

# Chapter One

November, 1999

Leslie Anne Galloway was taking her morning shower when the phone rang and the world as she knew it crumbled. The short, high-pitched peals carried over the thrumming of the water, and she debated whether to answer it. She was due at a book signing in an hour and the bookstore was a good twenty minutes' taxi ride away, which meant she was already running late. On the other hand, there might have been a last-minute scheduling change...

She left the water running, wrapped herself in a towel, and trotted across the hotel room to the bedside table. Shivering in the cold air that blasted from the overhead vent, she snatched up the receiver and gasped, "Hello?"

"You have to come home."

She recognized the cool, unfriendly voice as that of her father-in-law, retired surgeon Arthur Galloway. His florid, heavy-featured face flashed before her mind's eye. Why would he, of all people, be calling? And why tell her to come home? She was still struggling to sort it out when he dropped the bomb that would change her life forever.

"Jared is dead."

For a moment, Leslie felt a shielding disconnect. What did those flat, hard, merciless words have to do with her? Too soon, understanding burst through her meager defenses. A steel vice closed around her heart, seeming to choke off every life-sustaining function. Her ears buzzed. Her vision dimmed. She fought to draw enough breath to croak,

"*What?*"

"You heard me. My son is dead."

It was as if she were swimming upstream against a powerful current, each stroke futile, her strength waning, aware she was going to be swept away yet unwilling to acknowledge her fate. “Impossible!” she blurted. “I talked to him last night, and he was fine.”

Contemptuous silence.

She swallowed and tried again. “What—what happened?”

“You’ll find out when you get here. Just haul your ass home.” A sharp click. Silence. Then the drone of the dial tone.

Leslie’s numb fingers lost their grip on the receiver. It bounced off the bedside table and dangled downward, the earpiece grazing the carpeted floor. She sank down beside it, elbows on her knees, hands tenting her forehead, pressing, kneading, as if by sheer force she could erase those three horrible words from her consciousness: *Jared is dead*.

Jared. Her husband. Her love. His voice came to her, soft and warm as it had been in their last conversation. She wrapped herself in the memory, insulating herself against a reality she felt incapable of facing.

It was the first time they had spoken since Leslie’s departure on her promotional book tour two days before. She had been exhausted after a busy day: up early to be the guest of a local radio talk-show personality, lunch with a feature writer from the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, then on to the University of California, San Diego to speak before a creative writing class. On returning to her hotel room, she saw the message light on her telephone blinking. She dialed into the message center and heard Jared’s voice asking her to call. His tone told her nothing about his state of mind. They had argued the night before her departure over the growing commitment required by her writing career, and their parting had been strained. Had her absence fueled his bitterness?

She placed the call and was relieved to hear the gentle affection in his greeting. He said, “I’ve been waiting for your call. Something happened last night. Something—well, I won’t waste time on that now. But it reminded me how destructive anger can be. And then I started thinking about our quarrel the other night.”

“Jared, I—”

”No, let me finish. I know I’m selfish where you’re concerned. Your writing takes you away from me, and I hate that. But I know how important it is to you. I’ll try my best to be more supportive from now on. I don’t always show it, but I truly am proud of you.”

Leslie’s throat tightened with emotion. How often had she longed to hear those words? The literary critics’ most glowing accolades couldn’t begin to compensate for the one thing she wanted and had never truly felt she had—her husband’s admiration for and approval of her professional abilities.

“Thank you for that,” she said softly. “It means the world to me.”

“We’ll make a fresh start when you get home. I’ve made special plans to celebrate your birthday and Thanksgiving in one big blowout.”

“Sounds wonderful. What? When?”

“No way. It’s a surprise.”

She smiled. “You know how to pique a girl’s curiosity. How about just a tiny hint?”

“Not on your life. The sooner you get home, the sooner you’ll find out.”

They had spent the next twenty minutes exchanging news and minutia relating to the past two days. His final words were, “I love you with all my heart.”

Leslie wasn’t sure how long she huddled there, lost in her memories. Gradually her senses began to waken. She heard the hollow beat of the water against the fiberglass shower stall.

She saw the thin band of California sunshine where it shone through a crack in the window curtains onto the opposite wall. Her skin pebbled under the cold air hissing through the overhead vent. She felt chilled to the core.

Strident sounds issued from the dangling telephone receiver. She picked it up, pushed to her feet, and placed it in its cradle. She went into the bathroom to turn off the water, then discarded the damp towel, pulled her silk robe from the hook behind the door, and put it on. Her mind was a jumbled chaos of half-formed thoughts and burning questions. In the midst of her confusion, one name surfaced, sure and steady as a rock in a raging sea: Pen.

Pen, who had first recognized and then nurtured Leslie's writing talent. Who had counseled and comforted, challenged and guided, encouraged and then rejoiced in her success. Her best and now perhaps her only true friend.

Somehow she managed to place the call, punching in the code from her calling card followed by the familiar numbers she was accustomed to dialing several times a week. Pen picked up on the second ring. At the sound of her throaty contralto voice, something stabilized inside Leslie, and she said with surprising calm,

"It's me, Pen. I need to talk to you. I've just had some bad news."

A split second's hesitation. Then, "Oh, you poor dear. I already heard. I saw Herb Wendt at the grocery store a little while ago. His brother-in-law's on the police force, and he told me the whole story."

The last flicker of hope died. "Then it's true."

"Apparently so. I'm so sorry."

"Pen, what happened?"

"Didn't they tell you?"

"Arthur said I'd find out when I got home."

"*Bastard!*"

Leslie felt her friend's anger across the two thousand miles separating them, and it brought a small wave of solace. Pen understood Leslie's unique position within the Galloway family—that of captive outsider bound by the expectations inherent in sharing their name yet never breaching the circle of emotional warmth that set the rest of them apart. She alone could appreciate the depth of cruelty with which Leslie had been informed of her husband's death.

In a tone gentled by compassion, Pen continued, "It was an accident, dear. A crazy, senseless accident." An uncomfortable pause. "Apparently he'd been drinking."

"No!" Jared Galloway was a recovering alcoholic who had not taken a drink for over ten years. "He wouldn't. There must be some mistake!"

"If there is, I'm sure they'll catch it when they run his blood alcohol. But they found an empty bottle of Jack Daniels on the table beside his chair."

"Table? What table? I thought you said it was a car accident."

"No, no. It *was* an accident, but it happened at home. He lit the gas fire without opening the flue. He must have passed out, and the house filled with carbon monoxide."

Leslie bowed her head, gripped by sudden nausea. Such a simple oversight. She had done it herself any number of times, but she had always been alerted by the resultant gassy odor. An odor that would not penetrate a drunken stupor.

"When did it happen?"

"Last night sometime, apparently. Then when he didn't show up for a scheduled surgery this morning..." Her voice trailed off.

Leslie could imagine the scene. Patient prepped and sedated, operating room set up,

anesthesiologist waiting...and no surgeon. The ensuing panic had to have been palpable.

“Who found him?”

“I’m not sure. The police will have all the details. Do you know when you’ll be getting in?”

“No, I—I’ll have to see how soon I can get a flight.”

“Let me know, and I’ll pick you up at the airport.”

“Thanks. I’ll get back to you.”

Leslie sat with the dead receiver in her hand, her mind slowly stirring. She goaded herself to focus on the scenario Pen had just painted: Jared drunk and unconscious while his life slipped away in a cloud of carbon monoxide from an unvented gas fire. No matter which way she looked at it, questions arose.

To begin with, she had never known Jared to light the fireplace. She was the one who cherished the cozy ambiance of a flickering fire in the evening. Jared was usually oblivious, either deep in one of his medical journals or snoozing in front of the television, clicker in hand. And what about the bottle of Jack Daniels? He had always told her his drink of choice used to be vodka. Even if he had switched to whiskey, it made no sense that he would have fallen off the wagon on that particular night. He had told her he planned to spend the evening with a newcomer to AA, a man who wanted to stay sober but was experiencing massive doses of temptation. Would he have come home from such a meeting and started drinking?

Never!

The skin on the back of her neck prickled, a sensation that had nothing to do with the air conditioning. Beneath her shock and grief, a grim certainty began to form. Something about Jared’s death was terribly wrong.

# Chapter Two

## Musings of a Justice Seeker

I can't pinpoint the exact moment when I decided Jared Galloway had to die. If you've ever watched a pot of water come to a boil, you'll understand the process. As the heat increases, tiny, almost imperceptible bubbles begin to form. *The inkling of an idea works its way along the margins of the mind.* The bubbles rise slowly at first, barely disturbing the surface of the water. *The conscious mind doesn't recognize the portent of what is building in its inner reaches.* As the energy builds, the bubbles grow in size and number. *Awareness of an intriguing possibility begins to form.* Finally, when the correct temperature is reached, the water erupts into roiling activity. *Fragments of thought coalesce, and the individual is energized into a course of action.*

Please understand—this was no whim. Bitterness was eating into the very core of my soul, and I thought long and hard about what I could do to escape it. I believe people create their own destiny by means of their individual intellect and imagination. Applying those resources to my problem, I finally came to the conclusion that for my own sanity and peace of mind, I had to act.

But murder? I do not take the responsibility of removing a productive life from our planet lightly. My belief system may not encompass a higher authority who will one day sit in judgment on mortal men, but it *is* grounded in respect for the human condition at large. Before I could be comfortable with my decision, I needed to evaluate Jared Galloway in terms of the contribution he was making to the greater good. And in this I found him lacking.

As a physician, a healer, he had a unique opportunity to make a real difference in our sad, messed-up world. But how did he choose to spend his talents? Performing plastic surgery on rich, bored, vain individuals consumed by the selfish pursuit of eternal youth. No Louis Pasteur or Jonas Salk, our Jared. I concluded that his death would be no great loss to mankind.

How, then, was it to be done? Self-preservation required that it appear to be an accident. After mulling it over for some weeks, a fortuitous item in the daily newspaper pointed the way. I did some serious web surfing, took advantage of some unique contacts, and obtained the necessary means.

Prudence required that I wait until his wife Leslie was safely out of the way. Her west coast book tour provided the ideal opportunity. I decided to drop by their house the evening after she left, hoping loneliness would have primed him for a social call. Imagine my disappointment when he wasn't home! I didn't allow myself to give up. Their house sits atop a steep slope in a hilly, wooded, unlit section of town. I decided to park in the darkness along the road behind the house and wait. His car rolled into the driveway a little past ten. I pulled up behind him just as he was lowering the garage door.

He wasn't particularly surprised to see me, but neither was he enthusiastic. He said he was tired after a long day and was planning to head straight to bed. I did some fast talking, and he finally agreed to let me come in. As we walked up to the house, a motion sensor triggered an outside light. That's when I saw what he was carrying. I almost laughed out loud. I still marvel at the irony of his having inadvertently provided the crowning detail of an already perfect plan.

## Chapter Three

Leslie had always been a white-knuckle flyer. She didn't like being trapped in a metal tube some thirty thousand feet above the earth with her fate in the hands of a crew about whom she knew nothing. Jared said it was a control issue. Admitting he was right didn't make the ordeal any easier. She would grab onto his hand—or, if she were traveling alone, the seat's armrest—and close her eyes until the plane had leveled off and settled into the motion-free calm of cruise-altitude flight. Today she was so preoccupied, she didn't even notice when the wheels left the ground.

The previous five hours were a blur. Cancelling her commitments for the day. Calling her publicist to clear the remainder of her schedule. Making travel arrangements. Packing and getting to the airport. She'd had an unsettling experience as she walked toward her assigned gate. When the crowd ahead of her shifted, she caught sight of a familiar figure. Narrow head, dark hair, slight but squarely-held shoulders, brisk gait—Jared! She clutched her briefcase and darted around those in her path. As she came up behind him, her pace slowed and tears sprang to her eyes. It wasn't him, of course. This man was too tall and too young. She had seen with eyes of hope, forgetting that hope was dead.

Now she stared out the window beside her seat. Clouds and mountains drifted past, but she was blind to them. Instead, she saw the hazy sunshine of the hot July day when she had first met the man who was to become her husband.

He was standing with a small group of people on the far side of the lush back lawn. Leslie wasn't sure why, but she couldn't take her eyes off him. Granted, he was handsome, but in a soft, almost feminine way that normally didn't appeal to her. Perhaps it was the way he listened to those around him, then smiled and nodded or made some small gesture. He didn't speak often, but when he did, his friends seemed mesmerized. A leader, but a diffident, humble one, a person unaware of the impact he had on others. He was also the only person there who seemed unaffected by the weather.

It was one of those Midwestern summer days when the heat and humidity indices hovered in the nineties and the moisture-laden air seemed to suffocate rather than sustain. Everyone at the party was ruffled, flushed, and covered in a sheen of sweat. Everyone, that is, except the man who had caught Leslie's eye. His khaki pants were crisp, his yellow golf shirt unstained by sweat, his face tanned and dry.

“Isn't he gorgeous?”

Leslie started at the voice that came over her right shoulder. She was leaning against the trunk of an elm tree where she had taken refuge from the sun. Her entire body prickled from the heat, and the prospect of eating the pig that was now roasting in a pit at the rear of this posh suburban Chicago estate wasn't at all appealing. To make matters worse, she didn't know a soul except her hostess Isabelle, a fellow hospice volunteer. She'd accepted the invitation believing she would have the courage to mingle and perhaps take the first step toward a new life. Instead, the old shyness had pushed her into this obscure corner of the yard, once again the spectator as other people's lives unfolded before her eyes.

Now she turned and looked into a face she recognized—smooth elegant planes surrounded by clouds of auburn hair, piercing green eyes, a wide mouth stretched in a sly smile Leslie would know her anywhere.

“Marianne Krucinski?”

“None other. How’re you doing, string bean?”

Leslie winced at the hated nickname given her long ago by the boy both women had once loved. She had not seen Marianne since they graduated from high school nine years before. Hearing the nickname wiped away the intervening years and reminded Leslie of her lowly station in the teenage pecking order of their day. As Marianne no doubt intended, affirming that she was every bit as beautiful and probably twice as dangerous as she had ever been.

Leslie made a conscious effort not to react outwardly to the nickname’s implied slight. She smiled and said, “I’m great, thanks. What are you doing here?”

Marianne flicked her eyes toward the man Leslie had been watching and said, “Him.”

Leslie raised an eyebrow. “You’re together? I thought...I mean, I heard you were engaged to Steve.”

“I was, but—” She shrugged. “Poor Steve. He was pretty broken up about it. Took off for Saudi Arabia or some such godforsaken place. But really, who marries their high school sweetheart these days? There are too many other opportunities out there.” She leaned closer and murmured, “Such as divorced but wealthy plastic surgeons like Jared. Would you like to meet him?”

Before Leslie knew what was happening, she was walking across the lawn with Marianne’s monologue in her ear. “Not much of a party, is it? Dead, dead, dead. It’s the booze, of course. Or rather, the lack of it. Did you notice? Nothing but soda as far as the eye can see. That’s because they’re all alcoholics. Or *recovering* alcoholics, as they like to call themselves. I’ll bet there isn’t a person here who isn’t a member of AA. Or married to one.” She grinned and gave a conspiratorial nudge. “Or about to be married to one.”

They approached the group in question and moved in beside the man Marianne had called Jared. She slipped her arm beneath his and said, “There’s someone I want you to meet. An old high school friend of mine, Leslie Mauser. Leslie, Dr. Jared Galloway.”

They shook hands, and Leslie was embarrassed to have her clammy palm meet his dry one.

“Hello, Leslie,” he said, his hazel eyes smiling into hers. “You must be Isabelle’s friend from the hospice volunteer pool. The one who lost both parents recently.”

Leslie dropped her eyes, confused by the powerful, instantaneous attraction she felt for him, and murmured, “Yes. They died two months apart.”

“Then you’ve had a rough go of it. My sympathies.”

Not one to be long out of the spotlight, Marianne turned to Leslie with a face artfully arranged in empathetic lines and cried, “Oh, you poor dear. I didn’t know. I remember your mom and dad well. Such sweethearts. What happened?”

Leslie stiffened, aware that all conversation had stopped and every eye was on her. She wanted to throw Marianne’s phony sympathy back in her face by reminding her that, in fact, she had barely known who Leslie’s parents were, much less anything about their natures, be they sweet or otherwise. But of course, she hadn’t the nerve. Feeling sullied and used, she said, “Dad died of a heart attack. Mom of cancer.”

Marianne clucked her tongue and shook her head. “So sad.” Then she looked at Jared and said, “But enough doom and gloom. You bad boy. You haven’t introduced us to your friends.”

After the pleasantries were exchanged, Leslie eased her way out of the group. She couldn’t help but reflect that life seemed to be repeating the same cruel joke it had played ten years before by pulling her emotions toward a man already in the tight grasp of Marianne

Krucinski. This time, however, the joke's punch line had yet to be delivered.

She retreated to her lonely post while the pig was lifted from its pit and taken inside to be carved. Fifteen minutes later, Isabelle's husband announced that the buffet tables were ready. Leslie took her place in line, filled her plate, and carried it around to the shady side of the house. She perched on a low garden retaining wall and was about to take her first bite when Jared Galloway came around the house with his own plate and a can of Coke.

"There you are," he said with a smile. "Mind if I join you?"

Leslie hoped her face was flushed enough from the heat to mask her surprise and pleasure. "Why—why, please do. But Marianne...well, I don't know where she is."

"Good. Neither do I."

More surprise. "But aren't you two together?"

"Marianne and I? Is that what she told you?"

"I thought so. Or rather, maybe not in so many words. But I assumed..." Feeling foolish, she fell silent and looked down at her plate.

He chuckled. "You wouldn't be the first to assume things based on Marianne's prattle. She takes innuendo to the level of art form. But let me set the record straight. She is not my date. Today or any other day. Fact is, you're the person I came here to meet."

Astounded, Leslie gaped at him.

"It's true. Isabelle's been trying to set me up with one or another of her single acquaintances for over six months. This is the first time I'm actually approving her efforts. Does that scare you?"

Leslie felt a strange tingle in the pit of her stomach. A surge of confidence? The return of a skill she had but recently honed, the skill of flirtation?

"Should it?" she countered with a smile.

He looked long and deeply into her eyes. Finally, with great deliberation, he said, "Absolutely."

The invitation and promise packed into his delivery of that one word were still resonating in Leslie's memory when she felt a tug on her sleeve, pulling her back to a present she wished only to escape.

"Excuse me. Sorry to bother you. But aren't you Leslie Anne Galloway, the author?"

Leslie turned to look at her seatmate, a fiftyish woman with short, artificially-blackened hair, heavy makeup, and gold-loop earrings so large they grazed her plump shoulders. Her dark eyes gleamed with excitement.

"I saw you interviewed on Larry King Live last week, and I rushed right out and bought your new book. In fact—you won't believe it—I have it right here in my carryall. Would you be so kind?" She rummaged in a large bag and triumphantly produced a copy of *Bewitched, Bothered and Beheaded*, Leslie's just-released novel. The woman held it out, gushing, "I can't believe how lucky this is. I just love your writing. And to have an autographed copy..."

Leslie sighed and reached for the book. It was going to be a long flight home.



## Chapter Four

Pen was waiting when Leslie walked past the security checkpoint into Terminal Three at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport. She had suggested that rather than park and come in, Pen simply pick her up outside Baggage Claim about half an hour after the flight arrived. Pen had chosen otherwise, and the sight of her brought instant comfort.

Penelope Wickstrom was a large woman whose heart and generosity had always seemed to Leslie to match her size. Leslie considered herself tall at five feet seven, but her friend topped her by at least four inches. She was big boned but well-proportioned, the extra pounds she now carried having been acquired only in recent years since her divorce. She wore her graying brown hair short, framing a face that was pretty in a heavy-featured way. Smooth skin made her appear younger than her fifty-one years. Now she extended her arms, and Leslie walked gratefully into them.

The tears she had been holding at bay finally flowed. "Oh, Pen," she sobbed. "It hurts so much. He was...he was my life."

Pen stroked her hair and murmured, "I know, dear. I know. It's a terrible tragedy. But I'll help you through it. One step at a time."

Leslie pulled away and fumbled for a tissue. She blew her nose. "Thank God for you. I'm so lucky to have you for a friend."

"I'm the lucky one, kiddo. Now give your schnoz another good blow, and let's get out of here."

Leslie gave her a watery smile and took several deep breaths. They began walking along the concourse toward the main part of terminal.

Pen said, "I've been poking around all day trying to find out what I could about what happened. I can't believe that bastard Arthur didn't fill you in. Wouldn't you think the family would pull together over something like this?"

"That assumes they consider me to be part of the family. Which they don't."

Pen made a rude sound. "At least there's one bright prospect. After this is over, you can cut yourself loose from that bunch. And good riddance, I say."

It was a startling thought and one Leslie hadn't even considered. Her in-laws had been such an integral if prickly part of her life for the past five years it was hard to imagine an existence without them. To her surprise, the prospect wasn't as appealing as she would have imagined.

"So what did you find out?" she asked.

"Not much, I'm afraid. Word has it he was seen earlier in the evening at The Manor." She referred to the family restaurant where the citizens of their small northwest suburban community often gathered. "He was with some guy nobody seemed to know. But everyone agrees he wasn't drunk at that time."

"He wasn't drunk at all, Pen. I know he wasn't!"

Pen gave her a quick sideways glance. "It's upsetting, I know. And maybe you're right. We'll know one way or the other in a few days. After the autopsy."

"Autopsy?" Leslie felt a bubble of nausea rise to the back of her throat. She clapped her hand over her mouth, turned into the women's washroom, and just made it into one of the stalls before her stomach rebelled. When she emerged, white-faced and trembling, Pen was waiting

with a look of contrition on her face.

“You poor thing. Shame on me for bringing it up. As if you don’t have enough to deal with.”

Leslie waved the apology away. “Not your fault. It just takes some getting used to, that’s all.” She stopped at the sinks and splashed water on her face before they continued on.

They took the escalator down to Baggage Claim. Leslie’s suitcase and tote bag were among the first to ride the conveyor belt onto Carousel Five. She hooked the tote bag’s strap over the raised handle of the suitcase and pulled them along behind her. They rode another escalator down to the underground tunnel that passed beneath the airport feeder roadways. When they stepped out of the elevator onto Deck 6 of the parking garage, the night air was cold and tainted with the odor of jet fuel. Leslie swallowed a new wave of nausea and shivered, her wool blazer poor protection against the near-freezing temperature of late fall.

“Where is your coat, girl?” Pen chided. “It’s November in Chicago, for godsake.”

“I left it in the car when Jared dropped me at the airport. Didn’t want to hassle with it in California.”

She huddled in the passenger seat of Pen’s Ford Jimmy while her friend negotiated the exit ramp and pulled up to the collection booth. Leslie made a feeble grab for her purse, but Pen already had the parking ticket and a ten dollar bill in her hand. As the car accelerated away from the booth, the first trickle of warm air seeped through the dashboard vents. Pen turned the blower on full blast, and Leslie’s body began to unknot.

With the return of physical comfort came a fresh barrage of mental anguish. She was going home, but Jared wasn’t there. Would never be there...

The forty-minute drive out to the Fox River valley seemed to take forever. Pen asked her when she had last eaten.

“I had a few pretzels and a Coke on the plane.”

“That’s all? What about before that?”

“I don’t know. Nothing, I guess.”

“Well, no wonder you’re woozy. Why don’t I jump off at the Barrington exit, and we’ll grab a bite somewhere?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You have to eat, Leslie. You’re going to need all the strength you can muster.”

“I can’t, Pen. Maybe later after I get home.”

“That’s another thing. Don’t you want to spend the night at my place? It might be tough going back to the house after...” Her voice trailed off.

“I have to face it sooner or later.”

“But wouldn’t it be easier after a good night’s sleep?”

Leslie gave a bitter laugh. “I doubt if I’ll have one of those no matter where I sleep. No, I want to go home. There’s no point in putting it off.”

“Then maybe I should sleep over. So you won’t be alone.”

“It’s good of you to offer.” She reached across and squeezed her friend’s arm. “I hope you know how much I appreciate all you’re doing for me. But I need to face this by myself. At least for tonight.”

A tick of silence. Then, “Well, it’s up to you, of course. I just thought it might make it easier if you had some company.”

Pen’s tone carried the sting of rejection, but Leslie didn’t have the energy to explain herself any further. She wasn’t sure she could have even if she’d tried. She would make it up to

Pen later, but for tonight, she needed to be alone.

Despite her resolve, dread grew like a cancer in the pit of her stomach. She gripped the door's armrest with one hand and clenched the other in her lap as Pen turned onto Bonnie Dundee Road and drove up through the tunnel of winter-bare trees. At Greenbrier, they took a left and climbed to the top of the hill, where they turned into the private drive that curved in front of the house and around to the garage. The headlights swung across the darkened facade. Pen braked opposite the front door, shoved the gearshift into park, and turned to face Leslie.

"Are you sure you're all right with this? I'd be happy to come in with you."

Leslie swallowed hard and shook her head. "Thanks, but I'll be fine."

She got out, opened the door to the back seat, and removed her luggage. Before slamming the door, she said, "Thanks for everything, Pen. I'll call you tomorrow."

She pulled her bags up the shallow brick steps to the front door. She fumbled in her handbag for the house key and slipped it into the lock. Taking a deep breath, she pushed the door open.

The first thing she noticed was that the security alarm didn't beep its usual warning. Someone had deactivated it. With a prickle of unease, she shut the door and reached for the light switch. The central foyer in all its remembered ordinariness filled her eyes. Black-and-white marble tile, stairway rising to the right, darkened archways into the living room on the left and the dining room on the right, gilded wall mirror and beneath it, the credenza on which Jared had tossed his trademark rugby hat when he last came in. With a muted sob, she crossed over and snatched up the hat, burying her face in his familiar scent. Surely if she called out, he would come racing to take her in his arms and welcome her home.

"Jared!" she cried.

Her ears strained against the echoing stillness.

"Please don't leave me!"

She heard the soft burp of the furnace kicking on. Nothing more. She turned and saw light reflecting through the narrow windows on either side of the front door. The Jimmy was still idling in the driveway. Dear Pen—she really was worried. Still clutching the cap, Leslie forced the anguish from her expression, opened the door and waved.

The passenger window slid down and Pen called, "You okay?"

"I'm fine. You can go on. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Pen shook her head, closed the window, and pulled forward onto the asphalt apron to turn around. Leslie stood in the doorway and watched until the Jimmy's taillights turned onto Bonnie Dundee Road and disappeared through the trees.

She locked the front door and engaged the security system's perimeter. She walked slowly from room to room with Jared's hat still in her hand, turning on lights, looking for anything out of the ordinary that would explain what had happened. As she approached the great room they had added onto the back of the house, she noticed the faint but unmistakable odor of gas. Tensing, she pushed through the leaded-glass French doors and flipped the wall switch.

This was the room where they did most of their living, and normally it bore evidence of the day-to-day clutter that defined their lives. Now it was unusually pristine, having been tidied and cleaned the morning before by the weekly cleaning service. Leslie had picked up after herself before leaving for California on Sunday, and Jared's impossible pile of back-issue professional journals was neatly stacked on the shelf beneath the end table beside his leather recliner. One copy of JAMA was draped, spine-up, over a chair arm as if he had just gotten up for a break and would be back at any moment. She moved into the room, fresh tears flooding her

eyes.

Her nose soon adjusted to the lingering gas odor, and by the time she had crossed to his chair, she no longer smelled it. The black mouth of the stone fireplace yawned less than six feet from the chair. Lamplight shone down on the beveled glass top of the end table, revealing two telltale rings where moisture had condensed and dried around what she assumed to have been the whiskey bottle the police had found and the glass from which he had supposedly drunk. She averted her eyes, turned, and sank into the chair. She imagined her body rearranging itself so it fit into the indentations molded during the countless hours he had spent there. She pushed back into his favorite reclining position, lifted her face to the beamed, vaulted ceiling, and wept.