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FERN MICHAELS

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Forget Me Not



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Sugar and Spice

Let It Snow

A Gift of Joy

Five Golden Rings

Deck the Halls

Jingle All the Way

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Chapter One

Lucy Brighton sat back in her chair and looked at the array of drawings hanging on a wire with colorful clothespins. Izzy, the fat little Yorkshire terrier; Bizzy, the equally fat white Persian cat; and Lizzy, the colorful red and green parrot. She laughed at her own artwork. IBL, as she called the triad, was her creation, and that creation had led not only to a seasonal line of greeting cards for children but also to calendars, a comic strip, three books on IBL's antics that children clamored for, a cartoon that aired every day at ten o'clock in the morning, and a merchandising franchise. As far as she was concerned, she had it made in the shade and in spades, and she was only thirty-two. Thirty-two, and a spinster. No men in her life. How could there be? She worked virtually around the clock, but that was by choice.

Her friends, the few that she'd allowed into her inner circle, had long since vanished, either getting married or moving away in search of the perfect job—except, of course, for Angie, her best and only really close friend. At this point in time she had no interest in marriage, and she already had the perfect job. She knew she could retire right now, right this minute, as long as she was frugal with her money.

Her financial advisor had told her four months ago she was in the best position a thirty-two-year-old could possibly be in. Then the economy had started to tank, and she hadn't heard from him since. Well, that wasn't quite true. She had, in point of fact, heard from him, but he was singing a different tune and told her to keep working so she could make up for her losses in the stock market. She shrugged and thought to herself, *What goes down eventually goes back up.*

And her lifestyle required very little. Her house and this studio, where she whiled away all day and sometimes all night, had no mortgage, thanks to her parents, who had retired to Florida five years earlier. New Jersey was just too cold for them, they said. For some reason she thought that there was a lot more to it than that, but she'd accepted it and moved out of her cozy apartment and back into the house in which she'd grown up. Parents tended to be strange, and hers were definitely stranger than most.

Lucy tore her thoughts away from her parents and the colorful drawings and got up to walk over to the big picture window in the cozy four-room studio. She sat down on the window seat, pulled her legs up to her chin, and watched the autumn leaves swirling in the wind. Another week, and the leaves would all be down, and she'd have to go out and rake them unless she could hire someone to do it for her. She loved autumn; it was her favorite time of year. The pumpkins, the haystacks, the colorful leaves, the brisk air, the local football games, pure apple cider, and, of course, a blazing fire in the hearth. What more could she possibly ask for? Perhaps someone to share it with? Then again, who would be foolish enough to put up with her weird hours, eating on the fly, playing wild music as she drew and sketched? Someday. Then again, maybe she was destined to go it alone and be a carefree woman. How bad could that be?

Lucy left her perch on the window seat, walked into the kitchenette, and made a pot of coffee. By the time she packed up her work and sent it off, the coffeepot would be empty, and it would be time to think about dinner. Not that there was anything to think about. She'd dumped some beans and vegetables into the Crock-Pot when she'd gotten up, so that was taken care of. She absolutely loved her Crock-Pots. She had three of them. One for the main meal, one for dessert, and one for soups.

Because she'd read that beans were good for you, she made sure she ate at least a cupful every day either the soup or her main meal. In some ways she was a health-food nut. Then she'd go and blow by eating a pound of chocolate or a quart of ice cream while she watched television at night. Always, Lucy smiled as she slipped her one-of-a-kind drawings of the IBLs into individual plastic sleeves. Her agent was going to go over the moon with these. She dusted her hands dramatically. Six new greeting cards for Christmas. Check. Twelve drawings for next year's calendar. Check. Three months of the cartoon strip. Check. Book proposal. Check. A whole year's worth of work condensed into one FedEx package. She should celebrate. Like that was going to happen.

One last thing to do before heading up to the big house, the ugly big house, the hateful big house. The house in which she had grown up and the house that she hated with a passion. That house. Lucy clicked on her computer, brought up the FedEx Web site, and arranged for a pickup the following morning. She had had a special box built outside her studio, by her mailbox, where she left her packages for pickup so she wouldn't be disturbed while she was working. She looked around. Good to go. All she had to do was shut down her computer, turn off the lights, unplug the coffeepot, and lock up. Tomorrow she could sleep in. She was technically now off work, so to speak, until the first of the year. Not that that meant she wouldn't work—she would. She'd just not be on a schedule. Besides, Thanksgiving and Christmas were coming, and she really needed to think about either going away for a week or so to some exotic island or, horror of horrors, making plans to visit her parents. Even if it was only for a day or so. Maybe she could talk Angie into going with her, but Angie had a nine-to-five job with an ogre for a boss. Scratch that idea.

Lucy slipped on her Windbreaker, gathered up her package, turned off the light, then locked the door. She walked down the path to the mailbox, which sat between two cedar trees that she always decorated for Christmas. She opened the lid of the box, raised the red flag she'd screwed in as a joke, then dropped her package inside. She gave the bell a swat just to hear the sound that Toby, the driver, always made when there was a package. Done! Lucy gathered her jacket close around her neck; the wind had really grown strong, and the leaves were swirling like mad. She wasn't sure, but she thought she heard the phone ring inside the studio. No point in going back; by the time she got there and got the door unlocked, the phone would have stopped ringing. Whoever it was would call back sooner or later. She trudged up the hill to the big house and let herself in. She smiled at the pleasant aromas that greeted her, and realized how hungry she was. This was the moment when she always wished she had a real live pet instead of pets on paper to greet her. This was also the moment when she realized what a lonely life she led.

She hung up her jacket, washed her hands, and set her place at the table. If nothing else, she adhered to her mother's formal ritual at the dinner hour. Lucy removed the lid from the Crock-Pot and looked at the mess in the pot. She should give it a name. She went through this every night. Tonight, though, for some reason, it seemed important to give the contents a name. She looked down into the pot. Three kinds of beans and vegetables. Okay, Mess Number One. When she cooked soup, it would be Mess Number Two, and when she made dessert, it would be Mess Number Three. Done.

Lucy ladled out a generous portion onto her plate, grabbed a dinner roll from a bag on the counter, and set it alongside Mess Number One on the plate. Apple cider or beer? Or milk? Such a choice. She opted for the beer and reached for a glass. Since it was so quiet in the kitchen, Lucy turned on the television that sat on the counter just for sound. The early evening news. She flipped the channel, not wanting to hear or see the doom and gloom that seemed to make up the news these days. *Seinfeld*. Well, that was as good as anything else, even though she'd seen just about every episode at least a dozen times.

Lucy finished her dinner, scooped out a large spoonful of peach cobbler from Crock-Pot Number Three, and devoured it. She made a mental note to go to one of the roadside stands to get some ni-

juicy apples to make an apple pie. She could do that tomorrow since she was now technically not working. ~~She cleaned up everything, transferred the leftover food to snap-on bowls, and set them all in the fridge for tomorrow's dinner.~~ She looked around the neat kitchen. It was a beautiful kitchen, if you were into kitchens, which, unfortunately, she wasn't. Nor was her mother. Like the rest of the house, it was all for show. She out and out hated it.

I should have changed things, Lucy thought. But it had seemed sacrilegious somehow, and her mother probably would have pitched a fit, so it was just simpler to leave things as they were. It wasn't like she spent much time there in the big house; she didn't. All she did was eat and sometimes sleep there. More often than not, she slept in the studio, on the couch, which was every bit as comfortable as her bed on the second floor.

She hated it when she let her thoughts take over like this. And why tonight? Maybe because she had just finished up a long year's work and . . . And what? Now that she didn't have anything on her agenda, she had to think about her parents and this house. Maybe she needed another beer or a cigarette. God forbid she smoke a cigarette in this house. Or have a drink, for that matter. Well, no one was around to see her, but she knew cigarette smoke lingered or settled into the carpets and furniture, and if her parents ever came to visit, they'd surely smell it. Even if it was years from now. She didn't smoke, but once in a while, out of pure defiance, she fired up a cigarette, then almost choked herself to death as she puffed away. She wished again that she had a dog so it could poop on that fine Persian rug in the living room. A stain. She really wished there was a stain somewhere in this damn house. If she had a cat, it would probably claw at the custom draperies and shred them over time. If she had a parrot like Lizzy, it would fly all over the place and drop its feathers during molting season. More blights on the big house.

Carrying her bottle of beer and a stale cigarette she'd found in one of the kitchen drawers, Lucy marched into the family room, which was so well appointed, a person needed sunglasses. She moved over to the fireplace, threw in some logs, then turned on the gas starter. *Swoosh!* Instant fire. When she was growing up there, in that hateful house, the fireplace had never been used. Because . . . smoke escaped and settled on the furnishings, and one had to clean ashes out and carry wood in, and splinters fell all over, not to mention that sparks might escape.

"We have central heat, my dear, and Santa comes in the front door because he doesn't want to get all the white fur on his suit dirty." Even when she was a kid, she knew it was a crock. The phone rang just as Lucy was about to turn on the huge-screen TV above the fireplace. It was probably her artist-director, Henry, wanting to know if she had finished on time and if he could expect the results of her yearlong work the day after tomorrow. Good old Henry. She clicked on the phone, a smile on her face. Even before she could say hello, she heard a man's deep voice asking her if she was Lucy Brighton. She said, yes, she was, and listened.

"This is Detective Aaron Barkley of the Palm Royal Police Department. I'm sorry to tell you that you have some bad news. Are you alone, Miss Brighton? Would you prefer to call someone to stay with you, and I'll call you back?"

"No. I already know something is wrong, since you said you had bad news, so you might as well get ahead and tell me. I'll be all right. Please, just tell me whatever it is you're calling to tell me." Lucy sucked in her breath and waited.

"Your parents were killed two hours ago in a head-on collision. They died on impact. It's taken us this long to find you, or I would have called you sooner. A kind neighbor helped us."

Lucy's first wild, crazy thought was, *Now I can get rid of this house.* "How did it happen? You said they were killed. Who killed them?"

"A sixteen-year-old boy drunk out of his mind. He died in the accident, too. Your parents have been taken to the county morgue to await your arrival. Are you all right, Miss Brighton? I never like

deliver news like this over the phone, but you are out of state. I had no other choice, and I'm sorry ma'am, for your loss."

"I'm okay, Detective. I understand about the phone and all. Thank you for calling me. I'll make arrangements to leave on the first available flight I can get for tomorrow."

The connection broken, Lucy stared into the flames as she fumbled around for the cigarette she'd forgotten to light up. She held the lighter to the tip of the cigarette with a rock-steady hand. She coughed; she sputtered; she swigged some beer, then took another puff and repeated the process until she felt like she had coughed out her lungs. *How do people smoke these things?*

Her parents were dead. D-e-a-d! She wondered if she was supposed to cry. Probably. She squeezed her eyes shut, but no tears nipped at her eyelids. Maybe it hadn't sunk in yet. Maybe she needed to think about her parents; then she would cry. She should feel sad. She didn't. She didn't feel anything. Just sort of numb. Now, if she had a dog, a cat, or a parrot, this would be the time to hug them, and they'd understand what she was going through. She didn't believe it for one damn minute. Animals, and probably birds, too, reacted only to their owners' emotions. And at that moment in time she didn't have any emotions.

Would the world miss Dr. Fritz Brighton, renowned heart surgeon, who, before his retirement, had traveled the world, operating on people who had money blowing out their ears? Would the world miss Dr. Helene Brighton, shrink to those same wealthy people, who couldn't wait to fatten up her bank account so that they could hear her words of wisdom that would make them mentally whole again?

The answer was, who cared? All she was interested in was why she didn't care. Why she didn't feel anything. Lucy finished her beer and trotted off to the kitchen for another one. She flopped down on a chair and watched the fire in front of her. What did the only remaining relative do when called in a situation like this? It wasn't that she was stupid. She had just never had death enter her life. She had no grandparents, no aunts, no uncles, no cousins. That meant she was all alone in the world. With her parents gone, so was the last and only buffer between her and her own mortality. That might be a good thing, she decided, to have all that open space around her, so she could spread her wings now that the buffer was gone.

The first thing she needed to do was plan a funeral. She wondered if her parents had a will. Didn't people who had wills state what they wanted done with their remains? Hadn't she read that somewhere?

She needed a black dress. A veil? On television the mourners always wore black veils. Black shoes and black gloves. Like that was going to happen. Not. People in Florida didn't wear black; they wore yellow, lime green, and white. At least that was what her mother had told her once. Scratch black. There was no one to call to announce the demise of her parents. Whoever had passed as their friends here in New Jersey were gone. At least she assumed they were gone, since no one had ever called or dropped by once her parents had relocated to Florida. Maybe she just thought there were friends because for the life of her, she couldn't recall a single one.

A lawyer? Did her parents have a lawyer in New Jersey or in Florida? She realized that she hadn't a clue. There must be a lawyer in the background somewhere. How else had her parents deeded the house and studio over to her? A lawyer would have handled that. In order to find that out, she'd have to go to the bank and look in her safe-deposit box, where she kept the deed and the legal papers that came with it. Truth be told, she'd never even looked at those papers. The day she'd gotten her MBA, her parents had given her the news that they were moving and the house was hers. One week later, they were gone, and she was rattling around in a six-thousand-square-foot house that looked like no one had ever lived in it.

She hadn't cried that day, either, when she waved good-bye at the front door. When her parents didn't even look back, she had slammed the door and screamed, "Good riddance!" at the top of her

lungs. Then she'd gone nuts and bellowed out the F word again and again as she banged on the door.

~~No one to call. Angie was off on an assignment; no sense in upsetting her when there wasn't anything she could do, anyway. Only the airline. Which she did call. She booked herself a first-class ticket on a one o'clock flight out of Newark Airport for the following day. Since she didn't know how long she'd have to be in Florida, there was no point in driving herself to the airport and leaving her car in the long-term lot. She called a car service, who said they would pick her up at eleven thirty the following morning.~~

With nothing else to do, Lucy banked the fire, closed the glass screen, turned off the television, unlocked the back door, and made her way up the long circular staircase that resembled something in an antebellum Southern mansion. She made her way to her bedroom and, as always, was amazed at the lavishness of it. Everything was silk, satin, or brocade in champagne colors. The bed was a high rise and she needed a step stool to get into it. Her bedroom had changed over the years from a little girl's pink palace to a teenager's domain, then to what she was looking at that evening. She would come home from boarding school one day a month and see a brand-new bedroom, and no one would say a word. It was just there. More often than not, she found excuses not to go home, and her parents didn't seem to care one way or the other. Finally, she stopped going altogether. Everything was always neat and tidy, nothing, not even a piece of lint, anywhere to be found. She'd learned early on that nothing was negotiable with her parents. It just was.

Lucy sat down on a beige satin-covered chair and kicked off her sneakers. She leaned back and closed her eyes. She didn't hate her parents, but she didn't like them very much, either. Love simply wasn't in the equation. She couldn't really complain about her life. Her parents had been good to her. In other words, good providers in lieu of being loving parents. She'd wanted for nothing. In fact, she had more than most kids ever dreamed of having.

She had lived in a fine house full of people who saw to everything until she was ten years old. The things she yearned for the most, however, friends and a pet, had been denied. But her days were full of boarding school, with dance lessons, gymnastics, and piano lessons after regular classes. On the rare visits home, dinner was eaten alone in the kitchen with the housekeeper, whoever she happened to be that particular month. Breakfast was also with the housekeeper; then she was driven back to her boarding school by the chauffeur. Her mother looked in on her at night, usually around nine o'clock for the obligatory kiss on the top of her head and a whispered good night during those rare visits. Sundays her father called her at school, usually at noon, from whatever corner of the world he was in that particular Sunday. The calls never lasted more than five minutes.

Boarding school was okay—she'd actually enjoyed being away from home and being with her peers. She remembered those days fondly. Then came college, where she'd made some good friends, specifically Angie, and had her first affair—which had turned into a disaster when she found out she was just one of a string of girls the jerk had been seeing. She had sworn off the opposite sex after that and had concentrated on her studies, graduating magna cum laude, to her parents' supposed delight. There had been no fanfare at her graduation. Her mother had attended, explaining that her father was in Germany, operating on the chancellor's daughter. She'd handed over a generous check and left.

Lucy had stayed on and gotten her master's, and that was when her life changed—her parents retired and moved to Florida. Funny how she remembered that and the white-haired guy sitting in the front row who had smiled and clapped when she walked across the stage to accept her diploma. She wondered at the time if he was a friend of her mother's, because he was sitting next to her, but she had never asked.

Time to get a move on. She hated it when her memories took her back in time. The past was passing and there was nothing she could do about it. So what if she didn't feel anything at her parents' passing? So what if she couldn't squeeze tears out of her eyes? So what! There was no one to care but

her. Assuming she cared, which she didn't.

~~Pack. Good thing she hadn't packed away her summer clothing. She quickly emptied out a week worth of clothing and slammed it all any which way into a suitcase. And there wasn't one stitch of anything that was black in the suitcase. All she had to do was pack her cosmetics and toiletries in the morning, and she could be on her way.~~

Lucy brushed her teeth, stripped off her clothes, and pulled on her pajamas, certain she wouldn't sleep a wink and would end up staring at the ceiling all night, even though she'd consumed two bottles of beer.

She was wrong; the minute her head hit the pillow, she was out like the proverbial light and didn't wake till seven thirty the following morning. She showered, dressed conservatively in an olive-colored, lightweight suit, and headed downstairs, where she had coffee and a muffin. She watched television at the kitchen table while she waited for the car service to arrive. Her thoughts were everywhere and nowhere as she contemplated what lay ahead of her.

Chapter Two

Lucy let herself into her parents' house, or, as she thought of it now, the other hateful house. She thought at that moment that the house was giving off vibes that the people who had lived in it were gone. Gone as in never coming back. She dropped the house keys, her mother's keys, in a little crystal dish that sat on a table in the massive foyer. She knew they were her mother's keys because they were in the purse the police had given her. Everything had been in a sealed clear plastic bag. A purse whose contents were sparse: a package of Kleenex that hadn't even been opened, a cell phone, the keys, a small wallet with two credit cards, a driver's license, an insurance card, and ninety dollars in cash. A small coin purse had \$3.47 in change in it. In a smaller plastic bag inside the police-tagged bag were her mother's earrings, her watch, and her wedding ring. All that was left of Helene Brighton.

There wasn't even that much in her father's police bag. His wallet with two credit cards, his insurance card, his driver's license, along with the car registration; a cell phone; and \$451.00 in bills plus ninety-four cents in change, which must have been in his trouser pocket at the time of the crash. His watch, his tie clip, his wedding ring, and his car keys barely filled the little bag. It was all that was left of Fritz Brighton, the world's most respected and renowned heart surgeon. How sad that her parents had been reduced to two small plastic bags. Right now, right this moment, she couldn't even remember where she'd put the two plastic bags. Probably in the kitchen, which looked like it had never been used.

Lucy looked at herself in the foyer mirror. She didn't look like she'd just come from a funeral. To her eye, she looked the way she always looked. She had pulled her hair back in a bun; she was wearing makeup, something she didn't normally wear during the day. Her dress was simple, a beige, sleeveless A-line dress with a pair of pearls. Her shoes and handbag were a darker beige. She kicked off her shoes and padded barefoot out to the kitchen, where she brewed a pot of coffee. While she waited for the coffee to run through the filter, she stared out across the deck, which was empty of furniture and flowers. The day was gray and gloomy, and if she was any judge of the weather, it would rain before the day was over. Funeral weather.

Now, where did that thought come from? What she knew about funerals and weather would fill a thimble. Must be from television shows. Or perhaps she'd read it in a book? That was the best she could come up with for an answer.

Lucy poked around in the refrigerator, thinking she should eat something, but she wasn't hungry. Maybe later. Instead, she thought about the funeral, which wasn't really a funeral—only a service since she'd had her parents cremated. She hadn't been able to find a will in the house, which would possibly have stated her parents' burial wishes. So she'd gone ahead with the cremation since, according to the police, the bodies had been so mangled during the accident that identification was a bit impossible. The detective had gone on to tell Lucy it would be better to remember her parents the way she'd seen them last and not the way they'd died. She remembered nodding as she agreed with the detective.

Lucy sipped at her coffee, wishing she could cry or feel something. When no tears or feelings emerged, she sighed and looked around the marvelous kitchen, which had every right to be featured in *Architectural Digest*. Everything looked bright and shiny new. Barely any staples in the butler's pantry, little to nothing in the refrigerator. Did her parents eat out every day? Her mother had never

been a cook, and her father had teased her about burning everything, which was why they'd always had a cook while she was growing up. Did her parents have a cook here? A housekeeper? If so, where was she? Maybe she needed to talk to the neighbors, ask a few questions about her parents.

It was odd, Lucy thought, that none of the neighbors had stopped by to offer their condolences. Neighbors did things like that back in New Jersey. And no one had been at the service except for herself, the pastor, and someone named Lucas Kingston, who, the pastor told her, was the developer of Palm Royal, the enclave where her parents lived. An elderly couple, perhaps her parents' age, had sat in the last pew, but when the service was over and she turned around, they were gone. They could have been neighbors, for all she knew, or they could have been strangers who just attended services because they had nothing better to do with themselves.

How could her parents have lived here in Palm Royal for five years and not have friends who would attend their funeral service? It was all so weird that she didn't know what to think. But thinking wasn't going to get her anywhere; she knew that for certain. Just then, though, she needed to get off her duress and dive into what needed to be done until she could figure out if her parents had an attorney, a will, or where they kept their records. And she would have to make a decision if she was the one who needed to do all the work about putting the house up for sale, checking to see if any bills were owed, things of that nature.

Maybe what she should do was engage the services of a lawyer and let him handle it all. That way she could simply pack up her parents' things and put them in storage or take them back to New Jersey. She could pack a lot in her father's Range Rover in the garage and drive back instead of flying. Maybe she could sell the house furnished. Then she wouldn't have to worry about donating or selling off the furnishings, since they were new and looked new. The Mercedes her parents had been driving at the time of the accident was, of course, totaled. That meant she'd have to deal with the insurance company as soon as she figured out who that company was. Best-case scenario, three more days before she could leave. Worst-case scenario, at least a week to tidy up all the loose ends and be on her way.

Lucy almost jumped off her chair when she heard a boom of thunder. She finished her coffee and made her way to the second floor, stopping just long enough to pick up her shoes in the foyer. It took her just ten minutes to pack up her dress and shoes and put on a pair of faded, comfortable shorts and a T-shirt. She tied the laces of her sneakers and headed back to the first floor. *Start at the bottom and work your way to the top*, a niggling voice said. That meant the garage first.

No one has a garage like this, Lucy thought as she turned on the overhead light. There wasn't so much as an oil stain on the off-white concrete. Her father's Range Rover sat silent, its doors locked. There was nothing on any of the shelves, no jars of nails or screws, no tools, no gas can, no boxes or anything. No lawn equipment. There wasn't even a trash can. She frowned as she tried to remember if there was one outside. Didn't people here recycle? Well, if they did, her parents weren't among those who did their duty for the environment. She made a mental note to check the Rover later, although she was doubtful anything of any importance would be in the truck.

It took Lucy two full hours to check all the rooms on the first floor. All she could do was shake her head at what she didn't find. The drawers in the hutch and buffet server were empty. Every single drawer on the first floor was empty. The kitchen drawers held nothing but one notepad, one pen, one screwdriver, a small hammer, and eight slim candles still in the box they came in, along with a pack of matches tucked inside the box. The candles must have been her parents' idea of a hurricane package.

Back in the kitchen, Lucy washed her hands and poured a second cup of coffee. Her hands hadn't even been dusty, which meant someone had cleaned this house at some point. That someone definitely was not her mother. Not only didn't her mother cook; she didn't clean, either. Maybe the house cleaner came only once a week and didn't even know about her parents' death, and she'd show up on her assigned day. Anything was possible, she thought fretfully.

Lucy watched the rain slashing at the windows. Off in the distance, she could see lightning as danced and zipped across the sky to the tune of the wild thunder. She did take a moment to wonder if rainstorm like this was normal for the time of year. In the end, however, she didn't really care, so she finished her coffee and headed back up to the second floor.

Lucy started with her parents' bedroom. It was lovely, she thought, white wicker with bright accents of color. It made her think of sunny days and lush gardens. She couldn't imagine her father sleeping in such a room, but she had to admit that she really knew virtually nothing about his likes and dislikes. The monstrous walk-in closet was a puzzle, though. It was screamingly neat. Everything, and there wasn't much of everything, was neatly arranged. For some reason it all seemed staged, and that was the only word that came to mind. Seven suits, seven pairs of shoes on her father's side. Dress shirts all white and seven in number; a heavy parka in a clear dry cleaner's bag; two casual jackets with leather patches on the elbows; a Windbreaker; and three zippered heavy sweat jackets with hood seven in number again. A pair of stout cold-weather boots. Seven sweaters in the gray and beige line. A rack with seven ties and seven belts. That completed her father's side of the closet.

Her mother's side of the enormous walk-in closet held seven pantsuits, seven dresses, seven skirts, seven blouses, and seven pastel cashmere sweaters. A heavy outdoor jacket and two long coats were hanging side by side next to two raincoats, one gray, one black, and two evening wraps, one black velvet and one a champagne color. Again, seven in number. She counted sixteen pairs of shoes, from flats to mid-heel to spike heels. Jimmy Choo and Ferragamo. A lone pair of snow boots sat in the corner. Two pegs held seven scarves, seven belts, and one umbrella with a jewel-encrusted handle. The top shelf assigned to her mother held designer handbags: Chanel, Prada, Gucci, Fendi, Louis Vuitton, Givenchy, and Bottega Veneta. All of them were empty and appeared to be new. And even if not new, then barely used.

A frown built between Lucy's brows when she realized that there were no suitcases or even duffel bags anywhere to be seen. And yet her parents traveled constantly. Scratch that thought: They used to travel constantly, before they retired five years ago. She had no idea what they had done these past years.

Lucy continued with her search and walked next to the room that had been used as an office. The desk was a custom rosewood affair, extra long, with two beautiful burgundy ergonomic chairs side by side. Two laptop computers, a fax machine, a copy machine, and a printer. All separate units. A eighty-six-inch plasma TV hung on one wall. The other walls were bare. Did her parents sit in the ergonomic chairs to watch TV? She tried clicking on the laptops, but everything was password protected. She'd need a hacker to get into either one of them.

Lucy looked around. Every office had filing cabinets. This home office did not. The desk drawers were empty, with the exception of a box of paper clips, several gel pens, sticky notepads, a calculator with big numbers, a large box of staples, and a stapler. The closet was just that, a closet. But instead of a rod to hang clothes, there were shelves, which held boxes of copy paper, file folders, and mailing envelopes. The phone was black and was just an ordinary landline. The fax machine was also black.

"Well, this is a bust," Lucy muttered out loud. As if her outburst needed an exclamation point, a roar of thunder shook the house. Lightning must have struck something close by, she thought, as the lights flickered once, then again, but remained on. Lucy walked from room to room on the second floor. She'd already checked out the bedroom she had slept in, and it was just a room, with nothing hidden or stuck anywhere. The other bedrooms and connecting baths were just as bare. All were furnished, but that was as far as it went. No clues, no scraps of paper, no hidden messages. Neat and tidy.

Now what was she supposed to do? Where were her parents' medical files on their patients? Where were their banking records, their brokerage accounts? What was she going to tell a lawyer? "He

guess what, my parents died, and I can't find their paperwork?" Were her parents paranoid? Did they hide stuff? And if so, why? "I guess I never really knew my parents," she murmured as she walked back to her folks' bedroom. She looked around again. Where was her mother's jewelry box, her perfume? All women, even young girls, had a jewelry box, even if it was nothing more than a cigarette box. Where was the box her father kept his cuff links in, the dish where he put his change when he emptied out his pockets? She remembered seeing those things when her parents lived in the New Jersey house. The tops of the dressers were bare. The drawers didn't give up anything but sleepwear and underwear and socks and, in her mother's drawer, hosiery.

Next came the his-and-her bathroom, two of everything, even two bidets. Lucy's eyebrows rose at the sight. Her father's shaving kit and toothbrush were neatly placed on his sink. Her mother's sink held a little more—a blow-dryer, curling iron—but they were set into a niche in the ceramic wall. Night cream, day cream, a toothbrush, a comb, and a brush. In the shower she found ordinary shampoo and conditioner, Dove soap. A back scrubber that looked like it had never been used hung from the showerhead. Anyone's bathroom in the good old US of A. Just like her own back in New Jersey.

Then something came like a bolt out of the blue. A safe! There must be a safe somewhere in the house. But where? Lucy looked at her watch. It was almost three o'clock, and her stomach was rumbling. She tried to remember when she'd eaten last, and the best she could come up with was early yesterday morning.

Back in the kitchen Lucy fixed herself a dry-as-dirt cheese sandwich. She finished off the rest of the coffee and promised herself that she'd go out to dinner at the first restaurant she could find when the rain finally stopped. If it stopped. As she sipped and chewed, she asked herself, knowing what she knew about her parents, where they would install a safe. Did her father install it himself? Unlikely since he never used his hands for anything except his miracle surgeries. Her mother? Ridiculous. Maybe the house came with a safe. Highly unlikely. She'd have to search the rooms again. Wall safe? Floor safe? She just didn't know. And there was no one to ask. Still, she couldn't put the house up for sale if there was any possibility there was a safe for the new owners to find.

She remembered a mystery novel she'd read not too long ago, where one of the characters wanted to hide something. In plain sight was what the character had decided, and in the book it worked for him. Maybe her parents had read the same book. Or else they were smarter than the character. Plain sight. Lucy walked over to the door and looked out at the driving rain. "I just want to go home," she murmured over and over. "I hate this house, just the way I hate that big house back in New Jersey."

She made a mental note to think about going to a shrink to find out why she couldn't cry, why she didn't feel anything, and why she hated both of the houses her parents had lived in. Why? Why? Why?

Her shoulders stiff, her face set in grim determination, Lucy started again on the ground floor, this time to search for a safe. She knocked on walls, looked for recessed buttons that would possibly open a cleverly disguised safe. She got down on her hands and knees to inspect any irregularity in the floorboards but found nothing. She even checked the fieldstones in the fireplace. She went so far as to poke through the artificial ash on the floor of the firebox. She found nothing.

Tomorrow she would tackle the upstairs, because at that moment she was tired, and she was hungry. She raced upstairs, removed her shorts, and pulled on a pair of jeans. Even though it was still raining, she got into her rental car and made it as far as a Burger King, where she ordered two grilled veggie sandwiches, a milk shake, and a large french fries. She devoured it all in the parking lot, then headed back to Palm Royal. On the ride back, she came to the conclusion that her parents must have had a safe-deposit box somewhere in town, at one of the many banks. There were no safe-deposit keys on either her mother's or her father's key rings. She groaned when she thought about looking under all the different drawers in the house. In a movie she'd seen once, someone had duct taped a key to the bottom of a drawer. Checking each drawer and recessed cabinet could take her hours and hours, if not

all day. Her departure time was going to have to be extended to possibly ten days rather than a week. She groaned again as she swerved into the driveway.

The house was just as silent as it had been that morning, after the funeral service. She should have left the TV on or the stereo unit. She shivered. Now she knew what it felt like to be in a mausoleum. She walked through the rooms, turning on lights, the different TVs, as well as the Bose system for sound. It hit her then, right between the eyes. There wasn't even one picture of her anywhere in the whole house. Parents always displayed pictures of their children, usually candid shots taken here and there. Back in New Jersey, when she was growing up, there had been a few. One of her on her first pony ride, another with her father, sitting side by side on a bench in some park. They had been on the piano, in shiny silver frames. Where were they? Hadn't her parents cared enough about her to put those same pictures on the piano in the living room in this house? The thought that they hadn't hurt her heart.

Lucy flopped down on the sofa, which felt stiff and unyielding, as if no one had ever sat on it before she broke it in, and drew her legs up to her chin. She stared at the television screen, listening to Charlize Sheen bantering with his costar, but she didn't really hear the words. Her thoughts took her back in time to a fond, treasured memory of her father as he played with her on the floor in her room before bedtime. She was around five, and he was giving her a ride on his back as he made whistling sounds like he was a train engine. She remembered how she'd laughed and giggled and how her father had kissed her on the cheek and had told her she was his fairy princess. Her mother had stood in the doorway, a huge smile on her face. And then the hateful words every child detested hearing. "Time for bed." Her father had read her a story, kissed her good night. Then her mother had read her a story, and she had hugged her and kissed her and wished her sweet dreams. She smelled so good; her perfume was light and pleasant. She didn't know what the scent was at the time but later on realized it was lily of the valley.

At some point in time over the years, her mother must have changed her scent to one Lucy didn't really like—it was musky and heavy, like a winter scent. Even now, when the lily of the valley flowers bloomed back home in the flower beds, they reminded her of that particular night and her smiling mother when she hugged her good night. It seemed like a hundred years ago, but the memory was still so fresh and had never been forgotten. The big question now was, why did she have just that one treasured memory? Did she just forget the others? Because surely there had been others. And had she kept this one because it was so special? She'd never found the answer, even though she'd asked herself the same question hundreds of times over the years. She didn't have an answer now, either.

Lucy yawned. Time to go to bed. But first she decided to make a list of things she had to do in the morning, after she continued her search to find a safe, if there was one. An hour later she looked at the list in dismay. So many phone calls to make. So much to do. Well, she'd just have to tackle it the best way she could and hope for the best. She wanted to berate her parents for putting her through this. She wanted to wail and screech and pound her fists on something. Dammit, why hadn't they trusted her, their own daughter, to tell her what to do in case anything ever happened to them?

Why? Why? Why?

Chapter Three

Lucy woke to monsoon rain pelting the bedroom windows. She groaned. What happened to sunny Florida? She looked toward the nightstand and squinted at the portable clock she'd brought with her. Seven ten. She lay quietly, listening to the driving rain and staring through the windows at the gloom of the day outside. *Should I go back to sleep? Will I even sleep if I try? Probably not.*

So she swung her legs over the side of the bed and headed for the shower. But first she looked in the mirror. Who was this person staring back at her? She shook her head and turned on the shower.

Fifteen minutes later, she was downstairs, scooping coffee into the pot. While she waited for the coffee to drip into the pot, she munched on doughnuts she'd picked up on her way home from Burg King the night before. Less than fresh now, but she didn't care. She just wanted something in her stomach before she got on with her search for a safe. She turned on the counter television just to have some sound. She half listened to the global doom and gloom, which seemed to match the day. Didn't those made-up mannequins who spewed the news ever have anything good to report? Something warm and fuzzy, feel-good news? She couldn't remember the last time she'd heard anything that brought a smile to her face.

As she sipped at her coffee, she thought about her pleasant life, her successful life, back in New Jersey. She had Angie and other friends, neighbors, and a guy she saw off and on. She was close enough to New York that all she had to do was go to Metropark, hop on a train, and be in New York in forty-five minutes when she needed what she called a New York Fix. Of course, she had demonstrated everyone did. But her life was way too busy to worry about something over which she had no control. Then she remembered the promise she'd made to herself the day before to consult a shrink to find out why she couldn't cry or feel anything over her parents' deaths. And, of course, why she hated the small house and the big house back home. Well, she would do that. In fact, she could search out a good qualified shrink from here and even make an appointment she would keep as soon as she returned home.

Lucy finished her coffee, closed the doughnut bag, and let loose with a loud sigh. Time to start her search.

By three o'clock Lucy was so frustrated that she wanted to scream. She was sitting cross-legged in the massive walk-in closet, staring at the assorted clothing hanging on the rods. Such precision, almost military looking, one inch apart for each garment hanging. She thought about her own closet, which left a lot to be desired as she just tossed and jammed things in any old which way. She did not like regimentation of any kind. She also hated rules and regulations. "Guess that makes me a free spirit," she muttered to herself. "I just give up!" she muttered again as she untangled her legs and, in doing so, slumped sideways, her shoulder hitting the far end of the wall. "Ouch!" She maneuvered around to see what it was that was digging into her shoulder. And there it was, in plain sight, so to speak.

Lucy looked at what she thought was a walking stick but was more like a cane, actually. But on closer inspection, it turned out to be a man's black umbrella, which only appeared to be leaning against the wall but was actually mounted, the brackets undetectable unless you were on your knees and looking right at them. In plain sight. A man's cane, a short man's cane. A short man like her father. But it wasn't a cane; it was an umbrella. She sucked in her breath again and started to press and prod and squeeze until she found the button that would normally release the umbrella. The umbrella

didn't open up. Instead, the floor right in front of her started to slide toward her mother's section of the closet. The safe. Lucy sat down and hugged her knees.

So, I was right, after all, she thought as she looked at the safe in the floor. *This has to be the queen mother of all safes.* Some engineer somewhere, she opined, must have designed this particular safe because it looked so unusual, at least to her eyes. She'd seen safes, all kinds, in movies, on television, and she'd read about safes in novels. None were anything like this one. It was almost as long as two yardsticks end to end, or seventy-two inches long. While it looked to be a one-piece unit, it had three doors and three keypads. "And what is behind Door Number One?" Lucy said out loud. Then she went off on a rant that only frustrated her more. Right at that moment, at that precise moment in time, Lucy knew that her parents were involved in something other than being retired. Why would two retired doctors need a safe of this magnitude, hidden away like this?

Lucy continued to hug her knees as her mind raced. Houses that didn't look lived in. Clothes that appeared brand-new, never worn. Staged. But for whom? Certainly not for her, because she never came here. Who then? Her parents didn't know they were going to die in such a tragic accident. Were they in hiding in plain sight? Doctors had an inside track to drugs. Were her parents involved in something like that? Where did they go when they traveled? Where did they actually live? Anyone who was reasonably intelligent would figure out sooner rather than later that this house and everything in it was for show. She was positive now that her parents had not lived in this house on a daily basis. Maybe they came and went, but they sure as hell didn't live in it. That was one thing that she was absolutely certain of.

Lucy continued to stare at the state-of-the-art safe in the floor. Three keypads. Three different combinations, and she had no clue what they might be. The keypads were digital.

By four thirty, Lucy was ready to go nuclear. She'd tried every sequence of numbers she could possibly think of, house numbers, birth dates, special dates, random numbers, anything she could think of, but absolutely nothing had worked. She was angry at herself, but angrier still at her parents. What was she supposed to do if she couldn't figure out how to open the safe? Was she supposed to walk away and forget about all of this? Whatever the hell *this* was? Was it possible that the first keypad had to tie into the second, then the third? More than likely. If that was the case, she might have to blow the damned thing up before she could get it open. Or, magically, come up with a safecracker out of nowhere. That, in itself, would open up a whole other can of worms.

Lucy was back to hugging her knees, her eyes narrowed as she ran through numbers in her head. Outside, the monsoon rain continued to lash at the windows. She could hear the winds howling. She shivered and almost jumped out of her skin when the doorbell rang. She realized how vulnerable she was, all alone in this big house, even more so now that she'd actually found the safe. She got up and ran to the window but realized it overlooked the side of the yard and not the front of the house. She ran down the hall to the second empty bedroom and looked out the window. With the pouring rain, all she could see was a person—she assumed it was a man—holding an umbrella and punching the doorbell. She craned her neck to see if there was a vehicle in the driveway, but it was too gray and rainy to see anything.

The house was locked up tight, so she wasn't worried that anyone could break in. The doors were stout and solid mahogany. The locks and dead bolts were top of the line. She knew she was safe as long as she didn't open the door. She'd had the good sense to park her rental car in the garage, so anyone coming to the door would assume no one was home. She clearly remembered turning out the kitchen light that morning, when she'd come upstairs to start her search. That meant the house would appear dark to anyone just looking or attempting to visit.

"Go away, whoever you are," Lucy whispered to herself.

The doorbell rang one last time, a long peal that didn't let up, as if the person was pressing the

button and holding his thumb on it. And then the house went silent again.

Lucy watched as the figure turned around, walked a few steps away, and stood staring up at the second floor. Unless the person down below had X-ray vision, Lucy knew he couldn't see her in the darkened room. Still, she shivered. She remained where she was until she saw the lights of a vehicle spring to life. She watched until she couldn't see the lights anymore before she left the room and barreled down the steps and into the kitchen, where she made a fresh pot of coffee and scarfed down the two remaining doughnuts from the bag on the counter. She hadn't realized how hungry she was until just that moment. If nothing else, the doughnuts took the edge off her hunger.

Lucy carried her cup of coffee back up to the second floor, where she made her way into the walk-in closet again. She sat down, her back to the wall, and stared at the safe. She needed to think about the phrase "If you want to hide something, hide it in plain sight." Well, that was how she'd found the safe, so now she had to find the combination in the same way. *Think, Lucy. If this were you, where would you hide the combination?* When nothing came to her, she continued to sip at her coffee as she stared at the contents of the closet. *Seven!* Without stopping to think, Lucy leaned forward and started pressing the number seven, hoping against hope the red armed light would turn green. It didn't.

Lucy squirmed farther back and stared again, going from left to right, then from right to left, the way the old-time safes used to work. Seven was the key number; she was sure of it. Four times to the right, three times to the left, then two times to the right again. She'd seen that in a movie once. She realized then that she'd watched an awful lot of movies to have retained this kind of information. She tried again and again and still again, growing more frustrated as she went along. Seven. But . . . there were sixteen pairs of shoes on her mother's side of the closet, plus each of them had a pair of snow boots. One pair each. Could that be a two? If you added the two numbers that made up the sixteen pairs of shoes, you got seven again. She was onto something; she could feel it. Then if you took the seven and added two, it would make the last number nine, or if you subtracted it, it would make the last number five. Or possibly the last number was just a two.

Lucy pressed the numbers at the speed of light, but nothing happened. *Plain sight. Think plain sight.* She'd exhausted every combination but one, so she flexed her fingers. If this didn't work, she would simply close the safe back up and walk away. She pressed the number seven three times on the first keypad; then she pressed it three more times on the middle keypad. When she got to the third keypad she hit the seven, then the one, then the six. She held her breath and almost fainted when the red light turned a bright emerald green. She was so shocked, she didn't know what to do. She forgot the store outside, forgot how hungry she was, forgot the stranger who had knocked on her door. She focused only on the three keypads and the heavy iron handles that would open the doors. She crawled on her hands and knees over to the first one and opened the door. *Slick as a whistle*, she thought.

Lucy opened the second door just as easily, then the third. She stared down inside the square compartments that made up the three safes. Things looked tidy, and everything was neatly bundled. She started with the first one and gave the contents a cursory inspection. Deed to the house, real estate mortgage; titles to the two cars, the wrecked Mercedes and the Range Rover. Both paid in cash. Insurance papers, homeowners', car, and life insurance. Two policies for ten million dollars each with the beneficiary either her mother or her father, and if both were deceased, then she became the beneficiary. Two wills in blue covers, the same as the insurance policies: if both died, she was the sole beneficiary. There were bequests to people she didn't know and had not ever heard of. The dates of the wills, as well as the insurance policies, were the year she turned ten and was sent off to boarding school.

Lucy frowned at the thought. Her parents had sent her off to a boarding school and out of their lives, then had taken out enormous insurance policies and made a will. Why? It didn't make sense. A yellow folder held brokerage statements from Wells Fargo, current as of the last quarter. Lucy blinked. She

had no idea being a doctor could yield the kind of money she was looking at. Astute investing? An ito settled between her shoulder blades and worked its way up to her neck. There was something wrong here. She could feel it. A small check register, the kind you could carry in your purse, was current for the year, with the entries clearly legible. Household expenses, utilities, and entries she didn't understand. Later, she could try to figure that out. The current balance was \$17,866.03. January balance had started with \$67,000.00, with a check written to a name she didn't recognize for \$50,000.00. Other than that one check, there were just ordinary expenditures.

Lucy replaced everything the way she'd found it and moved on to the second compartment of the safe. Three ordinary cigar boxes were nestled inside. Not exactly ordinary. They were Cuban cigar boxes. She could smell the faint scent of tobacco. She opened the first box and stared down at what seemed to be dozens of passports. Mostly blue, but some were other colors. She looked through them. Different names on each of them, but all the pictures were of her mother and father. All the passports were heavily stamped from all their travels. Why did her parents need other identities? She started to feel sick to her stomach, and it wasn't from lack of food.

Lucy opened the second cigar box and saw credit cards, Visa, MasterCard, American Express, and at least a dozen different driver's licenses, with names that matched the names on the passports. Aliases. Most of the licenses were international; only four were American. The names matched the passports and credit cards. Were they all forgeries?

Getting sicker by the moment, Lucy reached for the third box. This one had two thick rubber bands around it. She removed them and gasped. She looked down at stacks of thousand-dollar bills. A hundred to a pack. *Rainy-day money?*

"My ass!" The words exploded from her mouth like gunshots. Getaway money? Take-it-on-the-lam money? At the bottom of the box was a small envelope, the kind a party invitation might come in. Inside was a slip of paper with nothing but rows of numbers. You didn't need to be a rocket scientist to know these were numerals for numbered bank accounts somewhere in the world, thanks again to her movie knowledge.

Lucy rocked back on her heels as she tried to fathom what she was seeing. She packed up the money and put the rubber bands back on the cigar box. She eyed the third compartment of the safe and cringed, but she knew she had to open it. Steeling herself for what was to come, she gingerly opened the door of the safe, almost expecting a bomb to go off. She looked down into the depths of the compartment and wanted to scream. Six guns. Two Glocks. Two SIG Sauers. Two Berettas. This time her movie knowledge didn't help her. She could clearly identify the makes of the guns because they were carved into the handles. Boxes of magazines—*bullets* were her words—completed the contents. Dear God, were her parents terrorists, mercenaries? She slammed the door shut and scooted back against the wall.

She had to think. *Think!* her mind screamed. She felt numb, unable to think. All she could do was test the safe doors to make sure they were locked. And then she pressed the button on the umbrella. She watched, her eyes as big as saucers, as the floor slid back into place. She started to hyperventilate then. She dropped her head between her knees and struggled for air. That was when she realized there were no income-tax records in the safe. She bolted upright and ran from the room, down the stairs to the kitchen, where she grabbed her purse off the counter and ran out to the garage, where she raised the garage door and backed her car out. She had to get out of there right now.

She drove through the pouring rain until she saw the garish lights of a steak house on the right, a eighth of a mile in the distance. She put on her blinker and drove into the lot, where she sat in the car and cried.

Lucy had no idea how long she sat there; a long time, she was sure. Finally, she dried her eyes, blew her nose, smoothed down her hair, and got out of the car. She ran through puddles up to her ankles

She was soaked. People were staring at her. She stared back. A hostess offered a towel. She realized she couldn't sit and eat in soaking-wet clothes with the air conditioner going full blast. For sure, there was no time to catch cold or, worse, pneumonia. She ordered a steak, a baked potato, and a garden salad to go. She stood dripping by the front door, hoping against hope that she didn't look as deranged as she felt.

She shoved bills into the waiter's hands, knowing she was paying too much for the food she had ordered, but she didn't care. Minutes later, after she'd slogged her way through the parking lot, she was back in her rental car and headed back to her parents' house.

Her parents' house!

Chapter Four

Lucy chomped her way through her dinner, barely tasting it, her head buzzing with her newfound discovery. Her head felt like an overactive beehive, her thoughts buzzing every which way as she finished her meal. She reached into a fresh doughnut bag. Knowing what a terrible sweet tooth she had, on her way home from the steak house she had gone past the drive-through and stocked up on chocolate-covered doughnuts, some for that evening and some for the morning.

When she finished eating, she tidied up and carried the take-out containers to the trash can, which she had finally noticed beside the garage. She took a moment to wonder what day the trash pickup was. Back in the house, Lucy started to pace. She always paced when she couldn't make sense of something that was troubling her. Her thoughts kept taking her back to the strange-looking safe in the floor of the walk-in closet. Where were her parents' birth certificates, their IRS records? Another thing that bothered her was the lack of a calendar anywhere in the house. Everyone had a calendar. She herself had three back in New Jersey. A person needed a calendar. Had her parents spent the last five years of their lives living in a bubble, a cocoon of some sort, where dates and times had no meaning? God, she was getting a headache just thinking about all the odd and disconcerting things she had learned since she had arrived in Florida.

"How could you do this to me? How?" she wailed. "I can't do this. I don't want to do this. This is above my pay grade. This isn't fair!" she screeched at the top of her lungs. *This is good, she thought. Let it out. Don't bottle it up. Scream till you're hoarse, if it will make you feel better.*

Which was precisely what she did. But it didn't help; she didn't feel any better than before. Then she cried. Not for the death of her parents, but for the ugly position she found herself in.

Satisfied that the kitchen was tidy and the doughnut bag closed tight, Lucy turned off the lights and made her way upstairs. Sometime during the past hour, her chaotic thoughts had led her to a decision to go on the Internet and see if she could take care of matters that way. She remembered the name of the lawyer who had drawn up her parents' wills, so she could Google them, then e-mail and fax them copies of the wills, although she was sure they had copies of their own. If she could get all of that done by the way that evening, she would be able to pack up her parents' belongings and head for home some point the next day. The rest of whatever she had to do she could do from New Jersey. She could get boxes from The UPS Store, load up everything, and, with any luck, be on the road by noon. First thought, she'd have to open the damn safe again to get out all the papers.

But that left a great big question: What should she tell the lawyer about the contents of the second and third compartments? Maybe that was something she should keep to herself. As to the arsenal in the compartment . . . was it actually legal to transport six guns, plus ammunition, across state lines? Maybe she could pack them in the clothes in the boxes she got from UPS. The ammunition could go in another box. When she got back home, she could decide what to do with the guns and ammunition. Just the thought made her shiver.

Lucy opened the safe, took out the papers she needed, then made her way to the room her parents had used as an office. Since she still couldn't use the desktops, she flipped open her own laptop and went to work. First, she Googled the law firm of Schwager, Schwager, and Schwager. Robert Schwager, Stuart Schwager, and Sara Schwager. A family firm. That was good. All three looked like serious, no-nonsense lawyers. Between them they had a lot of years of experience, and Robert, al-

known as Bob, had taken a case all the way to the Supreme Court and won it. Another plus. At a hundred dollars an hour, they had better be good, she thought.

She scrolled down until she found an e-mail address. She fired off a message, short and to the point. Her bottom line was for the firm to get in touch with her after she returned to New Jersey. She looked for a fax number and immediately faxed copies of her parents' wills, along with a copy of her own driver's license and voter registration card, and a copy of one of her credit cards, together with her address and phone number back in New Jersey. Death certificates. She sent off another e-mail to the law firm, saying she would fax them copies in the morning, after she picked the certificates up from the funeral home.

Her third e-mail went to the Dial Funeral Home, asking them to have a dozen copies of both parents' death certificates ready for her first thing in the morning.

The next thing Lucy did was Google the insurance companies that had written the astronomical policies her parents had taken out years and years ago. She photocopied the benefits page, sent her pertinent personal information, and promised them copies of the death certificates in the morning. She informed them in the same e-mail that she would be leaving Florida the next day and to contact her in New Jersey.

Lucy decided she could wait until she returned home to deal with the wrecked car and the Department of Motor Vehicles. Dealing with the DMV was a pain in the neck, as she knew from personal experience, so why put herself through more stress any earlier than she had to? The cars were undoubtedly part of her parents' estate, so maybe the law firm could handle that end of things. She made a mental note to ask that very question when she e-mailed and faxed the certificates in the morning.

Finally, she was left with the big question, What should she do with the money, the forged passports, and all those forged credit cards and driver's licenses? *Let sleeping dogs lie, at least for the moment*, she decided. Obviously, no one knew about them, so for the present, lying low was likely the best course of action. Why look for trouble when it might be avoidable?

Lucy turned off her laptop, returned all the papers to the safe, then pressed the button on the crazy-looking umbrella. She couldn't help but wonder what genius had come up with that. Pure James Bond.

It was too early to go to sleep, but Lucy decided to take a nice hot shower, crawl into bed, and watch some television until she fell asleep. But before she did that, she had to call her best friend, Angie, and tell her what was going on. She'd first met Angie in college, where they were roommates. She was from New Jersey, too, lived in Ridgewood, twenty-five miles from where Lucy lived. They spoke daily, e-mailed and sent each other text messages, and tried to meet up every other weekend for girl time. Of late, though, Angie had been spending more and more time with her on-again, off-again boyfriend when she was not traveling on her job. At last word, they were on, or at least they had been before Lucy had made the trip down to Florida. Lucy hauled out her cell phone, only to find that the battery was dead. No bars. And she had forgotten to bring the charger. At least there was a landline she could use. She thought about going back downstairs and getting her parents' cell phones, but she remembered that when she had tried to turn on the strange-looking phones, she'd had no luck. They had just looked at her, as if to say, "Who are you kidding?" Probably more James Bond gizmos.

Angie picked up on the third ring. She didn't even give Lucy time to say anything other than hello. "Where are you? I've been calling you for days. I even drove down there, and you were gone. You had a ton of mail, and I took it into the studio. There was a bunch of FedEx stuff in your box, so I took that in, too. Why haven't you called me? I was worried sick. You always tell me when you're going out of town. We agreed, Lucy, that we would always tell each other when we would be out of touch. Well, say something!"

"My parents died, Angie. I'm down here in Palm Royal. I'm sorry I didn't call. It was such a shock

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