

Chapter Eight



There was a firm knock at the door.

“Coming,” said Jan, and put down the magazine she hadn’t been reading anyhow.

Outside, Janice recognized the same police detective who had interviewed her before.

Tamber, something like that. The one who’d grabbed her before she could escape this madhouse.

“John,” she said, remembering that much, and he extended his hand.

Instead of a shake, Jan stood back to let him enter. She didn’t want to talk to him, after getting so little out of him the time before. Still, anything would be better than being stuck alone in a room with Nick, especially after the whole Harrison debacle. Who, by the way, was not taking her calls no matter how urgent she insisted it was to his secretary.

Nick stood, putting his fork down in his half-eaten room service meal. “Hey, you’re back on the case.”

The detective acknowledged him. “Mr. Marino.”

“Excuse me,” said Jan. Something about Nick’s tone had set her off, instantly, and she was coming out fighting. “This is a bad time. In fact, it’s been a bad time for quite a while, and I can’t see it getting better soon. If you want to talk about Maggie, take me somewhere else. I’m going to kill someone if I have to be here a moment longer.”

“Jan - “ began Nick.

“Don’t ‘Jan’ me, buddy boy,” she said, her voice dropping into danger range. “I can take care of myself a lot better than a certain twenty something girl you used to know.” Then to Tamblyn: “If we’re here because my house burnt, then I should be able to come and go as I please. If the police want to hold me here against my will, they had damn well better charge me with something.”

“Ms. Stuart.” The detective turned to her, and she was surprised to see a glint of pity in his eyes. “Ms. Stuart, this is a murder investigation. As much as you don’t want to hear about it, as much as you would rather not be involved, you are. Now, let us do our job. You’re here for a reason. And so, I’ve heard, is Mr. Marino.”

“It’s not your daughter that’s missing. It’s not his either, whatever the paternity test would say,” she said, fixing Nick. “You don’t know what I heard.”

And he didn’t, because she’d never told him.

“Ms. Stuart –” said Tamblyn again, but Nick interrupted.

He could overlook the not-your-daughter crack for now. That could be a year’s worth of argument. Thirteen years maybe. “What did you hear, Jan?”

“They have Maggie’s watch,” Jan said. She had the grimace on her face that meant she was holding back tears. Nick moved toward her but she warded him off with her hand and waved it

toward Tamblyn. Ask him.

“What about it?” Nick asked.

“Yes,” said the detective. “We have her watch.”

“And?” Pulling teeth.

Tamblyn sighed. “All right then,” he said. He sat down on the edge of the bed, resigned. “Please remember what I tell you will be in confidence. A policeman is dead. There is other evidence that the murder, and the abduction of your daughter, is tied into some kind of ritualistic behavior – don’t. Don’t fly off the handle. This is a bizarre case. However, there is no reason to imagine Maggie isn’t safe. There are also several other students missing, three boys: Aaron Scribner, Scott Saunders, and. . .” he checked his notebook – “Jason Lawson.”

Jan snorted, surprised. When Tamblyn gave her a curious look, she said only, “Just a boy Maggie had a bit of a crush on.” She motioned him to continue as he paused to assimilate the new information.

“There may have been some form of group hypnosis at work, as far as we can tell. Something happened at that school – but we don’t know what.”

“What kind of ritual?” asked Jan, narrowing her eyes. Before he could answer, she stormed on. “What? Satanic cultists? Urban witches? How many kids would they need, anyway? One or two? Do you think maybe they’re waiting for some big celebration to kill her? And just in the nick of time, you’ll swoop in on a rope and whisk her away?” She paused and her head dropped to her chest. “No, I’m sorry. This is too much pressure. And the last time I saw her –”

“Yes?” said the detective. “The last time you saw her. . .”

“I *felt* her,” said Jan shortly. *Deal with that, Mr. Detective.*

“You – felt her.”

“I thought – I must have imagined it, but for a second, I imagined I heard her trying to call out to me.” The memory sent a shiver through her.

Tamblyn turned this tiny piece of information through his mind. A standard psychological explanation would in a single step eliminate most of his worst fears. Mothers often said this sort of thing, that their child had cried out to them in crisis, that they could sense something was wrong.

He turned to go, apologizing spaciouly and excusing himself awkwardly. It was easy to be sympathetic and accommodating when he had a mission. Otherwise, it was like surgery without anesthetic. “I’ll keep you informed,” were his parting words.

“Well,” said Nick. “You certainly did a number on him.”

“I’m not talking to you,” she said, “Unless it’s absolutely necessary. And maybe not even then.” She disappeared into the bathroom where she cried for ten minutes and then reemerged collected to try Harrison again.

So Maggie wasn’t the only one missing. Maybe a bit of a relief, thought Nick. Although – no one else’s watch had been found, smashed.

He sat down again and picked up the magazine Jan had abandoned, trying to sort out his place in all this.

“I’m going,” Jan said suddenly, breaking him out of a haze of thoughts. She had her shoulder bag packed and hoisted up, flats on, the heels abandoned in the corner of the room. “Harrison won’t take my calls, and I can’t sit still any longer.”

“I thought you made a promise to that detective,” he said, knowing it was the wrong thing for any hope of reasoning with her.

“Whoopie,” she said. “He can take it to the bank. Besides, he wasn’t telling us everything. Goodbye, Nick, and good riddance.”

He raced her for the door, and with completely mixed feelings let her win. He started for

the phone as she left, thinking he could at least give her a head start. Then, not knowing what else to do, he replaced the receiver, his fingers never having touched the dial, picked his jacket out of the chair and followed her.



Nick trailed her nearly forty-five minutes before he realized where she was heading and didn't worry when he next briefly lost her.

We both must watch too much television, he thought.

From the hotel, it had been five stops on the subway, then a taxi into the heart of Don Mills. He got close again at a bus stop, but was afraid approaching her would just make her bolt and he'd lose her for good. It was important to remember he was getting to be an old fart with a slight beer gut, and she, until he came along at least, was in the habit of playing four hours of hard tennis a week with Harrison Edwards.

Why, he asked himself, *couldn't you have been sheepish before you started out to wreck your ex's social life? You're sheepish enough now for a month of Harrisons. Big mouth jerk.*

Jan hopped the bus back toward downtown, obviously feeling safe that she'd lost whoever might be trying to tail her, and Nick's cab pulled out to follow. When she paid her fare and grabbed a transfer, he understood. Back to Westbrook.

The Go station was crowded enough for him to get a seat and hide from her as well. He had a moment's panic when she disappeared, but relaxed when he saw her returning from the washroom. The bad thing about finding her again was to realize how much he needed a bathroom himself, but he couldn't chance it. If she decided to change her mind now and cab it, or go for a coffee to see if the next train was less crowded – he would lose her for good. He would race ahead in a cab himself, except that in true Nick fashion, after the lengthy and convoluted pursuit, he was now pretty short on cash.

But things went relatively smoothly, only a couple of close calls, and before long, he had managed to board the Westbrook train, on an adjacent car to Jan's, and in the seat right beside the door. He wondered what the detective would do when he found they were gone, how much of a head start they had, and when he would catch up. Nick believed the police always caught up eventually, but that was mostly because of his own personal experience. Most important, he wondered what Jan thought she could do on her own. He had no doubt – well, he had no doubt of only one thing. Times were going to be interesting.

She got a cab from the Westbrook platform, sure of herself now and feeling no need to wait for a bus or do any more smokescreen work. Nick was already in the taxi ahead, racing on in front of her. There was only one objective possible at this point. The driver was quite willing to take Nick along just as fast as he could. Nick even had to be grudgingly impressed. What the cabbie lacked in the all-out reckless speed of a, say, Paris driver, he more than made up for in his understanding of the subtleties of suburb rally racing. They bested Jan's car significantly, alternate route-planning frantically as they went, Nick on the lookout alternately through the back window for cops and through the front for obstacles. Nick threw a twenty for a seven dollar ride, cleaning himself out – why not be generous when you're on the run? – and moved into the shadows at the side of the house. The vegetation over here was scorched black and covered in soot. It was strange how very little of the damage showed from the outside.

Less than five minutes later, Jan was on the driveway too and her taxi pulled away with a less significantly elated driver. Nick left her a couple of minutes to hunt in the purse and finally to dump its contents over the asphalt in frustration before leaving his hiding place.

“Looking for these?” he said, holding up the car keys.

She stared at him, murderous, but with a large element of shock. Her pause didn't last long. “There's a spare set inside,” she said.

“Don't the police have the house keys?” He had thought of this.

“There's still the window,” she said and marched off toward the side of the house.

He sank to his knees. “Jan, this is me trying to say I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. For everything, not just the current mess. For everything. I have been so wrong, about you, about me, about those guys – about your boyfriend. Oh god, Jan, that was the worst thing I've ever done. I know you might find that hard to believe, but it was, because for once, I wasn't just thinking of myself. I was also trying deliberately to hurt you and him.”

“Are you finished?” she asked, but not quite as coldly as he might have expected. She was shaking, not with rage this time.

“You're scared,” he said.

“Brilliant,” she said. “Give me the keys.”

“No,” he said. “I want to drive.”

“What?” She took a step to put herself between him and the car.

“You heard me. No, you *understood* me.”

“You are not coming with me. I'm –”

”Going for Maggie,” he finished. “I know. You may need my help.”

“Nick,” she said angrily, “I don't exactly have much reason to trust you as far as Maggie is concerned.”

He looked down. “Jan –”

”Jan nothing!” she yelled. “Do you know what you put me through? You kidnaped my baby, dragged me through a gorgeous series of crappy little European no-star hotels. The police have come a long way in hospitality since then, you know, Nick. A long way. Do you know what they told me? ‘He's a known criminal, Ms Stuart. I think you should face up to it; maybe you aren't going to get your daughter back.’”

“Some break and enter,” he said faintly. “Nothing big. Petty stuff.”

Jan pursed her lips. The blond hair was straight and limp around her face. “I just kept telling myself, ‘this is what I get for marrying for love, a man I hardly know.’ You see, I didn't think I was going to get her back either.”

Nick waited, because he could think of absolutely nothing to say.

“Yeah,” she said. “Cat always got your tongue when you were accused of anything, right Nick? Well, I got her back, and I got some of the anger out of my system, but my world had fallen apart. I'm not going to lose her a second time, to you or to anyone else.”

He nodded. Then, “It was good in the beginning, wasn't it?”

“The keys, Nick,” she said.

“I'll help you make up with Harrison, if you think I can do anything, when we've got Maggie back.”

“The keys,” Jan repeated, hand out for them.

“I'm coming!” he said.

“Fine,” she said. “But I'm driving.”

He stared.

“After all,” she said, “I'm the one who knows where Maggie is.”

She had the gratification of seeing Nick shocked into total silence.



Jan Stuart was gone. Nick Marino was gone. Her car had vanished from the driveway on Castledown Place. John Tamblyn, understandably, was angry. Returning to headquarters, the hotel's purpose now evaporated, he went to Morritz for new developments.

"You aren't going to believe this," said Tamblyn.

"About that woman?" snapped Morritz. "No. I would believe her capable of anything."

"No, you really won't believe this. We got some belated news from Bull about the boyfriend, Nicholas Marino. He's her ex."

"Her what?" the lieutenant exploded.

"Her ex-husband. Father of Maggie Stuart. A rap sheet like your forearm in Europe. Including, get this, kidnaping. Tried to make off with the girl. Served time. Interpol doesn't think much of him."

There was a period of dangerous silence, then Morritz shook his head. "Incredible. Her ex." He paced. "So then, what's your idea about how they came to be spending a night together in the Stuart house?"

"Opens some interesting possibilities, and kills our convenient cover story at the same time."

Morritz hrrumphed. "Did they tell you what the fire department found upstairs? A couple of chairs, a whole lot of rope, and the lock on the closet where those knickknacks were found levered off with the leg of a chair."

"Hunt," said Tamblyn under his breath.

"You think the idea of a reconciliation in progress is out of the question?"

"You didn't see the way those two fought."

"All right." Morritz took a long pull at his coffee. "What?"

"How about an attempted kidnaping? How about they got the child at her home and not at the school? How about the girl was the target all along, and the entire rest of this mess is smoke screen?"

"No," said Morritz, staring straight at the detective's back as he moved back and forth. "No, I couldn't buy that."

Tamblyn, resigned, nodded. "I guess it sounds a little far fetched."

"You can say that again." Morritz laughed briefly, relieved.

"Although I'm pretty sure the girl was the target."

"What?" Morritz said, like it had been a bomb in his lap and not a single phrase.

Tamblyn rubbed his eyes with one hand, tired. There was no use in forcing this point. "I'm sorry, Chief. I can't see any other way around the facts."

Morritz tried another laugh. "Christ, John, you had me worried. This is speculation, right?"

But Tamblyn was deadly serious, seeing a path opening. "Look. The Stuart woman and her 'friend' won't get far if they keep her car. We can find her. I want to go after her alone. Together, the three of us might be able to find her daughter."

"How?" said Morritz, and was immediately sorry.

Instead of giving an answer, Tamblyn's mouth twisted. "What I need from you," he said, "is a promise to send back-up if I need it."

"You're still a cop," said Morritz.

"I know," replied the detective, "but this won't be a stake-out, or a shoot-out, or a sting. This could be very odd, and very scary, and I may need a lot of help."

Morritz sat back in his chair, his whole body tingling. "It's yours. I don't like kids being used in adult games."

"Neither do I," said Tamblyn. "Neither do I." He paced the width of the room once more.

Then, “Good,” he said. “I think this can be done. Remember, back-up, lots of it, and as quickly as you can the moment I need it.”

“You got it.” Morritz turned to the phone. “I’ll find out if they’ve got anything on the Stuart woman’s car yet.”

“I’ll be in touch,” said Tamblyn. Morritz caught something like hesitation in the detective’s manner suddenly, but what could there be to make anyone nervous in what he said next? “I have some packing to do.”



Harrison Edwards arrived at the front desk after the police had vacated and everything in the hotel was slowly returning to normal. He noted, with some measure of happiness, it was a different concierge on duty than the last time.

“Ms. Stuart, please.”

The man checked the computer, and looked up. “She’s not registered, sir.”

Harry took that in, then said “They might not have listed her under her name. She was in 206. The police had her put up here after her house burnt down.”

“Oh, that woman.” The concierge, losing composure for an instant before being all business again. “Yes, sir, she left.”

Harry had the unmistakable impression the young man had stifled a laugh. “Checked out?”

“Actually –” that half smile again “– I was under the impression she just – walked out.”

“She just –” Harry repeated.

“Yes, sir. The police didn’t seem very happy about it either. I gather she didn’t leave a number.”

Harrison Edwards was already feeling foolish for letting himself be swayed by Jan’s earlier messages begging him for forgiveness, and barring that, legal help. It was bad enough he had cared enough to come, when what had happened in the restaurant here had been unforgivable as well as remaining mostly unexplained. To be stood up, and exposed to ridicule, was the very end.

“Some writing paper, please,” he said. Business Harrison was coming to the fore, and the concierge scrambled to be of service. Using his own gold pen, he scribbled out a bill for one hundred and seventy dollars, his hourly rate as an attorney, itemized a couple of other services he had done for Jan after the debacle, priced them, tallied it up, and signed it. He folded the note and sealed it in an envelope with the hotel’s crest embossed on it. He wrote Jan’s name on the outside, and handed it back to the man behind the desk.

“See the police get this, please,” he said, and turned on his heel and left. The end of a very good tennis partner.



A green world spread itself below me. Above and around, nothing but blue skies, blue skies and clouds.

I breathed deep, the air cold in my lungs. It was heady and glorious. What couldn’t I do, free and flying like a bird over Westbrook?

I followed the long serpentine curve of Dunsinene through the subdivision, leaving behind the school and its black tar roof, skimming the crowns of the trees all blowsy in full leaf.

My cheek felt suddenly cool, and I touched it. My finger came away wet, and suddenly I realized that I was crying. And not just a little – the tears were coursing down my face.

I didn't understand. A moment before, I was happy and buoyant, a balloon floating above the earth, and now. . . and now, there was something hard and steely in my heart. I wanted to call out – Jason! Jason, Aaron! But I was alone. The blue surrounded me; the green of the trees, the black pavement ribbon and the vari-colored roofs of the houses of Westbrook were below. But I, Maggie Stuart, was the only living thing in the whole world, as far as my eyes could see or my straining thoughts could sense.

I felt the power tingling in my extremities, trying to burst out of my fingers and toes. But to what avail? I was alone, deserted. Jason had started to become my friend, and he was torn away. Aaron, I thought I could really learn to like him, and the same. Even Mr. Hunt, who I had been able to remember from school with an amount of real affection, had come and gone.

It was the power. It was the fact I had changed.

But then, what had really changed after all? It's not like I had fewer friends now than before. It's not like my social life had been destroyed by my kidnaping, my removal from my old life to these catacombs. You could almost say things, for a short time at least, had even improved. I'd found a sense of self, a sense of importance and value I'd been missing before.

And now, the crushing loneliness that had always been my life surged back. My mother was gone. My father had abandoned me when I was a baby. The lesson was clear. Anyone I loved, anyone who told me they loved me, left. Even the old woman in the Dreamworld who had given me the sketchbook was gone. How dare she do that, slip into my life for an instant, give me a random and unsubstantial compliment, and then vanish as if she'd never been?

The good things in my life, and I knew there had to be some, seemed impossible to call to mind. The disappointments, the abandonments, the broken promises, all of them were fresh and easy to call back to the surface of my thoughts.

The pleasure of the flight, although I was still experiencing it, was gone.

Around me, the vision of Westbrook began to blacken, like an old page caught by a slow smouldering fire, turning to ash without ever bursting into flame. The sky blackened, and the trees became sooty and faded at last, with everything else, into a pitchy, starless night.

And I woke, instead of floating in space, I felt the weight of the chains on my wrists.

I opened my eyes slowly. They were sticky, the lashes gummed to my skin. I lay, staring up at the stone ceiling, the irregularities of the stone shelf cutting into my back.

The tears on my cheeks were all that were left from the dream. They chilled me as they evaporated, leaving a tightness of salt-residue behind.

Some tiny thing inside me was still active, still invigorated by the first part of my dream. I could feel it deep within me, like it was in my stomach and throwing itself around, trying to burst out. *Fight*, it told me. *Don't give up. Hold on.* And, like Aaron Scribner might have said, *There's always some way out.*

There was another voice inside me as well. It was angry, and said over and over, *don't love. Don't care. Hate everything, and you'll be safe.* I was so lonely, I realized. Lonely from before the catacombs, lonely at school and lonely at home. Lonely, and alone, charting my life and my thoughts without a single other sailor or navigator to help me on this solitary voyage.

Somehow, that had to change. Somehow, I'd make it change. I refused to believe this was it, that my life would end in this dark, stony place. I would escape, somehow. I would explore what I had become. If that meant leaving everyone and everything I'd known behind, so be it. Hunt was the key. Hunt would get me out of here. I didn't know how I'd convince him, but I would. I would be the best student he could wish for, and I would learn everything he had to teach. I would learn more than he thought he was teaching me, and when the moment came, whatever the contest was, I

would be ready for the Burnt Man. I would win whatever ultimate contest it was he was setting me up for.

I would save Jason, and Aaron, and Scott, if he was really here too. I would go home, and I would bury my mother, and I would mourn her. But I would have power, and I would be able to go on.

I left the tears on my cheeks to dry on their own, stubbornly keeping my hands from them. These salty trails would be reminders when I woke again, the symbol of my promise to myself.

And when Hunt came back, I would find a way to keep him with me until I'd learned what I'd needed to beat the Burnt Man, so I would never have to be alone again.

Even as I told myself these things, another part of myself, even deeper inside, turned hard and brittle. I heard the echo of my dreams. *Don't be a fool*, it said. *Your mother's dead. He as good as told you that. Your father ran away. No one's going to love you. Everyone who says they love you leaves.*

I tried to ignore it, tried to hold on to the strong thoughts. I squeezed my eyes shut, letting more tears roll down, and tried to will myself back to sleep.



Hunt found the throne room without trouble, and the doors were open. A few steps inside were enough to convince him, if he'd had any doubt, that he was expected.

As if gravity was increasing exponentially as he moved, Hunt was borne down under incredible pressure. Quickly, he was forced onto his stomach on the floor and the doors slammed shut on their own, leaving him flattened in a pool of light.

"I feel like an insect, Char!" he called out, speaking pretty much straight into the mosaic.

A movement caught Hunt's eye, as it was meant to. A shape became distinct in the darkness surrounding his puddle of brilliance.

"Welcome," said the Burnt Man to Hunt's prone form.

"How kind of Your Worship to greet me yourself," said Hunt into the floor. "Lost none of your flair for the theatrical, I see."

The Burnt Man laughed, the sound as cool and glittering as long knives. "I am glad you have maintained your sense of humor. It will be pleasant for you to entertain me again, as you did of old."

"Your Worship –" Hunt began, trying to raise himself. A tapping gesture of a single one of the Dark Man's fingers sent him again flat against the floor.

"None of your lies. You never speak, but to flatter or to deceive. Either you serve my purposes, or I will destroy you."

Hunt relaxed. He was back on familiar ground.

"Of course I know you as the teacher of whom Marguerite speaks. I could feel your presence, the mark you tried to leave on her. How could you dare to put a trace into her? Did you sense her potential? Is she the reason you left your glorious career to become a schoolteacher?"

"I could ask you a similar question. Did you come to Westbrook because of Maggie, or to get at me?"

"I must thank you, Hunter," said the specter. "I was aware a great potential existed in the area in which you had placed yourself, but until you identified her, Marguerite's identity was unknown to me."

"Which is why you swooped down when you did. Really, you know, I don't remember you this loquacious, Char," said Hunt. "You're getting chatty in your old age."

The Burnt Man refused to rise to the taunt. “My Hunter. I may be older, but I have gained in wisdom and control. You have never had either, and the short time remaining to you will hardly give you the luxury of my experience. Stay, if you like. As before, you may have freedom within my walls. Go and see Marguerite, if you like. But tell me, what was the exchange you wished to offer me for that privilege?”

Hunt chuckled, trying to expand his rib-cage under the pressure on his back. “Just some information about a little botch-up by one of your agents. I take it Maggie’s mother wasn’t supposed to survive her house fire?”

Char burned darker for a moment, and then his attention returned to Hunt. “See her as you please. I can think of no one better to prepare her for me.”

“Thank you, Your Worship.” Hunt tried to move but the pressure on his back persisted.

“For now, however,” said the Burnt Man, “I give you permission to consider the floor of my throne room.”

The illumination of the room abruptly ceased and Hunt was left in darkness, the weight on his back still pressing him into stone. The Burnt Man, also, was not one to miss a chance to gain psychological advantage.