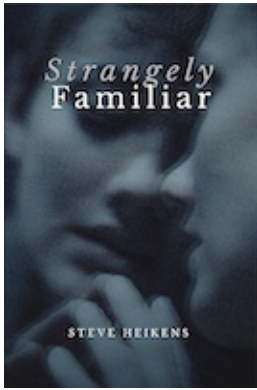




Strangely
Familiar

STEVE HEIKENS



Emotional empathy becomes an empowering tool for investigating the disappearance of a rebellious teenage girl. In this intriguing thriller, Detective James Julius trusts reason and facts but, when he starts seeing images that others don't see, he fears he's losing his mind. With help from friends, a hacker, a gypsy and a rogue, his newfound empathy exposes the dark secrets behind her disappearance, and reveals that people become Strangely Familiar when they experience similar pain.

Strangely Familiar

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**STRANGELY
FAMILIAR**
A PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER

STEVE HEIKENS

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P r a i s e f o r

S t r a n g e l y F a m i l i a r

“In *Strangely Familiar*, author Steve Heikens weaves an intricate mystery about abuse, money laundering, and just a touch of the unexplained. This book is very well written...readers will find themselves deeply hooked. *Strangely Familiar* is an exciting novel set in the eclectic streets of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Many readers will no doubt be hoping for future adventures with Detective Julius.”
—Manhattan Book Review

“Heikens has constructed a mystery which engages readers. Hoping for a sequel soon.”
—San Francisco Book Review

“I’ve got a school girl crush on Heikens’ leading man, James Julius, that just won’t quit. And I can’t wait to see what this smart, sexy, offbeat rebel does next. Keep writing, Heikens!”
—Lisa Cerasoli

Award-winning Author/Director
As Nora Jo Fades Away, 14 Days with Alzheimer’s

W w w w w

—What a thrilling...and entertaining ride!—

“Heikens writes like he’s a showrunner for one of the Big Ten (crime shows on TV). His dialogue is so fun and so slick. His leading guy, James Julius, is bursting with life and tongue-in-cheek banter. This book is the first in what I hope to be a long series of crime thrillers by Steve Heikens.”
—Verified Amazon Customer

W w w w w

—Very Impressed!—

“The story was very exciting and kept me wanting to read more. I was pleasantly surprised with all of the references to restaurants, towns, and buildings in the Twin Cities...and enjoyed the references to current events and topics that our society grapples with...all making the storyline touching and relevant. Somehow, I can't help but think the author expresses his own thoughts and opinions through the main character Julius.”

—Mark N. Shepherd

W w w w w

—Emotional Wi-Fi—

“Awesome book ... I loved the thrill ride of the book, great job and can't wait for the NEXT ONE!” —Solomon Molla

Chapter 1

It's Wednesday night, so I head to Minneapolis to meet my former partner Luis for beer. It's his week to pick the place, and he likes going to the same bar—Hubert's. I prefer places where we haven't been, but he's a creature of habit.

Luis struts in, stocky and handsome with shadow whiskers. His hair is a crew cut, but its height gives the look of a Mohawk. He steps to my table, flicks his Ray Ban Aviators and says, "What's new with that whacko kid you cuffed last week?"

I tilt my head. "Troubled kid."

Luis grimaces, sitting back in the booth. "You call stabbing her uncle and gouging him in the eye a 'troubled kid.' She's bonkers. Did she also have a dragon tattoo?"

"Could be something like that. Maybe she was getting revenge."

"You don't think that's screwed up?"

"Of course it is, but you have to wonder why she stabbed him."

"I don't. It's a crime, black and white. Her reasons don't matter to me."

A Botero shaped waitress approaches. "You boys want beer mugs, or you gonna drink out of the pitcher like the cops from St. Paul?"

"I'm from St. Paul.," I say. "Gimme a pitcher of Ultra...and one iced mug, for my dandy here."

Luis picks Killian's Irish Red and says, "Let me guess. She was dressed in black, with her hair streaked some crazy color, had on leftover makeup from the party she tripped at the night before, and had a crazed look in her eyes."

"I arrested her, didn't I? Who knows what happened before I got there."

Luis rolls his eyes, then stares off into the distance to mirror a glazed look. “What kind of bullshit excuses you thinking about this time?”

“Something doesn’t fit.”

“So we must acquit?” Luis laughs at his own joke.

I smirk.

“Did she claim he assaulted her? Any evidence of a fight?”

I shake my head. “Not really. Not yet.”

“Word downtown is that she was hallucinating, claiming she read his mind.”

“That’s kid talk. It’s how they understand reacting to his gestures and body language.”

“Why you got a bug up your ass about this kid?”

“Wish I knew. It was eerie, like the air around her was filled with emotions. They flip-flopped. First she was afraid, then angry. She turned rageful and started hitting me, but when I asked about her parents, she looked like a sad, lonely kid at a funeral. I can usually shut out people’s feelings, but her emotions were all over the place. Like they were broadcast from a bullhorn.”

“Did she tell you these feelings?”

“Not in words. Mostly it was in her eyes.”

“So you are reading into it?”

“Maybe...Her face showed contempt for the victim, but she wouldn’t tell me why. She refused to say what triggered her to stab him, or even if she did. Hell, maybe she doesn’t know.”

“And you do?”

“It’s not my job. Let the system figure it out.”

“I can’t believe you are getting soft—ever since you started working in St. Paul. Just proves that I was the presence of truth, justice and the American way in your life.”

We eat our hamburgers and drink another round. Luis heads for the men’s room.

Returning, he blurts out, “While I was pissing, I naturally got to thinking about you going soft on me.”

I snicker. “You stay on your side of the table.”

He rolls his eyes when he catches his own innuendo. “You know what I meant. Anyway, I was thinking if you are going turn liberal, maybe you should write for a living—like Garrison Keillor?”

I glance up, laughing out loud. “Right. Who’d pay me to scribble?”

“Look at all those crazy poems you write. Not to mention your bizarre letters to the editor. Your cops’ reports are always funny or at least weird. Hell, after you edited my reports, lawyers stopped beating me up on cross-examination.”

“You are so obsessed with literal details, you miss the big picture. I just added context.”

“Literal? Huh. That’s why your poetry makes no sense. It doesn’t even rhyme.”

“I’m starving on a cop’s salary. A poet doesn’t get money, only praise.”

“Hell, what about that movie *Ghostwriter*? You could do that. You edited lots of cops’ reports.”

I look askance at Luis. Ridiculous, but it was something I’d never thought about.

He continues, “Remember that female cop who went to work as a reporter for Channel 11? Or was it WCCO?”

“Yeah, but she was cute.”

“What you lack in cute, you make up for in size. Hell, you could intimidate the people you interview.”

“It works better with a pistol on my hip.”

“Now that Minnesota allows guns, you could go packin’.”

“I’m no writer. I’m just a simple farm boy.”

“Who’s been living in the city for twenty years. Hell, you read all the time and you have a weird way of looking at things.”

“Right, but not in Minneapolis. It’s been voted ‘Most Literate City in America.’”

Luis gets excited. “Was. Seattle beat us out. You should check out the newspaper. You got a perfect lead story: ‘The po’ l’il girl who reads minds.’ You could hide behind the journalistic version of truth.”

I grin, then burst into laughter.

Luis stands up, “I gotta run. My daughter has soccer. Call me later. Let me know what you decide.”

Luis’s suggestion messes with my head. I stop at the Local, the Irish pub that sells more Jameson than any bar in the world. Settling into a booth, I flag a waitress for a brown ale.

I can’t get the kid out of my mind. There is something about her spunky defiance. She stabs a guy twice and believes it was justified. Could she really believe that she read his mind? Sounds like a delusion or a hallucination.

Sitting nearby is a familiar forty-something brunette wearing a silk scarf and a sassy outfit. She’s a lawyer who fights for employees. Maybe she knows something about this kind of thing. Help me talk it through out loud.

As I approach, her eyes flicker.

“Hi, Sarah, what’s going on?”

She glances at me as if trying to remember my name. Her eyes have a stern look of “take no prisoners.” She thrusts her hand out at my waist level, as if her arm is a sword.

Clasping her hand, I say, “James Julius.”

She stretches her neck sideways, then nods in affirmation. Her eyes veer toward the empty seat opposite her.

I sit, no longer sure this was a good idea.

Her face is oval, cheeks smooth like an orchid. Three empty wine glasses are lined up against the wall, as if she is keeping track.

“Refill?”

She rubs the top of her scalp. “Why not?”

I signal the waitress and order a round. “What happened?”

“Appeals court reversed my verdict. Trial judge was tough, but fair. Damn appellate judges obsess about technicalities and ignore the big picture.” Her face displays anger melded with disappointment.

“What was the technicality?”

“Said my client welcomed the overtures of her boss.”

“What had she done?”

“That’s not the question—it’s what *he* had done.”

I throw my hands open.

“Told her to email X-rated jokes to his friends, but first he wanted her feedback on which ones were funny. She complained that they all treated women as objects and she wasn’t going to send them anymore.”

“So she had done some before and then refused?” I ask.

“That’s what the appeals court focused on.”

“Marshall Adams says that appellate judges start out as good people, but soon give up on justice and settle for being courts of law.”

“It’s easier to apply rules than focus on the people. I don’t want to talk about it anymore. Why are you here? It ain’t Irish poetry night.”

I look over her shoulder. “Do you know anything about hallucinations?”

She stares at me. “Like what you get on LSD?”

I laugh. “No. I arrested a teenager for stabbing her uncle.”

“Haven’t heard about it.” She finishes her glass of wine.

“Last week. The girl is an odd one—had really extreme emotions that were shouting at me. Maybe some type of delusion or hallucination. She said she looked into his mind and knew he was going to hurt her. I can’t put a finger on it, but I have a question about self-defense.”

She frowns. “Why?”

I shrug and tilt my head sideways. “Not sure. No evidence to corroborate it, but...cop instinct.”

“What does she say scared her?”

“She had a feeling.”

Sarah raises her right eyebrow. “No, I mean what did the uncle do that frightened her?”

“That’s the problem. She doesn’t claim he did anything, but what bugs me is that she was so damned convinced she was right. She kept saying, ‘I just knew he was going to hurt me.’”

Sarah grimaces.

“I know. It sounds crazy.”

“Reading his mind isn’t exactly admissible evidence. Could be twisted to show mental instability.”

“Don’t most kids go through a phase of magical thinking wherein they think they can read minds?”

“I didn’t. Did you?”

I shrug.

She shrugs.

“What if it’s just teenager shorthand?” I ask. “You know, an expression for reading what adults call nonverbal communications?”

The waitress delivers our refreshers.

Lifting her glass, Sarah says, “To new wine in old glasses.”

I grin. I order a glass of water. Trying to explain why this kid makes me sweat.

She squints one eye. “I’ve noticed a quirk in my sexual harassment cases that may be relevant. Sexual harassers have an uncanny ability to target the most vulnerable female in the workplace. It’s as if they instinctively know some deep dark secret about the woman—something that is not public knowledge.”

“You’re bullshitting me.” I shake my head sideways.

“No. Perpetrators sense stuff they can’t possibly know. As if they have a homing device for picking out a certain type of female. There are lots of other women in the workplace, but the guy finds the one who was most vulnerable.”

“How often? Two or three times?”

“More like seventy-five percent of the time.”

“That’s impossible. How could they?”

“No idea.”

The conversation lulls until I ask, “Are you suggesting that the kid is like a perpetrator—she picked up on the guy’s vulnerability and targeted the victim because she suspected he was vulnerable?”

“No. The opposite. Usually the female is the vulnerable one, but it may go both ways. I’m saying that sometimes we all know stuff, but we don’t know how we know it.”

“So?”

She stares into her wine.

I wait until she lifts her gaze. “Do these women have anything in common—the ones you are calling vulnerable?”

“That’s what’s strange. Each woman is different, but almost all of them had previously been abused...some in childhood, others date-raped, stalked, or some other traumatic attack.”

“Must be in their posture—the way they sit or gesture.”

Sarah raises her eyebrows. “Could be, but how does a perp know how to interpret the nonverbal behavior? They are manipulators, but they aren’t savvy enough to read body language.”

“Don’t most of us react to nonverbal cues, without knowing we are doing it?”

“That may be true in the battle of the sexes. Men are pretty thickheaded,” she says.

“No, I meant about emotional messages.”

“Like I said.”

I guffaw but add, “The air around her was electrified by fear, then anger, then sadness. Her ups and downs were freaky. I don’t know if it was teenage hormones or...”

“Guys have the same emotions. They just pretend they don’t.”

We sit in silence. Another carafe of wine appears.

“Is it just your clients?”

“No. Other sex harassment lawyers say the same thing. I’ve handled over three hundred cases of harassment, but I’ll bet over seventy percent of the women had a history of prior abuse.”

“Come on.”

“Maybe it’s like your juvenile suspect says—reading minds or something.” She pulls herself together, raising her finger and pointing like a schoolteacher at a blackboard. “I had an argument once with this lawyer—insurance defense type. He agreed perps and victims were connected, but he reversed it. He said my client attracted the perp’s attention, that she conveyed an air of availability like she wanted to be a perpetual victim.” Her finger wags as she continues. “Claims she was a magnet that attracted his guy. Lawyer said it was her fault—that women blame the nearest guy. Said my client’s lawsuit must have been generic revenge for childhood abuse or a date rape.” She pauses, taking a long, deep breath.

“That’s...ah, kind of mean spirited,” I say. “Classic ‘blame the victim’ routine.”

“I was pissed....but the thought haunts me. My client had been fondled repeatedly by her father when she was a kid.” She sits up straighter. “Perps manipulate reality by knowing who’s vulnerable—they pick ’em out of a crowd like they were public advertisements.”

“You’re serious?”

She nods. “Almost instantly. Give a perp ten seconds in the workplace and he finds the one who is afraid to say no.”

“You really think the victim and the perp are attracted to each other?”

“Nah.” She shakes her head. “Victim doesn’t seek them out. Perps are sly opportunists, like sharks spotting a weak fish and attacking. The victims are blind. Helpless.”

A waitress stops. I wave her off.

Sarah continues, “They learned powerlessness when they were kids, so they’re afraid to be confrontational. They either become bitter or choose the safety of trying to charm the bad guy into stopping. Most women know to stay away from perps, but victim types have a powerful need to please. They’re afraid that if they are not pleasant, they will get punished again. Guy starts with some small intrusion. She pretends nothing happened, and then shames herself into believing that it’s her fault. Gradually, guilt buries her for letting it happen. The guy ups the ante.”

“You think...?”

“Don’t know. Perp somehow knows who is vulnerable or easily intimidated—senses something about the person has made her a victim. Remember, they were kids without power. How the guy finds out is a mystery, but he takes advantage of it. Other women push them away.”

“Are you saying these victims give off a special vibe?”

“Who knows?”

“The perp must be tuning into nonverbal clues, pheromones or whatever, that say the woman wants him?”

She shakes her head, forming a smirk. “You think like a guy. I didn’t say the woman wants him. Most women don’t want to be harassed. A few think admiration of the body is the best they can do. Hell, sometimes it’s fun. I’m not talking about that. I mean women

who don't want the sexual attention, but the guy knows she is too timid to fight back. The guy feels safe in being sexually aggressive, like an adult preying on a child. Helplessness probably comes from their childhood...when they were truly defenseless."

"But are women unconsciously giving clues?"

"Maybe. Strong women send a message that says NO. Could be nonverbal signals, the way they look around or down, the way they talk..." She throws her arms into the air, "or some subtle emotional vibe. But, perps tend to go after the weaker ones. They seldom bother women with clear boundaries, unless it's a power trip. Then they take on the strong ones."

"Could the guy be picking up some unintended signal—like some kind of Wi-Fi projected by the woman?"

She grins. "I thought I was the drunk one. If the woman is sending a signal, why the hell would she project it so the perp can pick it up? That's even crazier. What did you call it?"

"Like Wi-Fi, but only the emotions are broadcast."

"That's a contradiction. One is human, the other technology."

I shrug.

She continues, "Yeah, I know, I know—which came first, the chicken or the egg? But the abuse from the past is shameful and humiliating, a secret struggling to stay hidden. I don't know how they are connected, but it happens too often to pretend it's just a coincidence."

"Do perps have a history of childhood abuse?"

"Good question. I don't know."

"Maybe if they both have had a similar experience..."

"Don't know, but it might lead to the ability to spot the signs. My job is to prove that the guy is motivated by the gender of the woman."

"Is that the truth?"

"Don't see them going after guys. A perp or harasser is not motivated by sex. He seeks someone he can bully or manipulate—victims of power figures. And when they're young, too, they could be easier to abuse."

“If the guys are after power, is it really about sex discrimination? I thought lawsuits were a search for truth?”

She glowers. “I suppose that’s a man’s viewpoint, but I see the power issue as leveling the playing field. Law is about winning and losing, a damn sporting contest.”

“Or it could just be coincidence!”

“Yeah, sure, seventy percent of the time.” She stares at me, raising her right eyebrow. “Time for me to go.”

“Do you want a ride, or should I call a sober cab?”

“I’m fine.”

She rises and leaves.

Chapter 2

Two Weeks Later

Luis shouts through my phone. “Did you hear about the plea bargain for that kid you busted?”
“Too much static. Can’t hear you.”

“Word is, DA offered the kid an out by going to rehab clinic for two years. Another rich kid gets off without jail time.”

“Is she pleading guilty?”

“What difference does it make? You were the only one thinking it was self-defense.”

“Where are they sending her?”

“That place where they repair gay and lesbian kids.”

Unnerved by this unexpected news, I turn my thirty-year-old Jeep toward Marshall Adams, Esquire, in Butler Square. It’s a hundred-year-old building, shaped like a medieval fortress and austere with its recessed windows.

I’m not eager to face Adams’s secretary. Esther is like a Doberman zealously guarding access to her boss. My arriving without an appointment will piss her off. But I have drop-in rights—Adams and I have been friends since he was a prosecutor, years back.

I pause in the majesty of the Butler Square lobby, a nine-story atrium surrounded by plant-filled balconies. In the middle of the open void hangs a German glider, no wider than a human body but with a 42-foot wingspan. The thought of being airborne without the security of an engine propels me forward into Adams’s office.

“Hi, Esther.”

She looks over the rim of her glasses. “You again? Need another favor?”

I give her my best smile. “More like a question.”

“You’ll have to wait. Mr. Adams has deadlines.”

Before I can flop onto his brown leather sofa, Marshall Adams steps out of his office and hands a document to Esther. “JJ, how are you?”

“Good. Got a minute?”

“For you, anything.”

Esther grumbles a cough.

“Well, at least thirty seconds.”

We step into his spacious office, where his wall displays a large framed print of him standing with U.S. Senator Hubert Humphrey and Professor Paul Wellstone in 1976. It’s the thirtieth anniversary of 1946, when Minneapolis enacted the first antidiscrimination law in the United States. The poster shows signs of *Gentiles Only* and *Whites Only* that used to decorate Minnesota’s summer resorts. Each poster has a large X slashing through the bigotry.

Adams pours two glasses of liqueur. We chat about days gone by. When the conversation lulls, I shift gears. “Did you read about the kid charged with stabbing her uncle?”

He swivels in his chair and pours a refill. “Just because I’m trying to retire doesn’t mean I stop reading newspapers.”

I wait until he turns back to me. “I don’t think she’s going to get a fair shake.”

“She’s got a public defender, doesn’t she? Who?”

“Billy McGee.”

“He’s good. Been around along time, but he still cares.”

“He’ll be fine...if she gets a trial.”

“If? A plea bargain already?” His eyes squint.

“Word on the street is a deal to drop charges if she is committed to a mental health clinic called PeopleChange.”

“Pleas are routine. Sounds like a reasonable tradeoff.”

I shrug.

He asks, “You’d rather she stand trial?”

“No, but doesn’t she get to decide?”

I rise and begin pacing.

“Her parents have been touring the rainforest in South America, apparently incommunicado. They aren’t back yet. They appointed her aunt as guardian ad litem. The aunt must have some clout in the

judicial system—she found a way to negotiate for transfer to a rehab clinic.”

“A guardian has to focus on what’s best for the kid. Rehab is better than jail. She must believe...”

I make a statement disguised as a question. “She’s the victim’s sister?”

Adams’s forehead furls.

“Trying to send the kid to a clinic where her uncle was on the staff?”

He frowns. “The guy stabbed by the kid?”

I pivot back and nod.

His forehead unfurls, but I can’t tell if he’s puzzled or worried.

“I left a voicemail at the PD’s office about it, but never heard back,” I tell him.

“With all the cutbacks, their workload is heavy.”

“Overwhelmed is more like it. Can she get justice with them?”

Adams stares at me. “What are you getting at?”

“Marsh, would you consider helping that girl?”

“Whoa.” He raises his hands. “She’s already got a good public defender.”

“Like you say, they are swamped. I was thinking, you know, she needs someone to protect her interests. She may have been assaulted.”

“James, you know I’ve been cutting back so I can retire. I’m wrapping things up, but I’m still swamped.”

“You’re the best. Every perp you ever prosecuted went to jail.”

“Not every one. Just the ones stupid enough to go to trial.”

“You know how perps think. You even defended a few scum since you left the DA’s office.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“Just look into this guardian issue. See if there is some side deal going on.”

He looks askance at me. “I know you. You get me hooked. Then ask for just one more thing—like suing the guy.” He points one finger in the air. “You play on my inability to say no.”

He leans forward, places his large hands on the glass surface. “Why this one? You’ve seen dozens like this.”

“She’s just a kid. Something smells here. One out of four girls is sexually assaulted by age eighteen.”

“And?” He turns his face sideways, peering out of his right eye, his open palm soliciting an explanation. While I pause, he elaborates, “You’re a cop. Usually you’re for the victim, not the accused. What’s the uncle’s name?”

“Samuel Paley. But this time, I’m not sure which one is the victim.”

He scowls. “What makes you speculate?”

“She might have been acting in self-defense.”

“On what evidence? Newspaper version makes it sound like she used a butcher knife to jab him in the stomach and then stabbed him in the eye. I’ve read nothing to suggest he attacked her.”

Adams pauses, expecting me to argue.

“People don’t usually stab someone for no reason,” I say.

“Unless they are disturbed or crazy. Was she on drugs?”

I shake my head. “Nothing showed up on the drug tests.”

“What does she say happened?”

“She’s not talking.”

“What makes you think she was defending herself?”

“Her emotions were flying everywhere. When I asked if had he done something to her that day, she kept saying he was going to.”

“You were the arresting officer?”

“Right.”

His hand rubs across the whiskers on his chin. “So you have a personal stake in this?”

“One of those quirky cases. Doesn’t smell right. The prosecutors offer to drop the charges if she is committed...”

“That’s still a humane alternative to jail.”

I know enough to shut up and let his reaction run its course.

He follows up. “Did she say why she stabbed him?”

“Kind of. She believed he was going to harm her.”

He raises one eyebrow.

“We haven’t yet found any evidence that he was or wasn’t attacking her at the time. Her version is that she had a strong feeling about her uncle planning to harm her. Doesn’t seem like something she’d make it up out of thin air?”

“A strong feeling?” His head tilts downward, jaw dropping open.

“Like she knew he was going to rape her.”

“That’s not evidence. Had he done something before?”

“Don’t know. She clammed up when I asked her if he’d done it before. She froze. Doesn’t that suggest that something had happened? If there was past abuse, it could justify defending herself.”

“Self-defense requires a provocation at the time, imminent danger, and use of an equal amount of force. Premonitions don’t count.”

“What about a battered spouse, like John Bobbitt’s wife?”

He shakes his head, as if trying to loosen the cobwebs of memory.

“The woman who cut off her husband’s dick after years of abuse.”

Adams shudders reflexively. “Had the uncle been aggressive before?”

“Don’t know. Maybe she anticipated an assault. It’s not clear what triggered her feeling.”

“Could be a fear of men?”

“Don’t know. But one more thing—the uncle blurted out, ‘I didn’t touch her.’”

Adams curls his forehead, “Unsolicited?”

“Yup, before anyone asked any questions. Made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.”

Adams blows a puff of air, leaning back in his chair.

“Remember what you told me about how you picked a jury,” I say. “You said when the hair on the back of your neck stood up, it was a warning. You knew for sure that a juror was deceptive, saying one thing but meaning something else.”

“That’s different. It was based on the juror’s words or nonverbal gestures.”

“You didn’t know what caused it. But you trusted that feeling in your body.”

Adams rises, shaking his head.

I pace around the room’s perimeter. “I’m not saying it’s cause-and-effect. But it haunts me.”

Adams looks off to his left, eyes flickering as his thoughts churn. “Anything else?”

“Two things. Her emotions were out of control, broadcasting in every direction. And she was so sure. There’s something about her certainty that’s bugging me. She had no doubts.”

Adams dismisses my comment with a wave of his hand. “That’s just rationalization. We all start with some doubt, then convince ourselves that we did what we had to do.”

I remain silent.

“Jesus, you’re not going soft on me. The cop I know would never describe that as a fact.” He shakes his head.

“I’ve seen a lot of guilt-laden victims and angry wrongdoers. Her sureness that she is right is different.”

“Or crazy. Still sounds like a kid who overreacted. Even if she was overwhelmed by fear, stabbing someone is bizarre. Was the uncle a big guy?”

“Not by size, but he’s a shrink—eerie and intimidating.”

“Describe Amy.”

“Four-foot-nine, ninety pounds of Irish redhead...rather black hair with pink accents. About fourteen. Feisty like a wild mustang.” I toss a trump card. “There’d be a lot of press.”

“Who needs it? I’m trying to escape the eye of the public.”

I shut up, hoping he will convince himself.

“Guy’s a shrink. He’s going to be hard to impeach...”

He sounds interested. I remain silent.

“It’d be expensive, a battle of experts...”

He paces the room, while I gaze at the news clippings of his verdicts posted on the wall.

“Are the parents back in town?” he asks.

“Due back this morning.”

STRANGELY FAMILIAR

Adams is fingering a book called *Prosecuting Child Abuse* when he turns to me. “Go ahead and tell the parents I will meet with them.”

As I head for the door, he adds, “I, too, have a feeling. I just know that I am going to regret this.”

Chapter 3

En route to Amy's house, I take the side streets to the Mississippi River and down Summit Avenue, an eight-mile boulevard with St. Paul Seminary at one end and the St. Paul Cathedral at the other. I cruise by two hundred mansions built by railroad wealth before horseless carriages became popular. They have been de-gentrified, set back from the street and protected by black iron-spiked fences. Now middle-class climbers occupy the old haunts, but utilities cost more than taxes. Arriving at the house where I arrested Amy, I knock.

A tall, skinny man in a sport coat and turtleneck opens the door.

"Mr. Paley?"

He stares at me, a frown furling his forehead. "Should I know you?"

"No. I was the officer who found your daughter and your brother Samuel."

He steps back, pulling the door between us. "My lawyer said not to talk to cops."

"I won't ask any questions. I just want to share some information you may not know."

He slides the door closer to the frame but vacillates.

"Just listen to what I have to say, okay? Then I will leave."

An older female voice pops over his shoulder. "Mark, who's there?"

He snaps his shoulder toward the sound and grunts, "Somebody about Amy."

"The lawyer said not to talk to—"

He yells, "I know. We won't talk. We'll just listen."

He allows me into the spacious entry. I move through the ten-foot frame and step into the voluminous living room where I arrested Amy. The room feels so much larger than it did. The leather furniture has been rearranged to hide the discoloring bloodstain on the floor.

Above the mantel stands the same picture of a young woman. This time, I also notice photographs of a young man leaping hurdles in a track event and playing hockey.

A short, stocky woman in a frilly blouse and grey skirt comes from the kitchen entrance. She approaches as if circling the wagons round to protect their home's interior.

No one offers me a seat, but the woman folds her arms. "I'm Amy's mom."

Her stare presses me to explain my presence.

"You were out of town when I arrested Amy..."

Taking a step closer, she says, "You're the one. Why are you here?" She bends her head down as if ready to head-butt me out the door.

"I heard that a plea bargain was in the works, but I'm not sure it's best for Amy."

"We will be the judges of what's best for our daughter."

"I know she has a public defender, but they are swamped..."

"We already dumped the PD. Hired our own lawyer. He's negotiating a settlement with the prosecutor."

I frown. "May I ask who's the lawyer?"

They look at each other. "I don't see why not. It's Lee Failey."

I try not to react, but my eyes must have widened.

Their faces react as if startled. The man asks, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. He is very good at defending corporations, but he's...he's not a criminal defense attorney."

"We just want it resolved, without more publicity."

Putting PR before their daughter makes me want to puke. I compromise on politeness. "Do you really think that two years committed to a rehab center is necessary? What if—"

"It may not take two years, but Amy needs help," he says. "She has been a very difficult child since starting high school—disobedient at home and defiant at school."

Mrs. Paley adds, "She dresses like a homeless person and stays out late past her curfew. Her grades have gone downhill."

As if competing with his wife, the husband says, “She let some hoodlum put a stupid tattoo on her leg and hangs around with those Goth kids. They’re dangerous, like those kids at Columbine.”

I bite my lip to avoid pointing out their false knowledge of Columbine.

The father steps back. “She used to be a good kid, compliant and respectful.”

Mrs. Paley speed-talks as if trying to get all explanations out at once. “She is very smart, studied science. She was fine until she began reading mythology. She got wrapped up in gods and goddesses. She let a pervert put a tattoo of the goddess Diana on her. The girls at school teased her and started a rumor that she was a lesbian. They shunned and bullied her. The boys did, too. She became angry with everybody and started blowing up for no reason. We don’t think she’s a lesbian, but we don’t know. Reparation therapy could save her. We tried to pray with her about it.”

I roll my eyes, but they appear not to notice. “Being tormented sounds terrible.”

“It was terrible, but nothing as bad as stabbing her uncle.”

“Shouldn’t her reason for doing that be investigated before she is committed?”

Mr. Paley puffs out his chest. “Are you saying she’s innocent? She stabbed my brother. She’s admitted it.”

“But what if she was defending herself?”

He throws his arms into the air and backs away.

Mrs. Paley asks, “Self-defense. Are you crazy? That would be a media frenzy. Didn’t you read that publicity on the neighborhood watch guard who killed the black kid in Florida? Newspapers love self-defense.”

Mr. Paley raises his voice. “There was no self-defense here. Her uncle took good care of her. They were friends and used to do things together—even went horseback riding. While we were traveling, we asked him to schedule some therapy with her. He stopped by to work out times. She went crazy. There was no reason to stab him.”

My mouth hangs open. “And that’s all there is to it?”

“Vivian thinks a short commitment with reparation therapy will restore her stability. Help make sure she rejects a lesbian life.”

“Who’s Vivian?”

Mr. Paley answers, “My sister. She’s a psychologist.”

I nod and ask, “Isn’t your brother on the staff at PeopleChange?”

“Yes. But he has forgiven her for what she did.”

Words fail me.

The father steps in closer as if to coax me out the door.

“Did you ask Amy what happened?”

The mother wrings her hands, “We just got back from Brazil and went straight to juvenile hall. She refuses to tell us. She is so hostile it hurts. I don’t know how to reach her. Viv said if sitting in juvenile hall won’t get her to admit it was wrong, PeopleChange is our only hope. We did everything to raise her to be a good child. But we now have to face the fact that she needs professional help.”

“Do you have any clues as to what prompted her actions that afternoon?”

“We are not supposed to tell anyone what we know.”

I nod. “Advice from the lawyer?”

They nod in sync.

“You think your own daughter stabbed him out of meanness?”

Mrs. Paley moves forward in her seat. “What else could it be? She panicked because he was trying to help her. Viv says it could have been us, if we’d been here trying to make her respect our authority.”

She drapes her arm into her husband’s. “She’s unstable.”

“Has she always worn her emotions on her shirt sleeves?”

“Viv says it’s a hormone imbalance of adolescence. It can also trigger a teenager’s fantasy about sexual things.”

“And you are a hundred percent sure that nothing harmful has ever happened to her.”

“Nothing we know of. But she hung around some dangerous people.”

“Had she ever expressed any fear of her uncle?”

The mother eyes her husband and slowly shakes her head, “For God’s sake, she said she read his mind. If that’s not crazy, what is?”

“Could be a kid trying to make sense out of the actions of an adult,” I say.

“You came to tell us something—get to it and leave.”

I swallow, push my tongue around the inside of my mouth and gaze around the room. “Amy was terrified of her uncle. Something happened between them that scared her.”

“What are you saying?”

“She may be the real victim, not the uncle.”

“That’s impossible. My brother may be pompous and self-righteous, but he didn’t deserve to be stabbed.”

“I’m not saying anyone deserves to be stabbed, but I found his words rather strange.”

“What words?”

“The uncle said, ‘I didn’t touch her.’”

“Why is that so odd?”

“No one asked any questions. He blurted it out, like he felt defensive or guilty.”

The mother pauses.

The father jumps to his brother’s defense. “He was delirious. Thought he was going to die. He’s not stoic about pain. He was just talking nonsense.”

“But why say it? It’s odd to protest when there are no accusations.”

“Your insinuation is offensive. Get out of here.”

“Look—I didn’t know you had a new lawyer. I asked Marshall Adams if he’d be willing to help Amy and her PD.”

The mom takes a step back. “Marshall Adams, the famous prosecutor?”

“Yes. He has lots of experience with victims and knows how perps think.”

“You think my daughter is a perp?” the father yells.

“No. Not her.” The silence increases in intensity.

Mr. Paley snarls and steps in my face. “My brother.”

My lips purse together, but I am silent. My head tips involuntarily.

“You should leave.”

“Do you want Adams’s card?” I ask Mrs. Paley.

The father turns sideways, saying, “Have him call us.”

“A lawyer is not allowed to solicit. I’m just trying to help. Here’s his number if you want a second opinion or an experienced set of eyes to look over the case.”

She reaches out and I hand her the card. Trying to leave, I catch myself. “Did you find your lawyer on your own, or did someone suggest him?”

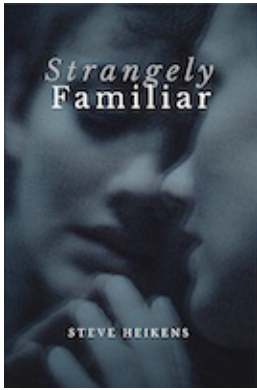
“Viv. She’s a psychologist and Amy’s guardian when we’re gone.”

“The victim’s sister.”

“My sister,” the father adds.

I leave a voicemail for Adams: “Amy’s parents hired Lee Failey. They may not call. The mother is wavering, but the father is defensive and believes his brother over his daughter. Thanks for being willing to try.”

The next day, Adams’s secretary sends me a text that he has been retained to represent Amy and that there is a hearing in two days.



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