

Nineteen years after Juliet Tannering's disappearance, her former high school classmate, Ray Geddy, sets out on a killing spree to bring down the powerful and ruthless political machine that covered up her brutal murder by one of their own.

The Arc

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Ken Jasper

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The A-List

OCTOBER

ALYSSA TRIED OPENING the bottle barehanded, felt the cap ridges tearing into her fingers, then used her jacket to cushion her grip. The cap turned with a quick hiss. She tossed it on the wrought iron coffee table, took a sip of beer, and winced.

"It still smells in here," she said, glancing around the shed as if she expected the source of the odor to be spewing visible fumes. Her black eyes glistened in the dim light of the twin red pillar candles on the table.

Carrie Dennis lifted a corner of the couch cushion and let it flop back. "I think it's these cushions." The old back porch furniture—a mildewed glider and white wicker couch with two matching armchairs—had been stored in the shed over several winters and forgotten. "My mother thinks we're crazy hanging out in here. She says there's probably rats."

Alyssa laughed. "Your mother's crazy."

"Yeah, like a fox."

On a whim, the two fifteen-year-olds had spent the better part of their Saturday cleaning out the dusty twelve-by-eight one-room potting shed, which had once served as a bathhouse to the original owners of the eighty-year-old yellow-stucco Spanish Eclectic house on Louisville's affluent East End. It was to Carrie's never-ending disappointment that the accompanying swimming pool had long since been filled in by the time her family had taken up residence. The old bathhouse, until that morning, had been home to a vast collection of plastic and clay flowerpots, disused hoses and gardening tools, empty steel trash cans, bundled stacks of newspapers, and the old porch furniture.

On the floor beside the couch, a boombox was playing Kelly Clarkson's "Since U Been Gone," and for a time the two sat quietly sipping their beer and miming the words. Suddenly Carrie froze, her beer bottle poised at her bottom lip, her eyes widely alert. She reached down and shut off the music.

"Yours," she said of her friend's distinctive ring tone.

Alyssa set her beer on the table and fumbled in the pocket of her lavender fleece jacket, eventually retrieving her cell phone. "I wonder who this could be," she said, her wide eyes full of mocking mystery as she checked the LCD. She flipped the phone open and raised it to her ear. "Hi, Brad. Where are you guys?... We're at Carrie's, out in the shed in her back yard, having a couple beers... Her dad's out of town, and her mom's gone to some party."

The Dennis girl leaned forward eagerly. "Is Parker with him? Tell them to c'mon over."

"Carrie says you guys should come over... Okay, we'll be here. Just come up the driveway. Try not to make too much noise... Bye, Brad." She slapped the phone shut and slipped it back into her pocket. "They're at Parker's. They'll be over in ten minutes."

Carrie drew her legs up on the couch cushion and sat on her New Balance cross trainers. "You think we should stay here?"

"Duhhhh, yeah," Alyssa said sarcastically. "Like, we did just spend our whole Saturday cleaning this place up."

"It smells, though. Suppose they think it's us."

Alyssa laughed and then shrieked as a loud thump rattled the wall directly behind the couch. Gasping, both girls jumped to their feet and ran to the door, clutching hysterically at each other's arms.

"What the *hell* was that?" Alyssa said, breathlessly.

"I don't know. Something hit the wall."

"Look and see."

"Me? You look and see."

"It's your shed," Alyssa said, laughing nervously.

A hand to her collarbone, Carrie tiptoed warily around the couch and approached the small dark window at the rear of the shed.

"Be careful, Carrie," Alyssa cautioned.

The Dennis girl put her face to the glass and peered into the blackness. "I can't see anything. It's too dark."

"What'll we do?"

"I don't know. Call Brad. Tell him to get his ass over here, pronto."

Suddenly a long yellow flame shot up from below the window, illuminating a diabolical face just inches from the other side of the glass. Both girls screamed. And then burst into frantic laughter.

"Brad! You total ass!" Carrie shouted.

"Oh my *God*! He scared the shit out of me!" said Alyssa.

"I'm going to kill him!" Carrie stomped to the door and yanked it open.

Brad and Parker were standing just outside, laughing. Brad was flicking long tongues of flame from a butane lighter.

"Didn't scare you, did we?" Parker asked.

"You assholes!" said Alyssa. "I can't believe you did that! God, I almost had a heart attack."

Still laughing, the two seventeen-year-olds approached the door, and the girls stood aside to let them in.

Once inside, Brad's gaze went straight to the table. "Michelob! My brew!" he said, reaching for one of the beers.

Carrie snatched up both bottles and spirited them away behind her back. "Forget that! After what you just did, you jerks can get your own beer!"

Parker closed the door and leaned with his back to it. He pulled two joints from his breast pocket. "Forget it, Brad. Let the girls have their beer. We'll just catch us a little buzz of our own."

"Can't you go sneak a couple more, Carrie?" Alyssa pleaded.

The other girl rolled her eyes and sighed with exasperation. "Back in a sec." She pushed Parker aside and opened the door. "I swear, if my dad finds out, he'll kill me."

When she was gone, Alyssa and Brad sat down in the glider. Parker flopped down on the couch, put his feet up on the coffee table and lit one of the joints. He took several deep tokes and passed it to Brad. Carrie returned just as Alyssa was passing it back to Parker. She handed each of the boys a beer.

"Shit, it's warm," Brad grumbled. "I hate warm beer."

Carrie scowled at him. "Take it or leave it, Bradley," she said, curling her lip around his name. She sat down beside Parker and took the joint from him.

What happened after that, Alyssa would remember only as a blur. They smoked and drank for a while, then started making out. Brad had his hand up her shirt and his tongue down her throat when the door suddenly flew open and Carrie's mother stormed in. As high as they all were, they couldn't stop laughing, even as Mrs. Dennis was telling the boys to get the hell out or she was going to call the cops. After Brad and Parker went skulking down the driveway, Mrs. Dennis followed the girls into the house and then yelled at them for twenty minutes before she showed Alyssa out the front door.

Two doors down, Alyssa could still hear Carrie and her mom screaming at each other: "You're grounded, young lady! That means no concert next week!" "That's not fair, Mom! We weren't doing anything!" "What, you think I'm stupid? You think I don't know what that stuff smells like?"

By this time, Alyssa's dope and beer buzz was gone. Fear had sobered her up quickly. She didn't think Carrie's mother would squeal on her, but there was always a chance. Moms could do the lamest things sometimes.

As she turned the corner onto Highland Road, she was wondering how it

was that Mrs. Dennis knew what pot smelled like. How did she know it made your eyes red? Maybe she'd been to one of those DARE meetings, where the police described the effects of pot and then burned some so you'd know what it smells like. But probably not. Probably Mrs. Dennis had smoked pot behind the garage with her boyfriend when she was fifteen. What kind of hypocrite would she be if she turned around now and squealed on her daughter's best friend? Pretty lame.

Anyway, she'd know as soon as she got home. Either her mom would be watching TV and barely say a word when she walked in the door, or she'd be waiting in the front hall with a face like some kind of horror movie chainsaw-wielding psycho. Either way, Alyssa wouldn't have to say much. Whatever conversation ensued, it would be mostly monologue.

It was the distant sharp slam of a car door that suddenly jarred her from her ruminations and made her freeze in mid stride. Her pot-reddened eyes searched the deserted suburban street. Near the corner, a dark figure appeared from behind a black van parked at the curb, crossed the sidewalk and disappeared behind the tall boxwood hedge that enclosed the backyard of the corner house. Alyssa stood motionless for a time, feeling the heavy night silence close around her, listening to her own short-clipped breathing. Then the whole thing seemed silly. She laughed nervously to herself, the way she always did at home when some creepy unfamiliar noise gave her goose flesh. "Cut it out, Ally. You're just being paranoid."

She forced herself to start walking again, but now all her senses were on edge. She was conscious of everything, from the clamminess of her palms and the pounding of her heart to the unnatural breadth of her stride and the slapping echo of her footsteps off the dark houses. Of course it was all just the damn dope. Alyssa wasn't exactly a weed head, not yet anyway, but she had smoked enough pot in her time to know that paranoia and the munchies went with the territory. But that reality wasn't all that comforting when you were walking home in the dark, especially after a major bad scene like getting bitched out by Carrie's mom.

Up ahead, the hedge loomed tall and dark alongside the walkway. Where it ended, an unlit driveway stretched only a few yards from the street to the garage. Alyssa felt a sudden chill. She considered crossing the street to avoid those forbidding shadows ahead. But that was nonsense, wasn't it? She was being silly and paranoid. After all, she'd been walking this path for years. She knew every crack in the sidewalk. At one time or another, she had baby-sat at almost every home along the way. So what was the big deal?

At her back, she heard a rustling in the hedge, but before she could turn her head, a hand slapped a soft cloth across her mouth and an arm came up around her chest. She screamed into the cloth but barely made a sound, and

no amount of adrenaline-charged effort could dislodge her assailant's hold. Her scream depleted to no useful end, she went to draw a breath and instead of the cool evening air found herself inhaling some heavy, warm chemical vapor. It was like rubber cement, she thought. Or one of those preservative solutions they used in biology lab at school. Formaldehyde. No, not that, but close.

She was gone, then. As Brad always said, wasted. But the buzz this stuff gave her was like no weed she had ever smoked. The cloth and hand were removed from her mouth, but she had already forgotten her fears and her situation. She was in his arms, being toted across the back yard. In the darkness, she couldn't see his face, though it was only a dozen inches from her own. And she was laughing, not loudly, but in a childlike giggle she could hardly believe was coming from her.

He carried her through another hedge, across a blacktop driveway and up a short flight of wooden stairs to an enclosed back porch. It seemed familiar to her, that porch, but whatever memory she had of it was not recent. He set her on her feet, balancing her against the wall with one hand while he opened the back door with the other. Then he helped her through a dark kitchen and dining room and into a living room. Her inebriation was so thick that for a time she didn't realize what was amiss here—that there was no furniture, just the empty wall-to-wall carpet.

Then, for the first time, her kidnapper spoke: "Okay, Alyssa," he said in a soft voice, "I'm going to lay you down here on the floor." He set her down gently on the carpet. "You feeling all right, are you?"

She tried to answer, "Yeah, I'm totally wasted," but it came out an indecipherable jumble. Or so it sounded to her.

"That's great," he said in a humoring way. "Here, I want you to hold real still now. You might feel a little pinch, okay? Try not to jerk your arm."

He was probing at the soft inside of her elbow, poking at it, flicking the skin with his fingernail. Then she felt it, the tiny pinch he had warned her about, but it was more than a tiny pinch. It was a sting, and then it was hot, and seconds later her mind was awl. She felt warm and secure, almost as if she were curled up in a cozy bed with a dozen heavy blankets over her.

In the next instant, there was a brilliant flash of white light in her face.

"What was that?"

"I just took your picture."

"What for?"

"Been drinking some beer, sweetheart?"

"Been, yeah, some. Two, I guess. Warm beer. Gross."

"Two cans of beer?"

"Bottles. Two bottles."

"Smoking some pot?"

"No... How'd you know?"

He laughed. "Don't worry, I won't tell."

"Who are you?" She wanted to sit up to get a better look at the man kneeling beside her, but she couldn't dredge up enough energy to lift an arm.

"You can call me Captain Midnight," he said with an airy chuckle.

"Hi, Captain Midnight," she said, and then began laughing.

"Okay, Alyssa. You just relax now. Go to sleep if you want. I'm going to make a phone call."

"Whatever," she replied in a yawn.

She heard him get up and walk away, felt the floor give under his footsteps. Then his voice was echoing from another room.

"It's me again, Lenny," he said. "You get my message?... I just took it. I've got her right here... She's a little drunk and drugged up from a party at her friend's house, but she's okay, feeling pretty good... I'm getting to that. Don't interrupt. Here's the deal: You remember '86, that business up in Cedar Park?... Yeah, you do, Lenny. All I want from you is the list... Everybody you paid off. I don't give a shit whether it was a dime or a million bucks or a ticket on the Space Shuttle. I want the complete list, Lenny. And just so we understand each other, I know at least four names that aren't too obvious that better be on that list. If I don't see those four names, I'll know you've made a tragic decision as far as your granddaughter is concerned... Don't be an idiot, Lenny. You've got nothing to lose by giving me what I want. Nobody ever has to know about the list. You're retired. You can live out your days fishing off your private pier and playing the horses... Oh, I think we understand each other perfectly, my friend. There isn't much in this world you hold near and dear, but you do love your granddaughter... Yeah, sure, fine. Just give me a minute and I'll get you a shot of her naked... No, I didn't think you would. Hold on and I'll let her say a few words."

Alyssa was lying on her side, her knees drawn up into a semi-fetal position, when her kidnapper returned and squatted beside her. His warm hand caressed the hair from her forehead. "How you feeling, Alyssa? Pretty good?"

"Amaaaazing," she said in a swoon.

"That's awesome. Here, say hello to your grandpa. He's on the phone."

He held the cell phone up to her face.

"Grandpa? Hi, grandpa. Where are you?"

But before her grandfather could answer, the phone was jerked away.

"So, I trust I've gained your complete confidence now, Lenny," her kidnapper said, returning to the other room. "Good boy. Here's what I want

you to do, then. Type me up the list and fax it to the number I'm about to give you. As soon as I see the list and confirm those four names, I'll have your granddaughter on her way home... Don't sweat that, Lenny. I'll give her a little something to bring her around. She'll be sober as a Pilgrim by the time she gets to her front door, and she won't remember any of this..."

THE COLD GRASS smelled earthy sweet. Felt feather-soft on her cheek. Tickled the inside of her ear. She turned her head slightly, toying with the tickle. Breathing greedily, she savored the turf's thick musky scent. Suddenly, like a static discharge, a surge of panic seized her consciousness—*What the hell?*—and she sat up rigidly, her fists clutching tufts of the cool turf, her wide bulging eyes beseeching her shadowy surroundings for a clue—anything!—as to *Where am I?* Yet, as the seconds ticked by and her heart seemed to climb into her throat, nothing familiar caught her eye or jogged her memory, and her mind remained defiantly blank. She got to her feet, turned a full circle, her fearful eyes gingerly probing the shadows for a threat she felt certain had to be there somewhere. But nothing showed itself. Nothing.

With the fingers of both hands, she combed the hair back from her ears and allowed herself a grudging sigh of relief. *God, what time is it?* She looked at her wristwatch, moving it this way and that to align the dial with a narrow beam of light from the streetlamp. *11:20! Holy shit!*

With a fresh shot of adrenalin, she started toward the dark house and then paused as an image flashed in her mind: Carrie's mom standing red-faced in the shed doorway, steaming mad. Followed quickly by a gush of vivid images. Brad in the window. Making out. Smoking pot and drinking warm beer. Mrs. Dennis in the kitchen, bitching them out, telling Carrie she was grounded and couldn't go to the concert. "Alyssa, I want you to go straight home..." But there her memory went blank.

What the hell?

She started toward the house again, then homed in on a streetlamp and found her way out of the back yard. Beyond the boxwood hedge she paused to look up and down Highland Road. Finally recognizing where she was—*Thank God! Just a block from home!*—she turned and headed off at an urgent pace that now and then would become a jog. And recalling the pot-smoking again, she whispered to herself resolutely, "Jesus, Ally! No more of that crap, girl! God knows where you'll wake up next time!"

LENNY ELDRIDGE STOOD in the darkened living room of his Venice, Florida, home sipping Grande Marnier from a tiny aperitif glass and staring at his reflection in the glass of the framed portrait that hung on the wall over the grand piano. It was a painting of his eldest daughter, Miriam, who lived

now with her husband and four children in Louisville, Kentucky. If he had an Achilles heel, Eldridge thought, the grandchildren were it.

So he had to admire the punk's ingenuity. Almost all of his adult life, Lenny Eldridge had devoted himself to the service of one man and his enormous and troubled family. It had been a lucrative career. Indeed, he had retired as the wealthiest troubleshooter he'd ever heard of. Until now, he'd never considered it a particularly hazardous occupation. After all, what did he have, besides money, that anyone else wanted? And there were certainly much richer men in this rich nation for a blackmailer or extortionist to target. But now, somehow, Lenny's past had come back to haunt him, and it wasn't money the bastard wanted.

So there had been no decision to make. His grandchildren—and in particular, his daughter's oldest child, Alyssa—were the most precious things in Lenny's world, a world of wealth that gave no comfort to his cancer-ridden old carcass. He had hung up the phone, sat down at his old IBM Selectric II typewriter, and unhesitatingly pecked out a complete list of the cast of that sordid play of nineteen years ago.

He was surprised at how easily the names had come back to him. Whores, they were—most of them—snatching up his first offer without dickering (only a few had forced him to harden his tone or furrow his brow), though he had to suppose most of them understood the tacit threat that accompanied a quarter million dollar payoff. No, he hadn't had to bend many arms. It had all been so easy, so terribly easy.

But as he stared at Miriam's portrait, at the warm brown eyes her mother had given her and she in turn had bequeathed to little Alyssa, he felt nothing but the cold poverty of regret. Gone to the last smug grin was the retirement nest egg of pride and satisfaction in which he had once invested himself for having so skillfully manipulated the system and thwarted justice. Now what he wanted—all he wanted—was to pick up the phone and dial his daughter's home, make a little innocent chat with her and then ask to speak with Alyssa. But he didn't dare. Miriam would likely become suspicious, because Daddy never called so late, unless it was an emergency. And he didn't want her to think it was that. No, he would have to wait until morning, and even then he'd need a compelling excuse for calling at such an odd hour.

He wondered: If the guy didn't keep his word, and Alyssa didn't come home, would Miriam call him right away? Eldridge didn't know. The sad truth was that he had been too little a father to his own children, too busy moving mountains for one very rich and powerful mover and shaker. That was truly sad—

“Lenny?” his wife called from the dark hallway.

“Yes, Ruthy.”

“What’re you doing up? Can’t you sleep?”

“No. I’m having a little nightcap. Care to join me?”

“Sure,” she said. Like a phantom her negligee followed her across the room, and she came to his side and hugged him, while he poured her an ounce of the sweet liqueur.

“I was just thinking about little Alyssa,” he said.

“You know she’s got a birthday coming up next month, Lenny.”

“Sixteen, I know.”

“She’ll be driving, soon. Hard to believe, isn’t it?”

AS HE SCROLLED down the list on the computer screen, Ray Geddy’s face betrayed none of the emotions welling in his consciousness. By all appearances, he could have been scanning the white pages of the Shallotte phone directory. But that poker face was nothing more than habit. And training.

A few of the names were surprises, a few were mysteries, but the four he had expected to find were all there. If Eldridge had omitted anyone, it wasn’t a major player. The list was complete. Complete, Geddy knew, because Eldridge had no loyalty left to anyone but himself. Oh, wasn’t that a delicious irony? Did Eldridge even recognize it? Was there a spark of humor left in the old bastard’s soul that he could grin at having sold out the machine to save a fifteen-year-old girl? Geddy wondered.

Prescriptions

MARCH

KINSEY RICE TURNED from Washington Avenue and rolled down the long ramp into the cellar parking garage beneath the Woodbridge Apartment complex, where she carefully guided her black BMW coupe into the slot marked 17. Gathering up her purse and computer bag, she stepped out into the breezy garage. Two slots away, number 15 was empty. Still away on business, she thought, as she locked her car and headed across the floor to the open stairwell. Too bad. She could have enjoyed a quiet balcony conversation with the taciturn, reclusive Eric.

Kinsey was twenty-five, pretty, single and, according to census records, black—her grandmother on her father’s side had grown up in the Mississippi cotton fields—though “honey” would certainly have better described her particular skin hue. She was also moving incredibly quickly up the influence ladder at MDC Media, Inc., making what was in her eyes a fortune, and enjoying all the good life that Southern California had to offer. Not bad for a Cleveland, Ohio, mail carrier’s daughter.

College had brought her here—a full scholarship at the UCLA business school—and though she had, over the years, dutifully returned to her Rust Belt roots for the obligatory holidays, funerals and sometimes birthdays, she had long ago given up thinking of Cleveland as home. This was home, this Santa Monica.

Keying the door to her first-floor apartment, Kinsey didn’t want to hear from old friends or family. Not today. She only hoped Eric’s soft knock would sound on her door before the night was through.

What was it that attracted her to him? She didn’t know. Certainly he was a good-looking man, but in a nondescript sort of way. He had dark hair, cut short, and medium brown eyes, and stood (he claimed) six feet tall. He wasn’t exactly buff, but well built and sturdy looking. He had a face that

didn't remind her of anyone else, but didn't stand out on its own, either. Rather, he looked like a sketch of a man—not any particular man, just a man. Even his clothes made little in the way of statement. But Eric Wendell made her feel good when he was around.

He had moved into Apartment 15 on the first weekend in February, and for the next two months she thought he had moved out again, except that his name was still on the mailbox. There were no sounds through the paper-thin walls, no parties, no pets being walked in the morning, and no furniture being delivered on Friday afternoons. By the time she had next caught sight of him—hurrying to his cute little 2004 yellow Honda S2000 in the garage slot near hers—she hadn't even recognized him for the next-door neighbor he was. Later that afternoon, though, while indulging herself in a beer and a romance novel on her balcony, Kinsey had heard a nearby door rumble open and glanced over to see this caricature of a man appear with a bottle of Corona Extra (garnished with lime slice). He hadn't noticed her at first, but had strolled to the railing and leaned over on his forearms to stare up and down Washington Avenue.

Kinsey had spoken first, though not until they had established fleeting eye contact. She still recalled what she had said: "You could be in one of those Corona commercials. You know, the ones where the guy and girl are relaxing on a tropical beach?" It took him some time to reply, and the long silence had made her wish she'd kept her big mouth shut, but then he had smiled finally and said, "Would you like to go for a jog on the beach?"

They had become friends, even made love several times, though Kinsey didn't think they probably would again. Not that it had been an unpleasant experience; it certainly hadn't. No, it was just that sexual gratification wasn't what either of them seemed to want from their relationship. For her part, Kinsey craved his quiet affections: a gentle caress of her tired neck, a partner for the Sunday Times crossword puzzle, someone to drink too much with on Friday nights and who wouldn't yell at her on Saturday morning when her head felt like an over-inflated weather balloon. Eric was all that and more. He would still grab her ass or her breast now and then, but it was more of an adolescent gesture, a cute and harmless tease. Kinsey wasn't beyond cupping him, either, when the mood struck her. Mostly they had fun together, the way she had once had fun with her high school friends, before they had all grown up and become too serious about life.

Now, when she opened her door, she found Tock staring up at her from the carpet with his huge brown eyes. The affectionate chocolate-brown Labrador retriever she had named after the dog in one of her favorite childhood books, *The Phantom Tollbooth*. As he always did, he waited until Kinsey had made a bathroom pit stop and changed into her jogging outfit before he got up and went to stand by the door. She grabbed his leash off

the door hook and snapped it onto his collar. Then they were out the door and down the stairs and hurrying along the sidewalk.

Tock took care of his business quickly, and his pace was more leisurely on the way home. They were waiting for the light at the corner when Kinsey spotted Eric's yellow Honda turning into the driveway. She didn't wave or call to him. In her mind she was scheming to sneak up and scare him somehow, though the precise details of the maneuver were sketchy.

But when they got back to the apartment complex, Tock dragged her down the ramp and into the garage. There she found Eric still sitting in his car, the engine off and the windows up. She had to restrain Tock or he would have jumped up and scratched the car. He adored Eric.

"What are you doing? Meditating?" Kinsey asked, bending down to peer through the windshield at him.

Eric broke from his trance, smiled at her, and then opened the door and climbed out. "I was having gas cramps."

"Oh, great!" she laughed. "Come on, Tock. Eric needs some time to himself."

"I missed you guys." He reached behind the seat and grabbed his green duffel.

Kinsey gave him a quick hug. "We missed you, too. It's been lousy quiet around here. How was your trip?"

"Uneventful. Made a couple good contacts, though."

The way he had explained it to her, he was a programmer and sales rep for a software startup that made database and tracking programs for police and private investigation agencies. It didn't interest her much, though, and she was grateful that he wasn't the sort who liked to talk about work a lot. Nor did it arouse her curiosity that his spare bedroom looked like some kind of command and control center from a James Bond movie, cluttered as it was with computers and printers and books on crime and police procedure.

"Well, good. I got a bonus today," she said proudly. "How'd you like to get gussied to the nines and trip the light?"

Eric frowned, but just to tease her. "Well, I was thinking about a quiet evening in front of channel 58"—the local PBS station—"but I guess I could let you drag me out for a quick meal."

"Eric," she said, looking sidelong at him, "you are such an asshole."

"Yes, I know." He locked the car and gestured with his duffel toward the stairs. "C'mon. I'll take a shower and we'll do the town."

Back in her apartment with the door closed, Kinsey told Tock, "Eric seems distracted lately, don't you think?"

The dog didn't respond, except by opening his eyes a bit wider and slapping his tail on the carpet at the sound of Eric's name. He watched her insert her favorite silver earrings into her pierced ears.

"I sure hope nothing's wrong."

Eric's father was dead. His mother and older brother lived somewhere in North Carolina. He didn't talk about them much, and when he did she always got the impression he was sort of estranged from them. If he was having problems, she didn't think it was with them.

But maybe he was suffering over an old girlfriend. They had talked scantily of their prior relationships. Kinsey was always leery of joining in such discussions, knowing how much she hated listening to stories of other people's failed romances. As much as she liked her next-door neighbor, she wasn't any more eager to hear about his prior love life than about his job travails.

"Maybe it's just a mood." She laughed softly, adding, "Maybe it's just PMS. Ya think?"

But if Tock had an opinion, he was guarding it diligently.

They took Eric's car and drove to Michelle's on Ocean Avenue. Kinsey had been to the ritzy celebrity dining spot several times before when entertaining clients and had always adored the food. Casually, it was still too rich for her blood, but this was a special occasion, of course.

So she was dumb-struck when the maitre d' observed them standing in line and said, "Nice to see you again, Mr. Wendell. I saved you a table by the window."

"They know you here?" she couldn't help asking, after they had been seated and plied with heavy, leather-bound menus.

Eric smiled. "I was here once. The waiter spilled boiling coffee on me. They were terrified I'd sue." He was teasing, of course, but she knew not to pursue it any further. "Before we order, Kinsey, I want it clearly understood that I'm paying for dinner."

"No, Eric! We're celebrating my bonus, remember? I'll pay, really."

"You don't celebrate a bonus, dear lady, by spending it on a fancy dinner. When we're done here, I'll take you to KD's and you can buy me a glass of single-malt scotch and a twenty-dollar cigar. How's that sound?"

"Terrible. I hate it. You're being unfair."

"Too bad. Get over it."

The sommelier, Doug, arrived and handed Eric the wine list. Eric made a quick selection and Doug was gone.

"Where'd you go this week?" Kinsey asked then.

"Louisville. Private detective agency. Nice town, Louisville. Ever been there?"

"No, and it's way too close to Cleveland to be anyplace I'd want to visit. The only place I ever want to see snow again is in the mountains in the distance."

He laughed. "You're a girl after my own heart, Kinsey."

He had grown up on Long Island, she recalled from an old conversation. His father had been an investigator for the insurance industry. Beyond that, she knew little of his childhood.

The dinner was divine. They stayed till after ten, then went to KD's, a favorite local cigar bar, for the part of the evening that was her responsibility. It was well past midnight when they finally headed home, and they were both well over the legal limit by any measure, though Eric's driving seemed to Kinsey unaffected by all the booze.

Back at his apartment, Eric went straight to the kitchen to pour them nightcaps. Kinsey headed for the bathroom to check her face.

Maybe it was habit. After all, his bathroom and hers, though mirror images, had the same fixtures and cabinets, even the same tacky metallic-gold wallpaper. So how weird was it that she barely gave it a thought before opening his medicine cabinet? Not so weird, perhaps. But once her eyes began scanning back and forth across the three sparsely occupied glass shelves, there was no stopping them. Kinsey had no idea what she was looking for, but what she found made her heart sink like a bad soufflé.

On the bottom shelf was a small amber prescription vial. The name of the medication jumped out at her in letters seemingly six inches tall: Lithobid, 350mg. Oddly enough, Kinsey knew about Lithobid. Years ago, her mother had been diagnosed bipolar. But Eric?

But that was only the warm-up to her cold shower. Next her gaze settled on the patient's name: Raymond Geddy. And then on the pharmacy itself: Patterson's Drugs, 522 Main St., Shallotte, NC.

For the first time since she'd known Eric Wendell, Kinsey felt a palpable fear of him. It was a moment she would never forget, not as long as she lived.

Eight Ball

WHEN GEDDY SAUNTERED through the door of the OP—the Other Place—on Baltimore’s east side, the vigilant young bartender, who in slavish obedience to the owner routinely carded anyone who didn’t look thirty-five, barely served him a glance. The small tavern wasn’t packed this Friday night, but it was busy. Single, first-shift dockworkers, mostly, their wallets lush with disposable income.

Geddy sidled up to the bar. Staring at his own reflection in the mirror, he waited patiently while the bartender, standing at the tap, filled a tray of beer glasses and bantered with the barmaid. When his turn came, Geddy ordered a beer, then wandered over to the video games in the corner and for the next fifteen minutes amused himself with several rounds of Lethal Force, a military commando game. That he was keeping track of the quartet playing pool at the table behind him would not have been obvious even to a trained observer.

The four men were playing eight-ball, one team clearly dominating. At the conclusion of their fourth game, the two losers looked at each other and shook their head to another round. By then, Geddy had his back to the video game console and was watching the action. One of the victors—a man who looked Geddy’s age, with thinning red hair and a chaotically freckled face—turned tauntingly to his audience and, after several seconds with no takers, took his cue and went to sit down.

Without moving from his place, Geddy said to him, “I don’t have a teammate, Red, but I’ll go one with you.”

An annoyed look on his face, the man said, “Not this time, dude. Go scare up a partner and we’ll do it.”

Geddy flashed a challenging smile. “Never mind then. I thought you wanted to play pool.”

Red’s partner shrugged. “Go ahead and play him, Rick. I’ll just get me another beer and take a load off.”

For a moment, Rick looked even more annoyed, but then his features

softened. "Okay, friend, it's your funeral. Your dollar, too."

Geddy stood. He pulled a bill from his roll and set it on the table, then went to the rack and selected a cue, chalked the tip, and stood by while Rick racked the balls.

"You wanna break?" Rick asked with a smug look.

"Go ahead."

"Your funeral." He positioned the cue ball to one side, rested the stick on the edge of his thumb, and executed a picture-perfect break, sinking the 1- and 5-balls.

"That's twice you've said that," Geddy noted. "What are you, an undertaker or something?"

Lining up his next shot, Rick paused briefly to fling him a hostile look. "That supposed to be funny, dude?"

Geddy waited for him to shoot—and miss—before he replied, amiably, "Oh, I don't know. I take laughs wherever I can find 'em." He quickly rounded the table and leaned across to sink the 12- and 6-balls in the corner. He missed the bank shot on the 10-ball.

It was his turn, but Rick was still on his stool, staring at the newcomer. "Do I know you?"

"Don't think so."

"You look familiar. Where you from?"

"Evanston, north of Chicago. How about you?"

"New York. Long Island."

Geddy shook his head. "Heard a lot about it. Never been there."

"Chicago, huh?" Rick said, still eyeing him. "Okay, so what's your name, Chicago?"

"John. Malvasi."

"Malvasi?" Rick repeated, looking skeptical. "Sounds Italian. You don't look Italian."

Geddy flashed a quick, perfunctory grin. "Really? What's an Italian look like?"

Rick laughed. "In my neighborhood? Dark. Short. Greasy."

"My mother was Swedish." Geddy gestured toward the table. "It's your shot, Long Island."

Nodding, the redhead said, "It's Rick. Rick Isaacs."

Minutes later they were just finishing up their game when Isaacs's partner returned with a girl under his arm. "Hey, Rick. If it's all the same to you, man, I'm gonna take off, okay?" He gave his pal a wink.

Isaacs stared disapprovingly at him for a few seconds and then shook his head. "Yeah, it's all the same to me, Tim, but it wouldn't matter to you if it wasn't. You're a pecker head, literally."

"Go again?" Geddy offered, as Tim and his girl headed for the door.

"Yeah, I guess. What the fuck. He was half in the bag, anyway. Let's see if we can scare up some opposition."

They did. It was nearly midnight when the supply of pigeons finally petered out.

"Good thing, too," Geddy said, massaging his thumb. "I think I'm getting a blister."

Isaacs returned his cue to the wall rack. "It's my back that gets me. C'mon, let's grab a couple beers and find a corner. I'll buy."

Geddy found the only free table that wasn't under one of the blaring juke box speakers, and Isaacs came over and set a beer in front of him, sitting down with his own. "So how do you pay the bills, Chicago?" he began the conversation.

"Not too well," Geddy laughed. "I'm looking for gainful employment. That's why I'm in Baltimore."

"Doing what?"

"Electronics. It's what I did in the army. You?"

Isaacs laughed grimly. "These days I'm mostly hiding from the bill collectors. My ex has her fuckin' lawyer following me around twenty-four seven."

"Sounds familiar."

"You too?"

"No, not me. But almost every other guy I know."

Isaacs took a moment to sip his beer. "You ever married?"

"Yeah," Geddy sneered, "to the fuckin' army. Twelve years."

Isaacs shrugged. "That's probably as long as your average marriage."

"I guess you could look at it that way. So, you didn't answer my question. What are you doing, besides hiding from the bill collectors and your wife's lawyer?"

He was a CPA, Geddy already knew. Isaacs had worked eight years for Arthur Anderson, before the government killed it. "Now I'm just doing tax prep for a local outfit."

"College?"

"Yale," he quickly replied. "You?"

Geddy only shook his head.

"Yeah, I'd probably have done better to join the friggin' army, too," Isaacs said philosophically.

The poor dumb bastard never knew what hit him. If Isaacs had ever heard of the old Dale Carnegie technique of impressing people by encouraging them to talk about themselves, he didn't remember or didn't care. Geddy bought the next round and sat staring at him with a fascinated expression, barely saying a word. Every time the other man's monologue swerved into Geddy's army days, Geddy deftly steered it away.

The barmaid brought them one more round of beers, and when those were gone, Geddy hustled to the bar and came back with two brimming shot glasses.

"I've got to be getting on," he said by way of explanation. He shoved one of the shots across the table. "Here. Let's chase a good night, what do you say?"

Isaacs smiled broadly. "I say never turn down a free chaser. What is it?" he asked, raising it to his nose. "Vodka?"

Geddy grinned and nodded. He raised his glass in a salute and downed it in one swallow.

"*Slante*," Isaacs made the traditional Gaelic toast, and he followed suit.

It took only a few minutes, then, and Isaacs began to look seriously woozy. His eyelids would slip down and then bounce back up. He'd lift his empty beer glass and miss his lips. Soon he was teetering on his chair. It was a performance the bartender was trained to detect, and he made quick eye contact with Geddy. Moments later he was standing beside the table. "You need a hand with our friend?" he asked Geddy.

"Maybe."

"With what?" Isaacs spouted indignantly.

"With you," Geddy laughed. "You're trashed, Rick."

"Shit, I only had six or seven beers all night. You guys are fu..."

The other two men watched him nod off in mid sentence.

"You got a car?" the bartender asked Geddy.

"Yeah, but I don't know where he lives."

"I do. It's only a couple blocks from here. I'll draw you a map."

The two men carried him out to the parking lot and laid him across the back seat of Geddy's gray minivan.

"Here's your map," the bartender said, handing him a cocktail napkin with three smudged lines on it. "You just head down Madison, here, and take your first right, go to the light and take your left. It's the brown brick apartment complex on the left, first building. I think it's Apartment 5, but you better check the mailboxes before you try his key." He stood back as Geddy climbed in behind the wheel. "Weird," he said then, shaking his head.

"What's that?"

"Been a long time since I've seen Rick get like this. He usually gauges himself pretty good. Guess he must be drowning some sorrows or something."

"Yeah, he was talking about his ex-wife and all his money troubles."

The bartender laughed. "That'll do it, for sure. Drive careful, man. You're okay, aren't you? To drive, I mean."

Geddy pretended to search for the steering wheel, then found it. "Sure,

I'm fine. Thanks for the hand."

He didn't need the map. He didn't need to check the mailboxes, either. Nor did he need help carrying his drunken friend up to the apartment. When he laid Isaacs sideways across the bed, the redhead said, "Where the hell am I? Jesus, I'm thirsty. Somebody get me a beer."

AT EIGHT-THIRTY next morning, Holly Isaacs finally picked up the phone and dialed her ex-husband's apartment. It rang four times and then the answering machine came on. After the greeting and the tone, she yelled into the receiver: "Rick! Wake up, you idiot! I'm supposed to be at the auction in half an hour!"

He had done this before—slept through his obligations—so it didn't surprise her. But it still pissed her off. Almost as much as Rick's inescapable past, his drinking had killed their marriage.

"You hear me, Rick? If you don't pick up this phone right now, I'm coming down there and take a baseball bat to that stupid goddamn car of yours!"

It was her favorite threat, and it always worked because she'd made good on it once, smashing the windshield of his stupid goddamn '74 Grand Am.

But seconds ticked by and no Rick.

"Okay, asshole! You asked for it!"

She slammed down the receiver and grabbed her purse off the kitchen table. "Come on, kids. If your father won't come to us, then we'll go to him."

The three boys—ages nine, seven and four—were silent on their march out to the car. From the TV room they'd heard their mother's barking and knew from experience not to rattle her cage. Holly recognized that and hated it. The divorce had been murder for her, but it had turned the kids' lives upside down. They had always been close to their father, but it seemed to her that since the divorce they had become more devoted to him than ever, and it was making an already difficult situation a thousand times worse.

But she had responsibilities, too. This damned charity auction was part of her job, a job she desperately needed (along with Rick's spotty child-support) in order to make her mortgage payments. So Rick and his goddamn hangover could damn well suffer with an apartment full of screaming, feuding, scrapping boys.

It was only a mile from her house, and her usual route took her past the OP, Rick's favorite watering hole. As she drove by, with the boys belted in like three silent angels across the back seat, she spotted his blue Grand Am, the only car in the parking lot. So he'd gotten himself too drunk to drive and that big stupid goon Pratt, who owned the place, had called a cab for

him. It made her sick the way all these divorced men took care of each other while at the same time they were helping each other commit suicide.

Minutes later, she pulled into the parking lot of her ex-husband's apartment.

"Okay, boys," she said, shutting off the engine and opening her door, "let's go wake up your father. And hustle, please. Mommy's already late for work."

The boys led the way up the front walk, up the stairs and into the building. Just inside the door, they stopped and turned to look at her.

"What?" she said. "Come on, you guys. You know the way."

But they just stared at her with those huge, lonesome eyes. They were Rick's eyes, the same one's she'd adored for years and now hated the sight of.

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" she said, finally, and pushed past them up the stairs to the second floor.

Rick's was the first apartment on the right at the top of the stairs. Number 4. She let little four-year-old Jeff push the doorbell. When there was no answer and no sound from within, she had him ring it once more. Still no answer. She looked down at him and smiled sourly. "I guess your father had a late night."

She tried the door and was surprised to find it unlocked. Strange. Even stone drunk Rick had always been a stickler for locking up. Holly entered the apartment with the three boys close at her heels. That, too, was odd. The boys seemed unnerved. Did they sense something? Were they like dogs that could feel an approaching earthquake? Maybe Rick had brought home some company for the night.

"You three wait right here," she said, and headed for the bedroom.

Entering the short dark hallway from the living room, Holly observed the beige rope tied to the doorknob and pulled taut over the top of the closed bedroom door. In the days to follow, this was where the short film of her horror would begin. It would play over and over in her beleaguered mind, and she would be thankful for only one thing, that she hadn't made the boys go first.

"Rick!" she said, sharply. "What the hell are you doing in there?"

She flicked the rope with two fingers and realized then from the touch what it was: a nylon stocking. She grabbed the knob and turned it with some difficulty, pushed, but the door barely moved. In fact, it seemed as if it were pushing back at her. Holly leaned against it with half of her hundred-and-thirty-five pounds. This time the door opened six inches and then something heavy banged it backward several inches.

"Christ, Rick!" she barked. "What've you got tied to this door, you idiot?"

She threw herself fully at the door and then fell headlong on the bedroom floor as the door flew back against the wall. Suddenly, Holly felt the room's creeping coldness. She smelled urine and feces, like a toddler's diaper change long overdue. Ammonia. She sat up and glanced back at the door, and then her heart began to pound and the blood hissed in her ears.

Seconds later, she had her four-year-old's hand and was dragging him out of the apartment. "Okay, let's go kids!" she said breathlessly. "Daddy's not feeling well."

BALTIMORE PD HOMICIDE Detectives Jim Farnache and Nat Kessler arrived at 1726 Merrill Creek Road forty minutes later to find the media had beaten them to it. WBTV reporter Jill Nully was doing a stand-up shot on the lawn in front of the apartment entrance, but quickly signaled her cameraman to cut when she saw Farnache pull up. Like a used car salesman, she was in his face before he could even stand up in the open car doorway.

"Good morning, Jill," Farnache greeted her sourly. "Don't you know you're supposed to open the door for a homicide detective?"

The bright-eyed blonde sneered good-naturedly at him as she held out her microphone. "What time did you get the call?" she fired her first question at him.

"A half hour ago. We were covering another homicide. Why are *you* here?" Nully didn't usually attend suicides.

"Oh, just scooping the tabloids this morning," she replied with a wink.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's Richard Isaacs," she said, as if the name would shake him to his foundation. It didn't.

"Who's Richard Isaacs?"

Nully showed him a dubious face. "I hope you're kidding."

Farnache shook his head and closed the car door. With the reporter at his heels, he followed Kessler up the walkway toward the entrance.

"You are kidding, aren't you, detective?" she persisted. "Richard Isaacs? The Tannering murder? The Sutton trial? I know it was a long time ago, but come on."

"Oh, *that* Richard Isaacs," he responded sarcastically. "How could I ever forget?"

At the front door, a patrolman was standing guard, and Farnache signaled him to block the reporter, which he gleefully did. Inside, another officer gestured up the stairs, and they began their climb.

Kessler said, "If she weren't such a bitch, she'd be a damned desirable woman."

"True, Nat, but she is such a bitch."

"I remember the Tannering murder, Jim, but who's this Isaacs guy?"

"One of Sutton's buddies, I think. But don't bet your mortgage payment on it. I was in the army when it happened. It was '86, June or July. The girl was the daughter of some big New York high mucky-muck executive."

"I remember seeing her picture in the papers," Kessler said. "Real pretty girl."

The way his partner said it—"real pretty girl"—Farnache could tell Kessler had been smitten with the girl at one time. But so had the public. Hers was not a face you easily forgot. "How old were you back then, Nat?"

"Eighty-six? I was sixteen. Why?"

"Just curious."

At the top of the stairs, another cop directed them to the open apartment doorway.

"Okay," Farnache said, "let's have a look-see what the infamous Richard Isaacs has done to himself."

The first thing that struck him when he passed into the one-bedroom apartment was the smell. It didn't surprise him. Death had two aromas, shit and decay, and neither one of them made for good dinner table conversation.

Sergeant Tom Grady appeared in the dark hallway that led to the back of the apartment. A nine year veteran of Baltimore PD, Grady had seen it all. He looked over at Farnache and grinned. "Hope you had a big breakfast this morning, Jimmy boy," he snorted.

"Smells like somebody needs a change, Tom. That wouldn't be you, would it?"

"No, but catch me in a couple hours. Come on in and take a look. We've got us a celebrity stiff in drag."

With Kessler close behind, Farnache patted Grady on the shoulder as he passed by on his way into the bedroom. The smell there was horrific. "Jesus! How about we open a window, eh?" He went to the room's only window, checked to make sure it had a screen, and then threw it open. He turned to look at the body, still hanging by the stocking over the door.

Except for the black brassier girding his flat hairy chest and the black panties over his head, the victim was naked. He was tightly bound at wrists and ankles with nylon stockings. There was lividity in his extremities, his hands and feet a deep hideous purple. His bowels and bladder had emptied onto the beige carpet just inside the door. A few feet away, a folding metal chair lay collapsed on the floor. Farnache approached the body and as a matter of strict procedure put two fingers to the cold neck. Not that there was any doubt the man was dead.

"Nice," Kessler commented. "Who discovered him?"

"His ex-wife," Grady said. "She came over to leave her three kids with him for the day. Lucky she came in here first."

"Where is she now?"

"Next door. She's friends with the gal that lives there."

"Was the door closed?" Farnache asked.

"Yeah. She said she had to push like hell to get it open."

"I can see that. She didn't smell anything?"

"Not till she got the door open."

Farnache was thinking about the air conditioner. If it had cycled during the night, the whole apartment would have smelled as bad as this room, whether the door was open or not.

"Possible needle mark on the right arm," Kessler observed, staring over Farnache's shoulder.

Farnache focused his attention on the tiny red mark at the inside of the elbow. "Uh-huh. Could be. Any paraphernalia around? Sharps, spoons, candles, burners?"

Kessler turned and scanned the room, then walked around to the far side of the bed. "More lingerie," he said, pulling a pen from his pocket and stooping to poke at a pair of lacy white panties on the floor. He squinted at the tiny tag on the waistband. "Size twelve. A hefty gal. Grady, what's his wife look like?"

The sergeant grinned. "Cute. Short and sweet. Doesn't weigh more than one-twenty, one-twenty-five max."

"Yeah, well, these aren't hers, then," Kessler straightened and went over to where his partner was still examining the corpse. "Triple-A?" he wondered aloud. Accidental Autoerotic Asphyxiation.

"Looks like it. Anyway, it's a cinch the wife didn't do him. He's gotta weigh one-eighty, if he weighs a pound."

"Right."

"She might of dressed him up some, though," Farnache suggested.

"Make it look like an accident?"

"Maybe, but probably not. Let's go have a talk with her, see what she has to say." He turned to Grady. "You say she's next door, Tom?"

"Right," Grady said. "But she's got the three kids with her."

A tall, dark-featured man in a navy-blue suit appeared behind Grady in the doorway, a heavy Polaroid camera suspended from a strap around his neck.

"Hey, John," Farnache said. "Got a beautiful still-life for you this morning."

"Jimmy," the crime-scene photographer said, smiling as he slipped past Grady into the bedroom. "Whew! Funky!" he observed.

Farnache nodded. "Go ahead and get your pictures. We're going to go interview this guy's wife," he said, gesturing at the corpse. "We'll be back in a bit."

KESSLER AND FARNACHE were waiting by the front door of the Other Place tavern when it opened two hours later. Jake Pratt stood out of the way and let them enter before he drew the key from the lock. When he turned toward the bar, he came face to face with the younger-looking of the two men. "What can I do for you?" he asked, a little irritably.

"You the owner?"

"Yeah, it's my place. Who are you?"

"Homicide," he said, flipping open a leather folder, displaying his badge and ID. "I'm Detective Kessler. This is Detective Farnache. And you are...?"

"Jake Pratt," he said in a strained but vastly more agreeable tone. "What's going on?"

"Were you working last night?"

"Yeah. Sure. I was here."

"Do you know a man named Isaacs? Richard Isaacs?"

"Yeah, sure. He's a regular. What'd he do? He didn't run anybody down last night, not in *his* car, cuz it's still sitting out there in the parking lot. My bartender wasn't going to let him drive, not as gone as he was when he left here."

"Yeah, we saw the car. That's why we're here. So he was here last night?"

"Sure, playing pool, till about midnight. Then him and his buddy had a couple more beers and we helped carry him out to the other guy's car. What's going on? What's this all about?"

"His ex-wife found him in his apartment this morning, dead," Farnache said.

"Dead?"

"From the looks of it, suicide. How much did he have to drink?"

Pratt's eyes rolled in a gesture of disbelief. "I don't know, but not all *that* much. I wasn't bartending, but all my employees are under strict orders about serving customers who've had enough."

"Who was bartending?" Kessler asked.

"Randy Minnick. He's pretty good at spotting a guy who's had his limit. He told me Isaacs only had maybe a half dozen beers over the whole six hours he was here. He said the guy went from damn near cold sober to fried in about fifteen minutes. He figured maybe he was doing pills or something. But the guy who was with him looked sober as you, or we'd never have let him out the door."

"He was with somebody?"

"Yeah, but I don't know who he was. I never seen him before."

"What'd he look like?"

Pratt's eyes took in the ceiling for a time, and then he shook his head.

"Hell, I don't know. Average. I was sort of in and out, taking care of business. Maybe you'd better talk to my bartender about it. He helped the guy carry Isaacs out to his car. I'm sure he could give you a better description than I can."

"Where can we get hold of your boy?"

Pratt turned and strode to the bar, took a napkin off the stack and jotted down the number. "He should be home now. He usually sleeps till about noon. He's off tonight, though."

"That's okay. We'll catch up with him."

"You think the other guy had something to do with it?" asked Pratt.

"Don't know," Farnache replied.

"He shoot himself?"

The detective shook his head. "Hung himself."

"Jesus!" Pratt turned his head and sighed. "Hey, the guy was trashed when he left here, I'll admit that, but he didn't get that way drinking the six or seven beers he bought here at *my* bar. That's not possible."

"Relax, Mr. Pratt," said Farnache. "We're not looking for a scapegoat. We just want to talk to your bartender and this other guy, if we can find him."

"Well, like I said, I was in and out. I didn't really pay a lot of attention to the guy. It was just the usual crowd. But Randy should be able to help you out some."

"How well did you know Isaacs?" Kessler asked.

"He's been a regular here for about two years. I've heard all about his divorce. Guess I know him about as well as the other regulars."

"Was there a bunch of guys he usually hung out with?"

"Not really. Just Tim Rollie, his pool partner. But everybody knew him."

"You mean the bartenders?"

"Bartenders, barmaids, regulars and service guys. Everybody."

"Service guys?"

"Yeah, you know, the guys who deliver the beer and empty the pinball machines. Sometimes Rick would be waiting by the door when I opened the place in the morning, just like you guys. Then sometimes he'd be the last one out the door when I locked up."

"Did he seem depressed lately?"

Pratt laughed. "Only chronically. I mean, come on, man, he'd just been through a divorce from hell. What do *you* think?"

Farnache gave him a studious look. "He ever talk about his past?"

"You mean like that murder case up in New York?"

The detectives met his question with silent stares.

"Yeah, he used to talk about it all the time. Blamed his divorce on it."

Said the media wouldn't leave him alone and it drove his old lady nuts. If you ask me, though, he was just too damn proud of himself."

"What do you mean?"

Pratt shoved his hands into his hip pockets and stared down at the floor. "I don't know. It was like you never got the feeling he was really all that sorry about it, you know? I think he enjoyed being famous. Man, I sure got sick of hearing about it, though. We all did."

Both detectives stared at him for a time, and then Kessler said, "This guy he was with last night, you'd never seen him before?"

"No, never. Minnick told me the same thing, and he's got a real good head for names and faces. If he'd seen him before, he'd know it."

Kessler and Farnache thanked him. Pratt walked them out the door and then watched from the window as they crossed the parking lot to Isaacs's blue Grand Am.

Kessler took the key and opened the driver's door. He got in behind the wheel and looked around, in the glove compartment, over the visors, in the center console. "Nothing much here, Jim."

Farnache didn't answer. He was standing with his hands in his pockets, a pensive look on his face.

"What're you thinking?" his partner asked finally.

"If I had to guess, I'd say Isaacs had been dead for at least eight hours, wouldn't you?"

Kessler nodded. "Could be."

"If he was as trashed as Pratt says he was, and they had to carry him out to this other guy's car, how the hell did he manage to hang himself?"

Kessler took a moment to think that one over. "Yeah, something's not right there. Soon as he's done with the body, we need to have a talk with the medical examiner."

"You believe our friend back there?" Farnache asked, gesturing toward the tavern.

His partner smiled. "Only the part of his story that makes him look like the good Samaritan. The rest of it's pure bullshit."

Nineteen years after Juliet Tannering's disappearance, her former high school classmate, Ray Geddy, sets out on a killing spree to bring down the powerful and ruthless political machine that covered up her brutal murder by one of their own.

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