



## Prologue

Something was off. She had the uneasy feeling of being watched.

Rachel Stroeb stepped away from the darkened portico, leaving her husband fumbling with his keys, their morose teenage daughter surrounded by a pile of winter coats and luggage.

Tall hedges and drooping palms hid their neighbors' houses, a film of dirty clouds blocking the light of the moon. But there was no sign of anyone, or anything amiss.

"Everything okay, Rachel?" D.C. called.

"I thought —" Rachel said. "Never mind. It's probably just the jet lag."

"I don't understand why the sconces aren't lit," her husband said. "I can't see a damn thing."

The darkness — that must be why things seemed out of kilter. Or maybe it was disappointment that their family was still incomplete.

Rachel returned to the stoop, slipping her arm around Elise's narrow shoulders. Her daughter tensed. Rachel understood. It had been an exhausting flight, an unproductive trip. Just the three of them had returned home to Miami Beach from Madrid. Without Jeremy.

"Here we go. Finally." D.C. pushed open the door, depositing their coats, suitcases, and laptops on the white marble floor. "I'll replace those burned-out bulbs in the morning."

Rachel flicked on the foyer light, reassured by the familiar arrangement of photos on the stippled wallpaper, the polished mahogany banister leading to the upstairs bedrooms. But the silence was unsettling. She was accustomed to the radio playing classical music, sounds of healthy family commotion. Their home on Lotus Island, where they'd lived the last twenty years, had mostly been a place of making wonderful memories.

Rachel took a deep breath and held it for a few seconds. Week-old flowers on the foyer table, and dog. No matter how frequently they bathed poor old Geezer, the smell of ripe fur like a dowager's ancient fox wrap hung in the air.

"Geezer." Rachel whistled. After ten o'clock. He was probably asleep for the night in his corner of their bedroom. Some watchdog.

Elise was twirling her long dark braid with one hand as she texted with the other. The smattering of freckles on the bridge of her upturned nose always reminded Rachel of cinnamon on vanilla pudding.

D.C. called from the kitchen. "You wouldn't believe how much junk mail we got in one week. And Flora left a note. She walked Geezer before she left around four."

"Can I go see Carlos?" Elise asked.

"Sorry, honey," Rachel said. "It's late. You have school tomorrow."

"Please, Mom. I won't stay out long. I promise." Her daughter's pretty green eyes were bloodshot, probably from crying on the plane. It hadn't been the winter break any of them had wanted.

"What's that?" D.C. said, coming in from the kitchen. Two days' whiskers covered his chiseled cheeks and chin. Jeremy had grown a beard while in Europe this past year and Rachel was taken aback by the striking resemblance between the father and son.

"I want to go to Carlos's," Elise said. "Just for a little bit."

“Absolutely not,” D.C. said. “You’re not traipsing over to the Castillos’ at this hour.”

“Fine,” Elise said, eyes overflowing with tears. “I can see why Jeremy didn’t want to come home.” And she raced up the stairs, the slamming of her bedroom door echoing in the empty house.

“You didn’t have to be so harsh, D.C.”

“Jeez, Rachel. So now I have to tiptoe around both my kids?”

“You could try being a little less righteous.” Rachel slipped off her new boots and stashed them in the closet, noticing blood on them from the nosebleed she’d had on the plane. Her tee shirt was also stained — three drops that looked like splattered tears. She pulled it over her head, hung it from a hook in the closet, and put on one of Elise’s sweatshirts.

D.C. was pacing beside their luggage and coats. In a stretched-out tee shirt and worn jeans he looked more like one of his students than a professor of international economics. “Less righteous?” he said. “I’ve got a twenty-two-year-old son who’s wasting his life and a teenage daughter who doesn’t like restrictions. What’s wrong with asking them to take some responsibility for a change?”

“I’m just saying, maybe you should lighten up. Elise is having a tough time. She’s disappointed Jeremy didn’t come home with us.”

“We’re all disappointed.”

“Elise is only sixteen. She worships her brother.”

“Well, maybe our daughter needs to find a new hero.”

Rachel took a deep breath. Why did her husband have to be so damn stubborn?

Geezer had made it down the curving staircase, tail wagging, arthritic hind legs moving stiffly behind him. He licked Rachel’s hand as she bent to hug him. “Stinky puppy,” she said. “Tomorrow, before I leave, you’re getting a bath.”

D.C. touched his shirt pocket, perhaps hoping to find a

cigarette, but they'd both quit smoking over a year ago, at least in front of each other and the kids. "Look, honey," he said. "I'm sorry. I'm as upset as you are that he didn't come home."

Rachel picked a wilted chrysanthemum from the vase on the foyer table. "You know, Danny, deep down all Jeremy really wants is for you to be proud of him."

"Hey." Her husband reached for her. He was a foot taller than she, and his chin rested comfortably on her head. "He'll figure it out."

Shortly after eleven o'clock, Rachel and D.C. climbed into their high four-poster bed. The sheets were cool against her cheek. So much nicer than a hotel. Geezer was panting in his sleep in the corner of the room. D.C. slid his arms around her and Rachel pressed against his chest. He smelled like perspiration and smoke. So, he'd found a cigarette after all. She wondered where he kept his stash.

Rachel snuggled closer to her husband. In twenty-five years of marriage, there had been a few bumps and missteps, and this one, too, would pass. He kissed her hair.

Before they went to bed, they had taken Geezer for a walk around the island. When they returned home, Rachel had been surprised to get a text message from Elise. *Please don't be upset with me, Mom. I'm over at Carlos's for a little. He promised to walk me home.*

And Rachel had been furious. But then the anger seeped out with her fatigue. Maybe their restrictiveness was what had pushed Jeremy away from them. Just this once, she'd let it go with Elise.

A key turned in the front door. Rachel glanced at the clock on the night table. Just before midnight. Elise had to get up at six thirty for school. She'd be exhausted. D.C.'s breathing was deep and even. Rachel hadn't told him Elise had gone out, preferring to keep her daughter's secret to starting another altercation. She listened for Elise's light footsteps running up the stairs. Rachel always left the

bedroom door open a few inches to hear her kids coming and going. What was Elise doing downstairs? The thin beam that leaked in through the crack in the open door went out. Elise must have turned off the downstairs foyer light. Why would she have done that?

There were footsteps climbing the stairs. Slow, heavy, not Elise's. Had Carlos come back with her? Was Elise trying to sneak him into her room?

Rachel sat up, annoyed. This wasn't like her daughter. She strained to see, but the room was a mass of hulking shadows. The footsteps got louder. But only one set; where was Elise?

Rachel's chest tightened. Could there be an intruder with a key?

She shook her husband. "Danny, wake up. Wake up. I think someone's in the house."

He groaned.

Rachel grabbed her cell phone from the night table and pressed the Contacts button. "G." She scrolled down to "Guardhouse."

The footsteps were just outside the bedroom door. Please God, don't let Elise come home now.

She pressed Send. It rang. Once. Twice. Come on, answer.

The bedroom door opened slowly.

Geezer grunted in his sleep.

There was a shape in the doorway. No face, just a creeping shadow. It was holding something. Pointing it at her.

Rachel heard only the blood pounding in her head. She dug her fingers into D.C.'s arm. Please, take what you want, she thought, but don't hurt us.

The shape moved closer.

Finally, a voice in her ear. "Guardhouse."

"Help," Rachel shouted into her cell phone. "Help us."

Geezer was barking hysterically, wildly.

"Rachel, get down," D.C. hollered.

The weight of her husband's body pressed against hers, pro-

tecting her, blocking her. There was a flash of light, then a deafening noise shattered the night. A blow, like a violent wind, threw Rachel against the headboard, taking her breath away.

Something warm and wet spread over her, covering her, drowning her.

“Elise, Jeremy,” Rachel whispered as she faded from consciousness. “I promise I’ll never leave you.”



## Chapter 1

Dark, cool, silent. The thick scent in the air reminded him of the fresh flowers his mother always kept in a vase on the foyer table.

His mother. His father.

Jeremy stared at the shiny wooden caskets. Sealed, the man in the black suit had told him. Their ashes inside.

Their ashes inside.

Impossible. Impossible. His parents were back in their house on Lotus Island. Angry with him. They always seemed angry with Jeremy these days. But that's where they were. Not here. Not here in this dark, cool, silent room with a smell that didn't belong. Or maybe they were at work. His dad playing big prof on campus, his mom intense and serious at the accounting firm where she was a partner. And they'd be very busy. Maybe too busy to be thinking about Jeremy. About what an idiot he'd been a week ago. But they definitely weren't here. They couldn't be here.

The room had high ceilings, drapes over the windows, rows and rows of benches. Flowers everywhere. A pulpit at the front. And two caskets. Two. STROEB MEMORIAL SERVICE, the sign outside the room had read.

"Can I help you?" the man in the black suit had said when Jeremy arrived at the funeral home straight from the airport a short while before.

"I'm, I'm Jeremy Stroeb."

“Jeremy,” the man had said, his face saddening. “Their son. I’m so sorry for your loss. We held off on the memorial service as long as we could, but your uncle said your flight had been delayed. I’m really sorry, young man. But you’re welcome to sit for a while in the chapel with their caskets.”

With their caskets.

Jeremy touched the dark mahogany. Their caskets. Impossible. He rested his face against the cool smooth wood. He closed his eyes. When he opened them, everyone would jump from the shadows shouting “surprise!” A stupid, terrible joke. A hoax to get him to come home. But he was ready to forgive them for that.

*Please, God, let this be a big terrible joke.*

A hand rested on his shoulder. Jeremy jerked up, expectantly.

The man in the black suit. “Your neighbor, Mr. Castillo, has opened his house to anyone wishing to pay their respects. I’m sure your family’s waiting for you there. I’ve asked my limo driver to take you. Whenever you’re ready, of course.”

The man was being very nice, and it made Jeremy’s throat close up. He didn’t know what he should say, even if he could speak. Thank you for your kindness, but you’ve made a mistake?

The limo stopped at the guardhouse at the entrance to Lotus Island. It had been a year since Jeremy had been home and things looked different. Darker and greener, somehow. The flag was flying at half-mast. They did that when one of the island residents died — lowered the flag. His father used to joke that it was a signal to the real estate agents that a fresh property would be coming on the market. He loved irony, his father. Jeremy turned to see if he was smiling. But his father wasn’t there. Just the driver waving to the guard.

The car took a right on Lotus Circle and Jeremy was about to correct the driver, until he remembered they weren’t going home. Would he ever be able to go home? Jeremy’s brain was clogged. So

tough to process what was happening. For the last twenty-four hours, he'd refused to think about it. His focus had been on getting home. Getting home. And now here he was.

Mansions, tall hedges, and gated driveways went by in a blur. Something wasn't right. The quiet island had turned into a carnival. Cars were parked along both sides of the street, extending back as far as the guardhouse. Several had pulled onto the grass of the bayfront park. Jeremy and Elise used to play hide-and-seek there, near the huge banyan tree they called "the grotto."

The driver continued just past the park to the Castillo mansion, stopping at the base of the circular brick driveway, which was blocked with cars. The huge ivy-covered house was just visible behind thick hedges and the tall wrought-iron gate. So different from his own house. Jeremy had never been inside this place. Enrique Castillo was a client of Jeremy's mother and Carlos Castillo was Elise's boyfriend, but the Castillos hadn't been close to his parents. So why was the gathering here?

Jeremy thanked the driver and hoisted out his worn backpack and ski jacket. The shirt he'd put on hours ago — the best one he owned — stuck to his perspiring back. The Miami air was so thick, even in January, he could hardly breathe. Or maybe it was something else.

He passed some people his age. The guys, in jeans and sport jackets, were leaning against a car smoking cigarettes. The girls, holding Kleenexes to their eyes, were mostly in short black dresses, though one wore tattered jeans and dilapidated army boots. Probably his dad's students. They eyed Jeremy as he walked up the driveway. The girl with the boots took a step toward him, a confused expression on her face. Jeremy picked up his pace so she wouldn't try to talk to him. He pulled open the heavy front door.

Harsh whiteness struck him like the flash from an atomic bomb. The walls, marble floors, baskets of lilies, columns stretching toward

the domed ceiling—everything white, as though life had been sucked out of this place. Mingled voices, sounding like a record played backward, floated toward him from the rooms beyond the entrance hall. The air smelled sickeningly sweet. He dreaded going in there, receiving their condolences, seeing the awkward sympathy in their eyes.

Elise, he thought. He had to find Elise. He stashed his backpack and jacket behind a column, the abrupt movements causing momentary dizziness. How long had it been since he'd slept?

“May I help you?” The voice was deep with a hint of accent. Enrique Castillo, tall and stiff.

Jeremy straightened up.

“My God. Jeremy.” Enrique Castillo held him by the shoulders. “I didn’t recognize you.”

“I just got in. I didn’t—”

“I’m so, so sorry, Jeremy. What a shock for all of us. Your uncle said he didn’t know how to get in touch with you. No address. No phone. You weren’t responding to e-mails.”

“I—” Jeremy coughed to clear his throat. “I was in Portugal.”

“Yes. Your uncle said you finally checked your e-mail yesterday morning. That you’d be here in time for the services. But then we heard you wouldn’t.” Enrique stroked his silver beard. “I suggested we have everyone gather here. Your parents’ house—well, you understand. It didn’t seem suitable.”

“I’d like to see my sister,” Jeremy said, wincing at the sharpness in his own voice.

“Of course,” Enrique Castillo said, “of course.”

The living room was an extension of the white. Jeremy blinked from the glare of light bouncing off the bay through the French doors. He reached for the back of a chair to keep from falling. There were people everywhere, but they were backlit and their faces no more than shadows. His friends wouldn’t be among them. Chris was with the Peace Corps in Zambia, and Ben was hiking in Machu

Picchu. The others he had grown apart from, and besides, they'd all migrated to New York and the West Coast. Jeremy was alone.

The dark bulk of a woman with flying blonde hair was hurrying toward him. "Jeremy. My God. You're here." Liliam Castillo squeezed his arm. "We're so sorry, Jeremy."

"Thank you." He tried to pull away, but she held fast. "Excuse me, Mrs. Castillo, but I really need to find my sister."

"Elise?" She glanced around the room. Her blonde hair covered one eye. "She was sitting on the sofa with your grandfather a short while ago. But your grandfather went home. He wasn't well. I wonder where she's gone. Perhaps with Carlos." She pressed her fingers deeper into Jeremy's arm. "He was the first one there, you know. My Carlos. He could have been killed himself." She crossed herself with her other hand. "He'd walked Elise home. He knew something was wrong as soon as they stepped into the house. And Carlos pulled Elise outside and ran to get the security guard."

"My uncle said it was a burglary. A surprised burglar who wasn't expecting anyone to be home."

"Is that what Dwight told you?"

Jeremy's heart was racing. "The burglar thought they had a gun, so he shot them. Wasn't that what happened?"

She released Jeremy's arm. "Of course. I'm sorry, Jeremy. I'm not myself. Let me get you a drink and something to eat."

Jeremy sensed a blur of movement around him. Everything surreal. It had been a foiled burglary. What else could it have been? People touched his shoulder, shook his hand, hugged him. And Jeremy nodded as they mumbled things. Told him how great his parents had been, what a tragedy, what a shock.

Right, he thought, grateful for the numbness that had settled over him when he had first learned the news. Wondering how he would survive when the numbness dissipated. Searching the room for his sister.

A stout, ugly man in a wrinkled suit and bow tie was staring at him. He looked familiar. One of his mother's business partners.

Someone was talking to Jeremy. A southern accent. "I know you must be overwhelmed," said the large man. He had a puffy face with small, alert eyes. His mother's other partner. "But I wanted to tell you," he continued, "as well as I knew your mama, I feel like you and your sister are family to me. And if there's anything I can do, you call me, y'hear?"

"Thank you," Jeremy said. "Thank you." The voices in the room got louder, softer, like someone was playing with the volume.

Liliam Castillo was hurrying toward Jeremy with a platter of food and a bottle of beer. "Here you are, Jeremy."

"Excuse me," Jeremy said. "I have to find my sister."

He pushed through the crowd. Where had all these people come from? It seemed as though they were multiplying before his eyes. Their voices bounced off the floors, echoed against the high ceilings, and reverberated in his head. He bumped into a young woman with short black hair and intense blue eyes.

"You're Jeremy, aren't you?" she said. Her eyes and nose were red. "I worked with your mother. She was —"

"I'm sorry," he said. "I really need to go." Air. Beyond the French doors, the sun was setting, covering the sky and bay with bands of pink like smeared blood. A yacht at the end of the dock rocked gently, making Jeremy queasy.

It had happened. It had really happened.

Jeremy hurried toward the water. The smell of fish and brine overwhelmed him. He puked into the bay.

In the distance, a horn bellowed. The sky had turned red.

My mother and father, he thought. My mother and father are dead.



## Chapter 2

His house. The house he'd grown up in. The house where his parents had been murdered.

Not his house anymore.

Jeremy stood in the front foyer, his backpack over one shoulder, dropping the new key his uncle had left for him on the foyer table. Breathing caused a physical pain as though his ribs were in a vise. It was the first time he'd been home in a year, since he'd left for Europe. The last time, he'd also stood here, in this very spot. His mother had offered to drive him to the airport, but he told her he'd already called a cab. "I understand why you have to go, Jeremy. But remember, your father and I will always be here for you."

Always?

The house was quiet. Too quiet. "Elise," he called. He didn't think she'd come here alone, but maybe she had. He had borrowed someone's phone at the Castillos' and tried Elise's cell, but it had been turned off. So he'd left word that he was going home if anyone saw her. All he could do now was wait.

Geezer was at the top of the stairwell, tail wagging. The sight of his dog was so unexpected that once again Jeremy thought he'd gotten it wrong somehow. That it had been just a cruel trick.

Geezer hurried down the steps, going as fast as he could with his hind legs dragging behind him. He licked Jeremy's hands and face.

“Hey, boy. What are you doing here? Who’s been feeding you? Walking you?”

Geezer seemed to be okay. But now he was sniffing the air, running from room to room, looking for something. For someone.

It was no trick. It had happened. But although Jeremy’s brain told him otherwise, he wasn’t all that different from the dog, his senses also poised to hear or see his parents in the next moment.

He was drawn to his father’s office, adjacent to the foyer. A working office, with bookshelves filled to overflowing and dozens of classical cassette tapes piled high beside the old cassette player he’d had since college. When Jeremy was a kid, his dad would roll back his desk chair to see who had come in when the front door opened. Then he’d smile up at Jeremy. “So, did you beat ’em?” he’d ask, even if Jeremy wasn’t coming from a game. Or even if he was, and his dad had no idea who he’d been playing against, or whether it was basketball, soccer, or lacrosse. An inside joke. “So, did you beat ’em?” But now there was no rattle of rolling wheels over the plastic floor protector.

Geezer had returned to the foyer and lain down in front of the entranceway table, his sorrowful eyes fixed on Jeremy. The vase, always filled with fresh flowers, was empty.

Jeremy carried his backpack up the stairs. The door to his parents’ bedroom was closed. He couldn’t remember it ever being closed. His mother liked to leave it open a few inches so she could hear Jeremy and Elise coming and going. It used to annoy Jeremy, this overprotectiveness of hers. He hesitated, his hand on the door-knob. He couldn’t go in there. He might never be able to go in there.

Jeremy went down the hallway, turned on the light in his childhood bedroom, and dropped his backpack on the floor. The room hadn’t changed, same deep blue comforter and navy carpet, posters from different phases of his life covering the walls—rock stars, cars, sexy girls. A collection of empty beer bottles from around the world

lined the shelf above his desk. He was surprised the room was clean, dusted, but it smelled funny. Like stale cigarette smoke.

He sat down on his desk chair. This was where his parents assumed he did his homework, but mostly he daydreamed and surfed the Net. He'd gotten the big, clumsy computer when he was thirteen—almost ten years ago. It was a 600 MegaHertz Pentium III and Jeremy had thought it was the coolest, fastest machine ever. But today the machine was a dinosaur. He wondered why his parents hadn't gotten rid of it. But they were like that. They kept up with the latest in technology, but never could part with the old.

And then it hit him again like a punch to his abdomen. His parents didn't need to keep up with technology. They were dead. His mother and father were dead.

He rested his head on his folded arms, trying to block it. Trying to breathe despite this unbearable pain. *Don't focus on the negatives, Jeremy*, his mother always said. *Think about something positive.*

Positive? Oh God. Mom, Dad, how could you leave me like this?

He jerked his head up. He must have fallen asleep. Jumbled voices were coming from downstairs.

“Jeremy?”

Jeremy's heart almost ripped through his chest at the sound of his father's voice.

“Jeremy, are you up there?”

And then he collected himself. Not his father. His uncle Dwight.

Jeremy went downstairs and into the kitchen. His aunt Selma was putting platters of food and casserole dishes into the refrigerator.

“Hey, Aunt Selma.” He kissed her cheek.

“Jeremy,” she said, holding him tight. “Oh Jeremy.” She was very skinny with white-blond hair like cotton candy, and she had always

been nice to Jeremy and Elise in the unnatural way some childless people were with kids.

“Ah, Jeremy. Here you are,” Dwight said, coming from the direction of the guest bedroom. He gave Jeremy an awkward hug, pulling away quickly. “We’re so sorry, Jeremy. What a tragedy for all of us. My big brother. I still can’t believe it. Thank God my parents aren’t alive to witness —”

“You should have waited, Dwight.”

“Waited?” His uncle cocked his head. He looked like a warped version of Jeremy’s father.

“The memorial services. I should have been there.”

“But we did wait, Jeremy. We waited as long as we could. I had to make a judgment call. I couldn’t tell when your flight would finally get in and everyone was already there.” He pulled on his thin mustache. “I couldn’t very well ask people to leave and come back another time.”

“They were my parents. I should have been there.”

“Yes, you should have.” His uncle’s voice rose with the same clipped intonation his father’s had. “And maybe if you’d checked your e-mails. Or maybe if you hadn’t gone off in the first place —”

“Dwight,” Selma rested her hand on his arm. “Please don’t.”

Dwight pulled his arm away. “You think you’re the only one affected by this, Jeremy? The only one that’s suffering? He was my brother, damn it. My big brother. He taught me how to ride a bike, for chrissake. How to throw a ball. You don’t think that I’m devastated by what’s happened?”

“I don’t know, Dwight. I honestly don’t know.”

“Jeremy,” Aunt Selma said. “Please, honey. You don’t know what you’re saying. You’re upset.”

Jeremy was trembling. “You’re right.” He took a deep breath. “Where’s Elise? Is she okay?”

Dwight shook his head and took a sandwich off a platter on the counter.

“She hasn’t been herself,” said Aunt Selma.

“She’s as unfathomable as you,” Dwight said. “Won’t talk to us. Won’t eat with us. Locks herself in the guest room or goes for long walks.”

“Wait,” Jeremy said. “Guest room? What are you talking about?”

“She’s been staying with your aunt and me at our apartment.”

“What?”

“Where did you think she was? The police only released the house from crime scene a couple of days ago. And then we had to get a clean-up crew in here.”

Jeremy tried to block that last remark. “I figured she was with my grandfather.”

“He can’t cope with a teenager.”

Damn. Jeremy had assumed Elise and their grandfather had been together. How had they gotten through this past week? “She can stay here with me tonight,” Jeremy said.

“That’s fine with me.” Dwight threw the half-eaten sandwich in the sink.

Geezer had followed Jeremy downstairs. He sniffed Selma and Dwight, then went to lie down in the front foyer. “I wasn’t expecting the dog to be here,” Dwight said.

“Who’s been taking care of him?” Jeremy asked.

“The housekeeper,” Selma said. “I forget her name. She had him at her place for a few days, but no pets are allowed there, so she brought him back here after the police left. She’s been feeding and walking him twice a day.”

“Flora,” Jeremy said. “Her name’s Flora.”

“Of course,” Selma said. There was a smudge of lipstick on her chin. “She seems like a nice person.”

His uncle had gone over to the liquor cabinet in the adjacent family room and was pouring himself a glass of Scotch. “Not everyone would be willing to work at a house where there’d been —”

“Have a sandwich, Jeremy,” his aunt said. “The Castillos wanted you to have this food. There was a lot more, but I didn’t think it would fit in the fridge.”

Dwight held up the bottle. “Want some, Jeremy?”

“No thanks.”

Dwight took a sip. “Listen, Jeremy. I know you and I never got along well, but in times of crisis, we need to work together.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Whatever our past differences, I’m still your uncle. I want what’s best for you and Elise.”

“That’s a bit of a change from when our parents were alive.”

“Your father and I had a few issues. But that doesn’t mean he and I didn’t love each other. And now, I feel responsible for you and Elise.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“Well, Elise then.” His uncle rested his glass on the counter. “We need to think about what’s best for her.”

Elise. Jeremy’s chest tightened at the thought of her. Alone this past week. Without their grandfather. Without Jeremy.

“Tonight you’ll be here at the house with her, but what about tomorrow? I need to know your plans, Jeremy. Selma and I have to make arrangements.”

“I don’t know my plans.”

“So you don’t know when you’ll be going back to Puerto Rico?”

“Portugal. I was in Portugal.”

“That’s right. It’s hard keeping up with you in your virtual world. No wonder your father was so aggravated. You don’t call home. You don’t respond to e-mails. Don’t you think of anyone but yourself?”

“Please, Dwight,” Selma said. “There’s no reason for this.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I haven’t slept much.” Dwight ran his fingers through his thinning hair. “I’ve been trying to hold everything together. The funeral arrangements, your sister, the police.”

“What about the police? Have they found anything? Do they have a suspect?”

“I talked to the lead detective for a bit,” Dwight said. “Detective Kuzniski. Seems like a good guy. Anyway, Kuzniski says they’re homing in on someone.”

“Give me Kuzniski’s number. I want to talk to him.”

Dwight reached into his wallet and handed Jeremy a business card. “Don’t take this the wrong way, Jeremy. I know how you feel right now, but there’s really no point in your getting involved with the police.”

“You don’t know anything about how I feel.”

“Sure I do. You’re angry, frustrated, ineffectual. I feel the same way myself.”

“Your parents didn’t just get killed, Dwight. You couldn’t possibly feel like I do.”

“Jeremy, Jeremy, why are you fighting me? I’m not your enemy. I’m just trying to help. You’ll be gone soon, then what? You think you can rush through here like a tornado, then leave when you’re bored? What about Elise? What happens to her?”

“I’ll work things out with my grandfather. Either he’ll come live here or Elise will move into his house.”

“Your grandfather?” Dwight said. “Why would you do that?”

“Because he’s Elise’s guardian.”

“Maybe you should have a look at your parents’ will.”

It seemed to Jeremy that Dwight was holding back a smile, but he must have been imagining it.

The front door opened and slammed shut. Jeremy recognized his sister’s voice murmuring to the dog.

“What are you talking about, Dwight?”

“Your parents entrusted your aunt Selma and me with Elise’s guardianship.” Dwight took a sip of his Scotch. “And we have no intention of letting them down.”