Tic Tac Toe

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To my family for their love and support.  
Especially Mark and Karolyn who inspired the idea,  
worked through drafts and filled this endeavor  
with fond memories and laughter.  
I am extremely grateful.
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How could this be happening? This sort of thing happens to other people, people in movies. Having a family member murdered just doesn’t happen to real people, does it? Irene Duncan had finally put what was left of her life back together – only to have it fall apart once again. This was a bad dream, yet as Irene glanced around the room during her father’s wake, she knew this was not a dream. She was certain in fact that this was as close as she’d ever come to living a nightmare. But she knew there would be no reprieve to this nightmare by simply waking up because, as misfortune would have it, she was already awake even though she looked as though she were half dead. Her thick, dark brown hair was parted on the side and pulled back severely into a pristine bun at the nape of her neck. Her almost too-slender face was pale, even more so than usual. Her flawless, porcelain skin accentuated her high, prominent cheekbones. Despite Irene’s chiseled bone structure, her features were soft and full. Yet, her most striking feature by far, were her large, steel-colored eyes. Her brilliant eyes lacked their usual luster and sparkle. They looked vague and detached. They were red and swollen from days of crying. She had eaten little since she received the news of her father’s brutal murder, and her already slender form now appeared to be wasting away. Belying the look of exhaustion on her solemn face, the black, raw silk suit she wore was immaculate. The straight skirt fell just above her knees. Her tailored jacket fit snugly and contoured to her slender torso. She wore jet-black nylons and trendy stiletto heels, which added a good three inches to her average height. As she stood silently in the congested room, spectators found her presence haunting. Just three days earlier while at her Aunt Phyllis’s home in France, where she had been living for the past six years,
Irene had received the news that her father, Judge William Duncan, had been murdered. Phyllis was her father’s older sister, and now that both her parents were dead, she was Irene’s only living relative. Upon receiving the startling news of her father’s death earlier that week, Irene and Phyllis settled their immediate affairs in Paris, packed quickly, and hastily flew through most of the night, leaving them only a little more than a day and a half to plan her father’s wake. There was no funeral scheduled at the moment because the police hadn’t yet released her father’s body. Once the police released Duncan’s body, he would be cremated as Irene’s mother had been. Duncan had kept his wife’s remains in an urn after she passed away because they had planned to have their ashes scattered together. Now, as Irene stood by the large oil painting of her father, it was no wonder she looked exhausted and broken – she was.

As Irene stood speechless in the front room of her family’s estate, she scanned the large, muddled crowd. At last she made eye contact with the only face she recognized, her father’s life-long friend Christopher Blake. As she watched Christopher Blake approach her, his presence evoked memories from her past, but Irene quickly pushed them to the back of her mind. Blake was a formidable, middle-aged man. He wore a perfectly tailored dark suit, white shirt, and a black and red tie. He had on gold cuff links with his initials engraved into them. In addition, it looked as though his shiny black shoes had never been worn before. He looked every bit the high-powered executive that he was; yet Irene felt no intimidation – only recognition – of not only her father’s closest friend but someone she loved as well.

“Irene,” Blake said, “my goodness it’s been a long time. I’m so sorry about your father.”

She put her slim hands in his outstretched palms and felt his huge hands enfold hers. Blake’s warmth earned him a gorgeous smile from Irene, her first genuine smile since her arrival back home. Irene said warmly, “Blake, I was hoping you’d be here. You’re the only person in
this sea of people I recognize and definitely the only one besides Aunt Phyllis who feels like family.”

Blake looked at her seriously. “Irene, now that your father is gone I expect you to let me know if there’s anything I can do for you. Understand? I know you have Phyllis, but you also have me and of course Max.” Irene stiffened at the mention of Max’s name, and the movement was not lost on Blake. Blake studied her troubled face and said, “What ever happened between you and Max? You used to be inseparable.” Before Irene could respond, Blake continued, “Oh, here he comes now.” Just then, Irene’s glance followed Blake’s across the crowded room, and she and Maxwell Frost made eye contact for the first time in six years. Her face couldn’t hide her anxiety. Her heart started pounding, and she began to tremble. Her hands were clammy and cold, and she felt like she was going to be sick. Suddenly it seemed as though it was six years ago, and she felt the humiliation and embarrassment so acutely it made it seem as though their last conversation was only just yesterday. They both just stared at one another, neither moving. Irene’s apprehensive eyes locked with Max’s expectant ones. She knew this would happen. She knew deep down that someday, no matter how far or how suddenly she ran away from home and her past, it would catch up with her. She knew that despite all her efforts that one day she would once again come face to face with Maxwell Frost. Now it was here. Today was that someday. Her past had finally caught up with her.
Chapter 1

Boston – Irene age 7

“When are they going to get here?” Irene exclaimed. “It seems like it’s taking forever.”

Seville Duncan glanced at her only child, and trying to hide the amusement in her voice replied, “It’s only been an hour since your father called from his office to say that he was on his way to pick them up.” Irene’s father, Judge William Duncan, had left directly from work that day to pick up his friend Christopher Blake and Blake’s nephew Maxwell Frost at the airport. Max was coming to live with his Uncle Blake since his parents had been killed in a car accident.

Christopher Blake and William Duncan had been friends since college. They were in the same fraternity and ended up being roommates their sophomore year. They had roomed together the rest of college. The two of them appeared to be an odd duo – especially since they had little in common. Duncan was tall and slender. He had thick, dark brown hair and silver eyes. He was charismatic and handsome and always had a pack of giggling girls surrounding him. Blake, on the other hand, was stocky. He was beginning to lose his hair and would soon end up completely bald. His facial expressions were often unreadable. He seemed stern and unapproachable. He rarely had a group of girls tailing him, unless of course, he was walking around campus with Duncan. The one thing these friends did have in common was that they were both incredibly intelligent. They had graduated from college at the same time and were both accepted to the same
university for their respective graduate degrees. Duncan studied law and Blake studied business.

It was during Duncan and Blake’s graduate programs that Duncan first met his future wife Seville Chambers. On a crisp autumn day, Duncan was hastily leaving the library on his way to class when he passed a stunning brunette walking through the main doors. Duncan turned around and followed the beautiful woman back into the library, where the two of them ended up talking all afternoon. That first meeting was just the beginning of what would end up being a lasting relationship. They dated for two years while they both finished school and then got engaged just after graduation. Blake and Seville became good friends quickly. All three graduated the same year – Duncan with his law degree, Seville her bachelor’s of music, and Blake his master’s of business administration. Duncan and Seville were married in Boston about a year later, and Blake was Duncan’s best man.

Duncan and Blake’s friendship became even more solidified when Duncan agreed to invest millions of dollars of his family’s money into Blake’s first entrepreneurial endeavor. The business venture turned out to be a great success, turning millions of dollars into several billions. After that first business venture, Blake formed several other organizations, all in diversified fields, one of which was a newspaper, The New England Post, which he still owned and operated. His other companies turned out to be highly successful as well, due to his careful planning and implementation strategies, thus securing his reputation in the corporate world as an entrepreneurial genius. He still owned and supervised several of the companies he had founded. He was a workaholic
and decided early on in the game of life against marriage, believing it would interfere with his corporate success.

Just as Blake was turning his first business into a corporate phenomenon, his closest friends Duncan and Seville experienced the birth of their first child – a little girl. They decided to name her Irene Matilda Duncan. Irene was a sweet, happy baby, and over the next seven years her personality remained very much the same as when she first came into the world. She was a joy to her parents and the love of their lives. Duncan had been working as a highly successful defense attorney in Boston, and just following Irene’s birth, became a judge for the state of Massachusetts. He was the youngest person in the state to ever hold such a prominent position. Over the next seven years, he became admired and respected by people throughout the legal world. He was well liked despite his sometimes radical and controversial case rulings. His aspiration was to serve as a Supreme Court justice for the state. Blake and the Duncans lived close to one another; and during the past seven years, they got together often, especially on special occasions such as Irene’s birthday. Irene adored her father’s best friend, despite his stern exterior, and by the age of seven, she had Blake wrapped securely around her baby finger.

As Seville stood behind Irene at the window waiting for Duncan, Blake, and Max to arrive, she recalled Blake’s expression just two weeks earlier when he heard the terrible news about his sister and brother-in-law. Blake had traveled to Virginia to handle the funeral arrangements. He also had to get everything in order for his 11-year-old nephew Maxwell Frost to come and live with him. Despite Blake’s uneasiness about becoming a parent, he had adored his sister and was pleased that his nephew Max was coming to Boston. While Blake was in Virginia for the funeral, he decided then and there
that he would be the best parent to Max he could be. He resolved that Max would be
given every opportunity to succeed in life and would grow up knowing how much both
Blake and his parents loved him.

As Seville and Irene gazed outside into the rainy evening, they finally saw
Duncan’s BMW pull into the circular driveway and stop in front of the steps that led to
their Colonial style home. At this point, Seville left Irene standing by the beveled paned
window and went into the entryway and opened the front doors to welcome them. Seville
was introduced to Max and greeted him warmly. After their introduction, while Duncan
was distracting Max, Blake leaned over to Seville and whispered, “I’m worried about
Max. I haven’t seen him cry since he found out about his mom and dad. What should I
do?”

Seville put her hand on Blake’s arm and responded sympathetically, “Just give it
some time. He’s probably still in shock. I’m sure he’ll let out his emotions when it’s the
right time.” Blake nodded to her and the group started into the kitchen area where Seville
told Max her daughter Irene was anxious to meet him.

Just then, Irene heard the voices from the entryway grow louder, and her father,
mother, Blake, and Max appeared in the doorway of the beautiful room. The kitchen
walls were a brown and red brick that complemented the hardwood floor. The room was
elegantly furnished with Victorian furniture, area rugs, and accessories that added to the
home’s overall historic feel. As Irene stood speechless by the window, her father
gestured for her to come forward; and when she reached him, he laid his hand on her
shoulder and said, “Irene, this is Blake’s nephew Max. He is going to live with him from
now on. Max, this is our daughter Irene. Irene, say hello to Max.”
Irene looked up at the boy, who towered over her small form, and smiled shyly. She observed that Max had dark brown hair, even darker than her own, and that his eyes, which watched her timidly, were the darkest shade of green she had ever seen. Irene walked a few steps forward until she was standing directly in front of Max and then she wrapped her arms around his waist – enveloping him in a tight hug – surprising both her parents and Blake. Irene’s voice laced with emotion, due to the tears she was starting to shed, said softly, “I’m sorry, Max, about your mom and dad. I’ll bet you miss them a lot.” Max stood there for a moment dumbfounded as this tiny stranger hugged him. He surprised the adult onlookers even more when he put his arms around Irene’s shoulders and returned her hug. Finally, the tears that Max had been suppressing began to fall down his cheeks.
“Seville, are you sure that this is okay with you? I mean having Max at your house every day after school,” Blake said worriedly into the phone as he leaned back in a leather chair situated behind the mahogany desk in his office. “It was one thing having him around every day before your treatments, but now it’s something else. You don’t have to say what you think I want to hear, just because it will make my life easier. You’re a saint, but this time I want you to tell me how you genuinely feel. Are you really sure it’s okay having Max there every day, or do you guys need some space?”

Seville responded to Blake in an amused voice that sounded rather like she was explaining something to a small child. “Blake dear, we have had this discussion a thousand times! How many times do I have to tell you that it’s fine! You know how much we all adore Max, especially Irene. She follows him everywhere, and they are always together. She absolutely worships him!” Seville started laughing. “Maybe I should be asking you if Max needs some space.”

She heard Blake laugh over the phone. “No, Max doesn’t need space. He’ll just have to get used to Irene worshiping him. I’d better tell him to enjoy it while it lasts! When she gets older, it’ll be a whole lot harder for him to get her attention!”

Seville laughed and said, “Blake, stop worrying about me. Everything’s fine. We all love Max and enjoy having him around.”

“You’re the best. I can’t tell you how much it means to me just how supportive you have all been through this. It has made things so much easier for me – and Max.”
“Thank you. That’s sweet of you to say.” After a slight pause, Seville’s voice became energetic once again, “Now stop calling me, and go back to work! I’ll see you tonight when you pick up Max.” She hung up the phone in the kitchen and glanced at the clock on the wall realizing it was time for her to drop Irene off at her ballet class. She left the kitchen, walked to the entryway, and called up the stairs, “Max, Irene, come on guys it’s time to go. Irene, are you changed for your lesson?”

Seville sat down on a tufted velvet bench in the entry to wait and took several deep breaths to help relieve the pain she felt so often these days. Soon she heard Max and Irene’s feet racing on the wood flooring in the hall upstairs and then watched as they both headed down the grand staircase. Max was still in his private school uniform. However, he had discarded the jacket, and the tie was loose around his neck. The top button of his white, collared shirt was undone. He also had the sleeves of his shirt rolled up and looked far more comfortable now than when he had arrived there that afternoon.

“Mom, we’re ready,” Irene responded as she and Max moved to where Seville sat. Irene was dressed in a black ballet leotard with an ivory chiffon skirt tied around her small waist. She wore a cardigan that matched the color of her skirt and black, patent leather shoes. Irene also carried a gym bag over her shoulder.

“All right then, let’s go,” Seville said as she stood up and walked into the kitchen to get her jacket and purse – with Max and Irene following after her. “Max, be sure you bring your school books with you so that we can do your homework while we wait for Irene.” He nodded and then smiled at Seville as he grabbed his bag, and the three rushed to the car.
When they arrived at the ballet studio, Irene jumped out of the back seat of the car. She waved to her mom and Max as she opened the door to the dance studio, waited until they both waved back, and then walked inside. During the past few months while Irene was at ballet practice, Seville and Max would wait for her in the car and work on his schoolwork. Today as practice ended, Irene bounded out the door and hopped into the back seat of her mom’s car. “So, how’d it go?” Seville inquired.

Irene’s face was flushed, her eyes bright as she responded excitedly, “It was great! We practiced for our recital that’s coming up. Our costumes are so pretty. They are all white with big, netted skirts.”

“When’s your performance?” Max asked. “Do I get to come?”

“No!” Irene said quickly. “Not this time.”

He looked at her puzzled, “Why not? I’ve never seen you dance in practice or at any of your performances.”

She looked at him shyly. “You can’t come to my performances until I’m good enough, and I’m not yet.”

Max laughed at her insecurity and responded smiling, “Come on Irene, you can’t be that bad.”

Irene thought for a moment and then said confidently, “How ‘bout we make a deal Max? If I ever end up as the lead in a ballet, then you can come. If I don’t, then you can’t! What do you think – deal?”

Seeing that she wasn’t about to budge on the terms of the deal, he said, “Okay, have it your way. I promise never to watch you perform until you are the star ballerina! But when you are the star, I get to come, and you can’t say no. Deal?”
Seville sat silently through the unusual conversation and tried to stifle her laughter when she saw them look each other squarely in the eye. Each of them seemed to be seriously considering who they thought would win in the end. She then heard them say in unison, each with a grin on their face, “Deal!” They shook hands on the bargain, and it was then that Seville couldn’t suppress her amusement any longer and burst out laughing.
Chapter 3

“Please don’t leave me, Mommy,” Irene pleaded with tears streaming down her face as she sat on the camelback sofa in the family room by Seville. “I promise I’ll be good. I’ll try to do better in school. I know I’m not the best dancer, but I promise I’ll practice harder. Just please, please don’t leave me!”

Irene sobbed as she stared down into her mother’s exhausted, tired eyes. Seville lay on the couch, a pillow under her head, a cashmere blanket on top of her, her hand lovingly placed on Irene’s cheek, her thumb wiping away the tears as they fell. Duncan stood solemnly behind Irene, his hand reassuringly on her shoulder. Blake, with his arm around Max’s shoulders, stood several feet behind Duncan. Both he and Max looked grief-stricken and depressed. Duncan stood there silently, watching as the heartbreaking scene unfolded. His beautiful wife was dying and now was saying goodbye to the people she cared most about in life. Seville had been diagnosed with a highly advanced case of pancreatic cancer. She had put up a valiant and courageous fight; but after her initial surgery, followed by several months of agonizing treatment, her frail body eventually succumbed to the inevitable. Now as she lay dying at her home, she knew this would be the last time that she would ever see her loved ones.

Her heart breaking, Seville responded to Irene’s tearful plea. “Irene, this has nothing to do with you being good or not. You have always been a priceless treasure. I have never been as excited as I was the day you were born. It seems like it was only yesterday.” She paused, her breathing labored. “I want you to know that I feel very lucky to be your mom. I am so proud of you, Irene. Promise me that you’ll never
change. I love you just the way you are, even if you aren’t the world’s most amazing ballerina just yet,” she joked trying to cheer up her distraught daughter. Her tone of voice became serious once again, “You’ll be the best one day – I already think you are. Know that whenever you perform, I will be watching you from heaven, and it will bring tears to my eyes to see my daughter dance like an angel because that’s exactly what you are, Irene – an angel.”

“I promise, Mommy,” Irene responded earnestly, tears still streaming down her face. “I’ll look up so you know when I dance that it was for you. Even though you can’t be there, I know you’ll be with me.”

Seville smiled at her adoring daughter, whose words brought tears to her eyes, and they started to fall down her sallow cheeks. Struggling for breath, Seville looked over at Max who was standing silently next to his Uncle Blake. She gestured for Max to come to her and said softly as he walked to the couch and took her weak, outstretched hand, “I love you, Max. I’m glad that we got to spend so much time together this past year. I want you to know you are like the son I never had.” She took another breath as she tried to ease her increasing pain. “You are so special to me, Max, and also to Irene. Please take care of her for me. She is going to need you so much, especially after I’m gone.” He nodded looking intently at Seville. “Know that I’ll always be with you – both of you – and that I’ll be watching out for you – even from heaven.”

Still holding one of Irene and Max’s hands, Seville glanced over at Blake. Blake returned Seville’s gaze, then cleared his throat as his voice clogged with emotion. “You know that we all love you, Seville.”
She smiled sweetly at him. “Thank you for always being so good to me, Blake. I
didn’t realize at the beginning when you were Duncan’s best friend that you would end
up being mine as well. I love you so much, and I’ll miss you.”

Seville took another strained breath as her pain became unbearable. Finally, she
glanced at her husband who still stood silently behind Irene and smiled at him, despite
her breaking heart. No longer able to hide her emotion, Seville looked intently into his
silver eyes and said, still crying, “I love you, Duncan.”

“I know, Seville. I love you too. I’ve loved you from the moment I first laid eyes
on you.” She smiled at him in response. Then her eyes became distant and vague, her
breathing shallow. Slowly she shut her eyes as she still held Irene and Max’s hands and
finally was free from the pain she had felt for so long. She had made the world a more
beautiful place simply by being in it.

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Irene sat alone on the window seat in her family room and watched the vast group
of people. Scores of family and friends had stopped by the Duncan home for Seville’s
wake to pay their respects. Irene had on a black, velvet dress, black tights, and black
patent leather, Mary Jane shoes. Her Aunt Phyllis had picked out her outfit and combed
her hair for her as well. Phyllis pulled up the sides of Irene’s long wavy hair, securing it
in place with a black, grosgrain ribbon. Feeling numb, Irene watched as her father,
Phyllis, and Blake feverishly circulated among the countless number of grownups. It
seemed to Irene as if they had been talking to strangers all day. Just then, Irene saw Max
gaze at her from across the room where he was standing by his Uncle Blake. He walked
over to the window seat, sat down next her, and said nothing. They both continued to
watch the adults in silence. Finally, still looking at the group of people rather than at
Irene, Max said, “I’m sorry, Irene. I loved your mom too.” He paused – thinking for a
moment – not exactly sure what he should say. “I really do know how you feel,” he
continued tentatively. “I lost both my mom and my dad.” He drew an audible breath
trying to steady himself as he recalled his parents’ fatal accident. “I didn’t even get to
say goodbye.”

Irene turned to look at Max, and he felt her eyes studying him. He turned his
head to look at her and found her face devastated. Just then, he watched as tears started
to form in her eyes. “She left me, Max.” Her tears started to fall. Silently, he continued
to stare into her despairing face which expressed feelings of intense anguish. “I know she
couldn’t help it, but she left me, Max. My mom left me all alone. After this is over, my
dad will have to go back to work, and my aunt will go back home. I miss her already.”

“You’re not alone, Irene,” Max responded putting his arm comfortingly around
her small shoulders. “I promised your mom when she died that I would be there for you.
You were there for me when I needed you, Irene – now I’m going to be here for you.”
She began to weep uncontrollably and turned into his chest, her tiny hands tightly
clenching the lapels of his crisp, black jacket. He kept one arm around her and moved
the other, holding her head gently against him as she sobbed, trying to console her as best
he could. “You’re my best friend, Irene. I’ll always be there for you, no matter what.”
Max parked his car outside Irene’s ballet studio where he picked her up from practice every day. After Seville’s death, Duncan and Blake decided Max would continue to come to the Duncan home each day after school. They felt it would help both children cope better with the death of their parents. The Duncan’s housekeeper, Abigail Lewis, looked after the children due to Duncan and Blake’s demanding work schedules. Max basically grew up at the Duncan home.

Max’s friend Luke Tredsley, who had become like a brother to Max, sat in the passenger seat of the car, and they both waited patiently for Irene’s practice to finish. Max always waited in the car for Irene because of the bargain they had made years before. Max reluctantly resigned himself to the idea that he wasn’t going to see Irene dance any time soon.

Irene’s technique had improved dramatically over the past several years, primarily because of her last conversation with her mother. She wanted to dance beautifully for when her mother watched her from heaven. At the end of each performance, Irene would stand at the back of the stage with the other supporting dancers, look up, close her eyes, and think of her mother. She would say silently to herself, “I love you, Mom. I danced tonight for you.” She would then look back at the audience, smile radiantly, and take her bow. This had become her ritual during each curtain call.

Irene was fast becoming one of the most gifted dancers her instructors had ever taught. Her flawless beauty when she danced left them speechless, and they concluded
that one day, despite her unpolished and self-conscious nature off the dance floor, she was going to be a success. Irene had been in countless performances so far, but due to her young age, she performed only in supporting roles. As soon as she got a little older, she could easily perform a principal part in any ballet.

Max looked out the window to see if he could tell if Irene’s class was almost over. “She should be done soon,” he commented to Luke.

Luke Tredsley was Max’s age and attended the same private school. The Tredsleys were in the same social circle as Duncan and Blake, and Max and Luke first met at Duncan’s home for a Sunday Brunch. At school, they played together on the football and soccer teams and during the years had become good friends. Luke was very well liked – especially by the girls. He was tall, athletic, and had sandy blond hair. Luke’s hair was longer than Max’s, and it curled above his ears and the nape of his neck. He had bright blue eyes that always seemed to be amused. Luke had a great sense of humor and never hesitated to say exactly what was on his mind.

“It’s cold out here, Max. Why do you wait for Irene in the parking lot?” Luke asked laughing. “Pretty sure there are places to wait inside.”

“Long story – don’t ask.”

Luke nodded his head and laughed recalling how Max rarely got his way when it came to Irene. He knew his friend loved Irene and that they had been like family for years. Max was protective of her and acted like her older brother. She was years younger than them, but Luke loved her too and enjoyed her company. They had all been friends for a long time. Luke paused and then continued, “Dude, I still can’t believe how lucky you are. You get to be lab partners with Tweed Richards. She’s hot!” He looked
over at his friend. “You know every guy wants her. I’ve never seen a girl that has it all going on like she does.”

Max shrugged his shoulders, “She’s not bad.”

Luke looked surprised wondering how such indifferent words could come out of his friend’s mouth about the best looking girl in school. Everyone loved Tweed Richards.

At eighteen, Tweed was curvy and voluptuous. She had straight, blonde hair that reached half-way down her back – hair made blonder with the help of her expensive stylist. She had blue eyes – eyes that concealed nothing. When Tweed wasn’t in her school uniform, which she had scandalously altered, she wore designer clothes. She didn’t waste her time on homework. Tweed was already on the prowl to marry into a family with plenty of money. Her parents bought a home they couldn’t afford in one of the most affluent neighborhoods in Boston and sent Tweed to the most elite private school to secure this outcome. They did whatever it took to fraternize among the wealthy – never letting on that they didn’t actually belong. Tweed wasn’t particularly bright and had no special talent, but she was attractive. The best way to describe her appearance was cliché, rather than truly beautiful. If one examined her features, her nose was too large, her eyes too close together, her eyebrows too thin, and her mouth too small. However, Tweed did a good job selling herself and was the most popular girl in school. Every girl hated her yet wanted to be her friend. Every boy loved her and wanted to be her boyfriend – and she knew it! However, the only guy in school Tweed really wanted was Maxwell Frost.
It was no surprise that Tweed had her sights set on Max. Max had just about everything going for him. He was ambitious and driven like his Uncle Blake, and it was expected that one day he would take over Blake’s companies, and in turn, inherit a fortune. He was the ideal choice for what Tweed Richards and her parents were looking for in a future marital candidate.

“She’s not bad!” Luke repeated flabbergasted. “You’ve got to be kidding me? Max how can you possibly describe the Tweed Richards as ‘not bad?’” He looked at Max questioningly and then started laughing as he realized Max had been trying to torment him. He knew Max was interested in Tweed – who wouldn’t be?

“Who’s Tweed Richards?” Irene questioned. Both boys jumped, startled, and then turned their heads to see Irene in the process of sliding into the back seat of Max’s car. They had been so engrossed in their conversation that they hadn’t realized Irene’s practice was over.

“Hey, Rene! We didn’t see you come out,” Luke explained. “Looking good. How was practice?” Luke observed Irene’s appearance as she shut the car door. She had on gray, baggy sweat pants and an oversized sweatshirt. Her brown hair was wavy and unruly. He laughed and said jokingly, “What are you wearing? Where’s the leotard? I thought ballerinas were supposed to wear tights and crap like that.”

They all started laughing. “I already changed, Luke!” Irene responded smiling. “I didn’t know you were coming with Max.”

“Well, I knew how seeing me would make your day, so I decided to let you have your way,” he teased. “Actually we’re going back to your house to work on a science assignment with a girl in our class tonight. Her name’s Tweed Richards – that’s who we
were talking about.” He paused for a second and then taunted, looking back at Max, “She’s in love with our boy Max here.”

Max shook his head in denial and laughed. “No, she’s not. Dude, give it a rest.”

Irene looked at Luke puzzled and waited for him to elaborate. “Tweed’s the hottest girl in school,” Luke added looking back at Irene, “and she and Max are lab partners. She’s got the hots for him.” Luke looked back at Max and said enviously, “Man, you’re so lucky!”

Max smiled casually at Luke’s comments but said nothing. Irene silently looked from Max to Luke. This was the first time that they had ever talked about another girl in front of her. Tweed sounded like she was perfect, and Irene could tell from Max’s reaction that he was definitely interested in her. Why did hearing this make her feel deflated? She was sure a lot of girls liked Max, but this was the first time she was worried about his liking one of them back. She recognized at that moment that although she and Max had been best friends, that may not always be the case. Someone would eventually replace her. She sat there lost in thought, feeling depressed and apprehensive. She realized suddenly that Max and Luke were staring at her. “Irene, you okay?” Max asked worriedly. “What’s wrong?”

“What? Nothing,” Irene responded, quickly putting an end to her wandering mind. She smiled reassuringly at Max in an attempt to mask her anxiousness. “I’m fine. Just thinking about practice I guess.” He nodded, smiling back at her. Max pulled out of the parking lot and headed to the Duncan home. He and Luke talked easily, not noticing Irene’s lack of participation in the conversation. Irene sat there pensively. Ballet was the
last thing on her mind. All she could think about was the impending arrival of Tweed Richards that night.
Chapter 5

“I can’t figure out the answer to this problem. Have you done it yet, Max?” Tweed questioned innocently as she leaned closer to him at the kitchen table, her head tilted toward him as she pretended to examine his paper. “Can you help me?”

“Yeah, sure,” Max responded pleasantly. Luke smiled, laughing to himself, as he sat watching Max try to explain the answer to Tweed, one she didn’t understand, and one Luke was certain she undoubtedly never would. Still, he couldn’t blame Max for liking her. Tweed was unbelievably attractive, but she obviously wasn’t intelligent. Luke was also right in his assumption that Tweed didn’t really care if she actually understood science. What she really wanted was an excuse to rub up against Max. She rested her leg next to his and put her hand on Max’s arm as she listened, seemingly engrossed in the explanation. “Does that make sense?” Max asked Tweed once he finished explaining the problem.

“It does now,” she responded sweetly with a flirtatious smile. “Max, you’re so smart. Thanks for your help. I get it now.”

Luke stifled his laughter but couldn’t resist saying, “Good, then the next question should be easy for you.” He added, knowing full well that she didn’t understand the concept at all, “It’s exactly like the one Max just explained to you.”

“Oh good,” she responded uncomfortably, then flashed one of her practiced, dazzling smiles at Max to hide her nervousness and ineptitude. She could kill Luke Tredsley. He was going to make her look like an idiot in front of Max. Thinking
quickly, to avoid having to do the assignment in front of them, Tweed said, “Max, can I use your bathroom?”

“Sure. There’s one down the hall to the right, next to the dance studio.”

“Thanks. I’ll be right back.”

Tweed walked seductively from the room. Knowing that Max and Luke were watching her, she became empowered. Flirting and boys were no problem for her. She was certain that Max was going to fall in love with her in no time. She walked down the hall and opened a door on the right, expecting a bathroom where she could check that her appearance was still perfect. Instead, Tweed mistakenly opened the door to the dance studio and discovered a girl in gray sweats sitting on the wood floor stretching. From what Tweed had heard from Max and Luke, she knew for certain this was Irene Duncan. Tweed disliked Irene instantly. She didn’t think it was fair for someone so painfully plain to have a father with so much money and influence. Irene also got to spend every waking hour with Max. In Tweed’s mind, she thought of herself as someone of great consequence, yet she didn’t have those things. “Well,” Tweed thought smugly to herself, “at least not yet.” Tweed was used to getting her way and knew exactly what she wanted. She wanted Max, and she was going to get him no matter how good of friends he was with this simple girl.

Irene heard the door open and looked up to see someone she could only assume was the legendary Tweed Richards watching her. She was everything Luke had described her to be. Tweed was everything that Irene felt she wasn’t. She was beautiful. She was confident. Irene sat there in silence feeling more self-conscious by the moment. “Hi,” she finally managed timidly. “I’m Irene. You’re Tweed, right?”
“I didn’t realize that Max was babysitting tonight,” Tweed responded snidely at Irene and saw a stunned expression form on Irene’s face due to the blow her words had just delivered.

Tweed could tell that Irene wouldn’t say anything bad about her to Max because she was too intimidated. Tweed’s patronizing attitude gained momentum when she realized that Irene didn’t stand a chance against her because she could be so easily manipulated. She and Max may have been friends, but she was going to be Max’s girlfriend. Enjoying Irene’s discomfort, she finished sarcastically, “Of course, I’m Tweed. Get used to the name because Max likes me, and I’m here to stay.” She started to leave the room and then – as she turned back to see Irene who was still trying to process the import of her words – added, “Oh, and by the way, sweetie, love the sweats!”
Over the next several months, Irene reconciled herself to the fact that Max was dating Tweed Richards exclusively. He still came to the house every day, but rather than just bringing Luke as he sometimes had in the past, he now often brought Tweed along as well.

Tweed had been right. She and Max had been seeing each other for months, and Irene proved to be no complication. She was certain that Irene never said anything to Max about their first meeting or her subsequent rude comments. She continued to intimidate and manipulate Irene in order to control her involvement with Max. She was cunning and took extreme care not to be unkind to Irene in front of him. She knew that Max would not stand for anyone, not even her, being unkind to the “little creature” that he loved and protected like a younger sister. However, when he wasn’t around, Tweed never hesitated to make it clear to Irene that her presence was most unwelcome. She told Irene that if she ever got in the way of her and Max’s relationship, she would tell him they couldn’t go to the Duncan home after school anymore because she didn’t feel comfortable there. Worried at the prospect of possibly losing Max, Irene kept her mouth shut – never telling him what Tweed had threatened. The last thing she wanted was to antagonize someone like Tweed Richards. Irene had already lost her mother, the person she had cared for most in life, and she couldn’t bear the thought of losing Max too. It seemed that the less she interfered with him, the more Tweed ignored rather than attacked her. When Tweed would come to the house with Max, Irene quickly got into the habit of retreating to her bedroom, the dance studio, the library, or her father’s study. Max
assumed that Irene’s remoteness was to give him space to be alone with Tweed when, in all actuality, Irene was afraid of her and the repercussions that could face her if she were around.

One night after Tweed and Luke had left for the evening, Max sat on the couch in the family room adjacent to the kitchen area. He was deep in thought and seemed worried about something. The house was silent. He had left only one light on in the kitchen and sat stewing in virtual darkness. Just then, Irene walked into the kitchen. She was dressed in her pajamas, her long, dark hair still wet from a recent shower. She flipped on an additional light in the kitchen. She didn’t see Max in the dark family room where he sat watching her. She was humming to herself as she opened the refrigerator door and removed an apple.

“Where’d you disappear to?” Max asked, startling Irene so badly that she gasped and dropped the apple she was holding. It fell to the floor and rolled as she stooped to pick it up.

“Max!” Irene responded her breathing shallow and frightened. “You scared the daylights out of me.” Her breathing was still slightly uneven as she collected herself. “Why are you sitting in the dark?” With the last question, Irene flipped on a light in the family room. “You really shouldn’t scare people like that,” she warned mischievously. “Next time I may come at you with a baseball bat!” They laughed, but then she looked into his face and could tell that he was concerned about something.

“I’m sorry that I scared you. I didn’t mean to.”

“Oh, I know. Are you okay? You seem worried about something.”
He motioned for her to sit next to him on the couch. She walked over to him and sat down and looked at his face somewhat concerned as she waited patiently for him to tell her what was on his mind. Suddenly she knew what was wrong with Max. Irene was frantic. Max was going to tell her that Tweed had asked him to stop coming to see her. She sat there quietly, waiting nervously, willing herself not to react until Max finished telling her the bad news.

Finally, Max took a deep breath. “I’ve got a little problem, Irene.”

“What?” Her voice was a faint whisper.

“I can’t dance.”

“What?” Irene questioned, her voice returning to normal, her anxiety leaving her instantly.

“You know that I asked Tweed to go to prom with me. Well, that was just brilliant because Tweed told me tonight how excited she is. She went on and on about how much she loves to dance and how good she is at it. How am I supposed to take her to prom when I can’t dance? I probably should have thought of that before I asked her to go. That was smart,” he said sarcastically. He seemed genuinely worried about his minor predicament. Irene’s initial concern was fast replaced by amusement, and she tried to stifle her laughter, but it was too late. “What’s so funny?” he said.

Irene burst out laughing – as Max’s own face spread into a large smile in response to her reaction. “I’m sorry I’m laughing. Nothing’s funny. From the look on your face I thought that something was actually wrong. I should have known it was something serious,” she teased. “Max, you don’t even have to know how to dance anymore,” Irene explained. “You just stand on the dance floor with your hands on her
waist and sway back and forth to the music, if you can even call it music. It’s not like you have to know how to actually dance like people used to. Trust me, you’ll be fine. No one will know whether or not you can dance because they’ll all be dancing just like you.” Her grin became even broader, her voice teasing, and she winked at Max. “No worries, twinkle toes.”

Max repeated jokingly, “Twinkle toes, huh?” Irene understood the mischievous expression on his face and stood up, backing away from him. Max also stood up – suppressing his smile – and began to follow her. Irene turned and ran toward the kitchen, moving behind the kitchen table with Max following her quickly. The table separated the two of them, and Irene moved tentatively trying to decide how to best outmaneuver him. Max watched her face enjoying her dilemma. “Come on, Irene. Give up. There’s no where to run. I’ve got you cornered.”

Irene was laughing hysterically, unable to prevent the tears from rolling down her face. She darted around the table and began to run back into the family room. Max caught her, gently grabbing her around the waist, lifting her easily off her feet. During this playful struggle, they lost their balance and fell ungracefully to the floor where they ended up sprawled together in a tangled heap, Max’s large frame on top of Irene’s tiny one. They were both laughing uncontrollably, their breathing labored from the lively tussle. “You weigh a ton, Max. I can hardly breathe,” Irene joked. “Get off me before you kill me.” She was silent a moment, then her eyes gleamed with amusement, and she pretended to be serious. “You know, on second thought . . . your dance technique’s not half bad. It really was most impressive, twinkle toes.”
“You just keep asking for it, don’t you?” Max looked down into Irene’s flushed face and grinned at her. He rolled off her and stood up, then reached a hand down so that he could help her up off the floor.

When they were both on their feet, Irene volunteered, “Max, if you’re really worried about your dancing, I can help you work on it.”

“Really?”

“Really. We can start right now if you want.” Max nodded eagerly in agreement, and Irene moved to stand directly in front of him. She took his arm, pulled it away from his body, and put her hand in his. “I put my hand on your shoulder,” she explained, “and you put yours on my waist.” After Irene’s initial instructions, Max soon got the hang of things and moved Irene easily around the family room and kitchen. “That’s it! See, I told you that you had nothing to worry about.”

“And we’re not even just swaying back and forth,” he joked. “Thanks for helping me,” Max responded as they finished their last turn around the room.

“You’re welcome. But just remember that one day I may need a favor, and guess who the lucky guy’s going to be?” They laughed again, both enjoying the moment. It had been a long time since they had had this much fun together. They hadn’t been this relaxed since Max started dating Tweed.

After they finished the dance, Irene let go of Max’s hand and moved back so that his arm was no longer around her waist. Max continued, “Well, thanks again. I’m sure Tweed will appreciate it. I didn’t want to end up embarrassing her.” He joked, “She’ll certainly be surprised when she finds out that I’m now an acceptable dancer, thanks to you.”
At the mention of Tweed, Irene’s smile vanished. Her expression turned distant. She spoke as if almost to herself. “It’s interesting, isn’t it, that in a dance timing’s so important. I mean, if you’re on, then everything’s set – but if you get off track, even for a second, it’s hard to ever compensate for the lost time.”

“I’ve never thought about it before.” Max was silent a moment – deep in thought. “I guess you’re right though. In a dance – or even in life – it’s harder to get something back rather than losing it in the first place.” He paused and then smiled reassuringly, “But look at the bright side – you said it was hard – you never said it was impossible – right?”

“No, no it’s never impossible.”
“Irene,” Duncan called up the stairs of the entryway, adorned with lavish Christmas decorations, “Max’s here.” He turned back to Max and embraced him in a warm, fatherly hug. “We’re sorry that Blake’s out of town, but we couldn’t be happier that you’ll be spending your holiday break with us.”

“Thanks for having me, Duncan,” Max responded with a smile. “This place feels like home to me, and there’s no one that I’d rather spend Christmas with than you and Irene. Uncle Blake’s missing out!”

“He certainly is! Well, that’s what you get when you schedule business meetings out of town at this time of year.” They both laughed as Duncan took Max’s coat and hung it on a coat rack and then moved his luggage next to the stairs to take up later. “So, tell me, Max, how’s Harvard?” Duncan questioned as he and Max walked into the family room and sat down. “I know that Irene still sees you, but it seems that I’m never home these days because of work. I hear that you’re graduating in the spring.”

“That’s right. I can hardly believe that it’s coming right up.”

“I’m proud of you, Max. What are your plans after graduation? Are you going to work for Blake right away?”

“Not right away. I’ve applied to Columbia for grad school, but we’ll see what happens. I’m hoping to start there next fall. If all goes well, I won’t be working for The Post until after that.”
“I’m sure that everything will go your way. So, you’ll be in New York in the fall? Irene sure will be excited to hear that!”

Max looked puzzled. “Why would Irene be glad to hear that I’m leaving Boston? I mean, I’m not suggesting she’d be too upset, but I thought she’d be sort of sad to see me go considering all the time we’ve spent together.”

“Hmm . . . hasn’t she told you that she may be moving to New York?” Duncan looked at Max and saw that his words had surprised him. Why would the prospect of Irene’s moving to New York bother Max? “No, I can see from your expression she hasn’t,” Duncan said growing confused. “I’d assumed she told you that she’d applied to Juilliard.”

“She did what?” Max gasped. The puzzled expression disappeared from his face and was replaced by one of hurt. His usual even temper had been provoked, and his voice was stern. “She never told me that she was even considering Juilliard. Every time we talked about her going to college, she changed the subject as fast as possible. I can’t believe she didn’t tell me!”

“Why are you so upset?” Duncan responded trying to find the underlying cause of Max’s irritation. “Don’t you want Irene to go? Or is it that you need some space – is that why you seem unhappy about the news?”

“That’s not it,” Max said as he got up and walked away from Duncan. He stood by the window, gazing pensively outside into the frosty, winter night. “I just can’t believe that she never said anything about it.” He sighed heavily, “Don’t you think it should’ve occurred to her to say something to me?”
“Something like what?” Irene asked hearing only Max’s last comment as she walked into the room. She was wearing a baggy red turtleneck and ill-fitting jeans. As usual, she didn’t have on makeup, and her brown hair was wavy and natural. Max turned to face her – his face cold – his arms folded across his broad chest. Her father remained seated on the couch and felt the tension in the room. Duncan had no idea why Irene hadn’t told Max that she had applied to Juilliard – that she’d been working toward that goal ever since her mother died. “What’s the matter, Max,” Irene asked tentatively, sensing his displeasure. “What should I have told you?”

“That you applied to Juilliard!”

Irene gasped, her eyes troubled, and she looked accusatorily at her father. “You told him! Why?”

“Why?” Max repeated annoyed, “Obviously it occurred to your father that I’d want to know that my best friend applied to the top art school in the country. Don’t you think you should have mentioned it?”

“If you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll check on some business matters before dinner,” Duncan said clearing his throat uncomfortably as he stood and left the room so that Max and Irene could finish their discussion in private. “It’ll be easier for you two to talk without an audience.” He exited the room hastily before Irene could object to his departure.

They stared at one another, neither saying a word. The silence was long and uncomfortable. Finally, Irene said apologetically, “I’m sorry, Max. I was going to tell you.”
“When?” He raised an eyebrow and countered sarcastically, “Before or after you graduated?”

“Once I found out if I was accepted or not. I didn’t want to tell you unless I got in, because if I wasn’t admitted, then I wasn’t going to tell you I’d ever even applied.”

“So, if you weren’t accepted, I was never supposed to know? Is that it? I thought I meant more to you.” Max’s look changed from annoyance to sadness. He felt disappointed and let down. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me. I can’t believe I had to find out about it from your father.”

Realizing she had hurt him, Irene walked to him and put her hands just above his elbows, his arms still folded across his chest. “I didn’t want to tell you because I don’t think there’s much of a chance I’ll get in. When I don’t, I don’t want you to be disappointed in me.”

Irene’s face was distressed, her voice soft but on edge as she tried to remain steady despite the tears forming in her eyes – tears she was determined Max wouldn’t see her shed. “Don’t you get it? I didn’t tell you because I can’t bear the thought of letting you down.”

Max couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Irene’s words made him feel like she had just punched him in the stomach. Irene turned away from him swiftly and felt the tears start to blur her vision. Max saw her move away from him dejectedly, and he thought his heart was going to break. She explained, “I applied before you ever even applied to Columbia. Even if I do get in, I don’t have to go. That way we won’t be in New York together if that’s what’s bothering you.”
Max stood there stunned. He couldn’t believe that Irene thought he was upset because he didn’t want to be in New York with her. Her back faced him – her shoulders slumped – her arms folded in front of her – her hands held her upper arms – and he could tell she was crying. Max walked to her swiftly until he stood behind her. He reached out and pulled her to him, crossing his arms in front of her until her back touched his chest and his chin rested on the top of her head. “I’m not upset. Well, I guess I was initially – but that’s because I thought you didn’t care about telling me – not because you were afraid to tell me.”

Max tightened his hold on her. “Irene, how could you think that I’d be bothered about us being in New York at the same time?” She didn’t respond. He continued – his voice open and honest. “I’m relieved actually. I know that you’ll get into Juilliard. There’s no question – even though you still haven’t let me watch you dance.” She turned facing him – his arms still tight around her as she looked up at him. He moved his hands until they were holding the sides of her face, and he gently rubbed his thumbs over her cheeks to wipe away her tears. “Irene, when are you going to realize that I love you and that I always will?”
Several months later when Max arrived at the Duncan home, he checked the mail like he had been doing for the past few weeks. He and Irene had been anxiously anticipating the arrival of the letter from Juilliard – and that afternoon it finally arrived.

“Irene, it’s here!” Max called as he burst through the front doors.

In his hand he held a large envelope. Max’s letter from Columbia had arrived earlier that week but remained unopened on the kitchen counter since he and Irene had agreed to open their letters together.

Max headed down the hall toward the dance studio – knowing Irene would be practicing. Before he got to the door, Irene had opened it and came running out. She wore a black leotard, black dance pants, and ballet slippers. Her long hair was pulled back into a low ponytail. She was zipping up a large, gray sweatshirt that she had thrown on over her leotard. Her face was flushed, and she was breathing hard – not only from her recent practice – but also from her anxiousness. Her face looked worried, and her voice sounded nervous. “It’s here?”

“Finally,” Max replied gesturing to the envelope he held in his hand. “It sure took long enough. Let’s hurry and open it. The anticipation’s killing me!” They both sprinted to the kitchen where he handed the envelope to Irene. He then picked up the envelope addressed to him.

“You first,” she said placing her letter on the counter. She clasped her hands tightly – not moving a muscle. She seemed far more worried than Max. “Hurry! I can’t handle the suspense.” Max swiftly sliced the envelope open with a letter opener. He
removed the papers and turned them so that he could read them. Irene stood watching his face anxiously – trying to hide her impatience.

Max finished reading and looked up at her. “I got in!”

Irene clapped her hands as she started jumping up and down. “Of course you got in! Was there ever any doubt?”

“Well, you never know.”

“I’m so excited for you.” Irene ran to him sliding her arms around his waist as he pulled her into a tight hug. “I knew you’d get in!”

“Okay – now it’s your turn.” Irene walked back to where she had left her envelope on the counter and picked it up holding it contemplatively, her hands shaking. Max couldn’t hide his own eagerness. “Open it!”

“I can’t. I’m too scared,” she replied looking at him, her anxiety obvious. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Here – I’ll do it.”

Irene handed the envelope to Max. He opened the letter hastily, skimming it quickly, his face expressionless. Irene stood motionless – not taking a breath. She watched his face earnestly looking for any indication one way or the other. “Well?” she asked tucking a lock of hair that had come free from her ponytail behind her ear, then placing one hand self consciously on her lips as she tried to hide her concern. He looked up from the letter. “Just tell me, Max. You don’t have to break it to me gently.” She took an audible breath. “This is making me nauseous.”

“You’re in!” Max said ecstatically. He ran to her laughing, picked her up at the waist, and tossed her up slightly so that her arms were around his neck. They celebrated
excitedly together as he swung her around the kitchen, her feet not touching the floor.

“I’m so proud of you! I knew you’d do it!”

“I can’t believe it!”

“I can.” Max set her gently back on the ground. Her hands rested on his shoulders – his held her tiny waist. “Now that you’ve been accepted to Juilliard – guess what that means?” Max questioned, his face delighted. “Soon, I will finally get to see you perform.”

“You may not be as excited when you actually see me dance,” she cautioned jokingly.

He laughed at her – then his voice became serious. “I really am so proud of you Irene – and I know your mom is too.”

“Thank you Max. That means a lot to me.” He placed a hand tenderly on one of her cheeks, and then he kissed her on the other. Irene’s heart started pounding – yet this time it had nothing to do with Juilliard.

Max looked down at her for a moment as if he were considering something. Then the moment was gone, and he smiled. “Well, I guess that I had better go call Luke and tell him the good news.” He walked out of the kitchen and headed upstairs to the study to call Luke.

Irene stood alone in the kitchen. Although the acceptance letter had surprised and excited her – nothing had prepared her that day for the sudden and unexpected realization that she was in love with her best friend – and had been for a very long time.
Chapter 9

New York – Six Years Ago

The past few months had flown by and were some of the happiest that Irene could remember – despite their rocky beginning. Shortly after receiving their acceptance letters, Luke had insisted on celebrating the good news. There was a lot for the three friends to celebrate – Luke had also recently been admitted to law school at Yale.

They ordered takeout, played cards, turned up the stereo, and danced to their favorite rock bands. Because of the loud music, laughter, and dancing, none of them heard a knock at the door. They didn’t notice that Tweed had let herself into Irene’s home until they nearly ran her over as she stood by the kitchen doorway. Her arms were folded reproachfully. She looked furious, and it was obvious that she was seething because of the cozy party that she had interrupted – one to which she had not been invited.

“What’s all this?” Tweed asked tartly but with a strained smile.


“And what exactly, may I ask, are we celebrating?”

Max interrupted before Luke could further antagonize her, “We’re celebrating our acceptance letters – we got in!”

“That’s fantastic! Max, I’m so proud of you,” Tweed responded holding on to the sides of his face – kissing him briefly on the mouth. Suddenly her smile vanished. She
dropped her hands and walked into the room as she kept her eyes fixed on Irene. “I didn’t know that you had decided on college. Where are you going?”

Irene held her hands together in front of her. Her heart started pounding anxiously, and her face looked frightened. “I’m . . .” she cleared her throat. “I’m going to Juilliard.”

“You’re what!” Tweed was shocked and irate. Before Irene could explain, she continued, her voice becoming increasingly harsh. “Well, I’ll bet you’re excited – in New York all alone with Max.” She clicked her tongue, “My, my . . . I should have known that you’d apply to a school in New York because you couldn’t bear the thought of being separated from him for even an instant, could you?” Not stopping for breath, she spat out, “I just don’t know how you managed to get in. Oh, never mind – I do. Did your daddy have to make a sizeable donation so that they’d take mediocre talent such as yours?”

“Tweed! Stop it! That’s way out of line,” Max demanded.

“Tweed,” Irene responded quickly trying to explain before the tirade continued, “I swear I applied before Max ever . . .”

Tweed cut her off rudely and turned to Max – no longer trying to conceal her animosity toward Irene. “I won’t have it, Max. I won’t have you in New York with her. Do you understand me? If she goes, then you stay. Is that clear?”

Max’s demeanor turned frigid. His striking face looked angry, and he paused a moment to compose himself. “I think we should talk privately, don’t you?” It wasn’t actually a question but was an authoritative statement that left Tweed speechless. She
nodded – too stunned to speak – and walked out of the kitchen without saying another word as he followed her.

“That was awkward,” Irene said finally drawing a breath as she looked at Luke.

“I actually found it enjoyable,” Luke joked as he let out a slow whistle. “Wow, Max was mad. I sure wouldn’t want to be Tweed right now.” They stopped talking when they heard the voices in the entryway grow louder and more argumentative. Suddenly the front door slammed, and the house was silent. Max walked back into the room and looked angrier than before.


“We decided to spend some time apart so we can sort things out.”

“You just broke up?” Luke couldn’t believe his ears. Max and Tweed had been dating since high school – it had been nearly five years.

“We’re just thinking things over, and we’ll see what happens.”

Irene was surprised and felt guilty because she felt responsible for their break up. “Max, I’m sorry. It’s my fault you broke up. She doesn’t want us to be in New York together, and that’s why she’s so angry.” Her face was distraught with worry, and she nervously bit her lower lip. “What should we do?”

Max looked at Irene. “Look at me, Irene. This isn’t your fault – you understand?” He walked to her and placed his hands reassuringly on her shoulders, looked into her troubled face, and smiled. “What do you mean what should we do? We’re going to New York – too bad if Tweed’s got a problem with it. She’ll just have to get over it because that’s how it’s going to be.”

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Months later autumn arrived, and Max and Tweed still had not reconciled. Max and Irene moved to New York as planned, Luke left for New Haven, and Tweed sulkily remained behind in Boston. This change marked a new chapter in Max and Irene’s relationship. This was the first time in years when they could be together and talk like they had when they were growing up. They were both busy with school, but they made a point of getting together whenever they could. Irene realized that the more time she spent alone with Max, the more she was in love with him. She tried her best to suppress her feelings. She masked them as well as she could – never wanting him to know the truth. She was terrified about what his reaction would be if he ever found out.
Chapter 10

“So, whose turn is it to pick this time?” Irene questioned as she walked from the kitchen into the cozy family room in Max’s upper west-side apartment. Tonight was Irene and Max’s movie night. Since the two of them had moved to Manhattan, they’d watched a movie together nearly every weekend. Irene carried a large bowl of popcorn, and Max followed her – carrying some cold drinks. They put the popcorn and drinks down, and then Max sat on the plush couch and put his feet up on the edge of the maple coffee table so that he’d be more comfortable. Irene walked over to the television and waited to start the movie.

“It’s my turn isn’t it?” Max asked in response to her question. He paused for a moment. “Yes, as I recall, the last time you chose and made me suffer through that awful Titanic movie,” he joked.

“It was sad!”

“I know it’s supposed to be epic, but in my opinion, I’d rather go down with the ship than watch it again.”

His sarcasm made her laugh. “All right, I’m sorry I made you watch it since you hated it so much. Just hurry up and pick something,” she said.

“Okay, let’s try a classic.” He paused, thinking to himself for a moment before he continued, “How about An Affair to Remember?” He smiled jokingly. “It’s heart wrenching, so you should love it!”

“I’ve seen it before – and you’re right – it is heart wrenching,” she said matter-of-factly, trying to keep a straight face. “Oh, and by the way, I do love it.” They both burst
into laughter. Irene started the movie and then walked back to the couch and sat down next to Max. He handed her the bowl of popcorn, and she held it on her lap as he picked up a beverage.

Irene became engrossed, and they had been watching the movie for some time before she finally realized that Max wasn’t looking at the TV – but at her. It seemed like they were sitting closer together than when the movie had started. Irene turned her head so that she could look at his face. She was puzzled by his unusual behavior. He just stared at her – saying nothing – but he was obviously deep in thought. She wondered what was on his mind. “What?” Irene questioned as she shrugged her shoulders casually. She was feeling more uncomfortable by the second. “Is something wrong?”

Max didn’t respond to her question. He just continued to stare intently at her confused face. Irene’s heart was pounding, and she held her breath. Never taking his eyes off her face, he took the popcorn bowl out of her hands and set it on the coffee table. Irene sat there motionless, holding her hands nervously in her lap. It all seemed to happen so fast, yet time also stood still. He slid a hand behind her neck, his thumb resting on her jaw. He gently held her head in place while he searched her eyes for an answer to his unspoken question. When she didn’t pull away, he drew her face close to his, and then he put his lips on hers. He kissed her hesitantly at first, not knowing how she’d react; but when her interest was unmistakable, he grew more assertive. He put his other arm around her and pulled her tightly against him. The kiss lasted for a long time, yet it didn’t seem nearly long enough for either of them. When it ended, they stayed in one another’s arms. Irene hoped that Max couldn’t tell that she’d never been kissed before – well, at least she’d never been kissed the way that he had just kissed her.
Max was stunned. He had just kissed his best friend – someone he had treated like a sister – up until this moment. He didn’t know what surprised him more, the fact that he had just kissed her or the fact that he had enjoyed it so much. Irene waited patiently for Max to say something about what had just happened. Max soon regained his composure and echoed her earlier question. “Is something wrong?” He paused – “No, nothing’s wrong – well, not anymore!” Max could tell that Irene seemed uneasy. “Are you sorry it happened?”

She smiled a half-smile at him, suddenly becoming shy. “No. No, I’m not sorry it happened.” She paused. She knew she had to ask, but she was afraid and uncertain of what his answer would be, “Are you?”

He looked closely at her, his face serious. “Definitely,” he paused watching as she braced herself for what she thought was going to be a rejection. Then he smiled boldly at her – seeming pleased with the situation. His voice was firm, his answer indisputable, “Definitely – not!”
Chapter 11

In the weeks that followed their first kiss, Irene and Max had started officially dating. For the first time in a long while, Irene wasn’t troubled by her feelings for Max. In the past she had worried that he would end up finding out she was in love with him when he didn’t feel the same about her. Since their first kiss, she had gradually started to let her feelings show.

Irene often reflected on all the fun memories they had shared together, and the places they’d been. They made it a goal to cross all thirty bridges and arches in Central Park. Once they had, she decided that her favorite bridge was the Gothic Bridge. They attended a baseball game at Yankee Stadium where the Boston Red Sox played the New York Yankees. Since Max was a die-hard Red Sox fan – he ended up without a voice for days following the game because of all the screaming he had done. They visited the Conservatory Gardens repeatedly to see the famous Frances Hodgson Burnett Statue. The statue had been sculpted in honor of The Secret Garden, which was her favorite children’s book. It was the last book her mother had read to her before she died. Irene and Max would sit by the statue while reading the classic tale aloud together. They jogged and roller bladed through Tompkins Square Park – which was their favorite park in New York because it was less frequented by tourists. They dined at Serendipity 3, where they sampled some of its acclaimed entrées and desserts that they had heard so much about.

One evening while at Serendipity, Irene told Max that she had a ballet performance coming up for school at the beginning of December. She told him that after
careful consideration – and since they were officially dating – she was going to let him come to the performance. He was taken off guard. He told her that he never thought she’d budge on the terms of the deal they had made so long ago. She then informed him that she was going to be performing a principal role in the ballet. Otherwise, she would not have “budged” on the terms of their deal! He was thrilled about her invitation. Finally he was going to see her dance for the very first time. Irene was in love with him, more than ever before, and it seemed clear from his behavior that he felt something too.

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Irene arrived at Max’s apartment late one Monday evening. The two had agreed to meet earlier that day when they talked on the phone. She hadn’t seen him since the previous Thursday because he needed to go home to Boston for the weekend to take care of some personal matters. She knocked on the door and waited patiently for him to answer. When he opened the door they both smiled, and he stood aside so that she could walk through the doorway. The November night was frigid. She wore a quilted black coat, scarf, and gloves – which he helped her remove after he shut the door. Her cheeks were red from the cold, and her eyes were bright. She rubbed her hands together, trying to warm them up. She looked at Max and smiled. “It’s freezing out there. I’m glad you’re back. Did you have a good trip?”

“Yeah, it was fine. I don’t remember last year being quite this cold. Come on and sit down,” he said gesturing for her to sit on the couch. She sat down – yet he remained standing. He started to nervously pace back and forth – not sure exactly how to begin.
Irene sensed his anxiousness and spoke trying to make things easier for him. “I’m glad you called, Max. You said that you needed to tell me something – and I have something that I need to tell you.”

“You go first,” he responded quickly.

Irene looked up at him, still seated on the couch. She was no longer comfortable. Self-consciously she tucked her hair behind her ear and clasped her hands together to prevent their shaking. She took a deep breath. The moment had finally arrived to tell Max the truth about how she felt about him. “We’ve known each other a long time. Max, you’re my best friend, and you know how much my family loves you.” She paused trying to collect her scattered thoughts before continuing, “I have loved being here in New York with you the past few months. I mean we’ve spent so much time together. It feels just like the good old days. It’s been so amazing, and I want you to know that I have enjoyed every minute of it.”

Irene drew an audible breath. Max looked at her but remained silent, not certain where the conversation was going. She stood up and turned her back to him. “What I’m trying to say and . . . struggling really hard to, is that,” she turned back to face him, “I’m in love with you. I’ve been in love with you for a long time. I finally admitted it the day that we opened our admission letters together.” She smiled sweetly at him. He stood motionless, still not speaking. “Please say something, Max.”

He cleared his throat. “Irene, I called you this afternoon and asked you to come here because I need to tell you that,” he paused, “Tweed and I have decided to get married.” Irene’s smile vanished. Her expression was one of disbelief, and her bright eyes were now beginning to fill with tears. “You know that we were taking a step back
to think things over. Well, we’ve stayed in touch during the last few months, visiting each other off and on. Things have been going really well lately. This past weekend I actually went home to Boston to see Tweed,” he paused, trying to explain his actions as best he could, “and I asked her to marry me. I’m sorry Irene. I never meant to hurt you.” She was devastated by the words she had just heard. She was embarrassed and felt like a fool.

“You went home to visit Tweed and didn’t say anything?” Irene felt acute humiliation. While she had been in New York waiting anxiously for him to return, he was in Boston proposing to his old girlfriend – someone who hated her. She ran her hand through her hair dejectedly. While she and Max had been together, he had also been in contact with Tweed. She really couldn’t blame him for choosing Tweed over her. She was gorgeous and confident, and everyone worshiped her. She felt that the contrast between her and Tweed was more marked at that moment than ever. She felt even more self-conscious, plain, and pathetic than before. Irene felt betrayed and hurt in a way that she had never known or imagined.

“Irene, I’m so sorry. You know how much I love you. I never wanted to hurt you.”

“Please Max, you don’t need to explain. I get it – really I do.” She paused and tried to collect what was left of her dignity. “You love me – you’re just not in love with me.”

“Irene, let me explain . . .”
She looked down at the floor and tried to pull herself together. She gathered her coat off the couch, walked toward the door, turned and looked back into his eyes, and said, “Goodbye, Max.”
Max walked into the theatre for Irene’s ballet performance. An usher gave him a program, and he proceeded to take his seat. He was eager to see Irene.

Max hadn’t been in contact with her since the night that he’d told her about his engagement to Tweed nearly a month ago. He’d called her repeatedly – he’d gone on numerous occasions to the Meredith Willson Residence Hall where she was living – and he’d also waited outside of several of her classes hoping to talk to her, to explain things to her – but so far, he hadn’t had the chance. She hadn’t returned his calls, and it wasn’t long before he learned that she had disconnected her cell phone. After several attempts, he finally caught up with Irene’s roommate as she was leaving the Samuel B. and David Rose Building where the residence hall occupied the top twelve floors. She was also unable to help Max – further explaining that she and Irene rarely saw each other. They had been assigned a room together, as was required of all freshman students attending Juilliard, yet they weren’t close.

It was clear Irene was avoiding him, but he wasn’t going to allow it any longer. She’d have to see him tonight after her performance. He had wondered how Irene would feel about his coming tonight, but this was the first chance he’d had to watch her dance. He wasn’t going to miss the opportunity – even if she didn’t want him there.

He removed his overcoat, sat down in his seat, and opened the program to glance through it. Inside was a small sheet of paper announcing that Irene Duncan would not be performing that evening. Someone else would be filling in for her. Max sat there for a moment, too surprised to move. Why was Irene not performing tonight? His mind
started racing, and he grew increasingly worried. Finally, the anxiety was more than he could stand, and he collected his coat and quickly left the theatre.

Max arrived at Irene’s dorm and was just about to walk into the Rose Building when a girl walked out its front door and stopped him. The girl recognized him – she had seen him with Irene – and thought Irene was lucky to be with someone so handsome. She smiled at him flirtatiously but tried to keep her voice innocent. “Sorry to bother you, but haven’t I seen you around before with Irene Duncan?”

He stopped but was too preoccupied to notice or care that she was flirting with him. He smiled at her politely. “I guess so,” he responded as he tried to end the conversation. “I was just on my way to see if I could find her.” He started opening the door of the building so that he could go inside.

“But Irene’s not there.”

“What?” Max asked turning to face the girl as he let go of the door.

“I said she’s not there.”

“Do you happen to know where she is or when she’ll be back?”

“I don’t know where she’s gone, but I know that she won’t be back – seeing as she moved out.”

Max was silent, too taken back to speak. His heart started pounding, and in confusion he repeated, “She moved out?”

“Yeah.”

“When?”

The girl paused for a moment, thinking to herself, and then looked at Max. “About a month ago, I’d say. Yeah, that’s about right. I passed her as I was coming in
one day. There was a cab out front waiting with some luggage in it. She walked past me on her way out, said goodbye, and got into the cab. I haven’t seen her since.”

“She’s been gone for a month?” He was becoming more alarmed by the second. He’d been trying to track down Irene for weeks, and the whole time she’d been gone. When he had tried to see her in Boston at Thanksgiving, Duncan informed him that she had decided not to come home for the holiday. Max assumed that Irene had simply decided to stay in New York with friends over the break. That was obviously not the case. Max was growing more anxious. “Thanks for your help.”

He hurried off to his apartment. He was online booking a flight to Boston. He was determined to be on a plane that very night.

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Max’s plane from New York arrived in Boston later that evening. He went directly to the Duncan home, knowing it was very late – but not caring. When he arrived, he rang the doorbell rather than letting himself in, due to the time of night. He paced nervously back and forth across the porch while he waited for an answer. Finally, the housekeeper, Mrs. Lewis, answered the door. She was dressed in her pajamas and appeared as if she had been disturbed from a sound sleep.

“Max! Is everything all right?” Duncan exclaimed as he walked down the front stairs into the entryway while he tied his burgundy, silk robe. “Is Blake okay?” With that last question, Mrs. Lewis stood aside so that Max could enter, closed the heavy oak door, and left to return to her room.
Max stopped in the entryway. “Blake’s fine, Duncan. That’s not why I’m here.”

He paused for just a moment never taking his eyes off Duncan’s confused face. Max continued, “Where is she?”

“Who?”

“What do you mean, who?” Max replied sarcastically. “Irene, of course. Why didn’t you tell me that she’d moved?” Max was irritated and was getting angry. “When I came to see her at Thanksgiving, you didn’t say anything about it! You told me that she was still in New York!”

“Actually, if you’ll recall, I never said that Irene stayed in New York – only that she had decided not to come home for the holiday, which she didn’t. So, what I told you was accurate.”

“Duncan, please just tell me where she is.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I promised I wouldn’t.”

“Why would you promise that?” Max questioned.

Duncan hesitated a moment feeling uneasy. “Because Irene asked me not to.”

“She did what? Why would she ask such a thing?”

Before Max could go on Duncan interrupted, “Don’t ask me where she is because I won’t tell you.”

“When is she coming back?”

“She’s not. Max, she may never come back.”

“Please tell me where she is,” Max pleaded. He looked tormented.
“I’m sorry, Max.” Max took a breath and braced himself for what he knew was coming. “I love you like a son, but I won’t let you hurt her again. You broke her heart—and seeing her like that broke mine.”
“All right, Dude, what’s the big emergency?” Luke asked as he walked into Blake’s home. “This had better be good. I haven’t even had a chance to go home yet. I drove straight here when I got your call.”

When Luke was driving home from New Haven for the Christmas holidays, he got a call from Max on his cell phone. Max said that he needed to see him as soon as he was in town and that it was very important.

“Let’s talk in the kitchen.” Max walked to the kitchen and Luke followed. Luke sat down on a bar stool and looked at Max. Max stood, leaning his weight against the granite counter, his arms folded. He said nothing.

Luke observed Max’s appearance. Although Max looked composed, he was far from it. Luke couldn’t help himself and said, “What’s up? You look like crap.” Max didn’t smile or respond to Luke’s joke. He waited patiently for Max to speak, but he didn’t. Luke was growing confused, took a breath, and cleared his throat. “So, are you going to tell me about your ‘big emergency’ or not? I mean as excited as I am too see you, don’t you think it could’ve waited until after I saw my family and unpacked?”

“I don’t know where to start.”

“How about the beginning, genius?” Luke’s face turned serious when he sensed Max’s discomfort. “I was kidding. What’s the matter with you?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Then you’d better start talking.”

“Well, of course you know that Tweed and I are engaged.”
Luke interrupted, “Who doesn’t? Tweed hasn’t stopped talking about it since it happened.” He laughed. “And I thought she liked to talk before. Now it seems that there’s no shutting her up!”

“Yeah, well, my problem comes down to the moment when I told Irene about our engagement. I guess you could say it was kind of a surprise for her.”

“Well, we were all a little surprised when it happened . . . I mean, you guys had broken up, and it seemed like it just kind of came out of nowhere.”

“I guess you could say that for Irene it really came out of nowhere.”

Luke paused for a moment. He knew where this was going and asked pointedly, “And why did it really come out of nowhere for Irene, any more so than for the rest of us?”

“Because we were sort of . . . um, dating at the time.”

“You were what?” Luke questioned in disbelief. After the initial shock, Luke’s mouth spread into a mocking grin. “You and Irene were dating? Now I find out! Man that’s some news that’s actually worth knowing.” Luke sat back and crossed his arms, enjoying Max’s discomfort. “So, Maxwell,” he jabbed, “exactly how long had you two been dating?”

“We started soon after we got to New York. We had a movie night almost every week. One night I couldn’t help myself, and I kissed her.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why’d you kiss her?”
Max took a deep breath as he recalled the fond memory of when he’d kissed Irene for the first time. His voice was a whisper, and he said longingly, “Because I wanted to.” He looked directly at Luke’s silent face. “I wanted to kiss her, Luke – I really wanted to.” He was admitting that fact to Luke – and to himself for the first time.


“We started dating. We were together whenever we had time. We did so many things together. I loved being with her.”

“Let me get this straight. After dating Irene for a while, you came home and proposed to Tweed?”

“That’s right. It’s hard to invest so much time and energy in a relationship – and when things started going well again with Tweed – I felt like I needed to give it another chance. I mean, we’d been together a long time.”

“So, let’s see if I understand this correctly. You broke things off with Tweed – started dating Irene – and loved every minute you spent with her – but you were also seeing Tweed at the same time. Things started going well again with Tweed – and you ended up getting engaged because you’d already invested so much in that relationship. Does that sum it up?”

Max looked depressed and nodded, “Basically.”

“So, what do you want to do now?”

“I want to see Irene.”

Luke shrugged his shoulders. “Okay, then see her.”

“She’s gone. She moved before the semester ended, and Duncan won’t tell me where she is.”
“Irene left New York!” Luke was surprised. “You’ve got to be kidding me. She dropped out of Juilliard in the middle of the semester?” Max nodded but said nothing. Luke thought to himself for a moment and then continued, “I’m assuming that she left after she found out that you and Tweed were engaged?” Max nodded again but still didn’t say anything. “And now Irene’s gone, and her father won’t tell you where she is. Is that right?” Again Max nodded – more uneasy the more Luke clarified the situation. Luke paused then continued without any reservation, “I don’t blame him. I wouldn’t tell you where she was either, you big schmuck!”

“I know, okay? I’ve felt horrible since it happened, and that’s not the worst of it. Not only we’re we dating, but right before I told her I was engaged, she had told me that she was in love with me . . . and that she had been for a long time.” Max was distraught. He ran his hand through his hair. “How could I have done this to her?” His voice clogged with emotion. “It all just happened so fast. I made a mistake, and before I could try to explain, she was gone. She’s gone, Luke.”

“Can you blame her? She probably felt humiliated. I mean she told you that she was in love with you, and you told her that you were engaged to someone else!” It seemed obvious that Irene had felt so embarrassed about what happened that she ended up leaving without telling anyone where she was going.

Luke knew at that moment that although Max was engaged to Tweed, he definitely had feelings for Irene. Finally, Luke asked quietly, “So, I guess the question now is what do you want to do?”

“I want to see Irene.”

“It’s too late. I should have told her that I was still seeing Tweed and tried to explain things to her. Now I may never get the chance.”
Chapter 14

“You’re what!” Tweed screamed at Max. “You’re calling off our engagement? Nobody breaks up with me, and you can bet that nobody’s stupid enough to break up with me twice.”

“Tweed, I’m sorry, I just can’t do this anymore.”

“But we are engaged!”

“Were engaged.”

“But I thought . . .”

“I know what you thought and I’m sorry, but I made a mistake.” Max tried to remain calm, despite that at any moment he was sure Tweed was going to lose it. He felt that she might end up maiming him before they finished this turbulent encounter. Max knew that Luke would have loved to have been there. When Max had told him earlier in the day that he was breaking things off with her that evening, Luke begged him to let him come and watch the spectacle. He told Max it was one of those things when hearing about it simply wouldn’t do it justice. Max knew that Tweed was going to be furious but realized it was time to end their relationship once and for all.

“A mistake!” Tweed shrieked, “I’ll have you know that nobody would ever think of marrying me as a mistake!” Her pulse was raging. How could this be happening to her – it was unimaginable! Her family had been elated when she and Max got engaged. She fantasized often about the life of leisure that she would have as his wife, but now she was frantic because it appeared that wasn’t going to happen. She wanted to know what
had made him change his mind. “Please, Max,” she pleaded in a well-trained voice, “I know that you love me, so why in the world would you want to call off our engagement?”

“I’m calling off our engagement because I’m not in love with you. I’m sorry if I hurt you, Tweed, but you deserve to know the truth.”

She was seething, and her usual seemingly perfect façade was shattered. “You’ll be sorry. I know that you’ll change your mind. You just better hope that I’m still around when you do!”

“I won’t be changing my mind.”

She stood stunned for a moment and finally realized just how final Max’s last statement had been. She had never seen him quite that certain about anything before. Fuming, she stormed out of the kitchen and hurled the front door open in the entryway. She found Luke standing just outside the door on the porch – about to knock.

Luke knew the minute he saw her that Max had already broken off their engagement. He studied her intently for just a moment and realized that she wasn’t nearly as attractive when she was unhappy.

“Get out of my way! Do you mind?”

Luke stepped aside so that she could move past him on the porch. He grinned, enjoying her lack of control. He called after her in a voice of feigned innocence, “Where you off to, Tweedy? Is it time for you to fly away?” She turned around and glared at him, and Luke’s grin became even larger.

“Oh, shut up. You know perfectly well what just happened, but let me tell you something. It’s just a matter of time before Max realizes he’s made a huge mistake.”
“Oh, Max knows that he made a mistake. It’s just a shame that it has nothing whatsoever to do with you!” With that, Luke turned around and walked into the house and closed the door firmly behind him.
“All right, that’s it! I’ve put up with this long enough,” Phyllis proclaimed in exasperation to her niece. Irene was still in her bedroom well past noon with the blinds drawn. She had been depressed ever since she had arrived at her Aunt Phyllis’s home in Paris almost three months ago. Phyllis tossed back the ivory and ice-blue printed damask duvet and walked to the window, where she pulled back the blinds, allowing the sunlight to stream brightly through the windows. Irene leaned up on her elbows to find her aunt watching her from across the room. Phyllis was a dignified and polished woman. She was poised, confident, and even a little eccentric. She was tall and slender – and typically wore designer clothes and jewelry. Her black hair was smooth and straight – cut blunt to her chin. She always looked crisp and pristine – the epitome of good taste. Phyllis was a no-nonsense woman who got what she wanted, and what she wanted right now was for Irene to stop wallowing in self-pity. “Sweetie, trust me – no man’s worth crying that much over.”

“I wasn’t crying,” Irene responded unconvincingly.

“Sulking amounts to nearly the same thing. Do you want to tell me what happened so that we can move on and be done with it?”

Irene shook her head as she whispered, “No, please don’t make me tell you what happened.”
“Your father told me enough. He told me it had something to do with that boy who grew up with you. What was his name again,” Phyllis said, stopping to think for a moment. “Ah yes, Maxwell isn’t it?”

Irene nodded, “That’s right. Maxwell Frost.”

“And?” Phyllis prodded.

“And nothing. I told him that I was in love with him, and I thought that he felt the same way . . . but I was wrong. He was actually engaged to someone else. Satisfied?”

Phyllis observed her niece’s distraught face and said compassionately, “I’m sorry dear. It’s not easy to recover from a broken heart, but sometimes you just have to let it go and try to move on.” Phyllis paused a moment, walked toward Irene, and sat on the edge of her bed. “I love you, darling.” She placed her hand lovingly on her niece’s cheek. “I want to help you, but you have to let me help you.”

“How do I do that?”

“By letting go of the past . . . of Max. Don’t you think it’s time you did?”

“I’m afraid to. I’m afraid to let go of the memories we shared. I’m worried that if I do, I’ll have nothing left to remember.”

“That’s not true. You’ll never forget your mother – and how much she loved you. You haven’t even begun to realize what awaits you.”

Irene burst into tears and wrapped her arms tightly around her aunt’s shoulders. She sobbed for a long while, releasing all the pent up emotions that had been inside for so long. Phyllis said nothing, just kept her arms around her niece while she cried.
Chapter 16

Boston – Two Years Ago

“What should I do?” Tweed whined. “Whenever I go and visit Max at work or at home, he’s polite but never acts like he’s even remotely interested in me.”

“That’s because he’s not,” Luke responded without hesitation or sympathy. Initially, he had allowed her to vent and complain, thinking that it would help her get over Max faster – but he was wrong. Tweed had been trying to reconcile with Max for nearly four years, and in the last few months she had stopped by Luke’s office once a week to rehash. Today Luke had officially reached his limit. He no longer cared if he crushed Tweed’s hopes and dreams. Her relationship with Max was ancient history, and she needed to come to terms with that fact and move on. “Look, I’m sure Max would find your undying devotion heart wrenching, but I don’t – so, cut the crap. You’ve been having plenty of fun since your engagement ended.”

Tweed was sitting on the edge of Luke’s highly polished desk. He had just recently started clerking for one of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court justices by the name of Judge Lowe. William Duncan had been appointed by the governor to the Supreme Court a few years prior, and Luke knew he probably got the job because of his connection with Duncan which reaffirmed to him the good old saying, “It’s not what you know but who you know.” Still, Luke thought it wise to err on the side of caution and not mention Max’s name in front of Duncan in case he didn’t take kindly to discussing the man who had hurt his daughter. However, with Tweed stopping by every week, Luke
was quite certain that Max, Tweed, and Irene were all catapulted to the forefront of Duncan’s mind.

“What do you mean I’ve been having plenty of fun?” Tweed questioned seeming very offended that Luke would dare to make such a suggestion – especially one so loaded with sexual innuendo.

“Look Tweedy, I wasn’t born yesterday, okay? Guy’s talk, and there’s been plenty of talk regarding you and your escapades.” He paused smiling, enjoying her self-consciousness. “I mean just look at you. Why else would you be curled up on my desk like a little sex kitten when there are three chairs next to it?”

“You flatter yourself if you think that I’m flirting with you!”

“Oh, don’t worry. I wouldn’t dream of flattering myself when it comes to you. I know that you’re not sitting like that for my benefit.” With that comment, Luke looked back down at his work.

Tweed was wearing red high-heeled shoes and a very short skirt – her legs crossed and tanned, even though it was the middle of winter. Her blouse hugged her body, leaving little to the imagination, showing her curves to the best of her advantage. She was trying to pretend like she didn’t know that she drove all the men at the courthouse crazy – including Luke. Luke admitted that she made him crazy, just not in the same way as the other guys. Luke was annoyed by her and her presence. He could barely wait for her to hurry and give him the weekly update so that she would leave.

Luke looked up from the document he was reading and spoke to her like he very much doubted her intellectual ability. “You’re sitting like that to drive the three men
standing outside of the room crazy. Maybe even the judges will stop and take a look at you as they walk to and from their chambers. I mean you are quite the sight.”

“Thanks for the compliment,” she responded sarcastically, smiling arrogantly.

“Nobody’s ever complained before about my looks.”

“I guess it’s all a matter of personal preference. For some guys you may be just the thing they’re looking for . . . me on the other hand, not interested.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“Try.” Luke paused and then grinned. “I’ve always preferred classy to trashy.”

“Luke that is without a doubt the meanest thing you’ve ever said to me. I’ve put up with your crap for years because you’re such good friends with Max.”

“Why have you put up with it, and why do you keep coming here? Is it because you think that I’ll put in a good word for you?” Tweed sat there silently, knowing she had been caught in her trap. That was one of the reasons that she had come to see Luke, and it appeared that he’d known it all along. “I have something to say about you, all right. I just can’t promise that it’s good.” With that, Luke started reading once again, noting to himself how much longer it takes to read when you’re being interrupted.

Tweed glared at Luke and slid off his desk. She smiled seductively at the other three men just outside the door who hadn’t been able to take their eyes off her. Then she turned back to him and hissed, “I’m never speaking to you again, Luke Tredsley!”

Luke didn’t glance up from his work this time. “Promise?” There was no response. He knew that she was still there but that she was just too flabbergasted to speak, and he continued, “Okay, see you later, Tweedy. My guess is that you’ll be back next week.” He looked up and smiled devilishly, “Same place, same time. If that works
for you, why don’t I just go ahead and pencil you in now.” With that, Tweed grabbed her purse and stormed out of the room.
Chapter 17

“How’ve you been? How’s work treating you lately?” Luke questioned as he sat down opposite Max at a booth in their favorite diner. They’d loved this place since their college days. The poor lighting added to the dingy feel, and no one but the locals seemed to know just how fantastic the food was. They hadn’t seen each other for some time due to their intense schedules. Luke was swamped with work since accepting the position with Judge Lowe, and Max seemed to work non-stop at The New England Post. Max had been with the newspaper ever since he returned to Boston after completing graduate school in New York. Max ran his uncle’s newspaper these days, and he was very skilled at it. Following the deaths of his parents, everything in his life had gone according to plan – everything except for Irene.

“Work’s fine. Busy, but fine.”

“I wish I could say the same. Perhaps I should mention that Tweed showed up again today wanting to know what your problem is and when you are finally going to come around.”

Max shook his head. “It’s been four years. When is she going to finally get the message?”

“You’re kidding, right? I mean you of all people should know that although Tweed’s easy on the eyes, she’s a little slow in the head,” Luke grinned.

Max responded laughingly, “Man, what was I thinking?”

“You weren’t, well at least not with your brain,” he joked. “Maybe that was your problem all along.”
“Give me a break. I was a senior in high school when we started dating. Even you’ve got to admit that on the surface, Tweed seemed like a good idea.”

“It’s just that after you scratch her surface, you realize that there’s not much underneath – just hot air!” Luke became more serious and cautioned Max, “You do realize that she’s going to keep stopping by my office to ask about you. What do you want me to do? Any chance that you’ll change your mind?”

“No chance. I’m not into her anymore. I realize now that I never really was and am never going to be. She’s not what I want.”

“It’s lucky that you realized that before you got married. Most people don’t find out that they can’t stand someone until after they’ve been married, but by then it’s too late.” Luke sighed dramatically. “Ah, the joys of marital bliss.”

Both friends sat in silence for several moments. Luke could tell that something was on Max’s mind. He seemed pensive. Finally, Max asked, “So, how’s working with Duncan? How’s he doing? Do you see him often?”

Luke knew what Max was really driving at with that question. He knew that Max didn’t care about how work was going. What he really wanted to know was if Duncan had mentioned anything about Irene, but Luke was going to make him spell it out. “I see Duncan pretty often. He seems like he’s doing just fine.”

“You know what I mean.”


“I can’t believe you’re going to make me say it.”
“Why can’t you believe it? Since when have I purposefully done anything helpful?”

Max nodded. “Good point.” He paused as he worked up enough courage to ask the question that he desperately wanted to know, “Has Duncan said anything about Irene? How she is . . . where she is?”

Luke suddenly became very serious when he saw just how difficult that question had been for Max to ask. He shook his head. “I’m sorry, Max. He hasn’t said anything to me about her, and I doubt that he will, considering we’re friends.”

Max nodded his agreement. “I thought that’d be the case, but I just had to check.” He paused, deep in thought. His voice sounded weary. “It’s been four years, Luke. Four years since the last time I saw her, and I’ve tried everything I can think of to find her. I never thought that she’d stay away for so long, and now I don’t know that she’ll ever be back.” He paused again, reflecting on the last time he’d seen Irene – the night she left his Manhattan apartment. “I wonder how she’s doing – what she’s doing. I wonder how she’s changed in the past few years.”
“It’s so good to see you, Daddy. It feels like it’s been forever!” Irene hugged her father exuberantly. She was so excited to see him. Although they talked on the phone and emailed regularly, Duncan wasn’t able to visit Paris as often as he would have liked. He always visited her because Irene refused to return to Boston – not because she didn’t love and miss her home and father – but because she couldn’t bring herself to confront her past – a past she had worked tirelessly to bury over the years while living in Europe.

“It’s so good to see you too! I’ve missed you!” Duncan returned his daughter’s hug and then stood back holding her hands so that he could see how much she had changed since the last time he’d seen her. She certainly took after her mother. He couldn’t believe how incredibly beautiful she’d become. Phyllis and France had obviously agreed with her. Phyllis had never married and didn’t have any children of her own to pamper, so she saw to Irene’s education in areas that had been neglected, due to the fact that her mother had died when she was just a child. Phyllis also helped develop Irene’s fashion sense, and she encouraged her to start dancing again. Ballet once more became Irene’s passion in life, and after several months of rigorous training, she was back in top form. She graduated from the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris, after which she secured a spot as a principal ballerina with the Ballet Company of Europe which performed throughout Europe. Her colleagues and acquaintances genuinely adored her. She was admired for her exquisite beauty and remarkable talent, but it was her infectious charm and zeal for life that people found most
captivating. In many ways, she was experiencing life for the first time. Phyllis’s confidence and glamour had rubbed off on her, and she had changed from a self-conscious, unpolished, and heartbroken girl into a beautiful, sophisticated, and confident woman. Her transformation had happened so gradually that even Irene couldn’t tell just how marked the difference was. Although her appearance had changed in many ways, her bright silver-colored eyes were exactly the same. Her dark brown hair was longer than ever but was no longer unruly. It hung in loose curls down her back. Today she was dressed casually – but still modern and trendy. She wore snug jeans, a black sweater that hugged her trim body, and black pointy-toed shoes.

“Duncan,” Phyllis questioned as she walked into the elegant library, “When did you get here?”

“Just a few minutes ago.” They greeted one another with a warm hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“I trust you had a good trip? Well, let’s go into the dining room for lunch while we hear about it,” Phyllis suggested.

“That sounds great,” Duncan agreed.

The three walked together into the dining room. It was furnished beautifully, and a dazzling crystal chandelier hung from its high ceiling. Centered under the chandelier was a long and ornate dining table. At the far end of the large room, French doors opened onto a terrace. The three enjoyed catching up while they ate. “So, Duncan, how’s everything in Boston?” Phyllis questioned. “Work treating you well?”

“Work’s been a little more stressful than usual lately – that’s why I can only stay a few days – but it’s nothing I can’t handle.”
“Well, I should certainly hope not,” Phyllis teased. “I can’t imagine your not being able to handle anything. You always did enjoy poking your nose into other people’s affairs even when they were none of your business.”

“Some of my clerks have proven to be a slight challenge recently.”

“Why? Are they not up to your level?” Phyllis joked. “Don’t be too hard on them, Duncan. I mean . . . I’m sure they’re just not as interested in your cases as you are. I mean – no offense dear – but most people don’t care how those things turn out, including your clerks. If it’s not directly affecting them, then why should they care?”

“Believe it or not Phyllis, people in the legal community usually have interest in case rulings, whether or not it affects them directly.”

“Enough of this boring legal talk. I’m terribly sorry I asked. The truth is that I was just trying to be polite. If it doesn’t hurt your feelings, Duncan, can we please talk about something more interesting?”

“Like what?” he countered.

“Oh, anything,” she continued without really thinking about her next question. “How’s Boston?”

“Boston’s fine.” Duncan paused. “Speaking of Boston, when are the two of you going to come and visit me?”

“We’re not,” Phyllis responded with a smile to ease the fact that she hadn’t any intention of giving in to what he wanted.

“But Boston’s beautiful this time of year. I would love it if the two of you came to see me.”
“I’m sure you would, Duncan,” she replied impertinently with a ready smile. “It would certainly require less effort on your part – and what man alive, may I ask, isn’t interested in things that require the least amount of effort?” Her question required no answer from him, and she continued, “And what man wouldn’t want Irene to come and visit him? Just look at her. But Irene has a lot going for her. Not only is she beautiful to look at, but after she’s opened her mouth, she’s still enjoyable company.”

He nodded. “Good point.”

“It is indeed,” she agreed. She paused for several seconds and said teasingly, “Well, I guess that you and every other man will just have to get used to disappointment. Anybody who wants to see Irene can come to her, including you. I don’t care if you’re her father. You know I’m the only one who gets special treatment, and that’s because I’m her favorite. Isn’t that right, darling?” Phyllis looked at Irene. “Please correct me if I’m wrong, my dear.”

“I will,” Irene responded winking conspiratorially at her aunt. They all started laughing. “I’m sorry, Dad. You know how much I would love to be able to see you more often.”

“Aren’t you ever going to come back home?” Duncan questioned concerned.

“Not if I can help it,” she responded without any hesitation.

He was somewhat confused. “But why not?”

“Because Boston’s the past,” Irene looked at Phyllis and flashed a confident smile at her before continuing, “and I no longer live in the past.”

Phyllis nodded her approval at Irene. “Well, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll see how dessert’s coming along.” With that, Phyllis left the dining room.
Irene looked at her father who seemed pensive. “What’s the matter . . . you okay?” She was troubled by his mood.

“What?  Oh, I’m fine.”

“You seem worried about something.”

“Do I?” Duncan reflected to himself for sometime. He seemed as though something was very much on his mind. He opened his mouth to speak, but then he shook his head. “It’s nothing, really.” He spoke quickly to cover his discomfort, “I was just going to say that I can’t believe how much you look like your mother.”

Irene smiled sweetly and took a deep breath as she recalled so many poignant memories with her mother. She said wistfully, “I miss her so much. I wish she were still here with me. Don’t get me wrong . . . Aunt Phyllis has been amazing, but it’s just not the same thing.”

“I understand, Irene.” He paused for a moment, choosing his words carefully. “Just remember that your mother will always be with you. Even though she’s gone, she can still lead you in the right direction and help you find the answers that you’re looking for.”
Chapter 19

Boston – Five Days Ago

Duncan glanced over his shoulder uneasily. His tormenter should be here any minute. He had agreed to meeting early in the morning when the chances were good that they wouldn’t be seen. It was early October, and Boston was even colder than usual. He pulled his black wool overcoat tighter around himself in an attempt to help block out the chilly autumn air and the light drizzle of rain. Why did it seem like he’d been waiting so long? With the passing of each second, Duncan became more uncomfortable. He was surveying his surroundings more intently. When they had made contact earlier that week, they had agreed to meet at the Paul Revere Mall just across Unity Street from the Old North Church. He stood listening, his back to the side of the historic statue in the middle of the outdoor square. The only sounds coming from the plaza were the hum of a street lamp and his own uneven breathing that seemed to resonate loudly in the cold, silent night.

At last, Duncan heard footsteps echo eerily off the brick walkway as someone approached the area where he stood. He held his breath, and the other party finally broke through the mist and approached him. “What took you so long?” Duncan questioned growing irritated. “I thought that we’d agreed on three o’clock sharp!”

“Afraid someone will see the esteemed judge and question why he’s out on a night such as this?” the person inquired sarcastically.

“Let’s just get on with it,” Duncan said losing his patience. “What’s so urgent?”
“I’m here to inform you that I’m no longer satisfied with our current arrangement.”

“What do you mean?” Duncan questioned in a worried tone of voice.

“You know precisely what I mean, and it’s going to cost you.”

“This is ridiculous. Your cut’s already fifty percent. This whole situation’s gone far enough, and I’m not going to put up with it any longer!”

“You’re not in a position to barter. You’ll play by my rules, is that clear? It would be unfortunate for the public to learn about the honorable Judge Duncan’s dirty secrets.”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

“You’ll find out!”

Duncan was silent for several seconds thinking quickly to himself as he tried his best to outmaneuver his enemy. Condescendingly, Duncan said, “You stupid fool! Do you honestly believe that I’m the loser here? Do you think that someone who shapes the lives of so many people could ever be intimidated by a nobody? Aren’t you just the quintessential example of the American dream – you’re pathetic!” He laughed arrogantly at his foe’s obvious embarrassment. “Now you listen to me. I’ve already leaked the story to The Post. I’ve told them I’m being blackmailed and that my life – as well as my daughter’s – could be in danger.”

Duncan paused, relishing the moment – his blackmailer caught off guard. He could feel his opponent seething, and he wanted to put a stop to this once and for all. He continued, further antagonizing his adversary, “No one will ever believe the story of a
crook.” He started to laugh smugly. “Your scheme is dead, and people will only hear my side of the story!”

Duncan was still laughing triumphantly when all of a sudden his blackmailer’s control snapped. His enemy lunged, grabbed him, and threw him head first into the granite pedestal of the Paul Revere statue. Duncan hit hard. The crushing blow to his head knocked him to the ground. The attacker’s rage didn’t diminish.Grabbing Duncan by the hair, the judge’s head was smashed into the brick paved plaza over and over again. When the brutal beating finally stopped, the judge’s face was broken, soaked in blood, and unrecognizable. The killer stood momentarily looking down at the judge’s lifeless form, assessed the situation, and knelt back down over him. Rummaging through the judge’s pockets with now bloodied gloves – the killer removed Duncan’s wallet, watch, and a tape recorder – and then vanished into the night.
“Are you ready to go yet?” Phyllis called up the stairs to her niece.

“I’m coming,” Irene called from her bedroom. “I’m just putting on my shoes and will be right down.”

“All right, dear, I’ll wait for you in the library.” Phyllis walked into the library and removed a leather bound, first edition from one of the shelves. She might as well read a little while she waited. She opened the book’s cover, but before she turned the first page, the telephone rang. Phyllis re-shut the cover and walked to the phone. She debated momentarily whether or not to answer it. She didn’t have much time for what could perhaps end up being a lengthy conversation because then her shopping excursion with Irene would be delayed even more. Finally, she conceded and picked up the phone.

“Bonjour.”

“Hello?”

“Yes?”

“May I speak with Ms. Phyllis Duncan please?”

“Speaking.”

“Ms. Duncan, this is Lieutenant Drake with the Boston Police Department.”

Phyllis stood motionless. Her heart started to pound, and her hands were cold. Why in the world would the Boston police be calling her? In a worried tone she answered, “Yes, Lieutenant, what can I do for you?”
“Ms. Duncan, there is really no easy way for me to tell you this.” Lieutenant Drake paused, trying to break the dreadful news as gently as possible. “Your brother, Judge William Duncan, was found dead two days ago in Boston.” There was no response, and he continued uneasily. “I’m sorry for your loss.” When there was still no answer, Lieutenant Drake inquired, “Ms. Duncan?”

Phyllis’s eyes brimmed with tears, and her voice clogged with emotion. “I’m here. I’m sorry, Lieutenant, but I’m afraid that you’ve given me quite a shock.” She tried to collect her composure as well as she could. “What happened?”

“We don’t know everything yet, Ma’am. He had been severely beaten – and no identification was found on his person – so it took us a little longer to identify him. We’re not sure if it was a robbery or what exactly. We’re still investigating – yet let me assure you that we’re doing everything we can to solve this.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Phyllis replied diplomatically, “I’m sure that you are.”

“We have another challenge, Ms. Duncan. We seem to be having some trouble locating Judge Duncan’s daughter. Do you know where we might find her?”

“My niece is actually here in Paris with me.”

“May I speak with her?”

Just then, Phyllis looked up and saw Irene walk through the double doors of the library. Phyllis felt sick, dreading the moment when Irene was going to hear the startling news for herself. Her mind was racing, wondering how to break it to Irene. Finally, she concentrated again on the Lieutenant’s question and responded tactfully, “No, I’ll tell her myself if you don’t mind. We’ll leave Paris as soon as possible. Once we’ve arrived in town, we’ll contact you.”
Irene was puzzled and silently observed her aunt, hearing only Phyllis’s side of the ambiguous conversation. As Phyllis ended the phone call with Lieutenant Drake, she jotted down his information and said, “Thank you for doing all that you can.” With that, she hung up the phone and then turned to face Irene. She didn’t want to break the news to Irene about her father’s murder but knew that she had to. She knew that she was the best person to tell Irene the devastating truth.

Irene could tell from her aunt’s behavior that something was terribly wrong. “What’s the matter?” Phyllis’s grief was visible on her face as she stood facing Irene. “I can tell something’s wrong. Please just tell me what it is!”

“Irene, that was the Boston police.” Irene stopped breathing and waited anxiously to hear the rest of her aunt’s explanation. “Your father,” Phyllis paused trying to hold back the tears that threatened to overflow at any second, “your father’s dead. He was beaten to death.”

Irene stood frozen in shock as she tried to register the unthinkable news. She gasped and then started to sob hysterically. Phyllis ran to Irene before she collapsed and put her arms around her. No longer able to suppress her own grief, she began to cry as well. They held one another tightly as they tried to comfort each other. They both were in shock. After some time, Phyllis collected herself. “We need to pack. We’ve got to be in Boston as soon as possible, and I’m sure the police will have some questions for us once we arrive.” Irene nodded her agreement to her aunt. With the news of her father’s death, it seemed as though part of Irene had died too. How much misfortune could one young woman stand, Phyllis thought to herself. She reflected on the numerous
heartbreaks that Irene had already endured at her age. She didn’t know whether Irene
could bear another heartbreak, especially one of this magnitude.

At last, Irene said numbly, “I’ll go get ready.” She left the library and returned to
her room to prepare for their departure. Under very tragic circumstances, Irene was
returning home to Boston for the first time in six years.
Chapter 21

Boston – Present Day

They both just stared at one another, neither moving. Irene’s apprehensive eyes locked with Max’s expectant ones. “Irene, did you hear me?” Phyllis questioned, joining her niece and Christopher Blake at Duncan’s wake.

The question from Phyllis woke Irene from her reverie and brought her once again back to the moment. “Excuse me?” Irene broke eye contact with Max and turned her attention toward her aunt. Irene tried to compose herself. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t listening. I’m afraid I’m a little distracted.”

“Darling, I said that the governor has just arrived and would like to offer his condolences. Will you excuse us, Blake?”

Blake smiled pleasantly at Phyllis and nodded, “Of course.” Blake affectionately took Irene’s hands as he gave her a parting kiss on the cheek. “Remember what I told you, Irene. We’re always here for you.”

“Thank you, Blake,” Irene responded sweetly.

Phyllis surveyed the room and found that Max had started to weave his way through the crowd toward them. Before he was able to reach them, Phyllis took Irene supportively by the elbow and whisked her away from the crowded room never giving him the chance to approach her.

Max stopped dead in his tracks as he watched Irene leave the room. His mind was racing. He didn’t remember Irene being so striking. Her face was incredibly beautiful. Had she always been so tall and slender? He recalled how she used to dress.
Her clothes were often too big – masking her small frame – nothing like the tailored black suit she was wearing today. He stood motionless in the sea of people and thought about Irene. He realized that she had changed a lot during the past six years, but she also seemed just the same.

From where he stood, Luke witnessed the interaction that had just taken place between Max and Irene. He excused himself from a group of his fellow clerks and walked toward Max – who stood alone in the middle of the room – and moved to his side. He knew why Max couldn’t bring himself to move or speak. Luke had noticed Irene’s transformation as well. He concluded that during the past six years, Irene had become one of the most beautiful women that he’d ever seen. He patted Max’s shoulder sympathetically. “Man, you totally blew it!”

“Thanks, Luke.” Max took a deep breath and continued, “I knew even before seeing her today that I’d blown it. I’ve known that for years.”
Chapter 22

“Are the police going to find out what happened that night?” Duncan’s killer contemplated once again. The murderer had re-played that night repeatedly, speculating on what the police may have learned during the past few days. Following Duncan’s death, the killer had watched and read the news coverage about the murder incessantly to see if anything could be learned from the media, but the police said it was premature to name any suspects or comment on possible motives concerning what may have happened the night Judge Duncan was killed.

The investigation was beginning to wear on the murderer’s nerves. During the subsequent days following Duncan’s death, the police still hadn’t generated any new leads. With each passing day, the murderer became more neurotic and began to doubt how successfully the crime had been carried out. The killer constantly questioned, “What exactly do the police know? Did I make any mistakes that will point to me? Would there have been a better way of disposing of the judge to prevent him from revealing the truth?”

The murderer muted the television and picked up the tape recorder that was sitting on the coffee table – the recorder that had been found in the judge’s pocket at the Paul Revere Mall. The killer had listened to it many times since that night hoping to learn something. The murderer pressed play once again and heard the exchange that had taken place moments before the judge’s death. Duncan’s voice resounded through the otherwise silent room, “I’ve already leaked the story to The Post. I’ve told them I’m being blackmailed and that my life – as well as my daughter’s – could be in danger.”
The killer shut off the tape recorder and wondered which reporter Duncan had contacted. The murderer questioned, “Who did he tell his story to, and how much is known about the blackmail?” While those questions were weighing heavily on the killer’s mind, the question that needed answering more than any other was, “Did I get away with murder, and how long will it be before I know?”

With questions still unanswered, the killer un-muted the television and tried to focus again on the news coverage. Before his death, blackmailing the judge had been riveting – it was invigorating to inflict pain on someone of his intellectual prowess and social status. Now, however, Duncan’s murderer realized the tormentor had become the tormented.
Max turned on the television in his large, corner office at The Post. He’d had a particularly demanding week. He still hadn’t had a chance to speak with Irene. He’d only seen her from a distance at the wake and on television. Each time Max saw her, he was taken off guard. The local news stations were covering Duncan’s murder – one special report after another – constant footage of Irene and her Aunt Phyllis trying to dodge the media frenzy.

Max removed his suit coat and placed it on the back of his chair. Then he loosened his tie and sat down at his desk which was hardly visible underneath the mounds of paperwork, photographs, and various news clippings. The police still didn’t have a suspect. Leaks from the investigation pointed to a robbery gone wrong. Max considered this theory very unlikely. If it were a mugging, the criminal would have taken Duncan’s valuables and fled the scene as quickly as possible. A petty criminal would likely not want to get caught up in the middle of a high profile murder. No, based on the brutality of Duncan’s injuries, this was a crime of passion. Max took a frustrated breath as he ran his hands through his hair. His instinct told him that something wasn’t right – but what? He didn’t believe that the explanation given by the police was accurate. He felt that there was more to the murder than the obvious facts, and he was determined to do whatever it took to uncover the truth.

Irene and Phyllis would be the best people to talk with about Duncan’s recent activities. They were the best sources to know any critical information involving him that was suspicious or out of the ordinary. They could point to a possible motive, which
in turn could lead to the murderer. But would Irene and Phyllis even talk to him – let alone answer his questions? How and when would he get the chance to see Irene? Law enforcement was shielding them, and the rare times Irene and Phyllis were seen in public, they were quickly escorted to a waiting vehicle or private location.

Max started re-reading the police and medical examiner’s reports and tried to make sense of the piles of information. He knew that he was missing something – his only question was what? As much as he wanted answers – what he wanted even more was the chance to see Irene.
Chapter 24

“We appreciate that you would come in today. We know how difficult it must be for you right now,” Lieutenant Drake said sympathetically to Irene and Phyllis as they all sat down in his office. Drake was a middle-aged man who didn’t seem to fit the stereotype of a hard-nosed police officer. His appearance was ordinary at best, and he wasn’t the least bit intimidating. However, he’d been in law enforcement since he was a young man, and his performance record was impressive. He had a reputation for being one of the finest officers in the field. “We hope that by talking with you we may be better able to determine exactly what happened the night that the judge was killed.”

Phyllis nodded. “We understand Lieutenant. We would like to help in any way we can. We appreciate your waiting until after Duncan’s wake to speak with us.”

Drake paused and looked at Irene. He hoped that he would be able to learn something from her. She hadn’t said a word since she’d arrived at the police station. “I should begin by telling you that I know how difficult the details will be for you to hear, but I’ll do my best to explain the situation as delicately as possible.” He paused again as he finished sorting through his meticulous notes. “This is what we know for certain. Judge Duncan’s body was found several hours after his murder. It took us a while to identify his body due to the extent of the facial injuries and because he didn’t have any identification on him. It appears that the beating is what killed him. There were no other injuries on his body.”
Drake paused. “So, here are some theories for what we believe happened that night. The first possibility is a robbery. If the Judge usually carried a wallet or wore a watch, they were missing. We’re not sure if any other valuables were also stolen.

“Yes,” Phyllis acknowledged, “you and I had talked about this possibility over the phone.”

“Another possible explanation is that this had something to do with drugs.

“I beg your pardon?” Irene questioned, speaking out for the first time since she’d arrived.

“I’m very sorry, Ms. Duncan . . .”

“Please, Lieutenant, feel free to call me Irene.”

Drake smiled amiably at Irene and then continued, “I’m sorry, Irene, to have to tell you this – but your father’s autopsy report shows that high levels of narcotics were in his system. Our investigation has uncovered that your father had been abusing prescription drugs for some time.”

“He what?” Phyllis questioned in a voice of disbelief. “I can’t believe it.” She and Irene exchanged surprised glances with one another while they tried to process the startling news.

“I gather from your reactions that neither of you knew anything concerning his drug abuse?” The women nodded their agreement. “That’s what I was afraid of. I was hoping that you might be able to shed some light on the information.”

“Do you honestly believe that my father’s drug use could have led to his murder? What could anyone else gain from this?”
“One thing is for certain – your father had something that someone wanted badly enough to kill him for it.”

The women sat there, unable to speak. “At this point in our investigation we’ve reached an impasse – and if anything comes to mind that you think could help, please let us know.” Lieutenant Drake reached into his coat pocket and removed his business card. “If you think of anything, anything at all, I want you to call me, day or night. I’ve written my home phone number as well.”

Phyllis took the card from Drake as she said, “Indeed we will, Lieutenant.” The three stood as the conversation came to a close. Phyllis and Irene were just about to leave the office when Phyllis spoke again. “Irene and I have talked about the possibility of returning to Paris in the near future. If we decide to leave soon, is that going to be a problem?”

“It shouldn’t be, as long as we’re able to contact you in Paris.”

“Certainly, Lieutenant,” Phyllis agreed. “Please feel free to contact us any time.” She paused and then continued, “Do you know when my brother’s body will be released? We’ve left the arrangements for his cremation in the care of Christopher Blake.”

“It’s still too soon to say. We’ll contact you and Mr. Blake as soon as possible.”

“We’d appreciate that. Thank you again, Lieutenant.” With that, Phyllis and Irene shook hands with him, said goodbye, and then left the police station.

Once they were on their way back to the Duncan home, Phyllis finally spoke her thoughts aloud. “Something just doesn’t seem right. I can’t believe that Duncan was involved in drugs. How could I not know something like that?” She looked at Irene who seemed pensive. “Are you okay, Irene?”
Irene nodded. She looked worn out. “I’m just so overwhelmed by everything that’s happened since we’ve been back. I don’t know what to think anymore.”

“I know how hard this has all been for you, Irene. We can go back to Paris or if you feel like you need to stay in Boston, I’ll stay with you as long as you want.” Phyllis looked intently at her niece. “What do you want to do?”

“I want to go back to Paris. My life made sense there. Hopefully if I go back, it will make sense again.”

Phyllis nodded. “I’ll plan for our return to Paris as soon as possible.” She paused and then continued uncomfortably, “Is there any business that you need to take care of while you’re still in Boston?”

“Such as?”

“You know perfectly well to what I’m referring.”

“If you’re asking what I think you’re asking, then the answer to your question is ‘No.’ Max and I have nothing left to discuss. I’ve moved on – and so has he.”

Phyllis knew better than to believe what Irene was telling her. She knew that regardless of what Irene said that she had never truly moved on.

She looked straight ahead and countered in a voice intended to rouse Irene’s suspicion, “So, Max has moved on has he?” Irene looked at her meaningfully and waited for her to elaborate further. Phyllis exhaled dramatically. “If you say so, then who am I to argue?”
“So, how’s the newspaper business?” Luke questioned as he stood in the doorway to Max’s office at *The New England Post*. Max looked up from his work and saw that his friend looked exhausted and disheveled, and that was putting it nicely. He knew that Luke’s work had been even more demanding than usual during the past couple of weeks. Since Duncan’s death, the media had bombarded everyone relentlessly, particularly anyone who had a connection – even a minor one – with him in the hope of learning something about the murder. News stations and reporters from all over New England descended on Boston. The John Adams Courthouse, where Duncan had served as one of the seven justices on the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, was constantly swarming with reporters waiting just outside its doors. Luke and his fellow colleagues were hounded – some even harassed – for information when they arrived or left work. It now seemed that the production was irritating Luke. “Have things been any worse than normal?”

“Apparently I should be asking you the same thing,” Max joked as he gestured for Luke to come in and sit down. Luke dropped his briefcase on an end table and then lounged on the leather sofa in the office. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but based upon your appearance, I’m guessing things haven’t calmed down much at the courthouse.”

“To say the least – it’s been a nightmare. No offense, Max, but people in your profession are obnoxious. I can barely get through the doors at work each morning. I mean, I hardly knew the man. Besides Irene and her aunt, you and Blake are the best people for the media to interview. You guys actually knew him outside of work. Over
the years I’ve gone to his house plenty of times, but he was never there.” Luke took a
deep breath as he rubbed his eyes. “From now on I’m going to tell the vultures about
your connection with Duncan and give them your contact information just to get them off
my back!”

“That would be a great idea,” Max countered sarcastically. “I wonder which story
they’d find more interesting – my connection to Duncan or the fact that I jilted his
daughter.

“Speaking of Irene,” Luke said sitting up, “you ever talk to her?”

Max shook his head. “Not yet. I went to her house two days ago, and Mrs. Lewis, the housekeeper – I don’t know if you remember her or not – anyway, Mrs. Lewis
told me that Irene and Phyllis had left Boston . . . indefinitely.”

all these years, you still didn’t get the chance to talk to her.” Luke laughed. “Man, she
must really hate your guts!”

Max started to laugh as well. “I’m sure she does, but this time I’m not going to
let her get away so easily.” Luke looked questioningly at his friend and waited for Max
to elaborate. “The last time I met Irene’s aunt was when I was eleven. She came to
Boston for Irene’s mom’s funeral. I’ve done some research the past two days on Phyllis
Duncan. I’ve decided that if I find her that she in turn can lead me to Irene. It appears
that Phyllis has a home in Paris. She’s lived there for years, even before Irene’s mother
died.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”
“I’ll bet you that really ugly tie you’re wearing that Irene’s been living in Paris this entire time. I just can’t believe that I never thought of it until now. So, that’s my theory on Irene’s whereabouts, and now I’m going to find out whether or not it’s true.”

“And how exactly are you going to do that?”

“Easy. I’m going to ask Phyllis?”

“How do you know that she’ll even talk to you? Since Irene won’t, it’s pretty safe to assume that her aunt won’t either. I doubt that Phyllis Duncan’s the kind of woman susceptible to your charms.”

“It’ll be pretty hard to ignore me when I show up on her doorstep.” Luke just stared at Max as though he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “What’s the matter Luke – did I take you by surprise?”

“It’s the first time in years that you haven’t been an idiot, so of course, I’m surprised,” Luke grinned. “So, you’re finally going after her, huh? What are you going to say to Irene when – or maybe I should say if – you finally talk to her?” he questioned.

“I’m going to tell her that something about her father’s murder doesn’t add up. The last time Duncan called me he sounded uneasy. He said that everything was fine but that he needed to give me something – that he couldn’t say what it was over the phone. We were going to meet for dinner, but he was killed two days before that. I know that Duncan’s murder had nothing to do with a robbery. I’m going to find out what really happened the night that he died. To do that, I need Irene’s help. She’s the person who knows about his acquaintances, social circles, activities, and aspirations. Any of these things could have led to his death. The other person who’s privy to inside information is you.”
“Me? What could I possibly know that could help?”

“You worked closely with Duncan, his fellow judges, and all of their law clerks. His murder could be connected to his work. If something doesn’t add up, and we find out what, we may be able to find the piece of the puzzle that’s missing. That’s the key to finding his killer.”

“Why are you trying to solve his murder? That’s not really your area of expertise. I mean no offense, but isn’t your job reporting the news rather than solving it? We really have nothing to go on because Duncan never told you what he needed to give you. Maybe he needed to give you a kick in the pants or a smack to the head. Anything’s possible.”

Max became serious. “I just can’t give up until I find out what really happened that night.”

“Why?”

“Because I let Irene down, Luke, and now I’m going to do all that I can to try to repair the damage. I want to find out who did this to her father, and I want her to have some sense of resolution.”

Luke knew that Max desperately wanted to uncover the truth about Duncan’s murder because of his feelings for Irene. Max had loved Irene like a sister when they were growing up – but they weren’t children any longer – and he knew that Max had fallen for her. He knew that Max wanted to talk to Irene about far more than her father’s murder. He wanted to talk to her about the friendship they’d lost. He looked seriously at Max and said, “Is it Irene who needs resolution, Max, or is it you?”
Max checked the house number again and knocked on the door. The bronze knocker fell with a thud. Max stood, holding his breath. Finally, the door opened. “Bon jour, M’sieur.”

“Hello,” Max responded to the man at the door. “May I please speak with Ms. Phyllis Duncan?”

“Is she expecting you?”

“No, no she’s definitely not expecting me.”

“May I have your name, M’sieur?”

“Maxwell Frost.”

“Won’t you please come in, Mr. Frost,” the butler said standing aside so that Max could enter Phyllis’s home.

“Thank you,” he responded pleasantly as he walked into the entryway. He looked briefly at the lavish surroundings and then followed the butler down the hall and into the dark walnut paneled library.

“If you’d be good enough to wait here, M’sieur, I’ll see if Ms. Duncan’s available.”

He nodded, “Certainly.” The butler shut the doors softly behind him, and Max looked curiously about the room in an effort to help pass the time. After a while, the doors to the library opened, and Phyllis stepped through them.
Phyllis approached Max. “Maxwell Frost? I’m Phyllis Duncan. You wished to speak with me?” She firmly shook his outstretched hand. “Won’t you sit down?” Phyllis asked gesturing toward a high-backed leather chair. He sat down, but he was far from comfortable. “May I offer you something to drink?”

“No thank you, Ms. Duncan,” Max responded trying to mask his anxiousness. The only person he was more afraid of than Phyllis at that moment was her niece. He was extremely nervous because he didn’t know exactly how she was going to react to his showing up at her home. So far, she’d been very polite, but he believed that she might very well be the type of person who would tell someone where to go and, all the while, have a smile on her face.

Max cleared his throat as he summoned his courage. “I’m sure you don’t remember me, Ms. Duncan, but we’ve actually met – many years ago when Seville Duncan passed away. I’m Christopher Blake’s nephew.”

“Of course,” she responded pleasantly. “May I call you Max?”

“Please do.”

Phyllis sat down in a chair across from him. “So tell me, Max, what brings you to Paris. You’re certainly a long way from home.”

“I’m here to see Irene.”

“Really? Well, I’m sorry, but I’m afraid that she isn’t here.”

He looked stunned. “What? Are you telling me that Irene hasn’t been living here?”

“No, I never said that.”

“Please, do you know where I can find her? I really need to speak with her.”
“About what?”

“About something stupid I did when we were living in New York.”

“That was a long time ago, Max. I’m sure you’ve moved on. I know Irene has. So, Max, do you have any children? I understand you’ve been married for several years now and just wondered. I apologize for asking.”

“Please don’t apologize – it’s just that I’ve never been married.”

Phyllis tried to suppress her smile at this unexpected news, and she had to breathe deeply to keep her voice from sounding uneven. “So, you called it off, did you? Irene mentioned you were engaged. I’m sure that must have been very difficult for you.”

“Actually I found it quite easy – due to the fact that I wasn’t in love with my fiancée’.”

She nodded. “I see.”

“Do you?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“If you could truly see the situation, then you’d know why I have to find Irene. I’ve tried to move on, but I can’t. I feel awful about what happened. If I’m ever going to get over it, then I have to see Irene again so that I can at least let her know that I’m sorry. I hope that you believe me, Ms. Duncan. I need to know where Irene is so that I can get on with my life.”

“What am I supposed to think, Max? You hurt my niece terribly, and now you come here and just expect me to divulge her whereabouts?” She took a deep breath to steady herself. “I’m sorry if I seem hesitant to assist the man who broke my niece’s
heart, but why on earth should I help you when you may end up hurting her all over again?”

“You certainly have no reason to trust me, and if I were in your position, I’d probably say the same thing.” He paused and then continued, “I can only hope that you’ll help me in spite of the pain I’ve caused.”

Phyllis pondered to herself for a moment what Irene’s reaction would be if Max showed up in Prague, where she was currently performing with her ballet company. Would Irene be angry with her for revealing her location? Max stood to leave, believing that she did not intend to help him. “I’m sorry for taking so much of your time, Ms. Duncan. I’ll show myself out.”

She took a long look at his tortured face and realized that he had also experienced considerable distress during the past several years. She stood and took a deep breath, knowing that once she’d spoken, there would be no turning back. “Irene’s in Prague.”

He looked taken back as if he couldn’t believe that she was helping him. “Prague?”

“Yes, she’s there performing.”

“I don’t know what to say.” He cleared his throat. “Thank you, Ms. Duncan.”

“Thank me after you see Irene. When she finds out that I told you where to find her, it’s possible that she won’t be pleased with either one of us.”

Phyllis wrote down the address of the theatre where Irene was dancing in Prague and handed it to Max. She walked him to the front door and stood on the porch while he got into the waiting taxi. Phyllis waved goodbye to Max. He waved back, and she
watched as the cab moved down the street and vanished around a corner. Max was on his way to Prague. He’d finally see Irene.
Max arrived at the theatre where Irene was performing after the ballet had already begun. It was dark inside except for the stage, so he didn’t bother with the playbill. After a few minutes, Irene appeared on stage. She looked stunning. He was astounded. Her dancing was breathtaking. He’d never seen her before in her element, and now that he had, it made him more nervous than ever to see her. At intermission, Max glanced through his program and found Irene’s picture and biography. He was surprised to see that Irene was listed in the playbill as Irene Seville. Irene wasn’t simply talented, she was extraordinary. When the ballet ended and it was time for Irene’s bow for the curtain call, she moved to the center of the stage, looked up, and closed her eyes for a moment. She then looked back and smiled beautifully at the audience as she took a graceful bow. Max suddenly remembered the conversation that Irene and her mother had had as Seville lay dying. He recalled how accurate Seville’s last words had been to Irene. She had indeed danced like an angel. He thought it was very fitting that she had taken her mother’s name. She really had created a brand new life for herself in Europe. He stood and joined the rest of the audience as they gave the performers a standing ovation.

After the curtain fell, the spectators slowly trickled out of the theatre. Max stopped an usher who was passing by. “Excuse me, Sir, do you speak English?”

“Yes, I do,” replied the usher. His wrinkled face was kind and his white hair shiny and smooth.
“Excellent. I actually need to see one of the performers.” Max wondered for a moment the best strategy to ensure the usher’s cooperation. “She actually doesn’t know that I’m here. I’m a friend of hers from America, and I wanted to surprise her.” Max knew that when Irene saw him she would be very surprised.

Not knowing the situation, the usher thought the gesture very sweet. “I suppose that you can wait in the green room while I get your friend. Who is she?”

“Irene Seville.”

The usher smiled and took a dramatic breath. “Ah, Ms. Seville – she is lovely.”

“Yes, she is.”

He followed the usher to the green room. “If you’ll wait here, I’ll find Ms. Seville.”

“Thank you.”

With that, the usher went to the ladies dressing room and knocked on the door.

“Ladies, I need to speak with Ms. Irene Seville.”

Just then, Irene came out of the dressing room. She was no longer in her costume, but her hair was still pulled back in a bun. “Hello, I’m Irene Seville. What can I do for you?”

“Ms. Seville, there is a friend of yours waiting to see you in the green room.”

Irene was surprised. Who would be coming to see her here? It must be her aunt she thought. Phyllis had surprised Irene on a few occasions when she’d shown up at her performances without telling her she was coming. Irene smiled at the usher and said amiably, “Would you please tell my friend that I’ll be there in just a few minutes?”

The usher nodded. “Certainly.”
She walked back into the dressing room, which had already cleared out, picked up her handbag, and walked toward the green room as she said goodnight to several of her colleagues on the way. Irene opened the door to the green room – suddenly stopped in her tracks – the “friend” waiting for her was none other than Maxwell Frost.
Chapter 28

Irene’s heart was racing. When she spoke, her voice was faint. “Max?”

“Yes,” Max responded.

“What are you doing here?”

Max tried to lighten the mood, “We did have a deal, remember?”

“You didn’t answer my question. Why are you here?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

Irene shook her head. “Not really. How did you find me?”

“Your aunt told me where you were.”

“She did?” Irene was silent for a moment. “And why did you come all the way to Prague to see me?”

“I didn’t get a chance to speak with you when you were home, and I needed to see you again . . . I needed to tell you how sorry I am about your dad.”

“Thank you, Max. That means a lot to me – but for you to come all this way? I mean we haven’t spoken to each other in years. I would have thought you’d forgotten all about me by now.”

“Never.”

Taken back slightly, Irene changed the subject. “So, how long will you be in town?”

“Not long at all. I’m leaving in the morning.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. It was good to see you again – really it was.”
“Irene . . . can we have dinner together before I leave? It would be nice to catch up and to hear all about what you’ve been doing.”

Irene smiled slightly and nodded. “I’d like that.”

“I can’t tell you what a relief it is to hear you say that. I was sure you might not even talk to me.”

Irene’s smile grew larger. “Oh, Max, I thought you knew me better than that.”
Luke was growing irritated. Max wanted him to look for something that didn’t add up at work – something suspicious. He sat at his desk weeding through piles of information thinking that it would have been easier if Max had asked him to find something that actually did add up. So far, his search had gone nowhere. His fellow legal clerk, Tom Robinson, was sick and had left a little early for the day, so Luke had their small office to himself. He had left the door to the office open as he often did and had been trying to work for some time despite the raised voices coming from the room just around the corner that belonged to the late Judge Duncan’s law clerks. Luke didn’t give their intense conversation much thought because it seemed that the two of them were always arguing. Bryson Walker and Adam Higgs had been Duncan’s legal clerks and were now slated to work for the new Supreme Court justice who had just been appointed by the governor. Bryson and Adam’s exchange soon escalated to the point that Luke had no choice but to notice.

Luke threw down his pen in exasperation and stood, walking determinedly out of his office toward theirs. It was time he told them to shut up. He’d put up with their whining long enough, and he couldn’t take it anymore. Luke rounded the corner and ran smack into the back of another legal clerk, Sarah Jane Stephens. He grabbed Sarah Jane by the shoulders in an attempt to steady the two of them and said loudly, “What the . . .”

Before he could continue, Sarah Jane whipped around to face him and placed her hand over his mouth to prevent his speaking any further. He was confused by her strange
behavior but didn’t question it. The two of them backed silently away from Bryson and
Adam’s closed office door and made it around the corner toward Luke’s just in time. The
door to Bryson and Adam’s office opened, and one of them spoke, “I thought I heard
something.”

Luke didn’t wait for the two men to investigate further whether or not someone
had been listening to their private conversation. He led Sarah Jane into his office and
shut the door quietly behind them. They were both silent for several seconds, listening to
make sure they hadn’t been discovered. When Luke didn’t hear anything coming from
the hall for some time, he opened the door cautiously and glanced out. The hall was
empty. He re-shut the door and turned around to face Sarah Jane. “What was that all
about?”

She looked at Luke with an innocent face in an attempt to cover her guilt. “I
don’t know what you mean.”

“Pretty sure you do. Hasn’t anyone ever told you that coy doesn’t become you,
darling?” He walked over to her until he stood close in front of her. His voice was
slightly agitated. “Sweetie, don’t try lying to me. I’m not stupid like most of the men
you know. What were you doing eavesdropping outside their office?”

“I hate to break it to you, darling, but men don’t get to judge their own stupidity.
If they did, then they would never be guilty of doing anything stupid, which I can
personally attest is decidedly not the case.” She looked at him shrewdly and then
continued. “You know, I don’t think my eavesdropping is what’s really bothering you.”

“No? Then what is? By all means enlighten me since I apparently don’t know
what I’m thinking,” he said sarcastically.
“I think that you’re all bent out of shape because instead of standing outside Bryson and Adam’s office door, you’d prefer it if I was waiting outside yours!” Luke couldn’t bring himself to respond, and then she persisted, “Am I getting warm?”

He wasn’t about to admit that she’d hit close to home with that last comment. He had been interested in her ever since she’d started clerking for Judge Jewkes a few months prior, but he didn’t understand her. Most women found him more than appealing, but Sarah Jane wouldn’t give him the time of day. He couldn’t quite decide what it was that he liked about her so much. Maybe it was how intelligent she was, or maybe it was her appearance. She was tall and had long, wavy blonde hair. Despite her fair hair, she had olive skin and dark brown eyes. She was something of an enigma. When he had first met her, she seemed timid. Yet he soon realized that in actuality, she was more fiery than any woman he’d known. Maybe that’s what he liked about her – he’d finally met a woman whose wit was quick enough to match his own.

“Sarah Jane, do you seriously think that I’d be bothered by your being outside another man’s door?” he questioned. “Trust me, that’s the last thing I’d be worried about. Why would I need to beg for your attention when I’m sure that there are plenty of other women who would be more than happy to oblige?”

His comment about all the other women who were interested in him disappointed her, and she couldn’t prevent her feelings from showing for a moment. Her voice lacked its usual sassiness. “I’m sure there are.”

With that, Sarah Jane moved past him and was just about to open the door when he put his hand on it to prevent her from leaving. She turned around and found him
standing close in front of her. She took a step back and felt the door directly behind her, not allowing her to retreat any farther. He placed a hand on either side of her.

Luke grinned, his tone of voice teasing. “You know from that last comment, I’d almost think you’re jealous.”

She looked disgusted. “I beg your pardon? Why would I care if you have other women shamelessly throwing themselves at you?”

“Because you like me. Come on, Sarah Jane,” Luke goaded, “Just admit that you’re a little jealous because you like me.”

Sarah Jane knew that Luke Tredsley had a long line of women in love with him, and she wasn’t about to admit that she liked him, even if it were true. She believed if he knew of her interest, he would string her along and then drop her the moment he became fascinated with someone else. She didn’t want to find out the hard way if her suspicions were true, and so she never acted even remotely interested in him. She thought quickly to herself, regained her footing, and patted him flirtatiously on the chest. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I’m afraid that I don’t dip my pen in company ink.”

Luke dropped his hands away from the door, and she opened it swiftly and headed for her own office. He felt disappointed as he watched her walk away. Then a thought suddenly occurred to him. Sarah Jane had said that she didn’t dip her pen in company ink – she’d never said that she didn’t like him. He realized then that she thought he was a player, and that was the reason she had kept her distance. He smiled confidently to himself and thought about how surprised she was going to be when she learned that he was very much a player – just not when it came to women.
Irene and Max had walked across the Charles Bridge to the Old Town Square and decided to eat at one of Irene’s favorite restaurants adjacent to the Astronomical Clock located on the exterior wall of the historic Old Town Hall. Once seated, they exchanged small talk, glances, and uneasy smiles across the candlelit table covered with a crisp, white table linen – yet didn’t enter into a conversation until after their entrees had been served. After a moment of awkward silence, Irene said, “I saw your Uncle Blake when I was home. It was nice to see him again. We didn’t get much of a chance to talk. I hope that he’s doing well.”

Max set down his drink as he nodded and said, “He is. He sure is something – I’ve never met anyone with as much drive as he has.” She smiled and then looked down at her hands nervously, not sure exactly what she should say next. She looked up as he spoke. “It looks like you’ve been keeping busy. So, tell me, Irene, what have you been up to since you arrived in Europe?”

“A little bit of everything. I graduated a few years ago from a dance academy in Paris, and I’ve been performing with my company ever since.”

“Do you like it?”

“Yes. It’s been such a great experience.”

“How much longer do you think you’ll stay with the company?”

“I don’t know for sure. They’ve been so good to me, it’d be hard to go anywhere else, but you never know.” Max nodded his agreement. Before he could ask another
question Irene said, “Enough about me, tell me about you. You finished at Columbia a while ago I’d imagine – right?”

“Yes, I finished a few years ago.”

“And did you enjoy it?”

He paused as he looked intently at her. “Not as much as I did initially.”

That statement made Irene feel uncomfortable, and she said hurriedly, “After you graduated, then what’d you do?”

“I moved back to Boston and started managing my Uncle Blake’s newspaper – and that’s where I’ve been ever since.”

“I bet you like it.”

“Yeah, it’s what I’ve wanted to do for a long time.”

Irene nodded and smiled. “I remember. You were always making up breaking news stories to write about.”

He laughed. “I’d forgotten about that. Let’s hope I do a better job reporting the news now than I used to.”

“No kidding,” she teased.

There was another break in the conversation. Max cleared his throat, his voice hesitant. “So, do you have a boyfriend? I’m assuming you’re not married, since your father never mentioned it?”

“That’s right.”

“Which part?”
“The I’m not married part.” Before he could ask more questions about her relationship status, she turned the tables so that she was the one asking the questions. “So, do you have any kids?”

“What?”

Irene looked confused. “I was just curious whether or not you and Tweed had any children. I mean you’ve been married for a while now.”

“No, we haven’t.”

“No – you haven’t had kids?”

“No – we haven’t been married. I broke off my engagement a long time ago.”

“Oh, I’m sorry I didn’t realize . . .”

“I had just assumed that your dad told you about it.”

“No, no he never mentioned it.”

There was a long silence. Irene was trying to think of a safe topic of conversation. Finally, she drew a breath and asked, “So, how’s Luke?”

“He’s fine – busy – but fine.”

“Busy getting into trouble no doubt,” Irene joked.

“That’s for sure,” he countered. Max thought to himself for a moment, wondering how to best approach the topic of her father. “You know Irene – speaking of Luke – did you know he worked with your dad?”

“Are you serious?”

“Well, he’s actually a legal clerk for another Massachusetts Supreme Court justice.”
“Wow, I can’t believe that Luke clerks for the Supreme Court.” She paused reflectively. “It’s hard to believe how time flies. When we were kids, it seemed like we were going to stay young forever. Life changes fast when you’re not looking, doesn’t it?”

“It’s amazing just how fast things can change.” They stared at one another for a moment. Max knew that this was the time to tell Irene about the conversation he’d had with her father before his death. “Luke’s actually helping me with some research that I’m working on right now.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “I guess you could call it an independent investigation of sorts. But I need someone else’s help in addition to Luke’s if I’m going to find out anything important.”

“Really? Whose help do you need?”

“Yours.”

“Mine?” Irene questioned as she grew even more confused. “How could I possibly help you?”

“It’s about your dad.”

“What about him?” Irene asked uneasily.

Max took a deep breath as he started to explain, “Irene, your dad called me the week that he died. We were supposed to meet for dinner so that he could give me something, but he was killed two days before that.”

“What did he need to give you?”
“He wouldn’t tell me over the phone – so I have no idea. Listen to me, Irene – I don’t think your father’s death was a robbery gone wrong or a random act of violence. We’re all missing something, and I need your help to find out what. Together we may be able to figure out what really happened the night your father was murdered, and who did it.”

Irene sat silently, thinking about his theory for a long time. She’d felt all along that the police were missing something, and it made her even more uncomfortable knowing that Max felt the same way. She looked at him, her face intent. “What’s your plan?”

“I’m leaving in the morning, and I was hoping that you’d come back with me.”

“You want me to go home?”

“Boston’s where it happened. To figure things out, we have to go back to where it all started.” He looked at her pleadingly. “If I’m ever going to find out what happened that night, I need your help.” When she still hesitated, he continued, “Please, Irene, I can’t do this alone.”

Irene knew how difficult it would be for her to return home. It meant that she would be digging into information concerning her father’s murder. She was afraid that she’d learn things that would be too painful for her to handle. It also meant that she would have to trust Max and let him help her. She would have to let him back into her life – and what would her aunt think about her sudden departure with Max to Boston? As hard as going home would be on her, Irene needed to know the truth. She’d made her decision. She only hoped that she wouldn’t live to regret it.
“Come in,” Sarah Jane called in response to the knock on the door to her office. The door opened and Luke walked in. She was alone in her office. Since their last encounter was just yesterday, she didn’t feel like talking to him again so soon. “Oh, it’s you. On second thought, don’t come in.” With that said, she glanced back down at her work.

“Feisty are we?”

“Only with you.”

Luke said self-assuredly, “Lucky me!” He walked to her desk and stood opposite from where she was sitting. After a moment he spoke, his voice sincere. “Look Sarah, I’m not here to annoy you okay? I just wanted to apologize for yesterday. I’m sorry that I tried to corner you into telling me what you were doing outside of Bryson and Adam’s office. It’s none of my business.” She looked up from her work, her face surprised. “Don’t look so shocked. Believe it or not, I’m the type of guy who can admit when he’s been a jerk.” That admission merited him a smile from her. When she still didn’t say anything, he assumed that she was through with the conversation. He sighed and shrugged his shoulders, then put his hands in his pockets. “Anyway . . . I’m sorry I bothered you.”

He turned around to leave, but her voice stopped him. “Luke,” she said as she stood and moved from behind her desk.

He turned to face her. “Yeah?”
She hesitated for just a moment and then continued, “I’m sorry about yesterday too. I wasn’t trying to hide anything from you. It’s just that when you found me outside of Bryson and Adam’s office, you took me by surprise, and I overreacted.”

“I understand.”

“I should never have been eavesdropping on their conversation in the first place, but I couldn’t help it. I was just walking by, and I heard them yelling at each other.”

“What were they talking about?” Luke questioned.

“I’m not sure exactly. All I know was that I heard Bryson ask Adam if he’d been going through his stuff.”

Luke was confused. “Why’s that such a big deal? They’re working on the same cases, so it’s not like they’d be keeping secrets from each other.”

“I thought the same thing,” Sarah Jane agreed. “That’s why his question seemed so weird.”

“What did Adam say when Bryson asked him that?”

“I don’t know because that’s when someone nearly knocked me over.” She smiled meaningfully at Luke. “I never heard Adam’s response. I was more interested in making a James Bond getaway before getting caught!”

He smiled and nodded. “Tell me about it. I thought we were dead for sure!” They laughed for a moment but then grew silent. He studied Sarah Jane’s face carefully and thought that she seemed pensive. “What’s the matter?”

“It’s just that . . .”

“What?”
“It’s seems like Bryson and Adam have been acting strange ever since Judge Duncan’s death.” She shrugged her shoulders in an attempt to dismiss her uncertainty. “I’m sure it’s nothing.”

He thought for a moment and then continued, “Not necessarily.”

She was puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“A buddy of mine basically grew up in Duncan’s home. He thinks that Duncan’s murder wasn’t a robbery like the police suspect.”

“Are you serious?”

He nodded. “We’re trying to find out what really happened that night. My friend has gone to Europe to find Duncan’s daughter to ask her to help him. He asked me to help him as well since I’m connected with Duncan’s work. He wants me to look for anything at work that seems suspicious, and Bryson and Adam’s conversation sounds plenty suspicious to me. It may turn out to be nothing, but it’s definitely worth looking into.”

“Let me help you.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want you involved if the situation gets messy. Duncan’s dead, and I’m not going to run the risk of your getting hurt.”

“How chivalrous of you, Luke,” she responded jokingly. “Hate to break it to you, but I’m already involved.” When he still hesitated, she continued, “Oh, come on, let me see what I can find out. No one will ever suspect me.”

“And why’s that?”
“Because, I’m a woman, and no one ever suspects a woman.”

She waited expectantly, and he let out a sigh. “Get your coat. We’re leaving.”

“Where are we going?”

“The airport. Max and Judge Duncan’s daughter Irene get back from Europe today, and we need to start planning.”

“Planning what exactly?”

“Our strategy. Duncan’s killer has eluded the police for weeks, and I’m willing to bet that the police are no closer to knowing what happened today than they were just after Duncan’s death. I’ll bet Duncan’s murderer thinks he’s in the clear by now – that he’s gotten away with murder. It’s time for us to make him uncomfortable – it’s time to uncover his mistakes.”
Luke and Sarah Jane waited just outside of security at Boston’s Logan International Airport for Max and Irene to arrive. At last, Luke spotted them weaving toward them through the crowd of people. Just as they reached him, Luke snatched Irene swiftly by the shoulders and gave her a tight bear hug. “Rene, it is so good to see you!” He stood back, holding her by the shoulders. “Wow! The years have certainly been kind – you look fantastic!”

Irene smiled broadly, delighted to see her old friend. “Thank you, Luke, so do you.” Just then, Max and Irene’s glance moved to the attractive girl standing behind Luke. Luke let go of Irene’s shoulders and gestured for Sarah Jane to come forward so that he could introduce her to his friends. He put his hand on Sarah Jane’s back as he said, “Sarah Jane, these are the friends I was telling you about. Max, Irene, this is Sarah Jane – she’s a . . .” Luke hesitated, not sure exactly how he should introduce her, and then choosing his words carefully continued, “We know each other from work.”

Max shook Sarah Jane’s hand as he said, “It’s nice to meet you.”

She nodded and responded pleasantly, “You too.” It was then that Sarah Jane looked over at Irene. She liked Irene instantly, even though Irene was striking enough to make any other girl green with envy. She smiled at Irene and said enthusiastically, “It’s nice to meet you. Luke told me so much about you.”

Irene smiled in response to the other girl’s friendliness. “Luke’s a sweetheart, but he exaggerates. I’m afraid there’s not much about me that’s terribly interesting.”
“I don’t know about that. I found what he had to say about you more than fascinating!”

Before Irene could ask exactly what he had told her, Luke chimed in hastily.

“Why are you all of a sudden in such a hurry? Have you been sharing information again that you shouldn’t have?” Max joked.

“I wouldn’t be acting so smug if I were you,” Luke countered. “Trust me – you were included in most of what Sarah Jane heard that she found so fascinating.” Max’s smile vanished, and he gave an exasperated sigh. “You never did know how to keep your mouth shut did you?”


Max couldn’t help but laugh at his friend’s open admission. “Let’s just get the bags.”

“Here, Rene, let me carry some of your stuff,” Luke said as he took Irene’s carry-ons from her hands. “You look tired.”


“Let’s get you home so that you can rest,” Max said.

The four friends walked to baggage claim where Max and Luke left Irene and Sarah Jane for just a moment while they went on to get the rest of the luggage. When they were a distance away from the women, Luke inquired, “So, you actually got her to
come back with you. I’d be lying if I didn’t tell you that I’m a little shocked you were able to manage it. I didn’t think you had it in you!”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Max said sarcastically.


“We start by doing our homework. We’re going to look closely at the people with whom Duncan spent the most time. We’re going to socialize with everyone he knew, his colleagues, his country club friends, friends of his wife, old and new acquaintances. We’re going to look into past case rulings – especially controversial ones – ones where the individuals involved had a lot to lose. We’re going to find out everything and anything that Duncan was involved with.” Max paused for a moment deep in thought and then continued, “My only concern about digging for information in so many circles is that we may not be able to keep our intentions a secret for as long as I’d like.”

Luke nodded his agreement as Max continued, “But that’s why we’re going to infiltrate as many of Duncan’s circles as possible at the same time. You can keep an eye on the courthouse while Irene and I look primarily into her father’s personal effects and social acquaintances.”

“Got it.”

“Just remember, Luke, that we have to be careful. We have to think before we act. Duncan’s killer obviously isn’t stupid – plus he’s had weeks to cover his tracks.”

“We’ve got our work cut out for us. As of right now, we don’t have a whole lot to go on. How are we going to catch him?”
“We just have to be patient. He’ll make a mistake. One thing I’ve learned about criminals from my line of work is that no matter how careful they thought they were when they committed a crime, in the end, they always made a mistake. All we have to do now is wait. Duncan’s killer made a mistake – he just doesn’t know it.”
Duncan’s murderer sat on the living room couch and watched the late night news to see how the murder investigation was coming along. By now, the judge’s death had taken a back seat to other stories, especially since the police hadn’t identified any suspects. The report was the same that night as it had been in the previous weeks. The police still hadn’t reached any conclusions but continued to assure the public that they were confident that they would find the person responsible for this heinous crime. “It’s been weeks since Duncan’s death,” the killer contemplated.

The killer knew that the police didn’t have a clue as to who the murderer was. “I did it!” the killer thought. “I got away with it! Obviously no one found out that I was blackmailing the judge or the police would have shown up to arrest me by now. I should have known that Duncan was bluffing. He never contacted a reporter about the blackmail.”

The killer sighed, feeling at ease – it had been nearly a month since Duncan’s death. The murderer turned off the television and lounged comfortably on the couch. The killer picked up the recorder on the coffee table, the very one found in Duncan’s pocket just after his death. The murderer decided it was now time to destroy the only piece of evidence from the murder scene.
Chapter 34

Irene hadn’t been able to sleep the previous night since her home seemed far more quiet than usual. She also hadn’t been able to stop her mind from dwelling on the horror surrounding her father’s death. She acknowledged to herself how strange it was that the home where she’d grown up and had so many wonderful memories now had an eerie emptiness about it. Irene knew that she felt this way because her mother and father were both gone; and since it had been so long since she herself had lived there, she felt like a visitor in her own home. As a result of a turbulent night, she got up very early, danced for several hours, and was sitting in her father’s study dressed and ready for the day when the doorbell rang at nine o’clock in the morning. Mrs. Lewis had the weekend off – and since it was Saturday – Irene went downstairs to answer the door herself. She was surprised to open the door and find Max waiting there – with breakfast.

He observed Irene’s immaculate appearance for such an early hour on a Saturday and said, “I thought you’d still be sleeping since you seemed so tired from the flight yesterday.”

She stood aside so that he could enter as she responded pleasantly, “I couldn’t sleep. Too wired from everything, I guess.” He nodded his understanding. She then continued, her face somewhat confused, “Why didn’t you let yourself in? Did you lose your key?”

“No, I still have it.”
Irene waited for Max’s explanation to continue, and when it didn’t, her mouth broke into a smile as she joked, “Then why didn’t you use it. It could have saved me a trip down the stairs.”

He smiled and then said somewhat flustered, “I didn’t know if you’d be okay with . . . I didn’t know exactly how you’d feel about . . . I didn’t want to startle you.” He seemed uncomfortable when he didn’t know how to go about explaining his actions.

Despite his clumsy explanation, Irene understood his reasoning and said teasingly, “How considerate of you, Maxwell. However, let me assure you that in the future should you wish to let yourself in, it won’t startle me.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” He looked at her for a few seconds in silence and then continued, “I brought breakfast. Have you eaten?”

“Not yet.”

“Good.” They walked into the kitchen and sat down at the table. “Luke and Sarah Jane should be here a little later. She’s going to help him look for stuff at the courthouse.” Irene nodded and Max continued, “I thought that after we ate we could start going over your father’s personal things and then decide where to go from there.”

“Sounds good, but I don’t quite know where we should start. I mean we really have no idea what to look for since my father was involved in so many things both in and outside of work.” She sighed tiredly and looked out the window in contemplative silence. When she finally spoke again, it was to herself as much as to Max. “You know, I’m beginning to wonder how well I really knew my father. Up until his death I felt like we were so close – but now . . . after all that’s happened – I’m not so sure.” She shrugged her shoulders and then looked at Max. “This is all so overwhelming.”
Max nodded. He wanted to take Irene in his arms – as he had done so many times in years past – but knew she would probably feel far from comforted. Instead, he just smiled at her and put his hand on hers. Irene’s eyes moved to where his hand touched hers. His voice was confident yet concerned as he said, “This must be hard for you, Irene, but you don’t need to feel overwhelmed. You’ve been through a lot, but you don’t have to do any of this alone. This may not mean much to you, but I promise that I’ll be here with you every step of the way.”

At last, Irene’s gaze moved from their hands to Max’s eyes, and she said determinedly, “Well then, I suppose that we had better get started. We’ve got a lot of ground to cover.”
Max and Irene were sitting in Duncan’s study with piles of papers scattered all across the room. They’d spent the entire morning looking over stacks and stacks of files, letters, and emails and had rummaged through countless photographs and other memorabilia of her father’s without much success. They opened Duncan’s safe in the office but found nothing that they believed was out of the ordinary. They determined that anything that could have helped them was no longer in the room – especially since many of his possessions had been confiscated by the police in an effort to assist them with the murder investigation. After several hours of searching without any leads, they tried to organize the mess they had made of the study.

When there was a knock on the front door, Max said, “That’s probably Luke. When he called me this morning, he said that he’d be here in a few minutes . . . and now that it’s been a few hours, he’s pretty much right on schedule.” Irene laughed and nodded her agreement. “I’ll go let him in,” Max said from the doorway of the room.

“I’ll be down in just a second. I’m almost done cleaning up this stack.” Once she finished in the study, she went downstairs and found Max, Luke, and Sarah Jane waiting for her in the kitchen. “Hi guys,” Irene said as she walked into the room.

Luke and Sarah Jane each greeted her with a friendly hug. It was while the two women were talking that Luke muttered under his breath to Max, “I’m guessing by the look of envy on your face that you didn’t get as warm of a welcome as we did. Am I right?”
Max turned to look at his friend and shook his head in exasperation. “Has anyone ever told you that you have a talent for bringing up the most annoying things at the worst possible moments?”

Luke grinned mischievously in response. “Just one more reason why people find me so likeable!”

Max couldn’t help but smile at him but then sobered as he said quietly, “Trust me, the last thing I want to do is complicate things with Irene any more than they already are. She’s overwhelmed right now – and understandably so. I mean, look at all she’s been through.” He let out a sigh and looked over to where she and Sarah Jane were still talking. Max studied Irene for a few moments and then said quietly to Luke, “I don’t want her to have to deal with anything else right now. I’m worried about her.”

Luke nodded his understanding. “I know you are, but try not to worry. She’ll be okay – you’ll see. Everything will work out.”

“I hope so,” Max responded hurriedly when he saw that Irene and Sarah Jane were finishing their conversation.

“All right, who’s making lunch?” Luke questioned to the group. “I’m going to need some food if people expect me to be the genius that I am.”

“In that case, I’ll make lunch. I wouldn’t want a little thing like hunger to hinder your intellectual abilities Luke,” Irene teased. With that, she walked to the kitchen to see what she could make. Mrs. Lewis had fully stocked the fridge – yet Irene decided nothing sounded as good to her as a corned beef sandwich with plenty of pickles and mustard. When she finished preparing lunch, Irene set Max’s plate in front of him, and the others then sat down next to him. Max sat still for a moment just looking at the
sandwich Irene had made for him. He recalled the many times in years past when she had made lunch for him. She always made him the same sandwich – because it was his favorite. It then occurred to him that he hadn’t eaten a corned beef sandwich in nearly six years – no one made it just as he liked it – no one except for Irene. At that moment, he recognized that the memories he and Irene had shared were harder to erase than he’d initially believed. This realization brought a subtle smile to his face.

Irene noticed that he hadn’t started eating and said in a confused voice, “Is everything okay?”

He looked directly at her and smiled as he said reassuringly, “Everything’s great.”
“So, did you guys find out anything this morning?” Luke asked.

“No,” Max responded. “There’s nothing at this point that really stands out as being out of the ordinary.”

“There’s so much information,” Irene explained, “that it’s difficult to know exactly what to look for. We went through so many papers and photos that I really don’t know where we go from here.” She sighed heavily, “I’m starting to think that this is worse than finding a needle in a haystack. My father knew way too many people. It’s no wonder the police haven’t uncovered something. Without any leads, it seems impossible.”

Luke and Sarah Jane listened attentively to Irene’s explanation. Luke then said, “Well, just a few days ago Sarah and I had an interesting experience at work. It’s probably nothing, but it’s still kind of strange. We didn’t want to tell you guys until you’d had a chance to settle in.”

Max and Irene looked intently at them as Max questioned, “What happened?”

“Well,” Luke explained, “it all started in the hall outside of Duncan’s law clerks office when I nearly ran Sarah Jane over as she was eavesdropping outside their door.”

“I didn’t mean to eavesdrop,” Sarah Jane interjected, “but I can’t help but do it when people are screaming at each other.”

“What were they arguing about?” Max questioned.

“Did they talk about my father?” Irene asked.
Sarah Jane shook her head as she responded, “Not that I heard, but I didn’t hear the whole conversation, so I don’t know for sure. All I heard was one of them accusing the other of going through his stuff. It seemed weird to me that he’d be shouting at his colleague about confidentiality when they work on all the same cases. They really have no reason to keep secrets from one another.”

“So, what Sarah overheard,” Luke explained, “made us a little uneasy, but the really strange thing happened while we were in the hall.” The friends sat quietly as they waited for Luke to elaborate. “Since Sarah took me by surprise, I didn’t exactly greet her in a quiet voice. We were afraid that they’d heard us, and so we hurried around the corner just as the door to the office opened. We heard one of them say that he thought he’d heard something. We didn’t stick around to find out anything else. At that point, we hurried back to my office before getting caught.”

“I don’t know if it sounds that suspicious when you just hear it,” Sarah Jane said, “but it seemed out of the ordinary at the time. Ever since Judge Duncan’s death, the two of them have been acting kind of strange.”


Max sat deep in thought and then spoke his thoughts aloud. “It could be nothing like you said. It could just be one really uptight, paranoid little clerk who’s oversensitive about his stuff – but on the other hand – it could be something.” He looked from Irene to Luke to Sarah Jane and then continued, “The two of you were there, and it seemed weird to you, so we’re going to assume that it was.” He paused for a moment to collect his
thoughts and then said to Luke and Sarah Jane, “Try to find out what you can about these clerks. What are their names?”

“Adam Higgs and Bryson Walker,” Sarah Jane responded.

Max nodded, “Yeah, keep an eye on Adam and Bryson in addition to anyone else hanging around the courthouse who seems to be acting suspicious. Try to be as subtle as possible. I don’t want them to think anybody’s watching them.”

They nodded their agreement, and Luke said, “Got it. We’ll try to be a little more discreet than we were the last time.” With that, he looked at Sarah Jane and winked.

“Since you guys have the courthouse covered,” Max explained to the group, “I think the best place for Irene and me to start is by going to her father’s country club. It’s the same one my Uncle Blake belongs to, and I know they have most of the same social acquaintances. I don’t think you should join us there, at least not right now. I don’t want anyone more aware than they already are that we’re friends.”


“Just remember guys that in all our situations we can’t seem like we’re prying too deeply. We don’t have to have this case solved by tomorrow. Duncan’s murderer has the advantage here. He knows who to watch out for. Eventually he’ll slip and make a wrong move. We just have to be there to catch him when he does.”
“This isn’t going to work,” Irene said apprehensively to Max as they got out of his car at the country club where her father had been a member for years. She and Max had decided the best place to start investigating her father’s acquaintances was at his country club, but now that she was there, she didn’t think it was such a good idea after all.

“People are going to think we’re up to something.”

“Why?” Max questioned as he walked around to where Irene was standing by the car.

“Because,” she explained, “when’s the last time I showed up at my dad’s country club to shoot the breeze with his friends?”

He nodded. “I see your point, but the main reason we’re here is so that your dad’s friends get used to us hanging around. We’re not here to find anything out today unless something comes up. We don’t even have to talk to anyone if it doesn’t seem like the right time. For all they know, we’re just here together to enjoy the day.”

“All right.”

When she still didn’t move away from the car, he began to understand just how nervous she was to go digging, and he said, “It’ll be okay, Irene.”

She tucked her hair behind her ear and nodded. She then looked up at him and smiled in an attempt to reassure him and to mask her own uneasiness.

He smiled back at her, took her hand, and proceeded to lead her away from the car and up the walkway to the doors of the clubhouse. She hesitated just outside the leaded glass doors, and she took a deep breath to steady herself. There would be no one in there
that she could trust. Despite their rocky past, Irene knew that when she walked through those doors – possibly to face her father’s killer – that she could count on Max every step of the way. She regained her composure and said, “Well then, shall we?”
Chapter 38

As Irene walked into the country club’s grandiose dining room where a number of members were enjoying a fine lunch, she quickly surveyed her surroundings. She made eye contact with Max’s uncle, Christopher Blake, who was seated at a crowded table with several affluent looking men and women. Blake stood up and gestured for them to join him. Max followed Irene over to the crowded table where Blake was still standing. Blake gave Irene a warm, fatherly hug. When he drew back, he held her beautiful face between his hands. “I’m so glad to see you. When Max told me the good news about your coming home, I was delighted. We’ve missed you.”

“Thank you Blake,” she responded sweetly. “I’ve missed you too.” Blake gave Max a swift hug as well, after which he turned to the group and said apologetically, “Please excuse my rudeness. You all know my nephew, Max, of course, and this stunning creature is William and Seville Duncan’s daughter, Irene.”

The individuals at the table exchanged the appropriate pleasantries with Irene, but she still sensed that at the mention of her parents, the tone at the table had grown tense and uncomfortable. Max sensed the change in atmosphere as well and said hurriedly, “It’s nice to see all of you again.” With that, Max pulled out a chair for Irene and then sat down next to her.

“It has been ages since we last saw you. How are you, Maxwell?” Dr. Steven Archibald questioned. “Is The Post everything that you had hoped it would be? Are you feeling overwhelmed?”
“You have no idea!” Max joked. The only one at the table who understood the double meaning was Irene, who had to stifle her laughter behind her linen napkin. It was then that she suddenly remembered where she had heard the name Dr. Archibald before. Dr. Archibald, a debonair psychologist in his mid-forties, had seen her father for some time following her mother’s death, yet he had greeted her just now as though they were perfect strangers. Irene suddenly felt very uneasy. Max sensed her discomfort but couldn’t account for what had happened to change her mood. He put his arm on the back of her chair to offer his unspoken support.

A moment later, Irene’s feelings of anxiety escalated to even greater heights – Tweed Richards and her parents had just entered the dining room.

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Irene tried to mask her surprise when she saw Tweed. Although it had been six years, it felt like she had seen her just days ago. After the initial shock, Irene quickly composed herself. She reflected on her past encounters with Tweed – and looking at her – suddenly wondered how it was that Tweed had ever managed to intimidate her. Irene was confused – she could have sworn that Tweed had been taller and considerably more attractive than she was now. Irene observed her arrogance – and how hard she tried to sell herself – that certainly hadn’t changed. Irene shook her head, her long, silky hair falling over the shoulders of her winter-white, cashmere sweater. She finally realized just how pathetic Tweed Richards really was. Irene sat up a little straighter, crossed her legs, and folded her arms. One eyebrow arched challengingly. Tweed had tormented her for years, and she had allowed it – but she wasn’t a little girl anymore. Today would be the day Tweed Richards would meet the woman Irene Duncan had become.
Irene wasn’t the only one who had noticed Tweed – Max had as well and looked over to find Irene watching the Richards family with amused interest. He was pleased to see that their arrival hadn’t affected her in the slightest.

Max and Irene’s gaze moved from the Richards to one another. They looked intently at each other for a moment, but neither of them had a chance to say anything because it was at that instant that Tweed caught sight of them. She weaved her way toward them as quickly and seductively as possible. “My, my, Max, I didn’t expect to see you here. I thought that you were too busy for this sort of thing since all you do is work.”

“It’s nice to see you too, Tweed,” Max said as he stood up. “Hello, Bob, Karen,” he said as he shook hands with both of Tweed’s parents.

“How are you, Max?” Karen Richards asked eagerly, her skin now weathered from years of sunbathing and her face unnaturally taut from what appeared to be recent cosmetic surgery. “We sure miss seeing you around,” she said as she pressed herself up against him. “We would love it if you would drop by sometime. Wouldn’t we, Bob? Tweed?”

“We certainly would,” Bob responded. It was evident from Tweed’s behavior toward Max, as well as her parents, that the Richards still had hopes of securing Max as a member of their family. Within the first few moments of seeing them, Irene easily deduced that Tweed’s parents, Bob and Karen, were every bit as disingenuous and shameless as Tweed herself.

At last, the Richards noticed that Max wasn’t alone. They looked to where Irene was still seated – their faces drawing a complete blank. Irene realized from their empty
expressions that they didn’t recognize her. Just then, Tweed spoke, “Well Max, aren’t you going to introduce us to your friend?”

Before Max could speak, Irene stood up and said confidently, “We’ve already met. How nice to see you again, Tweed. It’s been a long time.”

Recognition finally dawned on Tweed, and she couldn’t control the shocked and uncertain tone in her voice. “Irene? Irene Duncan?” Tweed tried to steady herself as she hid the loathing she had for Irene behind a practiced smile. “I’m afraid I didn’t recognize you, even though you’ve been all over the news lately. My, my, you’ve certainly changed haven’t you?”

“And you’re exactly the same – aren’t you?” Irene asked. Tweed wanted to scratch Irene Duncan’s eyes out. How had the awkward, adolescent girl she’d terrorized become so sophisticated and self-assured? She couldn’t believe this. She was in a state of panic. Not only did Irene seem confident in the extreme, but Tweed also had to admit to herself that she had become the most beautiful woman she had ever seen. She had disliked Irene all those years ago, but now she despised her. She knew now that Max would never change his mind about their broken engagement – despite all of her family’s efforts over the past years. Tweed couldn’t believe it. She’d made it her mission to sabotage Irene – when they were growing up – yet somehow she had become the casualty.
Chapter 39

Irene could sense Tweed and her parents’ hostility and thought it wise to leave the room before things got out of hand. She smiled at the Richards and then said to Max, “Would you please excuse me for a moment?”

“Certainly,” Max replied.

Irene had just made it out of the room when a petite, blonde, middle-aged woman detained her. “Excuse me my dear, but I couldn’t help but overhear that you are William Duncan’s daughter.”

Irene smiled politely. “Yes, that’s right.”

The woman’s face lit up, and she grabbed both of Irene’s hands so exuberantly that Irene was startled. “I’m Mallory Grant. I was so sorry to hear the news about your father. He was a great friend of mine.”

“Was he really? Well, how nice.” Irene tried to seem interested, but the truth of the matter was that she had no idea who this overexcited woman was, and she was anxious to end their conversation and make her way to the ladies room before getting detained by anyone else.

Ms. Grant seemed unaware of Irene’s desire to end the conversation and continued animatedly, “This is so fantastic – our meeting like this. Did you know that I’ve known your father for years? We met long before you were ever born and have stayed extremely close ever since.” That bit of news surprised Irene. She thought she knew all of her father’s “close” friends, but that appeared not to have been the case. Before she could respond, Ms. Grant rambled on without stopping for breath. “Yes, we
were great friends. Well, more than friends really. We were involved when Duncan met your mother.”

“I beg your pardon?” Irene questioned in disbelief.

Ms. Grant could sense Irene’s obvious discomfort, and she tried to cover up her blunder. “Well, that was a long time ago wasn’t it? After your father met your mother, it seemed like he fell off the face of the earth. We weren’t in contact much.”

Irene couldn’t wipe the puzzled expression from her face, and she wondered if Ms. Grant realized how she had contradicted her earlier statement. Irene opened her mouth to speak but was interrupted by Ms. Grant again – she was ruffled, her tone not quite matching her words. “Well, you’ll excuse me won’t you my dear. It really was such a delightful pleasure to meet you.”

Without waiting for any response from Irene, Ms. Grant walked hurriedly away from her and into another room. Irene stood there in a daze – she wondered how much more she was going to find out about her father before this whole affair was over.
Chapter 40

Irene had had enough surprises for one day. She walked swiftly back into the dining room where she had left Max. He was seated once again at the long table. The Richards were no longer accosting him and had found another table across the room. Irene tried to act calm as she walked up behind him and put her hand on his shoulder to get his attention. She smiled at him for the benefit of everyone watching and then whispered in his ear. “I need to talk to you.”

He heard the urgency in her voice and looked intently at her face. She looked as though everything was just fine, but he knew it was a façade. Her eyes proved just how anxious she was to be gone from there. He locked eyes with her and inclined his head in a way that was scarcely visible to anyone but her in an effort to show her that he understood. Max smiled to the group and said, “Well, it was nice to see all of you again.”

“Leaving so soon?” Dr. Archibald questioned.

“Unfortunately yes,” he responded.

Blake stood up and gave Irene another hug as he said, “It was so good to see you, Irene. Promise me that Max will bring you around the house sometime soon.”

She felt reassured by Blake’s presence and smiled sincerely. “I promise.”

Max took Irene by the elbow, and the two of them tried to walk casually from the room. Neither of them spoke until they were inside Max’s car and had pulled out of the ornate, wrought iron gates of the country club. It was then that Max turned to Irene.

“What happened?”

“Which part?” she countered.
“Let’s just start at the beginning.”

“I don’t know if I should start with Dr. Archibald who acted like he’d never heard of my dad before or if we should begin by talking about a woman by the name of Mallory Grant. Ms. Grant claims that she and my dad were involved when he met my mother.”

“He was what?” Max questioned aghast. “How did you find out something like that?”

“I found it out from the source!” she exclaimed.

“All right, let’s just stay calm. Let me see if I’ve got this straight. You found out today from some woman . . .”

“Mallory Grant,” Irene interjected.

“You found out from Mallory Grant that she was involved with your father when he met your mom?” Irene nodded and Max continued, “What’s the big deal? Once he met your mother, he decided not to be involved with her anymore. That sort of thing happens all the time, so what?”

“You’re right. It wouldn’t be a big deal except for the part where Ms. Grant told me that my father and she had stayed ‘extremely close’ ever since. When I seemed surprised by this, she started acting strange. She must have been bothered by something because she ended up contradicting herself. She went on to tell me that after my dad met my mom, she and my father weren’t in contact much.”

Max said nothing for a moment. He just stared straight ahead, deep in thought. After a few seconds, he glanced over at her and said, “That does kind of change things doesn’t it? Why would she say one thing and then turn around and say the exact opposite?” He shook his head. “It doesn’t make sense.”
“I thought it seemed strange, but everybody seemed weird around me except for your Uncle Blake. I’m sure you didn’t know this, but after my mom died, my dad went to therapy for a little while.”

“You’re right – I didn’t know.”

“He went to a psychologist by the name of Dr. Steven Archibald.”

Max couldn’t hide his shock at the startling revelation. He looked stunned, and when he spoke, she could hear the astonishment in his voice. “Are you serious?”

“Yes, you would have never guessed would you? When Blake mentioned my parents, Dr. Archibald acted like he had never heard of them, except for what everyone else has heard about them. Do you really think he believes that I wouldn’t know about my father going to him for help?”

“He may not be certain how much you know. Besides, it really wasn’t an appropriate time to bring up how he used to be your dad’s psychologist.” Max continued, “However, it does seem kind of strange that he acted like he’d never met your father before.” He ran his hand through his hair. “We can’t be sure yet what any of this means, but it’s definitely a good place for us to start looking. Let’s try to find out all that we can about your dad’s involvement with Dr. Archibald and Ms. Grant and see if anything happens to turn up.”

“All right.” Irene leaned back in the passenger seat and let out a sigh. “What a day.”

“I’m sorry it was difficult for you. I can’t believe I didn’t have a clue that any of this was going on.”

“There was no way you could have known, Max.”

“Hey, Luke, I’m going to put you on speaker so that the three of us can talk.”


“Definitely,” Max said.


“We ran into Tweed and her parents,” he responded with a grin.

“You’re kidding me! Oh man, I can’t believe I missed it,” Luke exclaimed, his voice a mixture of disappointment and acute amusement. “You guys should have let me come with you. I’ll bet Tweed was speechless.”

“Once she recognized Irene, she certainly was,” Max replied. “Actually, all of them were.”

“It’s about time something got her to shut up,” Luke declared. “You know, I would have paid good money, and plenty of it, to see dear, little Tweedy no longer chirping.”
“No, I won’t listen to one more word,” Irene shouted as she placed her hands over her ears to drown out the noise. “It’s not true. Do you hear me – it’s not true!”

“Just admit it, Irene. You wouldn’t be bothered if you actually thought that I wasn’t right, but you know that I am,” Mallory Grant replied as she inched nearer.

“Please stop!” Irene pleaded as she put her hands out in an attempt to prevent her from coming any closer. Soon Irene had backed herself into a corner, and she felt as if the room was closing in around her.

“Your father loved me. Do you hear me? Even though he married your mother, it was me who he was in love with – who he’s always been in love with!” Ms. Grant looked at Irene haughtily – seeming to relish her torment.

“Please,” Irene implored, “stop telling lies about my parents. Can’t you see that it’s upsetting me?”

“They’re not lies. If they were, do you really think that you’d be having so many doubts?”

“I’m not!” Irene responded. She couldn’t take it anymore. She started to sob. She couldn’t put up any more of a fight. She slid down the wall until she sank to the floor and covered her face with her hands.

Ms. Grant stood triumphantly over her. “You know I’m right. You’ll realize that if you only think about it. After all, how well did you really know your father?”

Ms. Grant’s question echoed again and again in her mind. “Stop!” Irene cried. “I know my father.” At the skeptical look on Ms. Grant’s face, Irene repeated herself
more forcefully, “I know him!” Why didn’t Ms. Grant believe her? Irene knew the truth – didn’t she?

Just then, Irene shot up out of bed. She was breathless, her heart was pounding frantically, and she was shaking. She let out a deep breath and collapsed back onto her pillows. It took her a few moments to realize that her disturbing conversation with Ms. Grant had only taken place in her mind.
Chapter 42

“Irene,” Max called as he let himself into her home, “you here?” He had come straight from The Post that day, where lately he’d been working even harder than usual. For the past several weeks, Max had tried to keep the news about Duncan’s murder in the paper. He hoped that by doing so it might help the police generate some new leads. So far, he’d been unlucky. Nothing new had turned up, and as a result, it was increasingly difficult with each passing day to prevent the story from becoming old news. It was early evening when Max finally arrived at Irene’s. He took off his sport coat, hung it on the coat rack, and then rolled up his shirt sleeves. “Irene?” he called again.

Max heard Irene’s voice call down to him from somewhere upstairs. “I’m in the study.”

He went upstairs to the study but stopped in the doorway when he found Irene seated on the ground surrounded by stacks of paper. He wondered why she was going through them again. The two of them had gone over each stack several times in the last few days, ever since they’d seen Dr. Archibald and Mallory Grant at the country club, but so far, they hadn’t been able to find anything incriminating about either of them. Max folded his arms and leaned against the door frame. His face was puzzled. “What are you doing, Irene?”

She looked up when she heard his voice. “I just can’t believe that we can’t find anything. There’s got to be something somewhere.” Max noticed that Irene looked frazzled and restless all at the same time. She didn’t wait for any sort of response from
him before she continued, “How could we have missed it? It feels like we’ve been through this stuff a million times!”

He could tell that her nerves were on edge. He thought she looked exhausted – beautiful, but exhausted. “You’re right. We haven’t found anything yet, but things like this take time. You don’t need to be worried. I mean, after all, we were at the country club only a few days ago.”

“It won’t make a difference how long we look. We’re still not going to find anything.” Irene stood up and walked over to the window. She braced her hand on the windowpane and looked out into the twilight and said achingly, “We’re wasting our time, Max.”

He walked silently across the room until he stood a few steps behind her. He knew that all the anxiety and stress were finally beginning to wear on her. He lifted his hand to touch her hair and then hesitated. He wanted to touch her, to comfort her, but he didn’t know how she’d respond. It was when he saw her brush her hand over her cheek to wipe away her tears that he knew he couldn’t stand the distance between them anymore. He reached up and gently stroked her beautiful hair. When Irene’s sobs became more intense, he took her by the shoulders and turned her around to face him. He wrapped his arms securely around her slender frame and rested his head on the top of hers. She didn’t resist his embrace, as Max feared she might, but instead clung to him for support as she cried. He realized that she had kept her emotions carefully in check since returning home but that all of the pressure had finally caught up with her.
After some time, Irene’s crying started to cease, and when she spoke, she tried to sound composed, even though she was anything but. “I’m sorry about my little meltdown,” she said apologetically. “I guess I’m just tired.”

Max loosened his hold on her just enough so that he could look at her face. “You don’t need to apologize. I’m just worried about you. You’re worn out.” He looked at her inquisitively as he said, “You don’t look so good.”

She broke into a half smile as she replied teasingly, “Oh, don’t I?”

He smiled down at her. “You know that’s not what I meant.” They laughed for a moment but became serious once again when he said, “Tell me what’s the matter.” When Irene looked at him as though he were mistaken, he continued quickly, “Don’t bother trying to convince me that nothing’s wrong. It’s obvious something is.”

She took a breath. “It’s really no big deal. I just haven’t been sleeping well.”

“What?” Max questioned – his concern apparent.

“It’s the house. It just doesn’t feel the same anymore. I feel like a stranger here – it’s so quiet.” He nodded his understanding. “There’s no one here anymore.”

“That’s not true. Your parents may be gone, Irene, but you’re not. You’re still here. This is your home, and it’s where you belong. Regardless of whether we figure things out or not, I know that your mom and dad would want you to be happy. They’d want you to move on.”

She bit her lower lip as the tears started to fall down her cheeks again. “I don’t know if I can until I know the truth about everything.”

He responded with assurance. “Then we’ll figure it out together. We won’t stop digging until we’ve found what we’re looking for.” Max took her face gently between
his hands and wiped away her tears. “I want you to be happy again, Irene, and I won’t be satisfied until you are.”
“Oh, for the love,” Luke said in exasperation as Tweed walked through the door to his office, not bothering to shut it behind her. He rolled his eyes and let out a deep sigh. “What are you doing here? Why do you always have to visit me at work?”

“It’s nice to see you too,” Tweed responded mockingly. Luke looked up and found a sour, unnatural smile stamped across her face. He could tell that she was here to find out something from him, and as a result, was trying her best to hide her displeasure with him, even though she couldn’t stand him.

His mouth spread into a slow grin. “If you’ll recall, Tweedy, I never said it was nice to see you. I asked you what you were doing here. Don’t you have somewhere else that you need to be?”

She looked down at him and responded smugly, “Is there anywhere that’s ever important enough for me to go rushing off to?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Luke paused and tried to look as though he were seriously considering some of the possible places that she must surely need to go, if for nothing else but to grace everyone with her presence. “It seems like you’d need to go get your hair done, or go shopping, or . . . maybe visit your plastic surgeon again.” Tweed felt like she was going to explode because of his last suggestion, despite the fact that it was the truth. His smile broadened belying his innocent tone, “Those are just a few ideas, but it’s all I can come up with on the spur of the moment.”
Tweed was seething, but she managed to keep her voice sulky with the hope of manipulating him in order to find out what she so desperately wanted to know. “You know something Luke, sometimes I think that you enjoy being cruel to me!”

“I’ve never denied it.”

“Oh, just shut up. I don’t care if you like me or not because – let me assure you – the feeling’s mutual! All I came here for today is to find out what’s going on with Max.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t play games with me Luke. I saw Max and Irene together at the country club a few days ago, and I want to know what’s going on between them. Just tell me whether or not Max is in a relationship with her.”

“Pretty sure the answer’s yes. If you’ll recall Tweed, haven’t Max and Irene always had a ‘relationship’?”

“Stop deliberately trying to misinterpret every word that I say!” she shouted, no longer even trying to pretend to be patient with the situation. “You know perfectly well what I mean. I want to know if Max and Irene are involved romantically.”

“How should I know?”

“You’re his best friend. Do you honestly expect me to believe that you don’t know if they’re dating?”

“I don’t really care what you believe,” Luke countered. “I truthfully don’t know if they are involved romantically or not. It never occurred to me to ask, probably because it’s none of my business – and may I add – it’s none of yours either.” He paused and then grinned mischievously as he said, “But if I were Max, I sure would be pressing for one. She’s the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever seen.”
Tweed’s face started to turn red with rage. “You’re absolutely no help at all!”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Guilty.” With that, she stormed out of his office – too irate to care that several of Luke’s colleagues had gathered around his open door to listen in on their lively conversation.
Chapter 44

Sarah Jane was in the ladies room at the courthouse when she heard the high heels of another woman echoing off the tiled floor as she entered the restroom. The woman was on her cell phone and appeared to be deeply engrossed in conversation. She was too preoccupied to be aware of Sarah Jane’s presence. Sarah Jane was thinking to herself how obnoxious it was for this woman to be on her cell phone in a public restroom when suddenly the woman’s words caught her off guard. “Well, I’m sorry if you’re upset that I showed up here, but it just so happens that I’m a little upset too.”

Sarah Jane listened quietly to the one side of the ambiguous conversation that she could hear. The woman’s tone became high and whining as she continued, “I had to come. I really needed to talk to Luke.” Her voice changed from a high-pitched whine to an aggravated whisper. “What’s your problem, Bryson? It’s no big deal.”

Sarah Jane held her breath when she heard the names Luke and Bryson. Who was this woman she wondered, and how did she know Luke and Bryson? Sarah Jane was almost certain that it had to be the same Bryson – Bryson Walker. After all, how many Bryson’s would be angry because this woman showed up here at the courthouse today?

The woman was silent for a moment but then launched into a stinging lecture. “You listen to me. I’ll go wherever I want, whenever I want. Do you understand?”

From the sound of things, Sarah Jane thought that the strange woman seemed like the type who was used to getting her way. The woman was silent for sometime but then let out a little sigh. She laughed naughtily, and her voice now sounded seductive.
“That’s what I thought you’d say. I don’t know if I’ll see you tonight. I’ll have to think about it.”

Sarah Jane decided it was less likely to seem as though she’d been eavesdropping if she exited the bathroom stall while the woman was still in the middle of her conversation. With that reasoning, she flushed the toilet, exited the bathroom stall, and walked over to the sink to wash her hands while the woman was still on the phone. Sarah Jane found that the woman’s appearance was exactly as she had pictured just from the sound of her voice. She was a tall, blonde woman who was dressed to kill. Sarah Jane quickly came to the conclusion that she would fit just about anyone’s definition of high maintenance.

The woman looked over nervously at Sarah Jane – realizing too late that her private conversation hadn’t been so private after all – and quickly hung up the phone. Sarah Jane could tell from her anxious response that she hadn’t been aware that anyone else was in the restroom. She knew it was critical at this point to act as though she didn’t care who the woman was and like she hadn’t been paying any attention to her. Sarah Jane smiled politely in response to the staring woman and said, “Hi, how are you?”

“Hi there,” the woman responded with a rehearsed smile. “I’m fine. How are you?”

“Just fine thanks.”

Sarah Jane dried her hands. She wanted to get out of there as fast as possible. She was dying to ask Luke who this strange woman was and then tell him all about the unusual conversation she’d overheard. She tried to hide her impatience and looked calmly into the mirror as she pretended to fix her hair. She noticed that the woman
appeared to feel more comfortable now as she seemed to realize that Sarah Jane’s presence was nothing to be worried about. Sarah Jane knew she could leave at this point without arousing her suspicions. She ran her hand through her hair one last time and smiled at the stranger again as she said, “Have a good one.”

The woman told her to do the same, and with that, Sarah Jane walked out of the ladies room and down the hall. She was careful to keep her pace slow in case anyone was watching. She walked into her office, found herself alone, and shut the door. She pulled out her cell phone and sent Luke a text message. She told him she needed to talk with him and to meet her at her apartment that evening after work. He wrote back immediately and asked if everything was okay. Sarah Jane replied that she didn’t know for sure but to make sure that no one was following him tonight.
“I’m not coming tonight,” Luke explained over the phone to Max. “I got a message from Sarah Jane asking me to come to her apartment tonight. It sounded urgent. She told me to make sure that I wasn’t followed.”

“It’s no problem if you can’t make it,” Max replied. “Just make sure that you two are careful. I have a bad feeling about this. I’ll keep my cell phone on me in case you need to get in touch with us.”

“We’ll call you if anything important happens that can’t wait until later. Otherwise, why don’t you give us a call when the party’s over or when you and Irene can slip away without everyone noticing, which isn’t likely since the two of you can’t go anywhere without the whole world noticing,” Luke joked.


“We will – you too. Who knows who you might run into tonight at your uncle’s party.”

“Don’t worry about us,” Max reassured. “We’ll be in touch.” Max hung up his phone and looked in the mirror as he tied his black, bow tie. Blake’s annual dinner party was scheduled for that evening. It was one of the biggest functions of the year for Boston’s social elite. Anyone who was anyone – or anyone who thought they were anyone – would be in attendance. Invitations to the event were highly sought after, and it was disconcerting what some people would do to make the list. Max had the responsibility of helping his uncle play host to the hundreds of guests who were expected
that night, a role that he managed with ease. He put on his black, tuxedo jacket, left his
apartment, and headed to his uncle’s home. When he arrived, a number of people were
already there.

As Max moved about the room from group to group, he interacted with his
Uncle’s guests. Blake’s home was beautifully decorated for the grand occasion. The
furniture had been cleared out of several rooms to allow for numerous tables that were set
with bone China, sterling silver, elegant, fresh-flower centerpieces, and engraved place
cards. An entire room was devoted to a concert band and dance floor, and the hum of the
music could be heard throughout the house. Max scanned the room – the crowd getting
larger and larger – to see if Irene had arrived yet. He was deep in conversation with some
of his old college friends when several of them suddenly stopped paying attention. His
gaze followed the rest of theirs across the room toward the entry to see what was causing
the commotion.

Irene had just entered the spacious entry and was being greeted by Blake. She
wore an elegant, emerald-colored, floor-length gown that clung to her slim curves.
Diamond chandelier earrings completed her ensemble. She could easily have put any
Hollywood starlet to shame. Max watched her face light up in response to whatever
Blake was saying – her features even more beautiful than usual because of her radiant
smile. He took a deep breath to steady himself. He couldn’t believe that the little girl
he’d known and loved like a sister had turned into such an intoxicating beauty.

“Who’s your uncle talking to, Max,” his friend Todd Matheson questioned. “I’ve
never seen her before.”

“That’s because she’s been living in Europe for the past several years.”
Another friend, Jeremy Woods, let out a slow whistle and smiled appreciatively. “You certainly don’t see many like that in real life – do you?” Jeremy continued, “You never mentioned who she is, Max.”

Max grinned audaciously at his group of friends and said, “You’re right. I didn’t.” With that, he left the stunned men and walked over to where Irene stood, still talking with Blake.

When he approached Irene and Blake, he placed his hand on the small of her back to get her attention and said, “I’ve been looking for you. You look amazing.”

“Thank you, Max,” she responded. She surveyed his handsome appearance and said, “You don’t look bad yourself.”

“Will you please excuse me, my dear?” Blake asked Irene. “I really should try to mingle with some of my other guests.”

“Certainly,” Irene said.

“Save me a dance?” Blake questioned, as he gave her a kiss on the cheek before leaving.

“Of course,” she responded sweetly.

“Max, stay with Irene and make sure she isn’t accosted,” Blake instructed his nephew. “I’m afraid that some of your college friends may be a little overeager to meet her,” he finished with a laugh.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take good care of her,” Max replied.

When Max and Irene were alone, she looked around briefly and then asked, “Where’s Luke? I thought that he was coming tonight.”
He spoke quietly so that they couldn’t be overheard. “Change of plans. He’s meeting Sarah Jane at her apartment later. It sounded like it was urgent.” She looked worried, and he went on, “Don’t worry. He’ll call us if it’s important.”

“Who say’s I’m worried,” Irene countered as she tried to hide her unease.

“Come on, Irene,” Max whispered in her ear. He tried his best to hide the satisfaction from his voice. “I know that look. Just admit that I still know you better than you think.”

She moved back just enough so that she could see his face. Her lips twitched, and her smile held a hint of flirtatiousness. She looked meaningfully into his eyes as she said, “Maybe.”

“I guess we’ll find out.”

“Perhaps,” she replied.

The two of them stood still for several moments as they looked at one another, each of them trying to decide what was going through the other’s mind. It was at this inopportune moment that the Richards spotted the two of them. Max noticed them approaching and couldn’t help but feel annoyed. Their timing was unbelievable. Tweed wore a revealing, red cocktail dress that left very little to the imagination.

Tweed linked her arm through Max’s possessively as she said, “There you are, Max. We’ve been looking everywhere for you. Haven’t we?” she said looking at her parents.

“We certainly have,” her father responded. Max tried to remove Tweed’s hand from his arm, but she only held on tighter to prevent him from doing so. Tweed glanced
at Irene but didn’t acknowledge her. Max looked at Irene imploringly – silently asking
her to understand his uncomfortable predicament.

Irene – amused and unfazed by the crassness of the Richards – said confidently,
“Well, I’ll just leave him to you then.”

When Irene turned to leave, Max tried to extricate himself from Tweed. He said
quickly after her, “Irene, I’ll come with you.”

Irene looked back at him and smiled mischievously. “Oh, no – you enjoy
yourself.” Irene walked hurriedly away from the Richards, as well as a stunned Max, to
the bustling room where the band was currently playing and noticed several couples
already on the dance floor. As she scanned the room to see if there was anyone she
knew, she bumped into a man. “Oh, excuse me sir.”

“I beg your pardon,” he responded. Irene was about to move on when the man
said, “You’re Irene Duncan, aren’t you?”

“That’s right.”

“I’m Dr. Archibald. We met a few days ago at the country club,” he volunteered.
Irene recognized him and tried to hide her apprehension as she said, “Oh, yes, of
course. It’s nice to see you again.”

Dr. Archibald’s gaze moved toward the dancing couples and then back to her as
he asked, “Would you care to dance?”

Irene’s heart began to race, and her hands turned to ice. Dancing with him was
about the last thing she wanted to do, but she knew that she couldn’t appear anxious. She
tried to keep her voice steady as she replied politely, “With pleasure.” She placed her
hand in the crook of his offered arm and let him lead her out onto the floor. Irene knew
that this dance with Dr. Archibald would test her in a way no other performance ever had – or ever would.
Chapter 46

Even though she was expecting Luke, the quiet knock on Sarah Jane’s door still startled her. She walked quickly over to the door and looked through the peephole to find him waiting outside the door. She opened it quietly, grabbed his hand, and pulled him inside. She glanced nervously up and down the hall to make sure that no one had seen him enter her apartment building and then shut and locked the door. She had been holding her breath, but now she let out a deep sigh. She turned around to find Luke watching her worriedly. “Are you sure that no one followed you here?”

“I’m sure.” Luke waited a few seconds before he spoke again because he expected her to start her explanation. When she didn’t he continued, “Sarah Jane, you better hurry and tell me what’s going on.”

“Here, let me take your coat,” she said. He removed his heavy coat and handed it to her. “Why don’t you sit down,” she said as she gestured to the couch, “while I get us something to drink.”

When she returned with the drinks, he took one from her and set it on the coffee table – not bothering to touch it. “What’s going on?”

“Did a woman visit you at work today?”

Luke thought for a moment and still not understanding how Sarah Jane’s question was relevant responded, “Yeah, Max’s ex-girlfriend, Tweed. She always comes to see me at work. That’s nothing new. Why are you asking?”

“What does she look like?”
“She’s tall and has bleached blonde hair.” He paused and thought how else to describe her. “I don’t really know how to describe her except that she’s overdone, and plenty of her is probably fake.”

“She’s got to be the same woman then.”

“The same woman as who?” Luke questioned, his face confused.

“The same woman that I met in the bathroom at the courthouse today. Do you have any pictures of her?”

He pulled out his wallet and found a picture that was taken after his high school graduation. The picture was of Max, Tweed, himself, and Irene, who had attended their commencement exercise. Luke removed the picture and said, “Hang on. I’ll have to see if I can get this sticker off her face. I love this picture, but I got sick to death of seeing her.” After a few seconds, Luke got the sticker off and then handed the picture to Sarah Jane. “Is this the woman you saw today in the bathroom?”

“That’s her all right.”

He paused and then said, “Okay, now that we’ve established that you had the unfortunate experience of meeting Tweed Richards today in the bathroom – why is that such a big deal?”

“I overheard her talking on the phone.”

“Well, that’s not too unusual. I would have been more surprised if she hadn’t been talking. Nothing can get that woman to shut up,” he said.

“No, Luke,” Sarah Jane responded as she tried to explain, “I heard her talking on the phone with Bryson Walker.”

His smile vanished. “What?” he questioned in a state of disbelief.
“Do they know each other?”

“Not that I’m aware of. I mean, I thought they maybe knew of each other since she’s visited the courthouse so many times, but I didn’t think they even knew one another’s names or that they were good enough friends to talk on the phone.” Luke shook his head as he tried to absorb this startling revelation. “I can’t believe this. Okay, why don’t you start at the beginning? What happened in the bathroom?”

Sarah Jane proceeded to explain the events that had transpired in the bathroom in detail to him. After her explanation, she studied his face as he tried to make sense of all that had happened. “What do you think Luke?”

“Well, it certainly sounds like the two of them are involved in some sort of relationship, even though I didn’t know it. I can’t say I’m surprised. Now that I think of it, the two of them actually seem perfect for each other.”

“How so?”

“They both drive me crazy.”

“So, what now?”

“I don’t like that they seem to want to hide the fact that they know each other – and that they know each other well. Why are they trying to keep it a secret?” Luke shook his head. “I just don’t get it.” He thought for a moment. “If Tweed mentions to Bryson that someone overheard her today in the bathroom and she describes you, he’ll know that it’s you. Just try to act casual.” Sarah Jane nodded. “Since Tweed seemed so worried that someone overheard her, it’s safe to assume that the two of them are up to something. We should be careful talking too much at work since Bryson will probably be
ultra paranoid around you. Don’t try to find out anything else for a little while. Just lay
low until he thinks that you’re no one to worry about.”

“What about you? What are you going to do?”

“Bryson and Tweed have no way of knowing that we’re working on something
together – unless they followed me here tonight – which they didn’t,” he amended
quickly when he noticed the look of concern on her face. “They’re going to be watching
you – not me. You know what that means don’t you?”

Sarah Jane took a deep breath. She shook her head. “Please tell me that you’re
not thinking what I think you are.”

“Well, if you’re thinking that the only way to find out anything about Bryson
would be if we went through his stuff at work, then I’d say we’re thinking the exact same
thing.”

“I was afraid of that.”

“Well, you know what they say,” Luke said with a confident grin, “great minds
think alike!”
Chapter 47

After their dance, Dr. Archibald escorted Irene off the dance floor. “Thank you,” Irene said politely as she tried her best to hide the fact that she couldn’t wait for this ordeal to be over.

“The pleasure was all mine my dear. I assure you.”

She smiled graciously and then said, “Will you excuse me?” Dr. Archibald nodded, and Irene turned around and swiftly walked out of the room and down the hall. She needed a moment alone.

She walked into a bathroom and shut the door. She leaned back against the door as she tried to steady her breathing. She was shaking from the thought of possibly having just danced with her father’s murderer. She took several deep breaths and when she felt calmer, she moved away from the door and looked into the embossed, filigree mirror. Her skin was pale, and she pinched her cheeks in an attempt to give them some color. As much as she would have liked to, she knew that she couldn’t hide in there the rest of the night. With that reasoning, she collected herself as well as she could and opened the door to return to the party.

Irene walked out of the bathroom and rounded a corner where she ran straight into Max. He held her by the shoulders to steady the two of them. “There you are! I’ve been looking everywhere for you. Thanks for leaving me alone with the Richards clan,” he joked. “Where have you been?”

“Nowhere. I just finished dancing with Dr. Archibald.”

“How did that go?” Max asked, his concern evident.
“I can’t remember ever feeling more unnerved in all my life. I thought for sure that I’d faint before the dance ended.”

“Did you?” Max said trying to lighten her mood.

“By some miracle – no,” she replied.

He lowered his voice. “Did you find out anything?”

“No. He acted as though the first time he’d ever met me was at the country club.”

“Wasn’t it?”

Irene stopped for a minute. “Actually, I guess it was. I’d heard his name before, but now that I think of it, the two of us had never met until a few days ago.”

Max took her hand in his supportively as he questioned, “Are you okay?”

“I think so. I just needed a minute to calm down.”

After a few seconds, he changed the subject. “Well then, Ms. Duncan,” he said with an engaging smile, “may I have the next dance?”

She grinned as she reminded him, “Max . . . you don’t know how to dance.”

“Didn’t you know that you don’t have to actually dance anymore? Someone told me once that all dancing is nowadays is swaying back and forth to the music.”

She tried to recall why those words sounded so familiar. Suddenly she remembered where she had heard them before. She had said them to Max when she taught him how to dance for his high school prom. She couldn’t believe that he remembered that night – it was such a long time ago. Irene couldn’t hide her surprise.

Max looked intently into her eyes and said, “How about it Irene? I promise that I’ve improved since then.”
She tucked a wisp of hair behind her ear and smiled up at him as she said softly, “I’d love to.”

As Max accompanied Irene onto the dance floor, he noticed that Tweed, her parents, his college friends, numerous guests, as well as Blake had all stopped to observe them. Max hadn’t danced with Irene since the night that she’d taught him how, and he honestly didn’t care if every single person at the party stopped to take a look. Paying no heed to the numerous observers, he slid his arm securely around Irene’s waist and took her hand in his. At first, she seemed tentative, but after a while she relaxed in his arms, and he drew her closer. He rested his head against hers and closed his eyes as he relished the moment of what it felt like to hold her close once again. It had been a long time since he had held her like this – but now that he had, Max knew that he never wanted to let her go.

Blake couldn’t hide his approving smile as he watched them. He had always loved Irene like a daughter. He was heartbroken when things hadn’t worked out between her and Max. As he observed them now, Blake felt that things would be different this time around. He knew that Max and Irene were meant for each other – he only hoped that they knew it too.
Chapter 48

Sarah Jane was absolutely beside herself. She tried to focus on her work but found it impossible. More than once today she’d become impatient and had looked out the window in an effort to keep herself from going crazy. She seemed completely unaware of the fact that her fellow clerk, Tim Clawson, was in the room and that he too was finding it increasingly difficult to concentrate because of her incessant pacing. He looked up from his work to find her once again looking nervously out the window.

“Everything okay, Sarah Jane?” Tim questioned.

His voice caught her by surprise, and when his words finally registered, she said quickly, “What? Oh, everything’s fine.”

“You seem restless.”

She smiled and tried to appear at ease in an attempt to deflect his interest in the situation. “I guess I’m just ready for today to be over.”

“Long day?”

“And then some,” she responded lightly. Her words couldn’t have been more accurate. Today was the day that Luke planned to go snooping around Bryson Walker and Adam Higgs’ office to see what he could find. Luke had given Sarah Jane strict instructions that under no circumstance was she to follow him into Bryson and Adam’s office.

She reflected on how many movies she’d seen where people didn’t do as they were told – and it always turned out to be a disaster. When someone ignored a warning and ended up being in the wrong place, the entire mission was often jeopardized. She
wondered if they made people in the movies brainless – especially females – to make it more dramatic. She used to think that no one was stupid enough to behave that way in real life, but now that she was in that position herself, she decided it was much easier said than done to do as you’re told.

Sarah Jane let out a sigh and walked resignedly back to her desk and sat down. Luke had told her not to come in after him unless he specifically told her to do so. With that, she pretended once again to be engrossed in her work, although she was anything but. The suspense was unbearable. As she sat there, she kept wondering how much longer it would be until she knew for sure whether Luke had gone prying – and if he had – had he gotten away with it?
Luke looked nervously over his shoulder in the dark room toward the closed door. This was the first chance he’d been able to sneak into Bryson and Adam’s office without being noticed, and to make matters worse, they were due back from lunch any minute. Just then, Luke heard voices on the other side of the door. He knew that he couldn’t afford to stop investigating now because he may never get another opportunity. He didn’t want to involve Sarah Jane, but he knew that he didn’t have a choice. He quickly pulled out his cell phone and sent her text message that the subjects were back, and he needed a decoy right away.

Sarah Jane was sitting restlessly at her desk when she got the text. She stood up and said to Tim Clawson, “I’m going to run grab something to eat. Is there anything I can get for you while I’m out?”

“No, I’m good thanks.”

“All right then,” she responded as she picked up her coat and handbag. “I’ll be back in a minute.” She left the room and walked hurriedly down the hall toward Bryson and Adam’s office. She found them standing outside their door talking with some fellow clerks. She approached the group of men with a large, disarming smile on her attractive face as she said, “Hey guys, I was just on my way to grab a bite to eat. Would any of you care to join me?”

The group of men couldn’t help but smile – their astonishment from the unexpected invitation obvious. Sarah Jane had worked at the courthouse for several months and had never seemed remotely interested in doing something with any of them.
Although most of the group had already eaten, they all readily agreed to join her. She and the group of men moved away from the office and began to walk down the hall. Luke heard retreating footsteps as well as fading voices and knew that Sarah Jane had successfully done her job – she’d bought him more time. Now it was his job to make the most of it.

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Luke worked quickly, despite the fact that the closed window shade made the room quite dark. He only had a flashlight because he didn’t dare turn on the light or open the blind in case someone happened to observe him from outside. After he finished sorting through all of the files, papers, and clutter in Bryson’s desk, Luke let out an audible sigh of discouragement. He began to feel that this risky maneuver would prove to be worthless.

Although it seemed pointless, Luke decided to quickly search Bryson’s cabinet files. After going through the first drawer and carefully replacing everything as he found it, Luke pulled out another manila folder from the drawer. He began shuffling through the papers inside when a piece of paper that had been folded askew – revealing the logo of a prestigious hotel – caught his attention. He unfolded the piece of paper and moved his flashlight so that he could read it.

For a moment, Luke could do nothing but stare at the information he was holding. He was in a state of disbelief. On the note were three cases that had recently gone to the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. Under each case, six of the seven Supreme Court justices’ names were written down along with a “y” or “n” next to their names. A dollar amount was also written next to three parties who were involved in the litigation. There
was only one judge whose name didn’t appear on the note – none other than the late Judge William Duncan.

Luke knew that he had tempted fate too long. He had to get out of Bryson and Adam’s office before getting caught. Knowing Bryson to be a paranoid individual, Luke decided it imperative to leave the note behind – in case Bryson should find it missing. He pulled out his phone, took a picture of the note, and proceeded to forward it immediately on to Max in the event that anything should happen to prevent him from doing so later. He hastily placed the note back where he had found it, closed Bryson’s cabinet drawer, and grabbed his cell phone and flashlight.

Luke quietly opened the door and found the hallway empty. He walked out of the office and shut the door softly behind him. He walked swiftly down the hall and had just made it around the corner to his office when he heard the rambunctious group returning. Luke walked into his empty office, sat down at his desk, and let out a deep breath. His brilliant idea had nearly failed – he’d almost been caught – twice.
Chapter 50

“Hello,” Irene said as she picked up the telephone in the kitchen where she was making dinner for Max, Luke, and Sarah Jane. The four of them were meeting that evening at her home to discuss some information that Luke found at work.

“Irene Matilda Duncan,” said the polished voice of her Aunt Phyllis over the phone, “When you decided to go home for a while, I didn’t think that would mean that I would never hear from you again.”

“Aunt Phyllis,” Irene said delightedly, “it’s so good to hear from you. I’ve missed you. How are things in Paris?”

“They’re fine, but I want to know how things are there.” There was a slight pause and then Phyllis proceeded with several questions, not bothering to wait for a response from Irene. “How’s the transition going – you adjusting okay? Are you sure that you’re getting enough rest – I do hope that Max isn’t wearing you out with all that investigating nonsense. Have you been able to find out anything – I trust that the two of you have been very careful?”

Irene laughed at her aunt’s concern as she responded, “I’m doing fine . . . and yes we’ve been careful.”

“So, any leads?”

“There are a few that we’re looking into a little more closely right now. We’re trying to find out what we can about dad’s psychologist, a legal clerk at his work, and some strange woman by the name of Mallory Grant who claims that she and my father
were involved when he met Mom. She also had the gall to imply that they had been close ever since.”

“I beg your pardon?” Phyllis questioned. “I must have misunderstood you. Did you say that your father was involved with another woman throughout his marriage? That’s rubbish. I don’t believe it for an instant,” she declared.

“I know – me either. It’s just hurtful that someone would say that.”

There was a moment when neither of them spoke – both of them deep in their own private thoughts. At last, Phyllis questioned, “So, what’s the plan now?”

Irene let out a sigh, “We just have to keep looking and hope that something solid turns up.”

“Promise me that you’ll be careful, Irene. It’s not worth knowing what happened the night your father was killed if it means placing yourself in danger. You’re all I have left.”

“Please try not to worry. I promise that we’ll be as cautious as possible.”

Satisfied, Phyllis responded, “Well, all right then, dear. Just make sure and keep me informed as to what you’re doing so that I’m not too concerned.”

“I will. I love you.”

“I love you too, darling. We’ll be in touch.”

Irene said goodbye, hung up the phone, and went back to preparing dinner. Later that evening, the others showed up as expected for Luke to explain what he had found at the courthouse that day. None of them realized at the time just how startling this information would turn out to be.
Max and Irene stacked the dirty dishes in the sink and returned to their seats at the kitchen table where Luke and Sarah Jane were waiting to discuss what had happened at the courthouse earlier that day. “Luke, why don’t you tell us what happened, and then we’ll decide where to go from there,” Max said.

Luke nodded and then explained, “I was able to sneak into Bryson and Adam’s office while they were at lunch today without being noticed. I went through all the stuff on Bryson’s desk but didn’t find anything that seemed particularly interesting – so then I looked through his cabinet. I went through tons of files and finally found something that could be important.”

Luke pulled out his cell phone and found the picture that he had taken. “I took a picture of a note I found – rather than taking the actual note – in case Bryson went looking for it and found it missing.”

Max pulled out his cell phone as well and found the picture that Luke had forwarded to him as he said, “What do you think it means, Luke?”

“I’m not exactly sure yet,” Luke responded. “Three cases are listed on the note. All of the cases went before the Massachusetts Supreme Court within the last year. I recall each of them, but I’ll have to do some research to remember all of the details. Under each case, the names of six Supreme Court Justices are listed with a “y” or “n” next to their respective name. There’s also a dollar amount by three of the parties that were involved in the legal action.”
Luke paused and cleared his throat. “I can’t be certain, but it looks to me like someone made a list as to how six of the seven justices would probably vote on these cases. If you look carefully, you’ll notice that the judges are divided in half with a three to three split on each case.”

Irene leaned over to look at Max’s cell phone as she said, “Which judge is missing from the list?”

“Your father,” Luke responded. “He ruled on all three of the cases, but his name is nowhere on the list.”

Irene looked at the picture of the note, and her eyes widened in surprise. She grabbed Max’s hand so that she could better see the picture on his cell phone. “I don’t believe it,” she said faintly.

“What?” Max questioned.

Irene looked from the picture to Max’s face as she said, “The note’s written in my father’s handwriting.”

“Are you sure?” Max asked.

“I’m absolutely positive. I’d recognize his writing anywhere.” Irene tucked a wisp of hair behind her ear as she questioned the group, “What does this mean?”

Luke felt uncomfortable now that he realized Duncan was the one who’d written the note. At that point, Luke had a strong suspicion what the information he discovered really meant, but he didn’t want to say anything that would disillusion Irene’s feelings about her dad any further. So, instead Luke said, “I can’t say for certain.”

“Just say it Luke,” Irene said. “We’re all thinking the same thing – so, just say it.”
“Well, it appears your father was making predictions as to how the other justices would rule on each case.” Luke paused again, not wanting to say what he knew he must if they were ever going to figure things out. Reluctantly he continued, “Since there are dollar amounts listed by three of the parties involved, it appears that your father may have been accepting bribes.”

Irene nodded solemnly as she said, “That’s what I was afraid of.”

Max heard the heartbreak in Irene’s voice, and he put his arm on the back of her chair as she continued, “How could my father have done such a thing. It’s not like we needed the money.”

“Let’s not try to understand why he did it,” Max said. “If it’s true, it’s very likely that some of the parties involved were far from happy about how things turned out – and as a result – perhaps got rid of him.”

Max thought to himself for a moment and then continued, “I think we should look into these cases more carefully and find out who had the most to lose. If we find that, it just may point us to a murderer.”
Chapter 52

Irene had just finished her ballet practice and was walking out of the dance studio in her home when she heard the doorbell ring. She stopped abruptly, glanced down at her attire, and noted to herself that she wasn’t fit to greet anyone in her current state of readiness. She heard the door open, and Mrs. Lewis exchange muffled greetings with someone. Shortly after, Irene heard the door close once again and realized that whoever had been speaking with Mrs. Lewis was now gone.

Irene walked through the doorway of the kitchen just as she saw Mrs. Lewis set down a crystal vase with an elaborate arrangement of flowers on the kitchen counter. Irene let out a gasp, her voice sounding out of breath as she exclaimed, “They’re beautiful!”

Mrs. Lewis turned toward Irene when she heard her voice and a large smile spread across the housekeeper’s face, as she responded, “Aren’t they? They were just delivered for you.” She paused for a moment and picked up the card that had arrived with the flowers before she continued, “This came with them.”

Irene walked over to her and took the card from her proffered hand. Not taking her eyes from the flowers, she broke the seal of the envelope. “I wonder who they’re from.”

“I have my guess,” Mrs. Lewis teased. “If Max had half a brain, he would have sent flowers a long time ago.” She let out an exasperated sigh and then added, “Better late than never, I suppose.”
Irene laughed and shook her head at that last comment as Mrs. Lewis walked out of the kitchen – leaving her alone. Irene opened the note – her smile vanished. She suddenly felt the skin on her arms prickling from the chill of fear that had swept over her, and her hands began to tremble so violently that she dropped the envelope. She moved quickly to the phone and hurriedly dialed Max’s number. She heard the phone ring several times, and each time it rang with no response, her panic escalated.

Just when she was about to hang up, Irene heard his voice on the other end of the line, “Irene?”

“Hi – I need to tell you something.”

Max could hear the unease in her voice and asked, “Is something wrong?”

“I just received flowers from Dr. Archibald.”


“Just now – he sent a card with them.”

“What does it say?”

Irene fumbled with the note because of her shaking hands but finally managed to open it. She took a deep breath and then began, “It says, ‘I haven’t been able to take my mind off you since the night we danced together. I can still smell the fragrance of your perfume. You’ve consumed me – and have left me wanting more – much more. Steven Archibald.’”

“Just try to stay calm.”

“He just makes me uncomfortable.”
“I know he does, but we still don’t have any solid evidence on him. All we can do is wait and see what happens.” Max waited for her to respond; and when she didn’t, he continued, “Just try and relax – okay?”

“Okay,” she agreed.

“I’ll see you tonight,” he said and then they hung up the phone.

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Max sat motionless for some time as he tried to absorb his conversation with Irene. Soon he couldn’t stop himself, and he began to pace back and forth in his office – the words of Dr. Archibald racing through his mind again and again.
Chapter 53

Sarah Jane tried to unlock her apartment door but struggled since she had her arms full. She fumbled for her key as her purse and several other bags kept sliding off her shoulder. At last, she unlocked the door – stepped inside – and then shut it behind her. She flipped on the light switch in her family room but stopped abruptly when she saw that her apartment had been ransacked. Furniture was turned over, and the cushions on her couch and chairs had the padding ripped out. Several pictures, mirrors, and photographs had been smashed and thrown to the floor. She walked swiftly to the bedrooms and then to the kitchen and found that her entire apartment was in the same vandalized state. It appeared to be a robbery, yet at first glance, nothing valuable seemed to be missing. In fact, several expensive electronics had also been thrown to the floor and were now broken.

Sarah Jane walked back into the family room to call the police when she got the distinct feeling that she wasn’t alone. She stiffened when she heard breathing in the room that was not her own, and she could feel herself begin to panic. She slowly turned her head and glanced over her shoulder just as she saw a man lunge at her from where he’d been hiding behind the curtains. He threw himself down on top of her and knocked her completely off her feet. She tried furiously to fight off her attacker. She tried to tear at his face but to no avail because of the black ski mask her assailant wore. She kicked, screamed, and clawed, and finally managed to get him off her long enough for her to get up off the floor.
She knew that she had to get out of there or she would be dead for sure. She started to rush to the door but let out a cry of pain as her attacker grabbed her from behind and hurled her over the desk. He then picked her up and threw her against a picture on the wall – glass shattered around her. She put her hands over her head in an attempt to protect herself from the flying glass. At that instant, she felt an agonizing pain and watched as the man withdrew a long, sharp object from her side. She realized she had been stabbed with her steel, letter opener which just a moment before had been on her desk. Her attacker held the letter opener threateningly in his black, gloved hand. The force of the attack made her stagger backward. She felt light-headed and nauseous as she looked down and saw her cream sweater soaked in blood. The man watched her agony with satisfaction – he was toying with her now.

Suddenly, her survival instinct set in, and she decided that if he was going to kill her, then it was going to be the hardest struggle he’d ever had. She held her stomach with one hand and looked at him – her eyes burning with resolve. This time when he started toward her – still holding the bloodied weapon – she moved rapidly and grabbed a lamp from one of the end tables and smashed it into his head. Her attacker fell abruptly to the floor.

Sarah Jane didn’t know whether he was conscious or not, but she knew that she couldn’t stick around to find out. She knew if she didn’t get out now, she’d be leaving the apartment in a body bag. With each step she took, her pain escalated, and each movement became more and more difficult. She was bleeding heavily and losing consciousness. She staggered to the door – struggling several times to remain on her feet. Finally, she threw the door open and stumbled into the vacant hall. She was certain that
after her attacker recovered, he would simply drag her body back into her apartment and finish the job if she didn’t have some witnesses. She knew that she needed an audience and that she needed one now.

With that reasoning, she stumbled down the hall to where the fire alarm was located – pulled it – and collapsed to the floor. The apartment building was filled with the deafening sound of the alarm. Moments later, tenants began to flood the hall and stairwells, and the entire building soon was in an uproar. It was then that several tenants noticed Sarah Jane on the floor holding her side – her blood everywhere. A few tenants rushed to her aid, and it was then that she slipped into unconsciousness.

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Luke had just stepped out of the shower after returning home from the gym when his telephone rang. He debated whether or not he should answer it. He wasn’t in the mood to talk to a solicitor – or even worse – to Tweed. He decided he might as well get the inevitable over with and picked up the phone. Nothing could have prepared him for what he heard next.
“Irene,” Max shouted in a panicked voice as he let himself into her home. Irene!”

He looked around swiftly in the entryway but found nothing out of the ordinary. When he had received the call from Luke about what had happened to Sarah Jane, he’d rushed over to Irene’s. He hadn’t been able to get Irene on the phone, and he was frantic that something may have happened to her. Just then, he saw her racing down the stairs toward him.

“Max, what is it?” Irene sensed the urgency in his voice and knew that something was desperately wrong. “What’s happened?”

He breathed a sigh of relief when he found her unharmed and rushed to her side.

“Why didn’t you answer your phone? I tried calling and calling.”

“I haven’t had my phone with me. I was at the store, and I forgot it.” She examined his face and could see that he was distraught. “Max, tell me what’s going on.”

He cleared his throat and tried to think of the best way to break the terrible news to her. He finally decided that there was no good way. He took a deep breath to help brace himself for what he was about to say. “Irene . . . Sarah Jane was attacked at her apartment tonight.”


“We don’t know for sure yet. She was stabbed in the stomach and had lost a lot of blood by the time the ambulance arrived. Her entire apartment had been torn apart.”
Irene put her hand over her mouth as she tried to absorb what Max had just told her. “This can’t be happening – not Sarah Jane.”

“Luke’s already at the hospital and wants us to come as soon as we can.”

She nodded. “I’m ready to go.”

“You probably want to grab a coat – it’s raining.”

“This works,” she responded as she grabbed her father’s overcoat hanging on the coat rack in the entryway. Irene hurriedly drew the coat over her head, and she and Max dashed out into the stormy night.
Chapter 55

When Max and Irene arrived at Sarah Jane’s hospital room, they found Luke seated next to the bed. He was holding one of Sarah Jane’s hands in his own. She looked battered. Her face had cuts on it, and her lips were bruised and swollen, as was much of her body. She hadn’t regained consciousness yet, and the room was deathly quiet. The only sounds in the room were those coming from the equipment that monitored her condition.

Max and Irene stood in the doorway as they took in the painful scene. When Max spoke, his voice was a whisper, “Luke.”

At the sound of his voice, Luke turned around and saw Max and Irene standing by the door. He gently laid Sarah Jane’s hand on the bed and walked over to his friends. Max and Luke gave each other a hug, and then Luke embraced Irene tightly. When he let go, Luke said, “Thanks for coming. I didn’t want to have to do this alone.”

Irene laid her hand reassuringly on Luke’s arm and said, “Sorry it took us a while to get here. We came as fast as we could.”

Their gaze shifted to Sarah Jane, and Max asked, “How is she?”

“She’s not awake yet, and with all the blood that she’s lost, she has a tough road ahead.”

“Do the police know what happened?” Irene questioned.

“They’re still investigating,” Luke responded. “It could be some time before we know for sure.”
They nodded, and then Max said, “We’ll wait with you until there’s an update on her condition.”

Luke went back to his chair and picked up Sarah Jane’s hand as he gazed at her. Max led Irene over to a well-worn couch in one corner of the room, and they both sat down.

The three of them sat there for hours, just waiting and hoping for any sign of improvement. It was well into the night before Luke’s concern and exhaustion overcame him. He fell asleep – his head on Sarah Jane’s bed – his hand still holding hers. Max looked over at Irene who had her elbows resting on her knees, her head in her hands. He put his hand on the nape of her neck, and she turned her face toward him. She looked beside herself with guilt and worry. Max whispered so that he wouldn’t wake Luke, “It’s going to be okay.”

“I’m so worried about her. She got hurt because she was helping us – I know it. Whoever killed my father wanted to scare us enough that we’d stop prying, and somehow, he knew that Sarah Jane was involved.” Irene paused for a moment and looked intently at Max as tears started to roll down her cheeks. “I’m scared that she might not make it and . . . I . . . I can’t help but wonder who he’ll come after next.”

Max put his hand on the back of her head and drew her toward him as he said, “I promise that nothing’s going to happen to you. You don’t need to be afraid.”

“I’m not scared for myself, but if anything happens to you or Luke . . . I don’t know if I’ll recover.”

Max held her tightly in his arms as he said, “Nothing’s going to happen to any of us. Try not to think about it anymore.”
“It’s so hard not to.”

“Just try to rest. I’ll wake you if there’s any change with Sarah Jane.”

She nodded. He kept his arm around her, and it wasn’t long before he heard her even breathing. He looked down and found her fast asleep. He pulled her father’s coat over her to keep her warm. Max stayed awake for a long time after Irene had fallen asleep. He was terrified when he thought about how he was going to keep her safe. Finally, when exhaustion overcame him, he rested his head on hers, and it wasn’t long before he too fell into a deep sleep.
When Irene woke up early the next morning, she was slightly disoriented, and it took a few seconds for her to re-acquaint herself with her surroundings. Suddenly, she remembered all that had happened the previous night, and she looked across the room to find Sarah Jane still unconsciousness and Luke still asleep.

It was at that moment she noticed her hand resting on Max’s chest and felt his arm around her. She tilted her head back and found Max was sound asleep. She studied his face for some time and couldn’t help but reflect on all that they had been through over the years. After a while – instead of feeling calmed by his nearness – she began to feel uneasy. As much as she didn’t want to admit it – especially to herself – she realized that she still had feelings for Max despite all of her efforts to forget him.

All of a sudden, Irene felt frightened. She was afraid when she recalled how she had loved him once before, and he had rejected her. Terrified that he would somehow be able to read her thoughts, even though he wasn’t awake, she moved quietly away from him. She needed some time alone to think, and she decided to go to the hospital cafeteria to get some breakfast.

When she returned with breakfast for herself and the others, she found Luke just as he’d been when she left, but Max was now awake. He was standing with his back to the door while he looked out the window. He turned around when he heard her enter the room, and a slow smile spread across his face as he said quietly, “Morning.”

“Good morning,” she replied shyly, still troubled by the realization she had earlier that morning. When he didn’t respond but just continued to stare at her, she
continued uncomfortably, “I got us some breakfast.” She walked across the room, sat down on the couch, and placed the food on a nearby table.

From behind her, where he still stood, Max said, “Did you sleep at all? I was worried about you.”

Irene could feel herself begin to flush and was grateful that he couldn’t see her because she was certain that her eyes would have given her thoughts away. She tried to steady her breathing and keep her voice calm. “Yeah, I slept fine. It’s probably the most sleep I’ve had since I’ve been back home. How about you?”

“Definitely,” Max responded. He walked around the couch until he stood in front of her.

She looked up at him, her face confused. “Huh?”

“That’s definitely the most sleep I’ve had since you’ve been back,” he responded with a teasing grin, purposely misunderstanding her question. She blushed again, only this time it didn’t go unnoticed by him.

Before either of them had a chance to say anything else, they heard Luke stir. He sat up and rubbed his stiff neck with one hand, his other hand still holding Sarah Jane’s. He gazed at her for a few moments and then turned his head to his friends. Irene stood up as she said, “Do you want something to eat?”

“Maybe a little.”

Luke joined them, and the three of them ate in relative silence. Once they’d finished Luke said, “As much as I would love for you to stay here with me, you both have important business to attend to.”
“Don’t think about that right now,” Irene responded sympathetically. “It can wait.”

Luke shook his head. “No, it can’t. We have to make sure what happened to Sarah Jane doesn’t happen again – and in order to ensure that it doesn’t, we have to figure out who killed your father. That animal is still out there – just waiting for the opportunity to strike again. We have to find him before he does.” When they hesitated, Luke continued, “I know it’s what Sarah Jane would want us to do.”

Max and Irene contemplated his comment for some time. Finally, Max said, “All right. We’ll keep looking.”

“I’ll do some more research on those cases while I’m waiting here,” Luke replied. “Can you guys get my laptop – it’s at my house – and bring it by when you have a chance?”

“Sure, no problem,” Max responded.

“Luke,” Irene said gently, “will you keep us posted on Sarah Jane?”

He smiled reassuringly at her as he said, “Sure thing, Rene.”

“And let us know,” she continued, “if there’s anything we can do for you.”

“I will.” Luke paused for a few moments and then trying to lighten the mood joked, “Now get out of here. I’m sick of you guys.”

The three friends stood up, grabbed their belongings, and walked into the hallway just outside of Sarah Jane’s hospital room where they said goodbye. Luke watched as Max and Irene made their way down the long hallway. Irene glanced back at Luke and gave him an encouraging wave which he returned. He didn’t want them to see how worried he was about them. He knew that given enough time, they would indeed be able
to figure out who was responsible for Duncan’s death and Sarah Jane’s assault, but time was running out. He hoped that they would find out who was behind it before it was too late.
Max held Irene’s elbow as the two of them dashed from the front doors of the hospital to his car. The stormy weather from the night before had not let up, and it was still windy and pouring rain. By the time they reached his car, they were both drenched. Max turned on the heat, and Irene rubbed her arms in an attempt to make herself warmer.

“It’s so cold!” she exclaimed.

“And it really doesn’t help that we’re soaking wet,” he responded with a laugh.

She nodded and drew her father’s coat tighter around herself. “My hands are like ice.” She then continued as much to herself as to Max, “I wonder if my dad kept any gloves in here.”

Irene started to rummage through the pockets of the coat but stopped when she felt a piece of paper in one of the inside pockets. She removed the paper and found that it was actually a card addressed to her father. She quickly skimmed the short note.

“What!” her voice trailed off as the shock set in. In her hands, Irene held a letter to her father written on the personal stationary of none other than Mallory Grant.

Max could hear the surprise in Irene’s voice and looked over at her. Her face was troubled and her hands were trembling. “Irene, what is it?”

She was too stunned to speak, and so instead, she handed the letter to him. He took it from her, read it, and then he re-read part of it again aloud. “I’ve waited for us to be together for so long, but I can’t take it anymore. I’ve had enough of this relationship limbo. It’s time for us to part ways, which we both know we should have done long
before now. I’ve been a fool to think that I could compete with a girl half my age for your affection.”

Max let out a slow whistle and said, “She doesn’t sound too pleased does she?”

“Do you realize what this means?”

Max knew that Irene soon might not have any good feelings about her father because of all the indiscretions they’d uncovered about him during the past several weeks. For a moment, he wished that they’d never gone digging in her father’s affairs. He couldn’t stand to see Irene anymore disheartened than she already was.

“I didn’t want to believe it, but . . . it appears that Mallory Grant and my father were involved after all.” She paused, tucked her hair behind her ear, and then continued, “And it sounds like he was plenty involved elsewhere as well. I don’t even know my father anymore, Max. I used to think he was wonderful, but everything I thought he was has turned out to be a lie. He probably never did anything heroic in his whole life unless it was convenient for him.”

“There’s one thing he did that makes up for all the other areas where he may have failed.”

Irene looked puzzled. “What’s that?”

“You – he succeeded with you.”

Irene smiled at him and said softly, “Thank you, Max.” Her smile grew larger as she continued, “But I’m pretty sure Aunt Phyllis would disagree with you. She would say that she’s the one responsible for my turning out well.” They both laughed for a moment before becoming serious once again. “What do you think about the note, Max?”
“What I’m more interested in knowing is who the ‘young lady’ is that Ms. Grant was referring to. She’s another person who has slipped under our radar. We need to find out who she is and why she’s tried so hard to keep her relationship with Duncan a secret.”
Chapter 58

Max was flooded with work as he sat in his office at The Post when his assistant, Diane, walked through the door in a huff. Diane had been at The Post for as long as he could remember. She’d worked there initially for Blake and then for him after he started running the business. Max thought of Diane as more of a friend than a colleague, and as such, she didn’t mince her words with him or tread lightly. She always said exactly what she was thinking, and it was obvious to him that she definitely had something on her mind. She shook her head, let out a sigh, and rolled her eyes. “You’ve got someone here to see you.”

“Do I have a meeting scheduled?”

“No.”

“Find out what story it’s concerning and whether or not it’s urgent. If it’s not, reschedule it. I’m swamped.”

“I certainly wouldn’t consider it urgent, especially since it has nothing whatsoever to do with work – but when I asked the lady to schedule an appointment, she became enraged. She simply won’t take no for an answer.”

“Did you get her name?”

Diane paused for a moment and then with a knowing smile said, “Tweed Richards.”

“Oh man! She is relentless. I can’t say I’m surprised.” Max smiled. “Go ahead and send her in – I’ll deal with her myself.”
Diane left his office and returned a few moments later with Tweed. Diane showed her into Max’s office and then shut the door behind them as she left. She wasn’t in the mood to hear Tweed’s obnoxious voice – neither was he.

“Sorry for just dropping in on you like this,” Tweed said to Max once they were alone. Her mouth spread into an alluring smile as she added, “I really hope it’s not too big an inconvenience.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you, Tweed,” he responded impatiently.

Her practiced smile faltered, and it took her several seconds to recover. “So, how are things with work?”

“They’re fine.”

“And your uncle – how’s he?”

“He’s fine.”

“Good . . . good.”

After a long, uncomfortable pause Max said, “So, are you going to tell me why you’re here?”

Tweed looked taken back. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Don’t you?”

She was surprised by his tone and pursed her lips as she said, “I’m not used to this. You’ve been hanging out with Luke more than usual haven’t you?” She waved her hand to dismiss any answer from him. “He’s rubbed off on you. It’s a shame he’s so vile – otherwise, he could have had some potential.”

Fed up with her incessant chatter, Max responded, “I’m pretty sure he’d say the same thing about you.”
Tweed’s composure snapped, and her demure façade melted away with her next words. “I don’t care what Luke thinks about me! He’s not what I came here to talk about. I want to know what’s going on between us.”

“The same thing that’s been going on for years – nothing!”

Trying to manipulate him in order to get what she wanted – she smiled flirtatiously and tamed her shrill voice to a softer tone. “You don’t really feel that way. I know you don’t.”

“Trust me, I do.” He turned his back to her, and her smile vanished. It was obvious to her that Max was signaling the end of the conversation, but she refused to leave until she knew the answer to one more question.

She was seething, and her voice sounded caustic. “This is about Irene isn’t it?”

“Let’s leave Irene out of this, shall we?”

“No!” Tweed shouted. “Tell me yes or no. Is this about Irene?”

“What would you say if I said yes?”

“I’d walk out of here and never come back.”

Max turned around to face her, crossed his arms over his chest, and smiled as he said, “It’s about Irene.”

Tweed’s breathing escalated, and her face went red with rage. She stormed out of his office and slammed the door shut behind her. Max realized this was the first time he’d ever told anyone openly how he felt about Irene.
“How are you, Max?” Blake questioned as his nephew pulled out an upholstered, high back chair and joined him at the table where he had already started on his appetizer. “I was surprised to hear from you. I thought that you said you wouldn’t be able to make it today.” They usually met for lunch every month at their favorite restaurant. However, Max knew how heinous his day at the office was going to be so he had canceled lunch that morning only to call and re-schedule it after what had happened with Tweed.

“Change of plans – things got complicated, and I need to talk to you.”

“Go ahead. I’m all ears.”

Max rested is hands on the table and took a deep breath. “Tweed dropped by my office today.”

Blake shook his head – not quite understanding where this conversation was headed. “Go on.”

“She asked me where things were going with us.”

Blake raised his eyebrows and said firmly, “I hope that you told her things were going nowhere between you.”

Max nodded. “I did.”

“So, what’s so complicated? It sounds like you straightened everything out. Hopefully, she’ll get it this time,” he added with a laugh.

Max cleared his throat and Blake could sense his hesitation. “There’s a little more to it than that.”
“I haven’t got all day, and from the sound of things at your office, neither have you – so you’d better start talking.”

“I guess you could say that things got complicated when Tweed asked me if the reason that I wasn’t getting back together with her was because of Irene.”

Blake tried not to let his immense interest or delight show as he questioned, “And did you tell her that Irene was the reason?”

“I don’t want to be with Tweed regardless.”

“Don’t skirt around my question like a politician – answer me.” Blake looked Max directly in the eye and asked the question that had been on his mind for years. “Is the fact that you’re not with Tweed, or anyone else for that matter, because you have feelings for Irene?”

He looked down at his hands and then back at his uncle. A slight smile touched his face and he nodded. “Yes. If I can’t be with Irene, I’d rather be alone.”

Blake grinned and slammed his hand on the table. “That’s the best news I’ve had in ages. It’s better than learning I’m one of the richest men in America.” He let out a deep sigh and leaned back comfortably in his chair. “You know – on second thought – I do have all day. Let’s make sure and order dessert.”

Max couldn’t help but smile at Blake’s obvious delight with the situation. “There’s just one little problem.”

Blake’s smile faded slightly, and he looked puzzled. “What’s that?”

“Irene. It’s possible that she may simply tell me where to go.”

“Possible . . . but not likely. You made a mistake once before where she was concerned – I’d hate to see you make another one.”
Max looked intently at his uncle and said, “What do you mean another one?”

“You’ve regretted for years how things turned out between you and Irene. Now you have a second chance. You’ll always regret it if you don’t find out if things could be different this time around.”

Max ran his hand through his hair. He was nervous to tell Irene the truth. “How do I just blurt out something like that?”

“Trust me – when the moment’s right – you’ll know what to do.”
Chapter 60

As Irene sat relaxing in her family room late one evening, she heard the doorbell ring. Puzzled, her brow furrowed as she glanced over at the antique mantel clock. She had spoken with Max earlier that evening, and he had said nothing about coming over. But when the doorbell rang yet again, Irene quickly concluded that he must have changed his mind and, due to the lateness of the hour, decided to ring the doorbell rather than let himself in so that he wouldn’t startle her.

Irene got up off the couch and moved quickly to answer the door, which she opened without preamble. However, instead of seeing Max waiting there as she’d expected, Irene found Dr. Steven Archibald on the other side of the now open door. Her heart rate immediately sped up, and it took a great effort on her part to keep her face expressionless. At last, Irene found her voice, a voice that sounded remarkably calm even to her own ears. “Dr. Archibald. What an unexpected pleasure.”

“Please, Irene,” he replied familiarly, “call me Steven.” She forced a smile in response but had no intention of complying with his wishes. After some time, he continued, “I think you know why I’m here.”

Irene hoped that Dr. Archibald couldn’t see the panic in her face or that her hands were shaking. The questions started to race through her mind, and she couldn’t help but wonder if he had somehow learned that she suspected him of her father’s murder. She tried to calculate for a moment whether she could shut the door in his face and lock it before he was able to stop her. She was so engrossed in her thoughts that it took her longer than normal before she finally said, “Actually, I have no idea why you’re here.”
“Didn’t you get the flowers I sent?”

“Yes. Thank you. They were very beautiful.” She paused for a moment before adding, her face full of confusion, “But, I’m not sure exactly what they have to do with your being here now.”

Dr Archibald clicked his tongue. “Stop trying to behave so innocently, Irene.” He paused and then added meaningfully, “I know what you’re up to.”

Irene felt an intense sense of terror – disaster lurking in the shadows – just waiting to break free. This time when she spoke, her voice trembled. “I don’t know what you mean.”

A slow grin spread across his face, and he took a step nearer. “Why don’t I just come inside so that we can talk about it?”

“Now’s actually not a good time for me.”

“Why not? We both know perfectly well that you’re home alone.” His face was intense, and when he took another step closer, her hand moved to hold the side of the door in an attempt to prevent him from coming any nearer.

Irene was terrified, and she felt as if she were about to faint. Just then, she saw a pair of headlights turn onto the circular driveway and watched as the vehicle came to a stop in front of her home. Two police officers emerged from the car and approached her.

“Ms. Duncan. We’re with the Boston Police Department. We have a few more questions to ask you,” one of the officers explained. “If now’s not a convenient time . . .”

“No, officer,” Irene interrupted, “now is just fine.” Irene opened the door wider and gestured for the police officers to enter. They walked through the door and into the
library which was located just off the entryway. Irene turned back to face Dr. Archibald.

“If you’ll excuse me, Dr. Archibald, I’m afraid this can’t wait.”

Left with no other alternative, he nodded as he said, “I understand.” He paused for a moment and then added, “I’ll be seeing you soon.”

Irene tried to keep her face calm and her smile convincing as she responded, “Thanks again for the flowers.” She shut and locked the door behind him.

After he’d gone, Irene leaned her forehead against the closed door. She was breathing heavily, and she shivered involuntarily – as a result of not only the cold night air. She stayed that way for some time as she tried to steady her nerves. Once she was calmer, she walked into the library where the officers sat waiting for her – they had unknowingly timed their visit perfectly.
Chapter 61

Luke sat quietly in the hospital cafeteria one morning as he researched the three cases he’d found in Bryson’s cabinet, but so far, his search had been unlucky. He’d already looked into two of the cases and found nothing that he believed to be motivation for murdering the judge. He only had one more case to go.

He let out a discouraged sigh and looked at the last case listed on the note – Peter McCune v. Heathshore Reality, Inc. He meticulously read through the information – careful not to miss a thing.

At the time of the litigation, Peter McCune was in his late thirties and a member of the lower middle class. One day, a few days after a snowstorm, McCune was on his way to an interview at a prominent business complex when he slipped on some ice in the parking lot. He hit his head on the curb and sustained severe injuries. His fall resulted in subsequent seizures and large medical bills. McCune sued Heathshore Reality, the owner of the complex for negligence. He maintained that it was Heathshore’s duty to keep the parking lot free from ice.

Heathshore disputed McCune’s claims stating that there was no negligence on its part. Heathshore asserted that it had cleared the snow from the parking lot. Therefore, it was not responsible for the damage done to the plaintiff. McCune argued that the cleared snow had melted and then refrozen.

Luke looked up from the computer screen. His gaze moved about the room, but his thoughts were still focused on the case he had just read. Reading the case triggered his memory, and he tried to recall how it had turned out. He remembered how
insurmountable a feat it had seemed for one man to take on an organization as powerful as Heathshore Reality. It was one of the most prestigious and affluent business developers in the state and the surrounding areas.

Luke rubbed his hands together thoughtfully for a moment and then glanced back down at the screen as he continued to read. The Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, with a four to three split, ruled in favor of Heathshore Reality, Inc. stating that there was no negligence on Heathshore’s part and that the ice in the parking lot was a result of natural accumulation rather than snow removal.

Luke let out a slow whistle. There was little doubt in his mind that Heathshore Reality had paid Duncan for swinging the outcome its way. After all, it had billions of dollars at its disposal. Peter McCune, on the other hand, lost a potential fortune. Luke thought to himself for a moment, and he couldn’t help but wonder if Duncan’s decision had been reason enough for Peter McCune to commit murder.
As Luke was returning from the hospital cafeteria that afternoon, there was a flurry of activity in and around Sarah Jane’s hospital room. Frantic, he rushed through the door to find several doctors and nurses crowded around her bed. He moved quickly to her bedside to see what was causing all the commotion. Even though he knew it would be difficult for him, he had to see what was wrong. As he broke through the circle of hospital personal surrounding the bed, he came to an abrupt halt. All he could do was stare at her – Sarah Jane had regained consciousness.

Tears of relief formed in his eyes, and when he spoke, his voice was quiet and sounded almost reverent. “Sarah.”

She smiled slightly and couldn’t stop the tears from rolling down her cheeks. Luke moved forward until he stood by her bed and gently took her hand in his. “They told me that you were here – that you’ve been here for days.” He nodded, and she took a breath and then continued, “Thank you.”

“For what,” he questioned, his face puzzled.

“For not leaving me alone.”

He smiled and didn’t even try to stop the tears that came. “Never.” He bent down and gently kissed her.

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Later that night, after Sarah Jane had had a chance to rest, Luke sat in a chair next to her bed where he told her about what had been happening since her attack. “I was finally able to track down your parents.” Her parents were deep in the jungles of
Cambodia where her father was on an aid assignment as a physician for the charitable organization Doctors Without Borders. “They’ll be here as soon as they can, but it could take a while because they were basically in the middle of nowhere when I got in touch with them.”

She nodded. “Thanks for doing that, Luke. I feel better just knowing that they’re on their way.”

She let out a relieved sigh, and it was then that she commented on his disheveled appearance and noted his obvious exhaustion. Rather than a suit, which he normally wore to work, he had on jeans and a black, button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up. It appeared that he hadn’t shaved in days, and his brilliant eyes had dark circles under them. Luke noticed her careful scrutiny and jokingly volunteered, “I know, I know – at the moment I’m not what you’d call every woman’s fantasy. Am I right?”

She smiled. “I wasn’t thinking that.”

He grinned, “Oh, you weren’t?”

“No. I was just thinking how different you look right now than when you go to work.”

“Speaking of work,” he teased, “I’m thinking everyone is going to know that something’s going on between us, seeing as I haven’t been there since you were attacked.”

Sarah Jane’s concern was obvious in her voice. “You haven’t been at all? You’re probably going to be buried when you get back.”
“Not really. I’ve been doing a lot of work from here – with my laptop. Max and Irene brought it to me. They’ve stopped by several times. They’ve been really worried about you.”

“They are so sweet.”

“Irene brings fresh flowers every time she comes.” He gestured across the room to the vast assortment of flower arrangements as he said, “It’s practically a garden in here.”

Sarah Jane smiled at him, but her smile faded as she noticed that he appeared to be worried about something. “Is something wrong?”

Luke tried to look relaxed, as though he were perfectly at ease, but Sarah Jane could tell that he was hiding something as he said, “No, nothing’s wrong.”

“Liar,” she teased. “Why don’t you just go ahead and tell me what’s bothering you rather than making me work it out of you. I’m sure my doctor would say it’s not good for my recovery.”

He looked down uncomfortably at his hands as he said, “I feel like this whole thing is my fault. I never should have gotten you involved in any of this mess. If I hadn’t, you never would have gotten hurt.” He paused and took a labored breath. “I’m sorry, Sarah.”

Sarah Jane placed her hand softly on the side of his cheek, and his gaze moved from his hands to her eyes. “I don’t want you to be sorry, Luke – I’m not.” He said nothing, and she elaborated, “The only thing that I’d feel sorry about is if I’d never had the chance to meet you.”
He smiled warmly at her, and even though his tone sounded playful, he meant every word he said. “I hope you really mean that because now that you’ve got me, good luck getting rid of me!”
“Irene?” Max called as he walked up the stairs in her house.

“I’m in my bedroom. Go ahead and come in. I’m almost ready.” He had tickets for them to the Boston Ballet’s fundraising production of The Nutcracker that evening. He thought that she needed a little diversion from all the stress of the past weeks.

He walked through the open door to her bedroom and found her seated at her hand carved vanity. She was looking through her jewelry to find something appropriate for her dress and the occasion. She looked up when she heard him enter and turned in her chair to see him. She smiled approvingly. “Wow! Not bad!” she said referring to the tuxedo Max was wearing. He didn’t have the jacket on yet, and the bow tie was hanging loosely around his neck – but Irene thought he looked dashing.

“Look who’s talking. You look amazing.”

“Thank you,” she responded – looking down momentarily at the midnight blue, silk gown she was wearing – and then added, “I wish I knew what jewelry to wear. Nothing seems quite right with the dress.”

“Here, let me see.” Max set his tuxedo jacket on the bed, walked over to the vanity, and began to look through the beautiful pieces of jewelry.

He stopped and glanced at Irene when she asked, “I wonder what this is?” She removed a charm necklace from one of the drawers and placed it on top of the vanity.

“This isn’t mine.”
His eyes widened, and he picked up the necklace. “What the . . .” Max said faintly. He knew whose necklace it was, but he didn’t have the slightest notion how it had come to be in Irene’s bedroom.

“Max, what is it?” Irene asked. “Does it mean something to you?”

Max turned over one of the charms revealing the initials TR engraved into it. The necklace did very much mean something to him. He had given it to Tweed Richards for her birthday. What bothered him most was the fact that Tweed had never set foot in this house after he had given it to her. He was trying to figure out how Tweed had misplaced her necklace here of all places. He held the necklace in one hand while he ran the other through his hair as he walked over to the window. He looked outside in contemplative silence and seemed unaware that Irene was there at the moment. She knew that something was decidedly wrong. She walked over to where he stood and put her hand gently on his arm as she inquired, “Are you all right?”

Max looked at her for a few seconds and then said, “To answer your question – yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes, the necklace does mean something to me.” He paused and took a deep breath. “I gave it to Tweed as a birthday present years ago.”

Irene didn’t understand why he was quite so upset and said, “She must have left it here by accident. You guys were here all the time.” She paused as she thought to herself for a moment. She shrugged her shoulders and dismissed the whole incident. “The only thing that seems strange to me is that I didn’t notice it until now. I’ve probably had it for years.”
“No, Irene. That’s what’s bothering me. You see, I gave it to Tweed for her birthday about six years ago. At that point, you were already gone, and I wasn’t here much. The few times I visited, Tweed never came with me, so I have no idea what it’s doing here.”

Irene looked intently at him. “Let me see if I understand you correctly. Are you saying that after you gave Tweed this necklace, she never once came here with you?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

She let out a gasp of astonishment. “Then how did it get here?” she questioned, although she was certain she already knew the horrifying truth. “If she didn’t come here with you, then who exactly did she come with?”

“I think we both know the answer to that.”

Irene shook her head as the tears started to form in her distraught eyes. When she spoke, her voice was emphatic. “No! No! How could my own father do that to me? He knew that Tweed did everything she could to make my life miserable, and that still didn’t prevent him from seeing her.”

“As much as I wish it weren’t the case, I’m inclined to agree that there was something going on between her and your father.” Max thought to himself for a moment. “As a matter of fact, Tweed is probably the ‘younger woman’ that Ms. Grant was referring to in the note she wrote your father.”

Irene turned away from him and walked to the window seat at the far side of her bedroom. She sat down and drew her knees up to her chest. She didn’t even try to suppress the tears. She rested her head against her knees and soon her entire slender frame was racked with sobs of disappointment and grief.
Max walked over to the window seat but stopped a few feet away from her. "I’m so sorry, Irene. I know how much you loved your father. You might find this hard to believe, but nothing we’ve learned means he didn’t adore you."

"It’s not that . . . well it’s not just that."

"Then what is it?"

She raised her head to look at him, but then she couldn’t say what it was that she was thinking. "Never mind."

"What? Tell me."

"No, really – it’s nothing."

"Try me," he said as he put his hands in his pockets.

She glanced away from him and looked out the window. She hoped that by not looking at him, it would make what she had to say easier. "It’s just that . . ." she paused as she tried to collect herself. She placed her hand on the windowpane to steady her trembling body and then continued, "It’s just hard that the two people I’ve loved most in my life have cared more about Tweed than they ever cared about me."

Max knew that he was one of the "two people" to whom Irene was referring. He also knew that Irene couldn’t have been more wrong. He couldn’t answer for her father – but as for himself – Irene meant much more to him than Tweed Richards ever had. He walked a few steps closer and said quietly, "You’re wrong you know."

"About what?"

"About my caring more about Tweed than you."

So surprised by his declaration, Irene couldn’t help but turn to look at him. He looked intently at her, and a slight smile touched his handsome face. "It didn’t take me
any time at all to get over Tweed, but no matter how hard I tried to forget you – I never could.”

Irene wiped the tears from her cheeks, drew a breath, and smiled tentatively as she responded, “And I never forgot about you, Max.”
Chapter 64

Frustrated, Luke ran his hands through his hair. He had been trying for the past few days to trace Peter McCune, but it seemed that he had fallen off the face of the earth. “Where could he have disappeared? I swear I’ve looked everywhere,” he said to Sarah Jane, his voice sounding exasperated.

She was resting on the bed in her hospital room while he sat across the room from her on the couch. She smiled briefly for a moment when she looked over at him, and she couldn’t help but recall the past several days. It seemed like he never moved too far from that couch. Suddenly, she noticed Luke staring at her – his face puzzled – and she tried to remember what they had been talking about before her mind wandered. She thought to herself for a moment and recollected that Peter McCune had been the topic of their conversation. She focused once again on the issue at hand and said logically, “People don’t just vanish, Luke. He’s got to be around somewhere.”

“Unless he ended up dying so that he didn’t have to pay his medical bills,” he responded facetiously, without really thinking about what he’d just said.

“That’s it!” Sarah Jane exclaimed.

“What?”

“Have you checked the obituaries?”

He shook his head. “I hadn’t thought of that.” Quickly he searched for any Peter McCune’s who had died in the state within the year. He sifted through the results hastily but stopped abruptly when he found what he was looking for.

“Anything?” she questioned expectantly.
Luke was silent for a few moments, unable to tear his eyes from the computer screen. After a moment, he collected his thoughts and looked up at Sarah Jane. “Peter McCune died unexpectedly from a cerebral hemorrhage in June as a result of traumatic brain injuries that he had sustained from an accident. June! Sarah Jane . . . June. Peter McCune died suddenly months before Duncan was murdered, so he couldn’t have done it.”

“So, what do we do now?”

He shook his head wearily. “I guess we’re just going have to accept the fact that Duncan may have been accepting bribes from the people on our list, but it looks like none of them murdered him.”

“Max and Irene are going to be so discouraged when they hear this didn’t pan out. I think all of us were hoping this would be the answer.” She and Luke just stared at each other, both feeling weighed down with thoughts of disappointment and failure. After some time, Sarah Jane said, “So, we’re right back where we started – we still don’t know anything.”

Luke shrugged his shoulders. “That’s not entirely true.” She looked confused and he added, “We know who didn’t do it . . . all we have to figure out now is who did.”
Chapter 65

December 25

Irene walked down the stairs from one of the numerous guest rooms in Blake’s home to the dining room to have Christmas brunch with Luke, Max, and his uncle. Luke’s family had scheduled a cruise months ago, but he opted to stay home with Sarah Jane. She was still in the hospital, and he was going to spend the day with her and her parents after brunch. Max was spending the Christmas holiday at Blake’s home, and he had insisted that Irene stay with him over the holiday as well. When Irene told Blake that she didn’t want to impose on them, he told her that she could never be an imposition – he considered her family.

As Irene walked through the double doors of the elaborate dining room, she found that all three men were already there – deep in conversation. When they heard her enter, the conversation ceased, and they all glanced her way. She smiled at them as she said cheerfully, “Merry Christmas!”

“You too, dear – you too,” Blake responded as he walked over to her. He gave her a warm, fatherly hug, which was soon interrupted when Luke picked her up and embraced her in a tight, bear hug.

She held her arms loosely around his neck and laughed as she said, “Put me down! I can’t breathe.”

“Sorry, Rene,” he said. “I couldn’t help myself.” He analyzed her appearance and then said, “Wow! You look stunning! What man wouldn’t love to find you wrapped under his Christmas tree?”
“That’s sweet of you, Luke, but you exaggerate. I’m sure I’m not every man’s Christmas wish!” she teased.

They all laughed, and it was then that Max reached her side. He hugged her closely, and she affectionately returned his hug. Blake and Luke exchanged glances and then looked back at them.

The time flew by, and Irene couldn’t recall having such a nice time or laughing so hard in a very long time. After brunch, Luke said goodbye to the group and left for the hospital to visit Sarah Jane. Blake thought that it would be better for Max and Irene to exchange their presents without an audience and excused himself.

A short time later, Max and Irene settled in the cozy family room to exchange their presents. A fire was burning in the rustic brick fireplace, Max sat in a large leather armchair, and Irene sat on the couch across from him.

“Who should go first?” Irene questioned.

“Me,” he responded with a grin. “Patience never was one of my virtues.”

She laughed as she said sarcastically, “You’re kidding?”

As he unwrapped the present, she said nothing but watched him in anticipation.

He opened the box and removed the gift. It was a commemorative, autographed baseball from the Boston Red Sox displayed in a handsome trophy-like, glass case. He looked at it for several moments, and Irene said uncomfortably, “I don’t know if you’re even a fan anymore but I thought that . . .”

Max interrupted, “I’m still a huge fan.” He looked at her and smiled, “I just don’t know how you ever found this. It couldn’t have been easy to come by. I’ve been looking for one this rare for years.”
“I’m glad you like it.”

“I don’t like it . . . I love it.” He stood up and pulled her to her feet. “Thank you,” he said as he gave her a kiss on the cheek.

She blushed and looked down nervously as she said, “You’re welcome.”

He noted her unease and not wanting to unsettle her more moved away from her. He sat back down in the chair and placed the baseball on the ottoman. “Now, it’s your turn.” She sat down and placed the package in her lap as she opened it. When she tore the red and gold striped wrapping paper, she saw that it was a book. She turned the book over so that she could read the title. She stiffened and her breathing escalated when she realized that the book she held in her hands was a first edition of *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. She gently touched the cover – her fingers tracing the words of the title – and then held it close against her. She couldn’t stop the tears from coming. This was the last book her mother had read to her before she died. It was also the book that she and Max had read aloud together in Conservatory Gardens while they had been attending school in New York. Irene was speechless. Max could not have given her anything that could have been more meaningful or thoughtful. She looked at him as the tears streamed down her cheeks, and her voice was barely a whisper, “You remembered?”

He cleared his throat, and it took a few moments for him to gather his composure.

“How could I forget? Those were some of the best times of my life.”

She nodded and smiled hesitantly. “Mine too.”
He stood up and then sat down beside her on the couch. She turned to face him, and he took her hands in his. He took a deep breath and said, “Irene, I . . .” his voice faded before he could finish.

“What?”

He tried once again to collect himself. It was time for him to say what was on his mind – what had been on his mind for a long time. He looked down at their hands as he said, “I know I don’t deserve you, and I know you don’t need me,” his gaze moved from their clasped hands to her beautiful face as he added firmly, “but I need you.”

Irene placed her hand softly on the side of Max’s face as she said faintly, “Max.” He reached up and covered her hand with his own. After a few moments, he moved his hand from hers to the nape of her neck – drawing her toward him. He looked down at her mouth and then back at her eyes. He closed his eyes and placed his lips on hers, and when he felt her warm response, his other arm slid tightly around her waist. One of her arms encircled his torso while the other rested on his chest. The kiss went on for some time – neither of them wanting the moment to end – both having waited years for it to happen again.
“How’s it feel?” Tweed questioned Irene.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she responded, her tone of voice sounding confused.

Tweed shook her head. “Stop pretending that you don’t know what I mean. You’ve played the innocent long enough!”

“Is this about Max?”

Tweed sneered maliciously. “Of course it is. You always wanted him didn’t you? Even when he was mine, you did everything you could to break us up!” she shouted.

“That’s not true. When he told me that you were engaged, I left so that I wouldn’t get in the way.” When she remained silent, Irene continued, “I didn’t want to interfere.”

“Your leaving messed things up a lot more than your staying would have,” she responded caustically.

Irene tried to understand what she was inferring. When she couldn’t, she looked at Tweed, and her face was puzzled as she questioned, “How? How did my leaving cause bigger problems?”

“When you left your presence still lingered like a ghost – a ghost that haunted Max.” Her face looked vicious as she gloated, “But, I got even.”

Irene’s heart started to race, and her breathing sounded harsh – even to her own ears. When she spoke, her voice was faint. “What do you mean?”

“Max may have chosen you, but your father didn’t.”
“Please,” she pleaded, “leave my father out of this.”

Tweed ignored her plea and continued, “You stole Max from me, and I stole your father from you. I’d say we’re even!”

“No!” Irene shouted. She placed her hands over her ears and clenched her eyes shut in an attempt to block out Tweed’s callous words.

Tweed walked nearer as she questioned smugly, “Is the truth bothering you?” Irene backed away from her, and Tweed smiled viciously as she clicked her tongue. “I can see that it is.”

Irene’s breathing became erratic, and tears streamed down her cheeks. Suddenly she was jolted awake – her pillow wet with tears. She’d been dreaming again. She thought about her dream for several moments, and it was then that she understood what she needed to do to be at peace with her father.
Chapter 67

December 26

The next morning, Max walked into the kitchen at Blake’s home for breakfast to find Irene already there. She stood with her back to him as she looked out the bay window – lost in her thoughts. She didn’t hear him enter, and it wasn’t until he placed his hands softly on her shoulders that she became aware of his presence. Startled, she turned around to face him as she let out a gasp. “Max! I didn’t even hear you come in.”

“Apparently,” he joked. “Sorry if I scared you.”

She shook her head, “No, I’m okay. I was just thinking.”

“What about?”

“My father,” she replied.

“I’m sure you’re disappointed. I honestly thought that we’d be able to figure out who killed him, but it’s starting to look like we may never know.”

“It’s not just that.” Irene looked down for a moment as she collected her thoughts, and then she looked back up at him. “My dad’s not who I thought he was, Max. I used to worship him, but since I’ve come home, I’ve found out all these horrible things about him.” She was struggling to keep her composure, and he took her hands gently in his own. “The thing that’s so unbelievable is that even though I know the truth about him, I still love him.”

He looked at her compassionately. “He’s your father, Irene. Just because he wasn’t perfect doesn’t mean that you’d all of a sudden stop loving him.”

“It’s time I laid the past to rest.”
Max nodded his understanding, and she continued, “I’ve decided it’s time to scatter my parents’ ashes. I think that all of us could use some closure.” Irene cleared her throat and tried to get a handle on her emotions before she added, “It’s going to be hard for me, but I know that if I ever want the chance to live . . . I need to let go.”
The next day Max and Irene left for Martha’s Vineyard. She thought that this was the perfect place to scatter her parents’ ashes. Her father owned a home on the beautiful western shoreline, and it was on an exclusive beach nearby where her parents got engaged.

Max and Irene walked silently down the long pier and stood side by side for some time before either of them spoke – taking in the breathtaking scene. He looked over at her – noticing the internal struggle she was having – and realized just how difficult today was going to be for her. Despite the fact that she’d already made her decision to let go, now that the time was here, it was obvious that it was easier said than done. His voice was quiet as he said understandingly, “You know, you don’t have to do this.”

She turned her head to look at him as she responded, “I need to, Max.” He nodded and placed his hand supportively on her shoulder. Irene smiled at him reassuringly and then took a deep breath. He held her father’s crematory urn while she held her mother’s. As they stood on the dock, they removed the lids of the urns and placed them on the weathered wooden planks. When Irene spoke, he could hear the emotion in her voice as she said softly, “Even though you’ve made mistakes . . . I still love you, Dad.” She then looked down at her mother’s urn and could feel the tears that threatened. She took several breaths and tried to collect her composure. “I love you, Mom. You always were an angel . . . you still are.”
After a moment or two, Irene looked at Max and nodded. The two of them scattered her parents’ ashes into the ocean and watched as the sea carried them away until they vanished from sight. She finally felt a sense of peace – her parents were together again – just as they’d always wanted to be.

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“You okay?” Max questioned, his tone of voice concerned.

Irene paused for a moment to contemplate his question and to reflect on all that had happened. She felt as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders – a burden that she’d been carrying much longer than she had ever realized. A slight smile touched her face as she responded, “Yeah . . . yeah, I’m okay.”

Neither of them spoke for a while, and then, after a respectful amount of silence, he questioned, “Are you ready to go?” She nodded and he bent down to pick up the lids to the crematory urns that they’d placed on the dock. He put the lid on Duncan’s urn and was in the process of handing the other lid to Irene when he noticed something secured inside of the lid. “What’s this?” he questioned. He stood up and moved closer to her so that she could see it.

She looked closely, her face confused. “I have no idea.” He pulled away the tape – revealing a key behind it. He removed the key – holding it in his hand. They were completely bewildered by it. “I wonder what it goes to.”

Max shrugged his shoulders. “Who knows?” He studied the key more closely and found an insignia with the letter “M” and two smaller “Cs” molded into it on one side and the number “31” on the other. “Look at this,” he said as he handed the key to her.
“What do you think it stands for, and what’s it doing in the lid of my mom’s urn? Why would anybody put a key there?”

He thought to himself for a moment as he tried to deduce an explanation. Suddenly he looked intently at her, and his voice was a whisper. “That’s a good question. Who would put a key there and why?” He paused to collect his thoughts before he continued, “I wonder who this key belongs to – and what it unlocks.”

“But why would somebody put it there in the first place – it may never have been found – it probably wouldn’t have been if we hadn’t stumbled upon it today.”

“Whoever put it there probably didn’t want it to be found unless . . . the right person came across it.”

Irene looked puzzled and asked, “Do you think someone in my family was meant to find it?”

“We can’t be certain, but it seems reasonable. After all, your family was really the only one with access to your mother’s remains.”

“That only leaves my father and me – and why would anyone leave it for me to find? I don’t even know what it goes to.”

“Well, whoever put it there didn’t do so simply by chance. Do you think your dad left it for you? And if so, why didn’t he just give it to you?”
Later that day, Max and Irene sat in her father’s study and searched for any clues about the letters “MCC” and the emblem on the key. She sat at Duncan’s desk while she searched the internet for leads. Max sat in a leather chair across the room from her, his laptop placed on top of an ottoman as he too looked for any information that could point them in the right direction. They’d been searching for hours when she finally broke the silence. “I think I found something!” she said excitedly.

At the sound of her voice, he glanced up hurriedly from his computer and walked quickly over to where she sat. “Look,” she said as she pointed to the computer screen. Max rested one hand on the desk and leaned over her shoulder so that he could see the screen. He listened attentively while she launched into an explanation of what she had found. “There’s a country club in Providence, Rhode Island, called Mapleridge Country Club. Its insignia matches the one on the key found exactly!”

He looked carefully at the screen for a few moments and then said, “That’s it. That’s the place.”

She tilted her head up to look at him as she questioned, “So, what do we do now?”

“Let’s check it out. What do you say we take a drive to Providence tomorrow?”

“I’m game.”

Irene then looked carefully at Max and couldn’t help but notice that he seemed preoccupied, as if he were contemplating something very serious. She touched his arm softly to get his attention. “Are you all right?”
He looked down at her face, her eyes wide with worry. He gently placed one of his hands on the side of her neck as he responded, “I’m fine.”

“Then what is it? What’s bothering you?”

He shook his head. “Nothing.” He moved his hand from her neck to the back of her chair and then grinned wryly as he continued, “I was just thinking how ironic it is that...” his voice trailed off.

“What?”

“That the key we found unlocks something at a country club in a city named Providence.”
Max and Irene left the next day for Rhode Island – hoping to discover answers to their questions. They felt a huge sense of relief when they arrived at the Mapleridge Country Club and found the intricate, wrought iron gates open. They drove through the gates and up the circular drive to the parking lot where Max parked the car in a secluded spot shaded by large trees – hoping that the less attention they drew to themselves, the better off they’d be.

He turned in his seat to face Irene as he said, “Let’s go over the plan one more time.” He took a breath and then continued, “I’ll go in first to see if there’s a number 31 in the men’s locker room. You’ll wait here until you hear from me – okay?”

“Got it.”

“If the key doesn’t work, I’ll come back out, and then you’ll go in and check the women’s – right?”

Irene nodded. She glanced around at her surroundings and couldn’t help adding in a worried tone of voice, “Do you think anyone will notice me here? Maybe I should wait in the lobby.”

He shook his head. “No – you’ll never blend in – trust me,” he said with a grin. “You’re impossible not to notice. People are more likely to wonder what you’re up to inside the lobby. No one will question you sitting in the car.”

“I hope you’re right.”

He took her hand assuredly as he said, “It’ll be okay, Irene. Don’t worry.”
She studied his face for a moment, and when she spoke, her voice sounded anxious. “So, how exactly do you plan on getting to the men’s locker room without anyone becoming suspicious?”

“Simple. I’m going to go through the front door and then walk to the locker room.”

“What if somebody sees you?”

“That’s the point. People are going to see me, and no one is going to think a thing of it.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because as Luke would say, ‘Don’t act guilty, and no one will think you are.’”

Her breathing was shallow because of her apprehension. “I hope this works.”

“Yeah, me too,” he responded seriously. He leaned across the seat and gave her a swift kiss before he climbed out of the car. He grabbed his black gym bag and then shut the door firmly behind him. Irene watched as he made his way to the elegant front entrance where he disappeared inside. She looked at her watch and took a deep breath.

Trying to distract herself from all the possible scenarios that could go wrong, Irene opened her purse and pulled out a Sudoku puzzle book. She flipped through the pages looking for a blank puzzle – only to realize she had finished them all. With that, she turned the booklet over and began to doodle on the back cover. She drew a tic-tac-toe board and started playing the game alone – anything to help pass the time. She played several times – all of the games ending in deadlock. Soon not even this diversion could ease her nervousness, and she put the booklet away. She closed her eyes and rested her head against the back of the seat. All she could do now was wait.
Max walked through the entrance and into the lobby which was lavishly decorated in shades of gold and cream with crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. The room was bright and airy from the numerous windows and mirrors lining the walls. French doors led outside to a large veranda and spacious, immaculate grounds.

He surveyed the room for a moment but then moved quickly through the crowded lobby. A female employee glanced in his direction – yet before she could ask any questions, he smiled broadly and said flirtatiously, “How’s it going? It’s nice to see you again.”

Her face turned red, and when she spoke, she stumbled over her words. “What? Oh, I mean . . . it’s nice to see you again too.” She giggled, and he gave her another dashing smile as he turned the full force of his charm on her.

With that, he moved past her and walked through a door leading out of the lobby and into a hallway. He looked up and down the hall for a moment as he tried to decide which direction would take him to the locker rooms. He couldn’t risk parading around the entire country club. If he looked like he didn’t know where he was going, someone was bound to realize he wasn’t a member.

Just then, a young couple walked by, both holding gym bags. Max decided it was a pretty safe bet that they were on their way to the locker rooms, so he followed them. He forced himself to keep his pace slow and to walk casually, but it was difficult for him. He was anxious to get his hands on whatever was in that locker and then get out as fast as possible. The couple stopped in a waiting area just outside of the locker rooms so they
could finish their conversation. The women’s locker room was to the left and the men’s was to the right. The couple was engrossed in conversation and didn’t bother giving him more than a passing glance as he strolled past them.

He walked through the door on the right into the men’s locker room. There were a few members inside, but for the most part, it was empty. Max glanced quickly at the locker numbers to figure out where in the room number 31 would come. He rounded a corner into a cubicle. This was his lucky day – there was no one in it. He spotted locker number 31 and quickly set his gym bag down on the bench as he drew the key from his pocket. His hands were shaking, and he fumbled with the key. He steadied himself and tried again – this time successfully inserting the key – the whole time praying that it would fit. He turned the key, and to his immense relief the locker opened.

Max looked quickly from side to side to make sure that no one was observing him and then reached inside. He drew out a bulky manila envelope and glanced at it briefly. The suspense was unbearable, but he knew that he couldn’t risk opening it there. He unzipped his gym bag, put the envelope inside, and zipped it back up. He glanced once more inside the locker to make sure he hadn’t left anything behind, shut the locker, and re-locked it. He put the key back in his pocket, grabbed his gym bag off the bench, and swiftly left the locker room.

He retraced his steps down the long hallway until he entered the lobby once again. The female employee he’d spoken with when he first arrived was still there, and she waved at him. He slowed his pace, and he tried to act calm and composed. He forced a smile and raised his hand in response. She blushed again and hurried to catch up to him.
When she spoke, her voice sounded coy, but he knew that despite the pretense, she was anything but timid. “Are you leaving already? You just got here.”

“I know, but unfortunately I’ve been called back to the office.”

“Well, I hope you found something today that was worth the trip.”

Max suppressed his laughter and raised an eyebrow. This time when he smiled, his grin was genuine. “I can assure you . . . I did.”
Chapter 72

Irene sat tapping her fingers on the glove box of the car while she waited for Max. She was nervous and as a result couldn’t seem to hold still. It seemed like he had been gone much longer than the time on the clock showed. Finally, he emerged from the entrance, and she sat up straight in her seat. She unlocked the doors and watched as he approached the car. He circled around to the driver’s side and got in. Before he had a chance to shut the door or say anything, she asked anxiously, “Did the key work? Was anything in the locker?”

He closed the door as he responded, “Yeah . . . I have it right here.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t looked yet.” He reached into his bag and pulled out the manila envelope. He opened the flap and looked inside. “What the . . .”

“What is it?”

Max reached in and pulled out several cassette tapes. “Tapes – they’d better not be the 80s greatest hits,” he said sarcastically. “That’s great! My car doesn’t have a tape deck. Can you even buy a new car with a tape deck anymore?”

Irene let out a frustrated sigh. “Well, that’s just fantastic. Now we have to wait until we get home to find out what’s on them. I hope I still have that old stereo in the closet of my dance studio.”

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Because Max and Irene were so anxious to listen to the tapes, the drive back to Boston seemed much longer than it actually was. When they finally arrived, the two
rushed into her house and down the hall toward the dance studio. As hoped, the stereo was still in the closet. They quickly removed it and sat down with it on the wood floor. Irene nervously took one of the tapes out of the envelope and then put it into the cassette player. She pressed play and for a few seconds, they both heard nothing but the sound of their own uneven breathing.

Suddenly they heard a voice on the tape – one they recognized immediately. It was the late Judge William Duncan. But instead of his voice sounding calm and controlled like they were used to, he sounded agitated – almost at a breaking point. “It’s about time you got here. How many times have I told you, I don’t like having to wait.”

The two leaned in closer to the stereo and held their breath as they waited for a response. After what felt like an eternity, another male voice on the recording responded, “Tough. Get used to disappointment. This is a game, and if you haven’t noticed . . . we’re playing by my rules now, and you’re losing!”

“That’s what you think, you little punk,” Duncan shot back. “If I pull out of the game, you end up with nothing. Do you hear me, Walker?” Her father’s voice sounded smug.

“But you’re not going to do that are you, Duncan? No, you’re not going to do that because you love money, and the only thing you love more than money is power. You’re the king – the one who decides how cases turn out – the one who decides who wins and who gets screwed.”

There was a pause, and then the voice continued, “How’s it feel, Duncan? How does it feel to be the loser?” The other man laughed menacingly, and when he spoke again, his tone was full of triumph. “Come on. Don’t make this any harder on yourself.
Just admit that I was able to outsmart you and that everything that used to be yours is now mine – the money, the power, Tweed.”

At the mention of Tweed’s name, Max and Irene exchanged shocked glances, not quite able to register what they had just heard. They listened to the rest of the tape, neither saying a word until it ended.

When Irene finally was able to speak, her voice was faint. “I don’t believe it. It has to be the same Tweed, doesn’t it?”

Max ran his hand through his hair, shook his head, and then let out a deep sigh. “It has to be. I mean how many Tweeds are there really – none. And, the fact that she was involved with your father . . . there’s no way it’s a coincidence.”

Suddenly Irene recalled a portion of the conversation. “My dad said the other guy’s name didn’t he? What did he call him . . . Walker?”

“Do you know anybody with that name?”

She thought to herself for a moment and then shook her head. “If I do, I can’t remember them.” Irene could tell that Max was considering something carefully. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m not quite sure exactly. Let’s see if we find out anything else on the other tapes.” Hours later, after listening to the rest of the tapes, they had no additional information about the man blackmailing Duncan. Max rubbed his chin thoughtfully and was quiet for a moment as he decided what course of action they should take. “Let’s give Luke a call. He may have some ideas where we should go from here. We’ve been staring at the same scenery for too long.”

“But it’s almost two in the morning!” she exclaimed.
He grinned mischievously in response as he pulled out his cell phone. He put it on speaker and dialed Luke’s number. It rang several times before he finally answered. He sounded groggy, as though he’d been awakened from a sound sleep. “This had better be good.”

Max stifled a laugh. “Hey, you awake?”

Luke sounded mildly irritated as he replied, “I am now.”

Trying to curb Luke’s annoyance Max added, “Irene’s here too.”


Her smile carried over to her voice as she responded, “I’m okay.”

“How you doing, Luke?” Max chimed in, “we found something, and we want you to come over and take a look.”


“Now,” Max confirmed.

“One question,” he asked. “Do I have to get dressed?”

“Just get over here,” Max said. He hung up on Luke and then glanced over at Irene. Her whole body seemed tense. Instantly concerned, he reached up and stroked his hand through her hair. “How are you doing?”

She turned her face toward him, and he could see the weariness in her eyes. “I don’t know. I just want this nightmare to be over.”

He nodded. “I know you do, and you’re right. It has been a nightmare, but look at the bright side.”
Irene looked at him intently, her face puzzled. “There’s a bright side to this nightmare?” she asked.

“Yeah . . . at some point you wake up, and it’s over. Just be patient. The nightmare may end sooner than you think.”
Shortly after receiving the phone call from Max, Luke arrived at Irene’s to talk about what they had uncovered and to see if he had any fresh ideas as to what to do next. Irene was upstairs in her bedroom changing her clothes, and Max was in the kitchen eating a late-night snack when they heard the doorbell ring over and over again. Max walked into the entryway and called up the stairs, “I’ll get it.”

When he opened the door, Luke was leaning against the railing outside, his arms folded across his chest – a large smile stamped across his face. Max looked at him questioningly – puzzled by his strange behavior and then asked, “Everything okay?”

Luke grinned meaningfully. “You tell me.”

Max shook his head and put his hands in his pockets. “I’m not following you.”

Luke started to laugh as he teased, “I was just curious if I was interrupting anything?” Max looked confused for a moment, but then his meaning registered. Luke smirked broadly, enjoying Max’s discomfort. “Answer the question, Maxwell. Did I interrupt anything important?”

Max tried to keep his face straight as he responded, “Nope. I was just getting something to eat.”

Luke let out a deep sigh – no longer even attempting to mask his agitation. “Apparently I give you way too much credit. I would have thought you’d have made better use of what little time you have . . . but apparently that’s not the case, and you’re not nearly as smart as everyone thinks you are.”
Max shook his head in exasperation, “Give me a break. I may not be as stupid as you think.”

Luke scrutinized him carefully – then realization dawned – and a grin spread across his face. “You told her! You finally told Irene how you feel – didn’t you?”

Max smiled broadly at his friend’s enthusiasm and nodded. “Yeah, I told her.”

Luke was overjoyed, his elation infectious. He let out a deep, relieved sigh – one that sounded as if he’d been holding his breath for years. He laughed good-naturedly as he punched Max in the arm. “It’s about time.” He paused for a moment before asking a string of questions. “How come I haven’t heard about this? When did it happen? What did she say? Is she in to you too, or did she tell you where to go?”

“I told her on Christmas, and no . . . she didn’t tell me where to go.”


Max rolled his eyes as he responded sarcastically, “Sorry, maybe I should have put off telling her until after Christmas just so that it wasn’t generic. How could I have ever overlooked that?”

They both laughed together for a moment, but then they became quiet as Luke tried to process the news he had just heard. When he spoke again, his face and voice were serious. “I’m so happy for you guys! I always thought the two of you were supposed to be together; but up until now, I was starting to think that I was the only one who thought so – well, besides your uncle,” he amended.

“Don’t get too excited,” Max cautioned. “If we ever get out of the mess we’re in, who knows what she’ll decide. She may end up deciding to go back to Paris.”
“Has she said that?”

Max shook his head. When he spoke, the words sounded calm enough, but Luke knew him well enough to know that he was worried. He knew that Max was concerned about whether or not Irene would choose to stay in Boston after this ordeal was over.

“No, but she may be thinking that.”

Luke nodded, thought to himself for a moment, and then replied, “Try not to worry about it until you have to.” He put his hand supportively on Max’s shoulder and smiled as he added, “It’s not over ‘til it’s over.”
Max and Luke finished their conversation on the front porch even though it was freezing cold. When they came inside, Max called upstairs, “Luke’s here, Irene. We’re in the kitchen.”

A few moments later, she joined them in the kitchen where they were at the table eating. “Hi, Luke.” At the sound of her voice, their conversation stopped suddenly, and they exchanged guilty glances – afraid that she would figure out what they’d been discussing only a short time ago. “I hope I’m not interrupting.”

Luke smiled as he stood up to give her a hug, “Of course you’re not interrupting anything. I was just so excited to tell Max the good news that I blurted it out. I should have waited for you.”

“News?” Irene questioned. Looking at both of them she waited for someone to fill her in.

“Do you want to tell her or should I?” Luke said as he turned to look at Max, his expression one of feigned innocence.

Max fought to keep his face straight and his voice casual. He waved his hand nonchalantly as he replied, “No . . . by all means, you tell it. After all, it is your good news.” He flashed him a warning glance.

Irene looked at Luke anxiously – her eyes bright, her curiosity heightened. “What is it?”

“Sarah Jane’s going to be released from the hospital tomorrow – well actually today, but she’s going to stay with her parents for a while, until she’s feeling better.”
Irene’s smile was enormous, and she hugged him tightly as she responded exuberantly, “Oh, Luke, I’m so happy!” She let out a deep breath. “That’s wonderful news. It’s about time we had some.”

Relieved, not to mention slightly surprised that Luke hadn’t shared his news as well, Max got up and slapped Luke on the back as he said, “That’s fantastic. We’ve been really worried about her.”

“I know. You guys have been so great. Sarah Jane asked me to thank you for everything you’ve done – until she can herself.”

“She doesn’t need to thank us,” Irene responded. “We’re just glad that she’s going to be okay.”

“You and me both, Rene.” There was nothing extraordinary about Luke’s comment, rather it was the way in which he said it that made Irene and Max look at him more carefully. Under their careful scrutiny, Luke looked down at the floor restlessly for a moment and shoved his hands in his pockets. When he looked back up at them, his face broke into a subtle, half-smile. “You guessed it – I’m crazy about Sarah, and she seems to finally realize that I’m not going anywhere.”

Irene threw her arms around Luke’s chest once again. “I am so excited for you!”

“Thanks,” he replied as he affectionately returned her hug. “I’m a lucky guy.”

“I think you’re both lucky,” she replied. Max walked over and gave Luke a congratulatory hug as well, the whole time keeping Irene’s slender frame wedged in between. They exchanged satisfied glances over the top of her head, and after a few moments, Irene laughed as she gasped, “Please, I’m dying here. The two of you are going to suffocate me!”
They laughed good-humoredly as they let go of her, and Luke joked, “Sorry about that. You know us – sometimes we just get carried away.”

She raised her eyebrows, her face as well as her voice reproachful as she teased, “Sometimes?”


The three of them sat down and enjoyed one another’s company while Max and Luke finished eating. They took advantage of the light and cheerful atmosphere – knowing it wouldn’t last.
Max, Irene, and Luke moved into the family room so that they would be as comfortable as possible for what they knew would be an unpleasant discussion. The mood in the room seemed particularly tense, the house unusually quiet. Luke leaned forward in his chair in an attempt to help brace himself for whatever news was about to come his way.

It was then that Max and Irene started their explanation. They relayed all the events that had transpired in the days following Christmas up to their discovery at the country club in Rhode Island.

Max then played the tape that he and Irene had listened to first. Inside the silent room, the voices on the tape sounded particularly loud and intrusive. They almost seemed to echo off the walls and resonate loudly throughout the large room. For the second time that day, Irene heard her father’s voice – yet the voice on the recording sounded like a stranger. “It’s about time you got here. How many times have I told you, I don’t like having to wait.”

Irene looked over at Luke and quickly interrupted, “That’s my dad’s voice.” Luke nodded but didn’t comment as he continued to listen carefully to the tape.

When Duncan’s blackmailer spoke, Luke’s eyes widened in shock, and he held his breath. Max and Irene noticed his strange reaction, and Max asked anxiously, “What is it?”

Luke thought to himself carefully for a moment before explaining, “I swear I know that voice from somewhere. It sounds so familiar.”
“Where?” Irene questioned.

He seemed to be in deep concentration for a moment, but then he shook his head as he responded agitatedly, “I don’t know for sure, but I’m absolutely positive that I’ve heard it before.”

They watched Luke expectantly – waiting for him to sort through his tangled thoughts – the whole time the taped conversation still playing in the background. As the three of them sat only half-listening to the disturbing conversation, they heard Duncan’s voice once again. “That’s what you think you little punk. If I pull out of the game, you end up with nothing. Do you hear me, Walker?”

At the mention of the other man’s name, Luke’s head snapped up so suddenly that it took both Max and Irene by surprise. His voice was intense, his eyes piercing. “What did Duncan just say?”

“He said Walker,” she answered.


Max looked intently at him and could feel the shock emanating from him. Max’s voice sounded concerned yet anxious as he said, “Luke what is it? What’s bothering you?”

He didn’t respond immediately. Rather, he just sat there for a moment in silence while he tried to collect his thoughts. Just when Max and Irene were certain they could stand the suspense no longer, Luke looked from one of them to the other as he responded, “Yeah, I know a Walker.” He took a deep breath. “Bryson Walker was your dad’s law clerk, Irene.”
He paused for a moment so that she could digest that bit of news before he continued. When he looked at her, he could see the anguish on her beautiful face. Max reached over and gently took her hand in his own – silently offering his support. “I knew I’d heard that voice somewhere before, and then when your dad said his name, it all clicked. It’s definitely the same person. It’s definitely Bryson Walker.”

Irene reached up and covered her mouth with her free hand. Her body started to tremble, and when she spoke, her voice was faint but forceful all at the same time. “He did it – he murdered my father – didn’t he?” The words left her mouth just as the tears started to stream down her cheeks.

Max reached over and pulled her into his arms. She clenched the front of his shirt firmly, her hands holding so tightly that her knuckles started to turn white. He kept one arm around her shoulders while his other hand moved to the back of her head as he held her securely to him. Luke leaned forward and placed his hand on Irene’s back to demonstrate that he too felt her grief and pain. The three friends sat that way for some time. It was only when Irene’s sobbing started to subside that Luke sat back in his seat as he questioned, “So, what do we do now?”

Irene looked up at Max as she waited for him to answer Luke’s question. He looked down at her face for a moment as he contemplated the alternatives. He glanced back at Luke and responded, “We know that Bryson murdered Duncan, but the tapes don’t actually prove that. All they prove is that Bryson was blackmailing him.”

“Maybe if the police know about the blackmail, they’d be more likely to investigate Bryson for the murder as well,” Luke reasoned.
Max nodded but then said, “That’s possible, but we can’t rely on that. It’s been months since Duncan’s death, and you can bet Bryson’s covered his tracks and disposed of any evidence that points to his involvement.”

Luke shrugged his shoulders in exasperation. “So, what now? If Bryson’s gotten rid of any evidence that may have been left, how are we ever going to prove that he was there that night? There’s still reasonable doubt.”

Max raised an eyebrow, his face composed and confident as he responded, “Simple – it’s a little thing called leverage.”
Bryson Walker sat alone—his mind kept wandering. He had been waiting for a call, and finally his cell phone rang. A gratified smile spread across his face, and he answered it abruptly, not bothering to check the caller ID. His voice was dark and sultry as he said, “Hey, baby. I’ve been waiting to hear from you all day.”

“Have you really?” came the reply. Bryson’s smirk vanished, and he stiffened for a moment. The voice on the phone wasn’t the voice he was expecting—it was the deep, polished voice of a man.

“I was expecting a call from my girlfriend,” he clarified.

The voice that responded didn’t sound amused in the least. The reply was only one, blunt word, “Apparently.” There was a long, drawn out pause, and then the voice continued, “Bryson Walker?”

“Who is this?”

It was then that Bryson heard his own voice coming from the other end of the phone sharp and clear, “Tough, get used to disappointment, Duncan. This is a game, and if you haven’t noticed . . . we’re playing by my rules now, and you’re losing!”

Suddenly Bryson felt a twinge of panic. Sweat broke into beads across his forehead, but he wasn’t a fool. Whoever was on the other end of the phone didn’t have anything that could link him to Duncan and his death. He was just about to tell the man where to go and hang up when he heard Duncan’s voice, “If I pull out of the game, you end up with nothing. Do you hear me, Walker?”
There was a tense silence for a few moments, when neither party said anything. At last, Bryson chimed in, “That doesn’t prove anything, you . . .”

“I’ll do the talking,” the man interrupted. Bryson heard him pause for a brief moment, but then the full force of his wrath was unleashed. “I know exactly what happened the night Judge Duncan was murdered. Walker . . . I have proof, and if you don’t do exactly as I say, I’ll go to the police.”

“What do you want?”

“You’ll find out. Meet me tomorrow – midnight.”

“Where?”

“One guess.”

Bryson tried to clarify the location but soon realized no one was there. The caller had terminated the phone call.
When Luke arrived at Irene’s home, it was evening, and the temperature was dropping quickly. He zipped up his coat, got out of the car, and hurried to the front door where he rang the doorbell. Even though he knew that no one was following him, he couldn’t stop himself from glancing around uneasily at his surroundings.

The door opened almost immediately, and he saw Max standing just inside the doorway. He seemed composed enough, but Luke knew that even Max was more tense than he appeared and that the only reason he wasn’t allowing it to show was because of how it might affect Irene. It was then that he noticed Irene a short distance behind Max. Her face was unusually pale – a result of too much worry. Luke walked into the house, and Max shut and locked the door before anyone spoke.

The three of them walked into the family room, and Max and Irene sat down on the couch with Luke sitting in a chair just across from them. Luke leaned forward in his chair, and when he spoke his voice was serious, his expression grave, “This plan of yours may not be such a good idea.” When Max opened his mouth to disagree, Luke hurriedly continued, “What if it doesn’t go as it should? With Bryson there, it could get ugly real fast.”

“I’ll take my chances,” he replied.

“Maybe he’s right,” Irene interrupted, her voice soft yet overwrought. Startled by her response, Max and Luke exchanged surprised glances and then looked over to where she sat on one corner of the couch. She rubbed her hands together restlessly and then placed one hand over her mouth for a moment. She looked up at Max, and their eyes
locked. They studied one another for a moment, and when she spoke, her voice sounded strained, as though she were trying to keep her emotions carefully in check. “What if something happens to you?”

Max didn’t respond right away – rather he just sat there – his eyes never leaving hers. At last he said, “I’m not going anywhere, Irene.” His face and voice were firm with resolve – his expression so intense that she held her breath, and her heart started to race. For a moment they were completely unaware of Luke’s presence. They were so absorbed with one another, they might as well have been in the room all alone. He leaned across the couch toward her and brushed back a lock of her hair that kept escaping from behind her ear. He placed his hand softly on the side of her face and moved his thumb gently back and forth over her smooth cheek as he said, “I know that you’re anxious about tomorrow night. Believe me, if there were another way out of this – I’d take it – but there’s not.”

Luke nodded and Irene let out a resigned sigh as she said, “Let’s go over the plan one more time . . . just to make sure that we all understand what we’re supposed to do.”
As Max stood in the center of the Paul Revere Mall, he couldn’t stop himself from glancing at those around him. He’d arrived for his appointment with Bryson early in an attempt to help steady his nerves and scope out his surroundings.

The night was bitter cold, and he could see his breath in the air when he exhaled. He drew his coat tighter around himself and then checked his watch. It was still some time before midnight. He let out a deep sigh and then realized that, up until that moment, he’d been holding his breath. He tried to remain calm, but because of his anxiety, he found it nearly impossible. He looked once again at the people passing through and lingering in the outdoor plaza as he tried to find the one that matched Luke’s description. He started to pace slowly back and forth. Each time he saw or heard anyone approaching across the brick pavement, his pacing ceased. It only resumed once Max established that the person in question was not there to meet him.

At that moment, Max started to doubt whether Bryson would even show up for their meeting. His theory about Bryson being the murderer hinged on his knowing where to meet. He ran his hand through his hair, and he couldn’t stop the question that kept running through his mind. “What if he doesn’t show up – then what?”

He looked at his watch yet again and found that little time had passed since he’d last checked it. He felt impatient – he was eager for this to be over – and at the same time, strangely troubled. This feeling multiplied greatly when he noticed that the number of people at the square seemed to be steadily dwindling. He stopped pacing abruptly
when he heard something that disturbed him – the sound of nothing. Max thought it odd that the closer it got to midnight, the less active the plaza became.

The air suddenly felt leaden and oppressive. The night was so still that he thought he could almost hear the falling snow as it thinly coated the ground. Suddenly, his breathing became ragged, and despite the heavy coat he wore, he felt chills spread over his entire body. Someone was watching him. He tried to reassure himself that it was only his imagination, but he couldn’t curb his uneasy feeling that everything was not as it should be.

Max glanced hurriedly around him and then stopped to listen. His body tensed, and he held his breath as he gazed intently out into the dark night. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary, and that was what bothered him most. Frustrated, yet anxious at the same time, he let out a haggard sigh and tried to stop his mind from dwelling on what he couldn’t control. He had no choice – the only thing he could do now was wait and see if Bryson showed up.

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Max was being watched. In the distance, a dark shrouded figure stood motionless, not making a sound as he quietly observed him. His face was heavily shadowed, hardly visible in the stormy, black night. His eyes narrowed as he sized up his enemy.
Chapter 79

As Luke moved through the crowded room at the Richards’ New Year’s Eve party, he fixed his bow tie – which had been knocked askew from all the hugs he’d received – with one hand while holding a drink in the other. Luke set his drink down on a serving tray as a waiter walked past him, and then he scanned the room in search of Christopher Blake. At last, Luke spotted him, and he made his way over to where he stood conversing with a group of people. After a few moments, he looked up from the lively conversation and saw Luke. “Will you excuse me?” he said to the group. He walked over to where Luke stood in a more secluded area of the room. When Blake was standing close enough so that no one could overhear their conversation, he quickly asked, “Have you heard from Max yet?”

“No. It’s not midnight yet so it could still be a while before we do.”

Blake nodded. “Keep me posted.”

“Will do,” Luke said. He started to weave back through the crowd when he suddenly felt someone pulling on his sleeve. His glance moved in that direction, and he saw that it was Tweed who was detaining him. She was wearing a short, spaghetti strapped, pink, satin gown. It clung to every curve, and Luke had no doubt many of the men in the room had enjoyed staring at her ample display. He had to stop himself from laughing. It looked to him like she had purchased her dress in the lingerie department rather than the evening gown section. As usual, her choice of attire was lacking in good taste.
When Tweed spoke, she didn’t even try to hide her loathing for him. She looked him up and down and said mockingly, “Well, Luke, don’t you clean up pretty. I didn’t know you owned a dinner jacket – let alone a tie.”

He smiled broadly. “It’s nice to see you too, Tweed. Oh, and by the way . . . nice slip,” he said gesturing to her revealing dress. Her cheeks turned red with rage, and Luke left her standing there, alone and speechless.

He had walked halfway down a sparsely populated hall when her voice stopped him in his tracks. “So, how’s your girlfriend, Luke? I heard she had an unfortunate accident. What a shame.”

He turned to face her, his eyes bright with anger. His jaw flexed involuntarily, and his whole body became rigid. When he spoke his voice sounded sharp, “What did you say?”

“I asked how your girlfriend’s doing,” she taunted. Tweed was so enraged with him that she forgot herself and continued to antagonize him further. “I heard she got messed up pretty bad. Is she going to make it?”

Luke moved so quickly it startled Tweed and made her jump. He reached her in seconds and took her firmly and none too gently by the shoulders. “What do you know about it?” he questioned angrily.

Her smile was malicious, her face smug. “I don’t know what you mean?” she said in a voice of pretend innocence. He had been her personal antagonist ever since she had started dating Max, and she relished finally getting even with him.

Luke moved her up against the wall, and this time when he spoke, it was clear that he would not tolerate a refusal. “How do you know about Sarah?”
“Luke, if you lay a hand on me, so help me!”

He asked the same question over again, only this time his voice was so irate that it drew the attention of guests who were standing in the hallway. “How do you know about Sarah?” Tweed started to shake. She’d never seen Luke like this before. He studied her face for a moment and then said disgustedly, “Let me guess. Bryson told you about her – about us.”

Her eyes widened in shock, and she tripped over her words, “How . . . how do you know about him?”

Luke’s mouth spread into a half-smile, and his confident, polished demeanor returned. “When a girl’s a tramp like you – word gets around.” Tweed’s face was indignant, but she was so taken back by what he had just said that she was shell shocked. When Luke spoke again, it startled her so badly she flinched. “You know something – you two make a perfect couple.”

“Oh, we do?” she questioned tersely.

“Yeah – you’re both disgusting.” Luke left her standing there and walked the rest of the way down the hall. Tweed glanced around uneasily and looked at the people who had stopped to watch her confrontation with Luke. She was unnerved by the expressions on their faces – instead of the usual awe and envy – the only thing she saw was loathing.
Despite the fact that Irene sat in Max’s car with the heat on, her hands were cold, and she rubbed them together restlessly. Although she had parked some distance away from the Paul Revere Mall after dropping off Max, she couldn’t keep from turning in her seat to look out of the car windows. She nervously watched as the people outside passed by her and then moved on their way.

She looked at her watch, and her heart started to race. It was quarter-to-midnight – only fifteen more minutes before they would find out if their theory about Bryson was correct. Max was wearing a wire so that Irene would be able to hear their live conversation and record it at the same time.

She looked out the windshield at the familiar area surrounding the square, and her mind flashed suddenly to the night that her father had been there – the night that he had ended up dead. She shivered involuntarily and anxiously bit her lower lip. She couldn’t help but wonder if tonight would end the same way. Would Max be taken away from her just as her father had been? The thought terrified her. Her mind started to race – her thoughts lingering on all that Max, Luke, and Sarah Jane had gone through during the past several months, all because they were trying to help her. She felt tears burn her eyes, and she leaned her head back against the headrest for a moment.

Images passed through her mind. It almost felt like she was watching a movie of her life up to this point. It started with memories of her father when she was still young. She half-smiled when she recalled how much she had adored her father growing up and how secure he had always made her feel. As time passed, she changed, as did those
around her. Her mind then skipped to the day in Paris when she’d received the phone call that her father had been murdered. She remembered his funeral, her conversation with the police just a short time afterward, and her subsequent return to France.

There was a slight pause in the images, and then one moment came to the forefront of her memory. It was the day when Max had surprised her in Prague and asked her to come home. As she looked back on the last few months, she recognized just how horrific they had truly been. She couldn’t believe that she had made it through them, and she knew she wouldn’t have if not for Max. He was the only thing that had made this time bearable.

Irene’s eyes opened suddenly, and she realized at that moment that as much as she wanted to catch her father’s murderer, she wasn’t willing to risk losing Max in order to do it. At that instant, everything became clear to her, and she knew exactly what she needed to do. She tucked her hair behind her ear and picked up her cell phone – the whole time her hands shaking. She glanced once again at her watch and noticed the minute hand inch closer and closer to midnight. Her concern for Max was so great that she didn’t waste valuable time thinking about the possible outcome of her actions. Without any hesitation, she dialed her phone – only hoping it wasn’t too late.
Chapter 81

Luke checked his watch and saw that it was nearly midnight. If everything went according to plan, he should be hearing from Max very soon. He was still furious because of his conversation with Tweed. He knew now that Bryson was responsible for Duncan’s death and Sarah Jane’s attack. There was no other way Tweed could have known about it. Bryson had nearly killed Sarah Jane, and more than ever before, Luke wanted him to pay for what he’d done.

He looked at the time once again. The seconds seemed to drag on. He couldn’t afford to lose his head. He still had a job to do. With that, he turned on his charm once again and rejoined the large group of people in the crowded room – the whole time keeping an eye firmly fixed on Tweed.
Max looked at his watch and then raised his head. At last, it was midnight. If Bryson was coming, he should be here any moment. Since he had been waiting outside for some time, his face was chapped from the cold, and his hair was wet with snow. He studied the landscape but found it difficult to see anything because of the fog that blanketed the historic plaza. Max didn’t hear Bryson’s approach across the brick – the snow muffling his footsteps. It was only when Max heard his voice that he realized Bryson had arrived and that he’d approached him from behind.

“If it isn’t Max Frost, the prince of The Post,” he said smugly.

Max was taken off guard that Bryson recognized him so instantly. He eyed him curiously but didn’t respond.

Max tried to keep his face expressionless, his demeanor composed, but he found it difficult. His heart pounded in his chest so loudly that he was sure Bryson could hear it and know just how anxious he truly was. He folded his arms across his chest in a gesture of pretend confidence while he looked Bryson squarely in the face.

“So, when are you going to tell me why I’m here?” Bryson questioned, even though he already knew the answer. “I know that you and your uncle are worth billions – so, it isn’t about money.”

Max then spoke for the first time, his voice abrupt. “I know everything Walker. I know you blackmailed Duncan and then ended up murdering him here. It’s on the tapes!”

Bryson had heard all about Tweed’s former fiancé, and he despised him. Max may have been with her first, but he refused to be outdone. His jealously and pride forced his control to the
edge of a steep precipice. It was time Max Frost learned who the better man was. It was time that Max Frost, the arrogant, obscenely wealthy, respected reporter, found out just how much he truly didn’t know.

“What if I killed Duncan? You can’t prove anything. I took the tape that Duncan made of that night and destroyed it! I thought you were supposed to be a great reporter Frost. If you’re as good as everyone says, then why don’t you tell me what else I took after I killed him.” He sneered, and his face looked distorted. When Max didn’t reply, Bryson mocked, “You can’t guess?” There was a pause, the silence tense. “I took his watch and his wallet. I hear the police had a difficult time identifying him without them. Apparently there was too much damage to his face.”

“And you destroyed his watch and wallet at the same time you got rid of the tape,” Max concluded.

Disgust filled Bryson’s voice. “You mean you don’t know?” He shook his head. “Tweed has them.”

Max’s eyes widened in shock, and his voice sounded stunned when he repeated, “Tweed? Tweed was involved?”

“I thought you of all people would know that she likes to play dirty.”

“Why are you telling me all this?”

“Because you’re a big shot reporter, and I know how much you love a story,” he ridiculed. Bryson studied Max for a moment and then continued callously, “Or are you trying to be a hero for your little girlfriend by solving her father’s murder? What’s her name again – Irene?”
“You really should be more careful, Frost.” Bryson’s eyes blazed, his face and voice menacing as he delivered the final blow, “Who knows – one day something may happen to her too!”

That comment succeeded in stirring Max’s anger when nothing else had. His jaw tightened, and he clenched and unclenched his fists.

Bryson started to laugh. He’d finally succeeded in making him angry. “You don’t have a story Frost, and you never will!”

Max tried to steady his breathing. He was still seething because of what Bryson had threatened about Irene. “What makes you think I won’t write a story, Walker? You told me everything I need to know.”

“But, you’re the only one who knows it!”

Suddenly, before Max knew what was happening, what was left of Bryson’s thinly veiled control snapped. He lunged at Max and tackled him to the ground. They struggled with one another, and soon Bryson had the upper hand. He punched Max in the face and then grabbed him by the scalp, slamming the back of his head into the brick plaza. “You should have stayed out of this!” Bryson warned.

Bryson reached into his coat and removed a gun. He pistol-whipped Max across the head with the gun and then grabbed him again by his hair. He began to unleash his rage violently and relentlessly. When Max no longer put up a struggle, Bryson raised himself up off the ground. He looked around quickly and saw that there was no one around at the moment – no potential witnesses. He then glared down at Max. His motionless body was sprawled across the wet ground – the snow mixing with blood on the brick pavement. Bryson aimed the gun at Max’s head. He paused for a moment and then said triumphantly, “Goodbye, Frost.”
He pulled the trigger as a bright light and a loud voice ordered him to the ground. Startled by the police, Bryson jumped – shooting Max in the shoulder, rather than the head. The police repeatedly ordered him to the ground. When he turned to face them, his gun still drawn, an officer fired – shooting him in the leg. Enraged with sudden and acute pain, Bryson opened fire on the police. Before he could get more than two shots off, he was thrown back onto the pavement from the force of the ammunition his body had sustained.

Several police officers stood over Bryson’s dead body as they surveyed what had just taken place while several others focused on Max. Just then, Irene pulled up in Max’s car – not bothering to park it properly – and rushed onto the plaza. She ran frantically to Max’s aid and knelt down on the brick. Tears were streaming down her cheeks as she gently picked his head up and held it in her lap. His eyes were closed. Irene was now covered in his blood.

Max could hear voices, but they sounded cloudy and vague as though they were from a great distance. He heard Irene’s voice saying, “Is he all right? Do something! Max... Max, can you hear me?” She sounded distraught as she pleaded, “Please, please help him.”

Another voice answered, “The paramedics are on the way.”

Irene smoothed her hand gently over his forehead. His eyes flickered open, and he found himself looking up into her beautiful, tear-drenched face. He wanted to reassure her that he was all right, but when he opened his mouth all he could say was, “Don’t leave me.”

She wasn’t able to speak for a few moments, so intense were her emotions. When she finally got them under control, her voice was full of feeling, and she replied, “I won’t.” Max closed his eyes once again, and Irene leaned down and kissed him softly on the mouth.
Chapter 83

Luke glanced around the room at the crowd of people at the Richards’ party. Guests all around the room continued celebrating the recent arrival of the New Year. However, Luke had a hard time concentrating, and he had yet to catch the party spirit. He returned the happy greetings of those around him half-heartedly. He was just in the process of receiving another round of hugs when he felt his phone vibrate.

Luke let go of the woman he was hugging abruptly – her face showing just how startled she was by his actions. He apologized politely and then weaved through the mass of people until he made it to the edge of the room. His heart was racing as he glanced at his phone. He had a text message – not from Max but from Irene.

He read the message quickly and scanned the room in search of Tweed. He found her some distance across the room surrounded by a group of older men including Dr. Archibald, who was far more attentive than seemed appropriate. Luke shook his head in revulsion but then re-directed his attention to those around him. He circulated about the room and with each salutation, he moved closer and closer to where she stood. When he was still some distance away from her, he stopped. He couldn’t risk getting any closer. He didn’t want to alert her to his presence. From where he stood, he could easily observe her without being noticed.

Just then, Luke felt someone slap him on the back. He turned slightly and found Blake by his side. Blake had a rehearsed smile on his face, but when he leaned toward Luke, his voice was urgent. “Any news?”
Luke spoke quietly so that they wouldn’t be overheard as he repeated what he had just learned in the text. They were quiet for a moment, and then Luke said, “Hopefully we’ll find out more soon, but all we can do now is sit tight.” The time seemed to drag on for them – both anxiously looking at their watches several times a minute.

After what seemed like an age, the Richards’ front door opened, and several police officers entered the house and swarmed the crowded room. Bob Richards approached the officer in charge and snapped, “What’s the meaning of this?”

Soon Karen Richards was at her husband’s side, anxious to find out the reason for the police department’s presence in her home. When she spoke, the gracious hostess had vanished, and in her place was nothing more than a hysterical woman. “You had better start explaining what you think you’re doing here. Do you hear me? This is private property, and I want you out!”

Lieutenant Drake, the detective to whom Irene and Phyllis had initially spoken just following her father’s murder, glanced in the Richards’ direction as he responded, “We’ve received material information in a homicide investigation which implicates your daughter, and we’re here to take her in for questioning.”

Tweed gasped as she said innocently, “You can’t be serious.” She shook her head – her voice sounding wounded as though she couldn’t believe that the police would even suggest something so horrible. “How dare you accuse me of such a thing.”

Lieutenant Drake responded matter-of-factly, “If you’ll come with us, we’ll try to get this resolved as quickly as possible.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you!” Tweed ranted.
Suspecting that she would not leave peacefully, the Lieutenant motioned to a pair of officers who moved swiftly to her side. They each took her by the arm, but when she refused to cooperate by walking out of the room on her own, they had to forcibly remove her.

Tweed started screaming in rage as the police officers started to lead her from the room. “Get your hands off me!” As she was being escorted past Luke and Blake, Luke stopped in front of her, and she shrieked, “What do you want?”

“Max asked me to give you this,” he said. He dangled a charm necklace in front of her. It was the same one Irene had found in her vanity table the night that she and Max were scheduled to go to the ballet – the night they’d discovered that Duncan and Tweed had been involved. Luke paused and then continued meaningfully, “I guess you lost it at one of your sleepovers with Duncan.” Tweed’s eyes widened in shock at his words, and she started to tremble. He paused for a moment to reign in his disgust. When he spoke again, his voice sounded bold and the full import of his words finally hit home. “We know everything, Tweed. It’s over . . . and so are you.”
Blake and Luke received the call from Irene about what had happened to Max just moments after Tweed’s arrest. They rushed straight to the hospital, but it still took them a while to get there due to all the New Year’s Eve traffic. When they’d spoken to Irene over the phone, she had been frantic about Max’s condition, and by the time they arrived, they were both extremely anxious as well.

When they entered the waiting room which was surprisingly crowded for being a holiday, they found Irene – her face in her hands and her clothing still covered in blood. “Irene,” Blake said worriedly as he hurried to her side. At the sound of his voice, she looked up suddenly and saw them coming toward her. She stood up and before she had a chance to say anything, Blake took her in his arms. “Are you all right?”

He held her by the shoulders so that he could see her face. She nodded, but when she spoke, her voice sounded hoarse. “I’m okay . . . I’m just worried about Max.”

He patted her shoulder supportively as Luke broke in, “How is he?”

“I don’t know yet,” she replied. “The doctor said that they would update me on his condition once he’s out of surgery, but they must still be working on him because I haven’t heard anything.” She shook her head and let out a painful breath as one tear rolled down her cheek. “Shouldn’t we have heard something by now?”

Luke put his arm around her shoulders reassuringly. “It’s okay, Rene. I’m sure we’ll hear something soon.”
Some time later, the surgeon entered the waiting room. He saw Irene, as well as the two men who had arrived since he’d last spoken with her, and he walked toward them. As he approached, Blake said quickly, “I’m Max’s uncle. How is he?”

The doctor shook hands with Blake as he answered, “He’s going to be fine. We were able to remove the bullet from his shoulder without any complications,” he explained. “He also needed stitches on the back of his head. We’ve run several tests and it appears that he has sustained a concussion, and he’ll need to stay here for a few days just to make sure that everything’s okay.” The doctor could still see the concern in each of their faces, and a slight smile touched his face as he continued, “He’s conscious, and he’d like to see you.”

He showed the way to Max’s room and then told them that he would be back shortly to check on him. When Blake, Luke, and Irene entered the room, they saw Max lying on the bed, his left shoulder bandaged and arm in a sling, the other hooked up to an IV.

Max turned his head on the pillow to face them, and a slow, smile spread across his face. His hair was disheveled, his face haggard, and when he spoke, he sounded weak and very tired. “Hey.”

Irene smiled faintly and walked over to the bed where she gently took his free hand in her own.

“How’re you feeling?” Luke questioned as he and Blake moved farther into the room.

Max’s lips twitched with amusement as he said, “I’ve been better.”

“Irene told us what happened,” Blake said. “Luke and I would have been here sooner, but we weren’t able to leave the Richards’ – the police showed up and arrested Tweed.”

That statement triggered Max’s memory of all that had happened at the Paul Revere Mall up until the moment when Bryson was about to kill him. When he spoke, his face and voice were full of confusion. “How did the police know about my meeting with Bryson? If they hadn’t shown up when they did . . . I’d be dead.”

“She must have tipped them off,” Luke reasoned, “otherwise how could they have known? Did the police tell you how they found out about it, Irene?”

The men’s attention shifted to her, and they waited to see if she could shed some light on what had taken place since she’d arrived only moments after the police.

They looked at her questioningly. When she spoke, she sounded somewhat hesitant. “The police knew about the meeting because . . . I called and told them.”

The men couldn’t hide their surprise, primarily due to the fact that they’d agreed not to involve the police until they had solid evidence. Luke sounded bewildered as he asked, “But how did you know Max was in trouble?” He shook his head. “The police could never have gotten there in time.”

Irene nodded. “You’re right. I called Lieutenant Drake, the detective I met when I was home for my dad’s funeral, before their meeting ever started. I told him that there was some vital evidence concerning my father’s death and that I was worried someone else was going to get seriously hurt.” She swallowed and pushed her hair back before she continued, “They got there just in time. I gave them the recording of your conversation
and that’s how they found out about Tweed’s involvement. After that, several officers went to the Richards’ home to arrest her.”

“I can’t believe it. Tweed’s known this whole time who killed your father – and was also involved,” Max said in a state of disbelief.

“It sounds like the district attorney is in the process of getting a search warrant to see if Tweed still has my dad’s watch and wallet,” she added.

Luke shook his head. “It was one thing for her to go along with the blackmail, but why risk hiding something like murder?”

“She probably thought that the police would find out about the blackmail money if she told anyone about the murder,” Irene clarified, “so, she kept her mouth shut.” She thought to herself for a moment. “It’s not too surprising she didn’t say anything. If she has my dad’s stuff like Bryson said, how do you explain something like that to the police?”


Everyone in the room was quiet for a moment as they contemplated all that had happened just a few short hours ago. At last, Blake let out a deep sigh and broke the silence. “I’m just glad you’re okay.” Max, Luke, and Irene exchanged glances for a moment but then looked back at Blake as he continued, “I realize that you’re a reporter Max and that by nature you have to know what happened, but no story is worth getting killed over.”

He half-smiled, but when he spoke, his voice sounded serious. “I didn’t do it for the story.” Blake looked slightly confused, and he waited for him to elaborate. Max
looked intently at Irene, and their gazes locked as he added, “I did it for something – someone far more important to me than any story ever could be.”
Epilogue

The New Year

It was some time after the night at the Paul Revere Mall that life for Irene slowly returned to normal. Bryson was dead. The police found the judge’s missing watch and wallet at Tweed’s home, and she remained incarcerated awaiting trial for her role in Duncan’s murder. With these events came resolution, but there also came renewed media attention. Reporters once again bombarded Irene as well as her close acquaintances for any salacious details concerning her father. After numerous strained and exhaustive days, the nightmare of all the events that had taken place during the past several months began to fade, and for the first time, Irene felt free from the troubles of the past.

Max had nearly recovered from the injuries he sustained at the historic square, and Sarah Jane was making steady progress as well. It wouldn’t be long before they both made a full recovery.

Max observed how with each passing day, Irene became more and more lighthearted and carefree. Her eyes shown brightly once again, and her smile was vivacious and alive. This was the Irene that he remembered. On the other hand, he felt the exact opposite. Although he was glad that her father’s murder had finally been solved, Max knew that there was little to keep Irene in Boston and that it wouldn’t be long before she decided to go back to Paris. He couldn’t suppress his fear that one day, when he woke up, she would be gone – and that all the time they’d spent together over
the last several months would seem like nothing more than a beautiful dream – one that would forever haunt his memory.

One night, several weeks later, Max came over to pick Irene up for a casual dinner party Luke and Sarah Jane were hosting. After everything they’d all been through, Luke thought it was time to celebrate, and in the near future he and Sarah Jane would be celebrating their upcoming engagement as well. Max’s mood was far from celebratory – he’d been brooding for the past several days about Irene. He knew he couldn’t postpone the inevitable forever. At some point, he was going to have to ask about her plans and whether or not she was returning to Europe.

Max had arrived at Irene’s house earlier than planned. Outside the front door, he took a deep breath and tried to steady his nerves before letting himself inside. He stepped into the foyer and shut the door behind him. He scanned the entryway and listened for some indication as to her whereabouts. “Irene,” he called.

“I’m in the kitchen,” she responded.

Max walked into the kitchen and saw her reaching inside the oven. She removed a dessert that she’d been baking and set it on a cooling rack. She smiled at him as she set down the hot pads. “Hey, I didn’t think you were coming by until later.” He smiled at her in response, but the smile didn’t reach his eyes. His reaction didn’t go unnoticed by her. When she spoke again, her smile had vanished, and she sounded worried, “Is everything okay?”

He shook his head. He put his hands in his pockets and looked down slightly before he raised his eyes to hers once again. “No, everything isn’t okay.”
From his response, she deduced where this conversation was going, and she felt a sense of dread. After all that had happened recently between them, she had been certain that things were going to be different this time around, but she couldn’t curb the uneasy feeling she suddenly had. Her mind flashed back to the night six years ago at Max’s apartment in New York when she’d told him she loved him and then learned he didn’t feel the same. Although a great deal of time had passed since then, her memory of that night was anything but vague. She linked her fingers together nervously and then looked away from him. When she spoke, he could hear the uncertainty and self-consciousness in her voice. “I assume you’re referring to . . . us.”

He nodded, “Good assumption.” Max scrutinized Irene carefully, hoping for any indication of what she was thinking, but he could read nothing in her distant expression.

She turned her back to him and walked a few steps farther away. She hoped the distance would make things easier for her. She was afraid that when he told her yet again that she had misunderstood their relationship, she wouldn’t be able to keep her composure. She bit her lip as a tear rolled down her cheek. She wiped it away briskly before he could see and then turned around to face him. “It’s all right, Max. You don’t have to explain.”

He furrowed his brow in confusion as Irene continued, “I never would have made it through the last few months without you, and it was fun while it lasted . . . but the last thing I want is for you to feel obligated.” He opened his mouth to interrupt, but she quickly added, “You feel bad about how things ended between us years ago, and you feel sorry for me because of my dad, and you’re trying to make things right now.”
He couldn’t have been more shocked, and she couldn’t have been more mistaken. His wanting to be with her now had nothing to do with her father or his previous error in judgment. He wanted to be with her because he was desperately in love with her – and he was almost certain that she was in love with him as well.

His mouth turned into a half-smile – but this time his smile reached his eyes. Before she could go on, he said, “Obligated? Is that what you think?”

She was too nervous to respond, and she couldn’t bring herself to look at him. She was afraid that if she did, he would be able to see exactly what she was thinking and know just how much she was in love with him.

There was silence for a moment while Max waited for her to comment. When she still didn’t reply, he said entreatingly, “Look at me.” She raised her eyes to his slowly, her heart was racing, and she couldn’t breathe. “Irene . . . I can’t believe you’d think that after all this time. That’s very generous of you, but I’m not that noble.” She studied him carefully, and he continued to explain, “I thought it was obvious how I feel about you . . . I love you, and I want to be with you.” He took a deep breath and looked her squarely in the face. “That night at the Paul Revere Mall I asked you not to leave me, and I’m asking you again. Don’t go back to Paris. Stay in Boston. Stay here . . . with me.”

Irene wiped her hand over her wet cheeks and bit her lower lip. She paused before she spoke as she tried to get a handle on her emotions. “I told my aunt and ballet company weeks ago that I wasn’t coming back – I just hadn’t told you yet. I didn’t know for sure if that’s what you wanted.”

“Well, now you do.” He quickly closed the distance between them. He walked over to where she stood and stopped in front of her. He took her face gently between his
hands and tilted her head up to look at him as he wiped away her tears. “Boston’s your home, Irene. It’s where you belong – and we belong together.”

She smiled at him, her beautiful eyes sparkling in subtle invitation. Max needed no further encouragement. He leaned down and kissed her firmly and completely on the mouth. They were both no longer uncertain about what the future would bring – and as a result – at last held nothing back.