eyes were fixed on mine. She plunked her little notebook off to one side. In the center of the table lay a crisp new manila folder snug with papers, with a mile-long alphanumeric label pasted neatly on the tab. Chakarian slid the folder toward herself, then opened it slowly and removed a color snapshot that had hung on my office wall. She placed it face up on the table. Slowly, with the barest touch of her fingertips, she pushed the photo toward me like an Ouija pointer, and for one delirious moment I thought I might see my future there.

Instead, it was my past. It showed me with a woman, tall and golden, squinting with laughter and sun-glare, by a car. My faithful Subaru, back in L.A. When Chakarian spoke, her voice was flat and distant, noncommittal.

“Case like this, it’s usually the wife,” she said. “So, what can you tell me about Dana?”

2 LOVE ON THE LEFT COAST

If you aren't tuned to the signs, you can easily miss the subtle change of seasons in Los Angeles. But I was from the northeast, so I watched, waited, even longed for it. An L.A. winter alternates between a gritty yet soothing warmth and violent rains that flood the surface streets and wash shopping carts and trash into the cement runoff rivers. Spring brings on those dramatic downpours, the ones that sluice cantilevered houses off the canyon walls and into the headlines. Then comes the steady hum of hot, cerulean summer: day after day after day after day after day of perfect weather, until you're lulled into a kind of sleepwalking passivity that leaves you unprepared for the fiery autumn. No, make that *fall*: the pharmaceutically pastel people turn vibrantly manic in their low pink houses and high glass towers as the angry Santa Ana winds scream down from the mountains, searing the skies with dark motes of burnt manzanita.

Damn, I hated L.A.

I'd hated it from the first week, when soaring temperatures kept everyone trapped inside—in civilized places you have snow days, not smog days—and a “routine” earthquake knocked my last good wineglass onto the floor and smashed it to bits. Yet I'd already been in L.A. for more than two anxious years when I met Dana Chase, and endured yet another six months

there before she and I admitted what we were both feeling. We tried to ignore it, each for our own private reasons—the shared one being that the timing was so very, very bad—then finally gave in and planned a long weekend in San Diego to “discuss” things.

Heading south on I-5, to keep myself free of the hot cloud I drove fast, slipping my small, black Subaru between gleaming BMWs and silvery semis. Squat, orange road reflectors harrumphed with every lane change. The heavy air pulled at my formless flowered shirt and pressed my dangling gold earrings back until they fluttered wildly against my damp neck. The same wind pinned Dana’s hand-drawn map to the USC Faculty sticker on my back window, but that didn’t matter. Any other time I would have kept the map taped to the dashboard, consulting my notes at every new turn, not trusting my memory for directions, but not that day: I had studied the map for hours, memorizing, imagining each unseen turn from Manhattan Beach to our rendezvous point in Garden Grove. Garden Grove sounded so scenic. It wasn’t.

At the off ramp I downshifted. Without the rushing wind, the sun was too hot on my bare arm, the radio too loud. What I’d thought was hunger now felt like nerves, like a flashback of a seventh-grade dance. It wasn’t just the usual murmuring anxieties that always oppress me whenever I drive somewhere I’ve never been—*Shouldn’t that Texaco be on the other side of the street? Did I miss my exit? Am I lost yet?*—it was honest-to-god embarrassed nervousness, sweaty palms and all. Jitters, about the afternoon, the weekend. But even as I considered swinging in and out of the K-Mart lot and back onto the freeway headed the opposite way I knew I’d keep going, bad timing be damned. Eventually, we all drive through Garden Grove.

I tried imagining that I had grown up there, that I not only recognized but could tell apart the endlessly identical palm-shaded streets lined with muted one-story houses with louvered windows and heavy Spanish doors. Deep breath. Two stop signs, turn left, right. Third house. I parked between two

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square, shiny black cars. Parents and grandparents. Another deep breath. Another. Shaking like a virgin bride. I was neither, but never mind that now.

Dana met me at the door, looking cool and composed, as always, in a soft turquoise shirt cut low and loose, and softer white shorts that brushed the sparsely freckled backs of her knees. The picture of innocence. With one hand she lifted her glass of lemonade and with the other touched me lightly on the shoulder, then slipped an arm around my waist to guide me—more like propel me—past the front door toward the family. Dana’s family. They sat in a line on a long flowered couch, posed like Norman Rockwell caricatures: towering polar bear of a father, blue work shirt open to expose a sleeveless undershirt and two green-black Sea Bees tattoos; wispy shadow of a mother, hugging a photo album to her sleeveless housedress; brindle-haired, burly grandfather, drumming long, blue-veined fingers on a bony knee; soft-edged, soft-voiced grandmother, surrendering to them all with an adoring unfocused gaze.

Two high-backed armchairs propped at right angles to the couch waited for Dana and me, and between them a third chair with its back to the family held Dana’s oldest brother, William. Half-brother, actually; same mother, different father. He was, I knew, considered a little “off”; Dana was never specific about what that meant, but she had commented once that without her family, William might be one of the street people mumbling around the La Brea Tar Pits. He doted on her; even I could see that. He half turned, slowly, his puppy-dog eyes following Dana through the introductions. Smiling at her and flicking his eyes over mine, he turned away again, seemingly unmoved by the family’s determined sociability, happy in his impassioned detachment. His chair made a soft thumping noise as he rocked slightly from side to side. I liked his silence immensely and briefly considered turning my chair around, too, to stare through the glass doors at the jasmine until we could leave. If I’m a social butterfly, I’m still in the cocoon. Instead, I smiled brightly at Dana’s mother.

“Hello, Mrs. Chase, Mr. Chase. Glad to meet you,” I managed to say, holding out my hand. They each shook it hesitantly, looking puzzled, as if I’d introduced them to some unfamiliar primitive custom. Dana had slipped away, probably to grab her suitcase and the ever-present Nikon, and was not there to interpret.

“Yes, nice to meet you, too, Katherine. Lemonade? So very hot today,” said Dana’s mother. “Can’t use the air...it’s on the fritz...my poor roses, and what with the water ban...well isn’t it just awful?” I kept my face frozen into a smile and glanced around at the photographs on the wall. Dana’s, I could tell without asking. I accepted the glass from Mrs. Chase. I hate lemonade. Happy to have something to occupy my hands, though, I pressed the sweating tumbler to my temple for a moment, then brushed my damp reddish bangs away from my forehead. Silence. More silence. I asked about the photographs.

“Dana’s, yes. Always a little different, Dana. Not like other girls, really,” she sighed. “You know, I wanted her to go to that photo school, you know, the one that offered her a full scholarship? But— ”

“Dana wouldn’t want to move that far away from us, though, you see. She loves her daddy, my baby girl does.” Dana’s father ran his words right over the shirttails of his wife’s conversation. “Took those when she was still in high school, you see, always talented, though I can’t say I like them much, you see, since I don’t like pictures of strangers that much myself, and anyway I like color, lots of color, not that black and white, too depressing, you see, kind of makes you want to look away, you see, not like a nice little scene, or a sports picture, but then I don’t know all that much about art myself, you see, I just know what I like.”

The grandmother listened with a fixed smile, nodding. But then the grandfather spoke, and she curled in on herself like a burning leaf. “Well, that’s Dana, mind of her own. Gals are different these days, that’s for sure. Those tight little shorts and all.” He barked out a little laugh, as though he’d told us a great joke. “Hot enough for you?”

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My shirt clung to the small of my back and I wondered how people that tightly tuned into the weather could look so unaffected by it. Maybe it had to do with being born there. Rare creatures, California natives. Dana came back into the room, and stood behind my chair, resting her elbows lightly on the antimacassar. She swirled the ice in her glass. The scent of Ivory soap and something like tangerines floated past. I checked my watch.

How could Dana seem so calm? The consummate actress. Was I missing something about this trip to San Diego? Was she? I had thought of nothing else for days. Jesse was out of town, again: he'd been leaving me, slowly, for years. In those final months since our divorce had become final on paper as well, he had become quite candid about the nature of his trips to Santa Barbara. That candidness, once a comfort, had become a knife; though I loved him intensely, I hated myself for staying so long with someone who did not, apparently, love me—anymore, if ever. Perhaps it was my wrestling with that pain that had given me the courage to open up to Dana, and to plan this exploratory trip. It had been years since I'd been in love with a woman. And never with anyone quite like Dana.

Dana's fiancé, a hot-tempered, Nautilus-addicted, fast-track suit named Richie, was off on one of his many out-of-state trips, too (one of several reasons I never did meet him face to face). It was to be just Dana and me hopping into one car and speeding away from Los Angeles for three whole days. No timetable, no plans, nobody but us. At least that's what it had sounded like until the night before. Between rounds of Pale Ales and nachos, Dana had quickly sketched out the little map on her cocktail napkin and pushed it across the tiny glass tabletop toward me.

Surprise. "It's my grandmother's birthday. My parents found out I was going to San Diego and asked if I'd just stop by on the way south and go out for a quick lunch. I told them we can't stay long. You don't mind, do you?"

Mind? I stared stupidly at the directions. "What's this?"

"I'm going down tonight on the bus," she'd said. "You'll drive down tomorrow, meet me. About eleven. They'll take us out and we'll leave from

the restaurant. When my father makes plans, it's just easier to go along. It'll be okay, really." I could not read her face. I hoped mine was as impassive.

It'll be okay, really.

I wanted to believe her, so I did. The hands on the mantle clock did not move, but I could not decide if it was actually broken. We seemed to be trapped in a slow moving one-act play. Too much furniture, too many people, too much heat. It felt unreal and ridiculous, and as Dana's father's voice kept up its rambling, rumbling cadence, I felt the corners of my mouth pulling up in an uncontrolled smile that I tried to hold back, afraid in spite of myself that I might laugh out loud and insult him somehow.

To control my expression, I stared at the so-called strangers in the photographs, although even I knew full well that they were Dana's ever-present high school friends. I had met them enough times, so surely the parents had, too. Maybe her father had meant people who weren't blood relations? Although this crew might as well have been family, so predictably present and familiar were they, and so casually indistinct—the kinds of people you never notice and can barely tell apart, like extras in a crowd scene, people you never give a second thought to and whose last names you never bother to learn. Yet captured by Dana's Nikon over and over, individually and in groups, they formed a dramatic and almost sinister cast, staring back into the camera in various poses of anger and ennui. As usual, Dana's lens had turned the everyday into art.

"I'll ride with Kit, Mama, to show her the way. William can come with us." She took her brother's hand, then mine, and encouraged us up from our chairs, pulling us through the hallway and out the front door. Behind us I heard the shuffle and murmur of the others gathering themselves to leave. After guiding William into my backseat and buckling him in, she snuggled into the front passenger seat and fanned the bottom of her blouse up and down slowly to cool herself, perhaps unaware that it revealed just the tiniest crescents of bare white breast. Perhaps not. Sweat trickled down the side of my face, like a teardrop.



Bliss. Heaven. True love. Head over heels. Every goopy cliché. Then, too soon after our romantic weekend: “So you understand about the wedding, right? Richie wants just our oldest friends—people we went to school with. You know.” And as always, what Richie wants, Richie gets. Dana looked unnaturally tiny and fragile, framed as she was by the arcing branches of a giant *figus* tree hung with clear white twinkly lights. She peeled the label methodically off her third Samuel Smith’s Pale Ale, stacking the tiny bits of paper into a damp pile. I hated that bar, “our” bar, where the beer was good but wildly overpriced and the hors d’oeuvres were generally inedible variations on a theme featuring not-very-creative presentations of suspiciously orange cheese. But the place was conveniently planted at the foot of the giant glass and concrete building where we worked. Perfect. Not too far from work, and not too close to home. Neutral territory. Outside, a warm rain fell in sheets against the greenhouse, blurring the traffic.

While Dana made her paper piles, I sifted through the stack of new prints she had brought along, vividly contrasting black and white portraits of the Coronado Hotel, scenes around Mission Bay, closeups of a sleeping battleship. San Diego. But it was not the San Diego I had kept reliving from our trip months before. When we’d emerged, blinking, around the occasional mealtime, Dana had not taken more than a few desultory snapshots, typical stuff: me by the pool, her by the pool, both of us at the Wild Animal Park. No, these artsy photos were more recent. None of them had a natural horizon—things floated off center and veered anxiously away from the camera lens—and the grays all but disappeared. Weirdly beautiful. I’d recently convinced Dana, after weeks and weeks of earnest arm-twisting and ego-stroking effort, to enter something in the Adams-White Photography Competition. These photos were by far her best work yet.

But at the bottom of the pile was that sunny color print that would taunt me four years later: Dana, with her arm snaked across my shoulders, and me, in tank top and Ray-Bans, leaning happily on the fender of the Subaru.

My uncontrollable shoulder-length curls seemed oddly well-behaved under the San Diego Zoo visor I wore like a tiara. I looked like the goddamned girl next door—one who had just spent forty-eight hours woven into the deliciously bare sun-baked limbs of her good friend, Dana. In the photo I looked dizzily happy, and I had been, although being with Dana was sometimes like standing on a floating log in a fast-moving current. Exhilarating, but you had to keep moving or you'd lose your balance, maybe even drown.

"I understand," I said, though I wasn't at all sure I did. I tried for a lighter tone. "Besides, I've already been in one wedding party, and that's enough for me." I spun Jesse's ring on my own left hand for emphasis. Realizing I should take it off. Wanting to seem okay with things, be cool. Feeling stupid. Lost. Hurt. Off balance.

"You'll come to the reception though, right? It's just a big party. You'll come early and stay late?" With no more beer label left to concentrate on, Dana seemed unable to control her hands. They fluttered like small birds at the edges of the table. It was not like her to let herself be visibly shaken, and I felt responsible.

I smiled, but I knew she was waiting for me to tell her that it was all right...that I didn't mind not being invited to her wedding (though I was apparently invited to remain in her life, even in her bed)...that I didn't mind being kept at arm's length from her inseparable pack of old friends (although I had never known anybody else who at thirty-three still spent so much time with so many old high school buddies). I didn't want to mind. After all, if she didn't mind Richie's heavy-handed control, why should I? And their longstanding, loyal attachments were endearing, in an oddball, quirky kind of way.

I didn't want to mind, but I did. Selfish, I guess.

"Of course I'll come." I poured the last of my beer into my pilsner glass and drank it down. I pushed the pile of photos back toward Dana, who reached out and touched my hand with the tip of one bronzed, spiky finger. The thin gold box chain around Dana's wrist—I had bought it for her after

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San Diego—brushed lightly across my skin and I pulled my hand back slowly, casually. My hand seemed to be vibrating inside, though it looked normal. “If that’s what you want.”

I pulled out my wallet, looking for cash and finding only credit cards. I staggered without standing, my eyes starting to water, and tried to feel nothing. Finally, the waitress brought the bill, and I scribbled a total and signed my name, barely looking. I slipped on my blazer with a pinstripe bravado I did not feel. “I have to go.”

“Sit down, please. There’s more.” Dana slipped her photographs into a slim leather portfolio, then slid that into a tropical print canvas tote, patting it maternally before she set it down on an empty chair. “Karen’s throwing me a shower.”

I sat down again, abruptly, never quite able to control my body around Dana. “A shower? You mean like where two dozen women in outfits they wore to impress each other give you risqué lingerie and cute little froggy dish towels and everybody giggles about the Big Night? Dana, you hate that stuff. And besides, you’ve been living with Richie *forever*. Do you really need a new blender that badly?” My voice was squeaky. I felt my cheeks burning, though I was not sure why. I hated for Dana to see me this way.

She laughed. Dana laughed well, effortlessly, as outwardly confident people do, with just the right softness in her voice, the right tilt of her face, the right rearrangement of her eyes and mouth. She took my hand and held it—pinned it to the table, actually, so suddenly that she earned a look of shocked disbelief from our waitress, who, at some unknown signal from Dana, had brought another round of beers—and said, softly, “My favorite cynic. That’s why I love you; you’re so damned honest. You’re just too funny.”

It wasn’t supposed to be anything like love; you don’t talk about forever with your friends. And with one and a half husbands and too little time for just us, love had seemed a perverse subject, better avoided. But it didn’t seem so bad now that I thought about it, just ill-timed. Funny? Funny was

Dana waiting until then to say the word love, waiting until it somehow didn't matter anymore—more curse than compliment.

Maybe it was a brain spasm. Or maybe just my third Pale Ale on a near-empty stomach. “But Karen! Countess of Correct! Princess of Perfection! Empress of Etiquette!” *What was I saying? Shut up, shut up!* I saw the tiny points of candlelight in Dana's eyes begin to dance and found that my knees were shaking hard against the table. Karen had disliked me from the moment we met, and told Dana so at every opportunity. Karen seemed to know long before I did what kind of relationship Dana and I would share, and she did not like it one bit. “You know exactly what it will be like: a dozen of your very best friends from school all lined up on one side of the room, and me on the other. Like someone you just happen to know from work.”

“It's not going to be like that,” Dana said. “Richie wants *everybody* invited.” There was a hollowness to her voice, but I could not see inside. I wondered exactly what she meant by everyone. Husbands? Coworkers? Lovers? “It'll be fun. A poker party.” Dana looked steadily into my face, daring me to say I would not come, but knowing I could not stay away.

“I've never played poker.” Hedging.

“You'll love it. It's perfect for you: building off the luck of the draw, keeping everything to yourself until the last moment—even an objective way to tell if you're winning or losing,” Dana said evenly. And not quite innocently. I wondered at the hurt in her voice. Which part of the stupid things I had said had hurt her?

“I'm sorry.”

“Just come. I need you there. I need you.”

We stayed until the glass around us turned to mirrors under an inky sky, mimicking our every move. Dana talked about work, photography, music, everything but what mattered, but at least she did not let go of my hand until it was time to go.



A month before Dana's shower, after working late closing the magazine, Dana and I stopped at the Beau Thai for dinner. The slicked-back waiter hovered at the table's edge withdrawing cold plates of *prik king* and *mee grob*, offering desserts, coffees, liqueurs, then spinning away on his heel when Dana waved him off with a distracted snap of her hand. Somewhere between the ginger beer and the Thai ice cream, she reached into my chest and turned my heart upside down. "Right away. It's what Richie wants. Well, me too, I guess."

I played with the silverware and tried to imagine Dana with a child, while Dana peeled the labels off our bottles. Dana, a mother. What did that make me, an aunt? A stepmother?

Several days earlier, I'd gotten a call from a regional magazine in the northeast, offering me a regular column, plus a generous contract for six feature articles. I had told them I'd think it over, all the while sure I'd say no, certain I'd rather die than move three thousand miles away for what seemed like a part-time job. But when your nighttime fantasies take a melodramatic turn, it's time to wake up. I watched Dana's latest beer label pile grow on her plate.

"I'm leaving."

"We haven't finished eating." Dana lit a match and held it, watching it burn. Then she lit the pile.

"L.A. I'm going back east."

Dana gazed into her label bonfire. I watched, too, as I explained in someone else's voice about the trip, making it up as I went—how I planned to drive cross-country, stay in motels until I could find a house. How I would be leaving in less than a month. How there was nothing in L.A. for me anymore. How it looked as though I would be gone before Dana's wedding.

Dana looked up sharply, and lurched into the table, spilling the last of my Tsing Tao. She let the amber puddle seep into the bubblegum pink table-

cloth. “You can’t wait? The way you drive, what difference is another day? I mean, it’s my *wedding*.”

No, it’s your *reception*, I thought, but did not say. The deadness that had been growing inside lately scared me. It’s my natural defense against the pain of rejection—don’t let anyone get close enough to hurt you again!—and I had ignored it for a very long time, keeping the numbness at bay by thinking about other things: the two of us eating Burger Bus burritos in the Rodin sculpture garden, or drinking pitchers of margaritas while painting Dana’s fence, or riding the kiddie rides at Disneyland. About San Diego, and the hours since then spent exploring, learning, touching. But the more Dana talked lately about the dress Richie had picked out for her, and the minivan he’d bought—some godawful cherry red thing, so not Dana!—the less I could listen. I dreamed every night of running away, moving back east, having seasons. Of leaving before I could be left this time.

“Let’s get out of here, go to your place,” said Dana suddenly, waving her American Express card over her head at the sulky waiter. “Right now.” She signed the tab with a hurried flourish and tugged me out of my chair. She drove very close to my bumper. In the sympathetic pink glow of the city lights against the smog-blue sky, I could see her singing as she drove.

I pulled into the empty driveway, switched off the ignition and locked the car, keys at the ready as I headed up the walk. Dana parked inches from my bumper and threw her keys under her front seat, then glided across the lawn looking beautifully Californian in her thin whitish sheath and loose sandals. In the shadow of the spiky palms and century plants hunched around the steps, she slipped her arms around me from behind as I unlocked the front door. She followed me through the dark house into the kitchen, holding me loosely as a cape, tickling the back of my shoulders and legs, making me crazy, crazy, unbuttoning me, lowering me down onto the cold tile floor. Me thinking, Please don’t do this, I’m not strong enough to say no yet, but hearing myself saying only Please. Please. Please. Tasting the salt of my own tears on her skin, whimpering like a junkie.

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After, the predictable domestic hum of the refrigerator mocked me as I leaned against it. Dana snapped my photo there in profile, then poured two stiff single malts we did not need. We sat close together on the kitchen floor, listening to the sounds of each other's breath, to the ice clinking in the glasses, to the wind crackling through dry palm leaves. There was either no need to talk, or nothing to say. I traced a yellowing bruise on the curve of her arm, three large marks like so many stepping-stones, but before I could ask her about them, Dana kissed me, slipped her dress over her head, and drove away. I moved to the living room and sat in the dark for a very long time. I drank my Scotch, then hers.

For days after that we barely spoke. Dana had always been the kind of woman who could, without offending, touch you as she talked, just let her hands fall comfortably on your shoulder, let her fingers brush your forearm. When I had first met her I found the touching unnerving, and avoided it. Then I had courted it. Now when we looked over proofs in Dana's office, we kept an insulating space between us, and hardly breathed. If Dana brushed against me slightly, even accidentally, I pulled back as though burned. If we rode the same elevator, we stood apart. If our elbows touched, we apologized automatically. Nothing had changed, yet everything had, and suddenly Dana had a crowded calendar of lunch appointments and places she had to be right after work, and many things to do that did not involve me. I worked late and drove fast. Jesse was small comfort. After almost ten years of marriage—God, I'd been so young!—he'd become restless and eager to move on. He found my love for Dana titillating, but irrelevant to him. His midlife crisis kept him too busy to do more than lend an occasional soothing pat and a distracted reassurance over the phone. If you can call kind words from someone who's left you *reassurance*.

I thought so much about going away that I finally made it happen without hardly noticing what I'd done, making arrangements like a sleepwalker. Leave now, leave later—what did it matter? Now that I was really leaving I wasn't so sure, of course. Maybe what I really wanted was to stay in Los

Angeles—working at a job I did not like in a city I hated?—just to be near Dana, now several weeks pregnant (not to mention about to be married), to protect her. Not that she wanted my protection: she'd laughed off the bruises, bristled at my repeated questions about them. Leave now, leave later. It was not much of a choice. Everyone I loved loved someone else more. I was trapped in the kind of bad tear-jerker movie I hate so much. Cue soulful music, heavy on the violins.

Two weeks before her shower Dana asked me to lunch. I suggested the dark Irish pub we both loved. She chose Johnnie's, a depressingly bright plastic coffee shop with molded pink and yellow booths and dust-gray windows. Choking down a dry club sandwich, I listened as Dana told me—again, as though I could forget—that things just had to be different. That she didn't regret any of it but that, well, she just couldn't spend any more time with me. Not that way. But we could still be friends, of course. Would I please not try to touch her, kiss her, stand too close.

One week before her shower, when I stayed late typing up notes for my replacement, Dana slipped into my office and came up behind me when no one was around—though anybody might have been—and starting kissing the back of my neck. She followed me home and made love to me again and again and again, then spent the night with me and my fat cat, Goodyear. When I woke up he was curled in my arms, purring, but she was gone. She called in sick at work and stayed out of work for the rest of the week, missing my official going-away party, having thrown her own. My heart felt small and wrinkled, the size and shape of a walnut.



By the time I arrived at Dana's shower most of the thirty or so people crammed into the fake adobe bungalow had already played a few hands and drunk more than a few beers. I propped myself up against the refrigerator. Dana's laugh floated across the murmur of the party and burned in my ears, and I looked through the archway to see her holding court in the over-

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crowded living room, clinging to a man in a tight red silk T-shirt and white cargo shorts. His thickly muscled back was toward me, but by his proprietary grip I knew he had to be Richie. I'd made it this far without having to meet him face to face, and I meant to keep it that way.

I turned away from the archway. William was rocking side to side at the kitchen table, stacking bottle caps with the precision and passion of an automaton. He glanced at me but did not seem to recognize my face, only the look in my eyes. Something like empathy flashed across his face, then he closed down once more. I checked my watch. Drank a beer. Drank some coffee. Opened another beer. Checked my watch again. While I stood shifting from foot to foot wondering what Miss Manners would have me do—what was the proper protocol for attending one's on-again-off-again lover's bridal shower?—I was enveloped in a cloud of patchouli, and a long, slender, sun-brown hand settled casually on my forearm. I turned, expecting Dana. Wanting, yet not wanting, it to be Dana. It wasn't, yet it was.

“Hi, I'm Sebastian. Dana's younger—by a few minutes—but much wiser brother. We need another player over here and you come highly recommended. I hear you're a natural at gambling.” He looked so much like Dana, but taller, maybe a little harder, with soft blond hair that fell helplessly into deeply set gray-blue eyes, the color of the Pacific in early morning. When he smiled, he was Dana.

Funny how I always felt the attraction first, then registered gender. I held my arms tightly to my sides, afraid they might rise up of their own accord and touch him: he had the same little crinkly lines around his eyes, the same embracing smile, the same concentrated attention, but with an edginess Dana did not have. He pointed me into a lumpy green chair that faced away from the crowd and opened a beer for me, although I held half a bottle in my hand already. I knew the other two players slightly—Patty and Ken, two of the high school buddies.

Sebastian explained the basics of the game slowly and patiently, stopping every now and then to point to a sheet ranking various hands. Full house,

pair, straight. Safe bets, long shots. Never draw to an inside straight. Encouraged by Sebastian's nods and smiles, I played most of the night. Though I sensed that I was being cheated subtly and systematically—I could have sworn I was winning hands but my piles of chips were dwindling—it didn't feel like losing. It just felt like a few bad hands, and something I'd get ahead of if I just kept playing.

"I knew you'd have a ball at this," said Dana. She stood just behind the green chair, leaning over so that her hair brushed lightly across my bare arm. No sign of Richie, thank god. "And I suppose Bassy's stealing you blind. He's such a pirate."

I shivered in the heat. "Deal me out, please." I maneuvered through the chairs and card tables toward the kitchen, then walked through a narrow doorway out onto a dimly lit patio, where strings of crimson lanterns hung from the fig trees, bleeding puddles of light across the uneven paving stones. I thought Dana might follow. I was right.

"You leave tomorrow?"

"The movers took everything this morning."

"You won't stay for the wedding, then? It's just a few weeks."

"I can't, Dana."

Dana was standing close. Very close. So close that it would have been easy, just by leaning, to feel her body again, to hold her, to ask her to come with me—to forget that jerk Richie, forget L.A., forget everything except me, us. So close that it almost seemed as though Dana *wanted* me to do just that, to ask for forever.

I wanted to. Maybe I should have. But I didn't. Because for once I could read her scared face plainly. Although the tense question mark of Dana's body said, *Can you take me away?* her eyes said, *It won't matter. It's no use. I can't.* Folding.

"I'll send you a postcard from the right coast." Trying to look confident, bluffing.

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I brushed a wisp of hair out of Dana's face and let my hand rest for a moment on her damp freckled cheek, then stepped through the glow of the luau lights to a waiting cab.



Now I'd spent the past four years erasing and editing those memories, only occasionally stopping to wonder how it had turned out for her, with him, out there. I'd sent her that postcard, adding my new address and phone number, although I wasn't sure just why. I never heard from her again.

Over time, I tried to convince myself that I had imagined her desperation. I worked hard to forget the power of her touch, the sensual sound of my name on her lips. I could not deny the longing that had pulsed under the patio lights, but eventually I had to admit what part of me had always known: Dana's longing had not been for me, but for the maps in my glove compartment, the full tank of gas in my car, the moving van packed and ready to go, the postcard stamps tucked into my wallet.

Yes, I had tried to forget about Dana. And I had almost succeeded when Chakarian reminded me. *Case like this, it's usually the wife.* What could I say about Dana? What did I really know about her? Everything. Nothing. Especially about how her husband came to be dead on my office floor.

"We were very close, once," I said finally. "Three thousand miles and a million years ago."

3 PERCHANCE TO DREAM

“So what I heah you saying is you have no idear how this guy Richid, who *just happened* to be married to some woman you were *very close to* in L.A., *just happened* to wind up splatted across yaw office window, shot dead with this .38 that *just happened* to be in yaw cah?” Walters, still half leaning, half sitting on the battered table, pretended to read this from his notes, punctuating his sarcasm with stubby air quotes. He flipped a color photo of the gun out of the folder and onto the table in front of me. Without waiting for an answer, he continued in a particularly grating Beantown snarl, “Expect us to believe that gahbidge?” His lips curled in the faintest of sneers as he stared into my eyes, perhaps trying to read my mind. And perhaps he really could make out the words I was thinking—*fuck you!*—since he scowled and made a big show of writing something in his little notebook.

Chakarian shrugged and leaned closer to me.

“What Jack’s trying to say is we’ve been sorting out some rumors. People who knew you both say you and Dana were, well, *lovers*.” She stared steadily into my eyes. I stared back. Her eyes were so brown they were almost black, deep-set and faintly ringed with dark circles. Armenian? Exhausted? I guessed both.

“The rumors were true,” I said evenly. “She broke it off.”

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“When?” asked Chakarian.

“Because of the husband?” Walters tapped his pen on his perfectly white front teeth.

Double teaming me. “Several times, but the last time right before I left L.A. And no, because of herself,” I said. “Maybe she was just curious, experimenting, and it didn’t feel right.” Look right, more like.

“But it felt right for you?” Tap, tap, tap. He stared at my T-shirt, or maybe what was under it. “Whatever it is you and this Daner did.”

“Actually, yes, it felt *won-der-ful*.” I dragged out the word for his benefit. “I was in love with her. Not that it’s any business of yours. Or is this part of that good cop–bad cop crap they teach you guys?” I was definitely watching too much TV. I wanted to stand up and walk around, but when I shifted in my seat Chakarian gave me a silent warning. With a single glance, she pinned me to the chair. I could feel my ears getting hot, a sure sign that I was getting angry. “And why the hell did you have to drag me in there to see...that...when you could just as easily have asked me these questions somewhere else? Why am I here?”

Chakarian spoke in a low, PBS-announcer voice. “Ms. McCormick, that would be something they *do* teach us at the academy. Take the suspect to the scene of the crime and hope he—or she—breaks down and confesses to committing the unspeakable act, unable to bear the strain of guilt when faced with the horror of the frightful deed.” The somewhat fierce look her face had worn all morning softened into crooked smile. Then a quiet laugh drew her cheeks up in a set of laugh-line dimples. She leaned back. My ears cooled a little. Not enough. They’re pretty big ears.

“So, I’m a suspect?” I desperately wanted to stand, but didn’t. I wasn’t sure my knees would work anyway. “You think I shot a man?”

She was still smiling. “Of course you’re a suspect. Actually, you, half the town, a couple dozen habituals, and naturally the lovely widow herself. I wouldn’t worry too much—yet. It’s just him being killed here in your office,

on top of this thing with the gun, see, it's very messy," she said. "Finding it in your bag and all."

"Look, it's not my gun," I sighed. "And I can't believe you'd think for one minute that I'd kill someone just because I was in love with his wife four years ago."

"What about that old saying, 'Hell's got no fury...'" Walters said. "Maybe you just hold a grudge lawnga than most."

I chose to ignore the mangled quote made even more painful by the accent, which might have been Southie—they all sound the same to my untrained, upstate New York ear. "Why would I hold a grudge against Richie? He had nothing to do with Dana and me." I realized as I said it that it was true. Against my better judgment, Dana had never told him about me, about us. About her *adventure*. And she hadn't broken it off because of him but because of something inside herself—that was obvious. "Dana made a choice. And it wasn't me."

"He *was* her husband." This coming quietly from Chakarian.

Not when we were together, I wanted to say. *Only after I left*.

"Way I see it, you love this Daner, and she kicks you to the curb. But you don't want to kill her, so to get back atta you—"

"Wait four years, somehow convince her husband to fly across the country, lure him to a pretty public place that screams *Kit did it!* and then kill him in a loud and messy way?" I'm not good with authority figures. Faced with the slightest bit of browbeating I either burst into tears and turtle or, like now, get all pissy and defensive. That's never wise. And under certain circumstances, is possibly even dangerous. "That's just plain stupid."

"Stupid? Could be. Could be you and Richid had a discussion or two about things. Back then. And again Friday night."

"Look, I never even met the man. Dana said he knew nothing about us, and she didn't want him to because he had a mean temper and she knew he'd be a jerk about the whole thing. I talked to him on the phone a few times, and he *was* a jerk, even without knowing that Dana and I were...more

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than friends. She usually came to my place, and I was never at their place when he was home. He traveled all the time.” The memories tasted mildly bitter on my tongue. I could still see that one glimpse of him across that long-ago crowded room, his broad back and muscled arms, how he pinned Dana to him. “They’d already lived together for a while before she and I...got together, you know.”

“Is it really possible he didn’t know?” again Chakarian spoke softly, as though she was trying to calm Walters down. Or me.

“Look, I don’t know if he did or not. It doesn’t matter now. I don’t think it even mattered then. Dana loved him, but seeing me or not seeing me—that was her decision, not his.”

“So you’re saying her not seeing you—that was her idea?” Tap, tap, tap on the teeth.

“Yes, I already told you that. Look, it was all a long time ago, and I’m over it,” I said, finally standing up and stepping away from the table. Even as I said it I wondered if it was really true. My tough-chick façade is about a millimeter thick. I could feel an all-too-familiar ache welling up. So much for time healing all wounds. Chakarian stood too, taking a step toward me.

“Ms. McCormick, I hate to do this, but...”

Whoa. Visions of solitary, cuffs, big bull-dykes in prison jumpsuits. Three deep breaths, like my therapist says. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. Now speak. “Officer, if I’m a suspect, I want a lawyer. If I’m not, I’d like to go home now.” I tried to sound as though my knees weren’t clacking together like chattering teeth.

“You don’t need a lawyer. Yet,” Walters growled.

Chakarian smiled grimly. “To tell the truth, Ms. McCormick, the real reason we brought you here is we need your help. It’s your office, after all,” said Chakarian. I must have winced. “So I hate to have to do this, but I have to ask you to go back in there again. Just give me a few minutes, maybe clear some things up, and I’ll drive you right back to your dock.” Whew. We angled toward the door. Walters started to follow but she waved him back.

“Jack, how about you finish talking to Maris Bellamy and the others? I’ll swing by and pick you up after, or you can bum a ride with a uniform.” He considered for a moment, then nodded.

I followed her back down the hall and into the room, where she repeated the bootie-and-gloves routine. This time my eyes swiveled automatically toward the bloodstain. I made myself look away. Chakarian stood facing the stain, her broad hands, gloved again, resting lightly on the back of my desk chair. Black fingerprint powder puffed up between her fingers and she looked down at her hands as though they belonged to someone else. She rubbed them together and then wiped them unselfconsciously on the seat of her jeans. I felt slightly comforted by her attire. How much trouble could I be in if she didn’t even have to dress like a cop? I considered the tiny embroidered RPD too discreet to count.

“Ms. McCormick, to the best of your knowledge...”

“You might as well call me Kit.”

“All right. Kit, then. To the best of...look, was there anything that you know of in this room somebody might’ve wanted? Papers, valuables, money? You can see it’s been tossed. Any reason at all you can think of for the victim or the killer to be here?”

I laughed. “The papers are all free promo lit, proof pages, my scribbles. The most valuable thing is probably the computer, which I doubt anybody’d want since it’s so old. Well, I had a signed photo of me with Helen Mirren on the set of *Prime Suspect*...no, that’s still on the wall. And I hardly make enough money to be likely to leave any in my office.” I couldn’t think of a single good reason for Dana’s husband to be in New Hampshire, let alone in my office. Not to mention for a killer to be there, too.

“I know it’s a mess, but try to look past that. Anything missing?”

I reached for the desk drawers, but she stopped my hand before it reached the pull. After she handed me a pair of latex gloves, I rifled the desk, finding as “valuables” only 42¢, a losing lottery scratch ticket, and an expired coupon for half off dinner at the Oxford Inn.

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“What about the files on the computer?”

I do most of my writing at home or on my laptop. My own computers are newer, faster and, best of all, at my house. The only office politics I have to put up with come when Goodyear has to share me with visitors. Mostly I email files to the office or, if they include images, send them to an online drop box. That way the managing editor and the copyeditor can put my work straight into production without waiting for me to stop by. Nevertheless, I checked out everything in my work folders. Nothing seemed to have been missing or added.

“I can print out all the files and double-check if anything’s been changed for some reason, but I can’t see much point: the ‘date modified’ fields are all at least several days old. Unless you just want printouts for posterity. But anybody could get in there; it’s not password protected.”

“Actually, we’ve already printed everything, and made copies for you. Just in case.” The tone of her voice told me that she, too, thought the computer held no clues.

I took another long look around the room, hoping I’d notice something that might explain the break-in, but saw nothing unusual. The few items I could tell were missing had, according to Chakarian, simply been bagged and tagged as evidence and were on their way to a lab in Concord. I stepped toward the back wall where a rogue’s gallery of friends, publicity shots and casual acquaintances stared back at me in dizzying disarray. A few of the frames and panes of glass had broken as they’d fallen or been thrown to the floor during the search, and many of the pictures had been slashed. I pointed to a small black-and-white snapshot, still intact. “There’s one of Dana, the one in the hat.”

Chakarian stared into the print appraisingly, then back at my face, as if trying to see the resemblance between me and the laughing woman so obviously enthralled with the blonde in the baseball cap. Dana’s attentions had always been complete and overwhelming, charging the air around her with

an energy and light so strong it seemed to overexpose the picture. I'd been drawn in like a moth to a porch light.

"Okay, one more thing. Can you tell me about this?" Chakarian handed me a photo of a small penknife with its largest blade sunk to the hilt in a frighteningly fleshlike, almost colorless contour. Probably butter. Clay. Raw turkey. I slipped into a hunker, a comforting crouch close to the ground. Not as far to fall.

"My Swiss Army knife," I said, pointing at the engraved inscription, legible enough in the photo. "My husband Jesse—ex-husband, that is—gave it to me as a 'survival tool' when I told him I was moving to New Hampshire. His city-boy idea of a joke. Is that him? The dead guy?" I babble sometimes when I'm anxious. To stop myself from talking, I blew black fingerprint powder off my knees, adjusted the paper booties on my Reeboks, brushed off my pant legs; though I had touched almost nothing, the dust was everywhere.

She nodded. "When's the last time you saw it?"

"Months now. Maybe last spring."

"Where do you keep it?"

"No place special. It was here for a while, but last I knew it was in the glove compartment of my car. It's not much use except it does have a corkscrew and a teeny screwdriver—two essential travel items." Babbling again. I sounded like those travel articles I tried so hard *not* to emulate. You know, the ones that make readers feel totally irresponsible if they travel with anything less than a complete home workshop, a junior chemistry set, and the perfect mix-and-match ensemble with a cocktail dress that doubles as sub-zero pup tent.

"That's the car that you flipped yesterday morning, the black Subaru sedan, license plate 'RIGHTR'?" she said, glancing up at me as she read from her notes. "That a political position?"

"Hardly. More of a bad-pun do-gooder wannabe philosophy."

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Chakarian led me out of the office and back into the elevator. As we waited for the car to come scraping up she rubbed at the corners of her eyes with her first two fingers, then stifled a yawn behind a loose fist. Her two-toned blue squad car smelled of gun cleaner and artificial citrus. This time I got to sit in the front seat. Progress. “Buckle up,” she said. “By the way, you okay? Usually it takes a day or so after an accident before the real aches and pains set in. The way you got tumbled around, you might be sore tonight, maybe tomorrow morning.” She sounded sincerely concerned. A good cop could probably fake sincerity. Probably something else they taught at the academy.

The car wreck seemed weeks ago, not one day. “No big deal. I’ll soak in the hot tub tonight, take some ibuprofen. Watch the sunset over the lake and wonder why the hell this is happening. Why anybody’d kill somebody, and what the hell it has to do with me.” The idea of sipping wine on my deck held quite an appeal, and I gave myself over to the vision for a moment, letting the smooth ride of the squad car lull me into a serious daydream. The spell broke suddenly as a question floated to mind like an old toy 8-ball message.

“Why was Richie even in New Hampshire? Here in Rockbridge?”

As Chakarian turned onto the dirt road that led to my dock, she shot me a calculating look. “You’re kidding, right? You must know. You’ve been writing about it.”

“I write about a lot of things. What do you mean?”

“Otter Creek. That big place going up in your cove. Heron Cove. Richard Smith is—or was, I should say—the developer.”

“Shit.” I leaned back on the seat and stared at the ceiling. “Oh, shit.” She nodded grimly.

The Otter Creek Development was, as far as I was concerned, an unnatural disaster. Heron Cove was a small, boulder-studded enclave in the southeastern corner of Indigo Lake. An unknown out-of-towner named Richard Smith had acquired 54 acres of land that included a tiny strip of water-

front—just a hundred feet of rocky beach—and had originally planned to put a commercial building on the few acres of buildable land not classified as wetlands. Half a dozen groups of outspoken official and unofficial boards and committees had convinced him otherwise. We had all thought that was the end of it until he'd drawn up plans for a condo complex and gone to the town planning board for a variance on the setback rules. When the board nixed that request, too, he'd gotten crafty. His lawyer pointed to a regulation the town had been forced to adopt in response to a lawsuit charging “snob zoning”; suddenly Smith was building a high-density, low-income housing project that didn't have to comply with the setback rules. The idea of so many people on an important chunk of Indigo Lake watershed—well, it was no surprise that the lake people, me included, were still fighting it.

“You're telling me Dana's Richie is *that* Richard Smith?” I couldn't believe it. Of all the places for him to turn up. Did that mean—?

She must have heard my heart leap against my ribs. “Of course she's here, too. That's why so many questions about her. Like Jack says, the wife is always the prime suspect. And you did...well, you did *know* her,” said Chakarian. She stopped the car at the top of the hill that sloped down to the mainland dock and shut off the ignition. She turned sideways on the seat to gaze at me steadily with those dark eyes, her brow scrunched together over a slightly bent nose. A tiny scar danced above her mobile right eyebrow.

“Look, you should know. I'm sympathetic with your...politics. But other people in town, including old-school cops like Walters, would love nothing better than to turn this into a convenient rag headline—‘Jilted Dyke Wastes Obstacle Hubby,’ you know?” she said quietly. Her deep, slightly raspy voice worked well at low volume. She ran her fingers through her short wavy hair, dark brown with gold highlights, very nice. “I just hope you're ready for a lot of shit to come down.”

“Actually, I'm not,” I said softly, not looking away. “A dyke, that is. I mean, strictly speaking.”

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“Right. You were married to a man once. But after that you were with a woman.”

“Yes, and before I was married to a man, I was married—as much as possible, anyway, since it wasn’t legal then—to my proverbial high school sweetheart, Grace. We were together nearly eight years.”

Eight wonderful years. So long ago, yet so sharply etched into my memory that I could still see the tiny crescent dimple in her right cheek when she smiled, hear the squeak of her Nikes echoing on the basketball court, feel her laughter against my neck like the drape of a silk scarf.

The ticking of the cooling engine lulled me back to those days, reminding all over again how much I missed her, missed the life we had planned out so naively. Finally Chakarian spoke, her voice offering a pointed challenge. “She wasn’t enough, so you moved on?”

“She was *everything*. But she was killed in a car crash her second year of med school. It was a long time before I started dating again, if you can call it dating. When I finally fell in love again, it *happened* to be with a man, Jesse. It was legal for *us* to get married, and we did.”

Chakarian was silent for a moment, thoughtful, frowning. Finally she leaned farther back into the seat and stared up at the roof of the car briefly, then turned to face me again. There was a new edge to her voice, though she spoke evenly and quietly. “I’ve never understood you people. It’s like you just can’t make up your mind.”

You people. After years of hearing the same old bullshit you get tired of talking about it. Either we don’t exist or we’re just in denial. You might as well try explaining why some people really like red, and others surround themselves with green. And some of us just like color. “I’ve made up my mind,” I said, though even I was tired of my joke: “I like both.”

She did not laugh.



Chakarian was right about one thing. By evening my body felt as though it had been encased in a two-ton Brillo body cast. I had bruises on both knees and elbows, a very stiff neck and shoulder, a knob on the back of my skull, and a less-than-charming black bruise on my butt. Not too mention an extra rosy glow on my nearly hairless face.

Slowly I eased into the hot tub I'd set into my wooden deck and let the jets swirl steamy water around me. A cold glass of Pouilly-Fuisse and a warm bowl of tortellini sat within arm's reach. My cat nosed around the bowl and announced his interest in sharing my dinner.

"Sorry, Goodyear," I cooed. "You get salmon supreme." He rubbed against my hand anyway, then plunked his ample gray behind on my towel to watch the sun set across the lake. A small yellow seaplane circled, then came back and made a landing out of sight around the horn of Settler's Point. A few late-season mosquitoes were out, and in the gathering dusk I saw a bat swoop high overhead enjoying the feast. All around me a chorus of bullfrogs kept me company. A pale apricot light washed across the sky and onto the cobalt surface of the lake. The chill air cooled my skin as I sipped my wine. Life was good.

Well, except for that murder thing, that is.

Heron Cove seemed abandoned. Only a few lights shone on the shores. One set of those lights might belong to Dana: she must be very near. The town wasn't big, and most likely she and Richie would have been staying on their own property here in Heron Cove. Odd that I hadn't run into her at any of the planning board meetings or abutters' hearings. Of course, even Smith had never shown up in person; he'd always sent a local lawyer in his stead. Had Dana known I was here? As one of the main members of the anti-development committee, I was getting to be fairly well known—if not exactly adored—around town. She was probably avoiding me. Small wonder. If I'd known she was involved I would have avoided her, too. But now I was

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curious. Did Dana kill Richie? And if so, why? And why here of all the god-damned places?

Somehow I couldn't picture soft, sensitive Dana wielding a gun. Nor could I imagine Dana having to kill anyone to get something she wanted. After all, she'd had no trouble persuading me to do anything for her. Come to her, stay away, come, stay away: whatever she asked, I did. I'd even given her up, because it was what I thought she wanted.

That pattern would look very bad in light of recent...well, developments. But I could think about it in the morning. By then, Chakarian and the Manchester cop, Walters, would surely figure out that I had nothing to do with Richie's death. It wouldn't matter that Chakarian apparently didn't think much of me and my "politics" personally; she would be professional, I was sure. Well, almost sure. So tonight I would just relax. Above the canopy of pine and oak, the stars were just beginning to pop out of the night sky. Already my aging, aching body felt better; there is nothing like a hot tub to soothe away the knots and worries. Another year older, and a little wiser, I thought, and toasted myself with a cool, oaky sip of wine.

"Happy birthday, Kitten. You haven't changed a bit. And that wine looks wonderful. Pouilly-Fuisse? Or is it Pinot grigio tonight?" *Dana*. I'd have known her wind-chime voice anywhere, any time. Perhaps I'd even been expecting it, so little did it startle me.

"Glasses are in the cupboard over the sink, bottle's in the fridge," I said with a calmness I didn't really feel, waving toward the French doors behind me. "I'd rather not get up, you understand." Why? Did I think that the sight of me naked after all this time would drive her into a frenzy? Or me?

When she returned, she'd brought the bottle with her. She poured herself a glass and settled the bottle between us, then sat at the edge of the tub and let her bare feet dangle into the swirling water. She wore a pair of loose lemon-yellow shorts, a soft, thick white sweater pushed up at the forearms, and a dozen or so dangly silver and gold bracelets. A small gold box chain encircled her left ankle. She leaned over to see me better in the amber glow

of the bug light. Touched my shoulder. Brushed a stray hair away from my face, her fingers whispering against my cheek and earlobe. “Kitten, I’m so sorry.” *Please don’t call me that. I may not be immune.*

Begging again, inside anyway. Suddenly, anger boiled up like the water in the tub. “Sorry? About what? That your husband got himself killed in my office? That the local cops think I did it? And that they think I did it because I’m some kind of lovesick lesbian psychopath pining for you after all these years? Or maybe you’re sorry you killed him, but you think I’m still such a sucker I’d go to jail for you?” Bubbling now like a cinematic sap. Anxiety and hurt churned up memories and feelings I’d let sink from view. Flashes of recalled sensations: the curiosity in her hands, the ferocity in her kiss. She was *sorry*?

“Katherine.” She stilled my diatribe with the soft expiration of my name, a sweet sigh. “Actually, Kitten, I was thinking how sorry I am that I’ve been living right across the cove for almost a month and I didn’t dare come see you until now. That I didn’t have the guts or the sense to come to you before...before this all happened.” She cupped her wineglass in both hands and stared at her own toes wriggling under the water. “I was afraid you’d still be angry with me.” The light from the house gave her a golden halo.

Angry. I motioned toward my towel. She handed it to me and I turned away and slipped into it, trying to keep covered without seeming to, not knowing why it should matter, feeling her watching me. Our eyes locked; I looked away first. Goodyear stirred and pressed himself between us as I sat next to her, dangling my feet into the tub, too. I absently scratched his ears. “Dana, why here? I mean, why couldn’t you build somewhere else—anywhere else but here?”

“Richie’s older brother Donald lives up north, but he knows this area and told Richie it was hot. Richie was doing a lot of big waterfront developments in Northern California, the Carolinas, and Rhode Island before the market started to go a little soft, and Donald thought maybe he could ride it out by doing a lot of little projects instead of a few huge projects. Less ex-

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posure. And why not here? It's beautiful. Of course, *I* knew you were here, but I didn't tell him that. He knows now...I mean, he did."

"Kind of out of the way, isn't it?" The wine had turned metallic on my tongue. "I mean, I know it's less than an hour from either Boston or the ocean, maybe twice that to the mountains, but it's not exactly Napa Valley."

"To keep Donald happy. Richie idolized Donald. If there's money in it, Donald's in it, and Richie is too. Was. Was in it." She shivered visibly. "It gets so cold here at night, doesn't it?" Wrapped only in a towel, with my tub-warmed skin suddenly exposed to the chilly night air, I was nevertheless flushed and far from cold. Good thing. Otherwise, I might have taken her cue and led her inside, where I had a fire ready to go in the blue enamel wood stove and steaming mugs of cappuccino awaiting only the flick of a switch. Bad idea. Very bad.

"My robe's over there if you want to put it over your shoulders."

"Kitten, I can't believe he's dead. He was shot late Friday night, they say, and it's Sunday night already and they still don't know who did it? Why haven't they caught him?" Her body shook with silent spasms. She looked up at me with wet blue eyes. Puppy eyes, mesmerizing, like a baby Husky.

Oh, Dana. I took her hand, just lightly, expecting my body to feel that familiar surge, and guarding against it. Surprisingly I felt nothing. Was I really, as I had told the police just that morning, finally over her? "Don't worry. They'll figure it out. They'll see that you didn't do it, and that I didn't do it, and they'll figure out who did," I said, trying to sound confident. I don't lie. But this felt a little like lying, and I sounded hesitant, even to myself. Dana seemed not to notice. She set her wine glass on the deck.

"Wait, they think I did it?" She sounded shocked.

"I think right now it's a tie between 'Dana did it for the money' and 'Kit did it for Dana.' "

"I thought he was gone. I mean, he said he was going out of town for the weekend, south somewhere," said Dana. "I didn't pay much attention—he's gone so often."

“I’m sorry,” I said. I wasn’t sure what about, but I did feel something like sorrow.

“I—I should go. I left the baby with a sitter.” Baby. Oh god, that’s right. Dana stood up slowly, uncoiling herself gracefully from her crouch. “My canoe’s right over here, by your boat.”

“Let me motor you, Dana. You don’t have any running lights.” She didn’t argue. I shrugged on the periwinkle chenille robe I’d draped over an Adirondack chair, letting the towel slip to the decking, and padded down to the boats in my bare feet. The metal was warmish below the water line, colder on the seats. I tied her canoe to the transom of my dinghy and patted the center seat. “Sit.” She sat.

“It’s right over there. The two little blue lights.” Her voice was just a whisper, like the lightest traces of wind in a poplar grove. “We’re—I’m—staying in the cottage there until all the units are built and the cottage is torn down.”

“If the units are built,” I said without thinking. Habit.

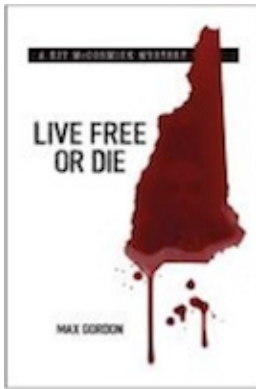
Her jaw tensed. Eyes turned cold, distant, fixed. “Oh, they’ll be built. Count on it.”

It was an odd turn to an already odd visitation, and it chilled me as the night air could not. If Dana so desperately wanted those units built, for some bizarre reason I couldn’t begin to name, since according to Chakarian she already had pots of money, they would of course be built. I would fight it, others would fight it, but already I had the gnawing sense that things had gone too far for any of us to stop the project. When I pulled up alongside Dana’s dock she hopped out of the boat and stalked off without another word, leaving me to tie her canoe to a cleat on her dock. I motored slowly back to my cabin in the moonlight, watching the lacy furrows of wake in the pale light of the nearly full moon. After cleating *Woodstock* to my own dock I turned off the hot tub and replaced its thermal lid. Inside, I carried my wineglass from room to room turning off the lights, intending to sit for a while by the fire. Instead, I found myself climbing the stairs and crawling under the

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under the flannel sheets of my huge bed, suddenly overwhelmed by a creaking, bone-grating exhaustion, and the even worse pain of my own too-good memory.

Happy fucking birthday to me.



Life is a humdrum three stars out of five for travel writer Katherine "Kit" McCormick. That changes forever when a dead body turns up in her office. As the ex-lover of the murdered developer's wife, Kit becomes the prime suspect and the killer's next target. Kit works with the closeted Detective Kasey Chakarian to unravel the knot of corruption and shameful secrets, but every clue leads to further entanglements...and mortal danger.

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