



TESS

GERRITSEN

PRESUMED

GUILTY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Guilty—Until Proven Innocent...

Miranda Wood thinks she has seen the last of Richard Tremain, her rich and married ex-lover—until she discovers him stabbed to death in her bed. With her knife.

Miranda is the obvious suspect, and she looks even guiltier when her bail is posted by an anonymous donor. Was this an act of kindness designed to buy her time to clear her name? Or is someone trying to manipulate Miranda and draw her into the dark and secret world of a murdered man, where everybody's presumed guilty?

With her world falling around her, Miranda is determined to discover who killed Richard. But proving her innocence may become secondary to staying alive....

Praise for

TESS GERRITSEN

“Tess Gerritsen is an automatic must-read in my house.”

—*Stephen King*

“Tess Gerritsen...throws one twist after another until the excitement is almost unbearable.”

—*San Jose Mercury News*

“Ms. Gerritsen is a master!”

—*RT Book Reviews*

“Gerritsen’s romances are thrillers from beginning to end.”

—*Portland Press Herald*

“Tess Gerritsen brings us action, adventure and compelling romance.”

—*RT Book Reviews*

“Riveting...Gerritsen knows how to fashion credible, dimensional characters.”

—*Los Angeles Times*

Dear Reader,

Years ago, when I was a doctor in training, one of my patients handed me a paper sack and said, “I’ve finished reading these. You might enjoy them.” Inside that sack were a dozen romance novels, a genre that I had never before read—and had no intention of reading. I was a mystery and science fiction reader, and I was working eighty hours a week in the hospital, with scarcely enough time to eat and sleep. But I couldn’t resist taking a peek at one of those romance novels. A few pages in, I was hooked. Within a week, I’d devoured every one of those books.

I’ve been a fan of the genre ever since.

So it’s not surprising that the first suspense novels I wrote were also love stories in which danger meets desire, and hearts—as well as lives—are at stake.

I’m now considered a crime thriller author, and many of my mystery readers are surprised to discover that I once wrote romantic suspense. But I assure you, in these early novels you’ll find many of the thrills and chills that I’ve since become known for.

I’m delighted that Harlequin MIRA is rereleasing my romantic thrillers. These are the stories that laid the foundation for my career as a crime novelist. I hope you enjoy them!

Tess Gerritsen

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To Terrina and Mike, with aloha

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One

He called at ten o'clock, the same time he always did.

Even before Miranda answered it, she knew it was him. She also knew that if she ignored it the phone would keep on ringing and ringing, until the sound would drive her crazy. Miranda paced the bedroom, thinking, *I don't have to answer it. I don't have to talk to him. I don't owe him a thing, not damn thing.*

The ringing stopped. In the sudden silence she held her breath, hoping that this time he would relent, this time he would understand she'd meant what she told him.

The renewed jangling made her start. Every ring was like sandpaper scraping across her raw nerves.

Miranda couldn't stand it any longer. Even as she picked up the receiver she knew it was a mistake. "Hello?"

"I miss you," he said. It was the same whisper, resonant with the undertones of old intimacies shared, enjoyed.

"I don't want you to call me anymore," she said.

"I couldn't help it. All day I've wanted to call you. Miranda, it's been hell without you."

Tears stung her eyes. She took a breath, forcing them back.

"Can't we try again?" he pleaded.

"No, Richard."

"Please. This time it'll be different."

"It'll never be different."

"Yes! It will—"

"It was a mistake. From the very beginning."

"You still love me. I know you do. God, Miranda, all these weeks, seeing you every day. Not being able to touch you. Or even be alone with you—"

"You won't have to deal with that any longer, Richard. You have my letter of resignation. I meant it."

There was a long silence, as though the impact of her words had pummeled him like some physical blow. She felt euphoric and guilty all at once. Guilty for having broken free, for being, at last, her own woman.

Softly he said, "I told her."

Miranda didn't respond.

"Did you hear me?" he asked. "I told her. Everything about us. And I've been to see my lawyer. I've changed the terms of my—"

"Richard," she said slowly. "It doesn't make a difference. Whether you're married or divorced, I don't want to see you."

"Just one more time."

"No."

"I'm coming over. Right now—"

"No."

“You have to see me, Miranda!”

“I don’t have to do anything!” she cried.

“I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

Miranda stared in disbelief at the receiver. He’d hung up. Damn him, he’d hung up, and fifteen minutes from now he’d be knocking on her door. She’d managed to carry on so bravely these past three weeks, working side by side with him, keeping her smile polite, her voice neutral. But now he was coming and he’d rip away her mask of control and there they’d be again, spiraling into the same old trap she’d just managed to crawl out of.

She ran to the closet and yanked out a sweatshirt. She had to get away. Somewhere he wouldn’t find her, somewhere she could be alone.

She fled out the front door and down the porch steps and began to walk, swiftly, fiercely, down Willow Street. At ten-thirty, the neighborhood was already tucked in for the night. Through the windows she passed she saw the glow of lamplight, the silhouettes of families in various domestic poses, the occasional flicker of a fire in a hearth. She felt that old envy stir inside her again, the longing to be part of the same loving whole, to be stirring the embers of her own hearth. Foolish dreams.

Shivering, she hugged her arms to her chest. There was a chill in the air, not unseasonable for August in Maine. She was angry now, angry about being cold, about being driven from her own home. Angry at *him*. But she didn’t stop; she kept walking.

At Bayview Street she turned right, toward the sea.

The mist was rolling in. It blotted out the stars, crept along the road in a sullen vapor. She headed through it, the fog swirling in her wake. From the road she turned onto a footpath, followed it to a series of granite steps, now slick with mist. At the bottom was a wood bench—she thought of it as her bench—set on the beach of stones. There she sat, drew her legs up against her chest and stared out toward the sea. Somewhere, drifting on the bay, a buoy was clanging. She could dimly make out the green channel light, bobbing in the fog.

By now he would be at her house. She wondered how long he’d knock at the door. Whether he’d keep knocking until her neighbor Mr. Lanzo complained. Whether he’d give up and just go home, to his wife, to his son and daughter.

She lowered her face against her knees, trying to blot out the image of the happy little Tremain family. *Happy* was not the picture Richard had painted. *At the breaking point* was the way he’d described his marriage. It was love for Phillip and Cassie, his children, that had kept him from divorcing Evelyn years ago. Now the twins were nineteen, old enough to accept the truth about their parents’ marriage. What stopped him from divorce now was his concern for Evelyn, his wife. She needed time to adjust, and if Miranda would just be patient, would just love him enough, the way he loved her, it would all work out....

Oh, yes. Hasn’t it worked out just fine?

Miranda gave a little laugh. She raised her head, looked out to sea and laughed again, not a hysterical laugh but one of relief. She felt as if she’d just awakened from a long fever, to find that her mind was sharp again, clear again. The mist felt good against her face, its chill touch sweeping her soul clean. How she needed such a cleansing! The months of guilt had piled up like layers of dirt, until she thought she could scarcely see herself, her real self, beneath the filth.

Now it was over. This time it was really, truly over.

She smiled at the sea. *My soul is mine again*, she thought. A calmness, a serenity she had not felt in months, settled over her. She rose to her feet and started for home.

Two blocks from her house she spotted the blue Peugeot, parked near the intersection of Willow and Spring Streets. So he was still waiting for her. She paused by the car, gazing in at the black leather upholstery, the sheepskin seat covers, all of it too familiar. *The scene of the crime*, she thought. *The first kiss. I've paid for it, in pain. Now it's his turn.*

She left the car and headed purposefully to her house. She climbed the porch steps; the front door was unlocked, as she'd left it. Inside, the lights were still on. He wasn't in the living room.

"Richard?" she said.

No answer.

The smell of coffee brewing drew her to the kitchen. She saw a fresh pot on the burner, a half-filled mug on the countertop. One of the kitchen drawers had been left wide open. She slammed it shut. *Well. You came right in and made yourself at home, didn't you?* She grabbed the mug and tossed the contents into the sink. The coffee splashed her hand; it was barely lukewarm.

She moved along the hall, past the bathroom. The light was on, and water trickled from the faucet. She shut it off. "You have no right to come in here!" she yelled. "It's my house. I could call the police and have you arrested for trespassing."

She turned toward the bedroom. Even before she reached the doorway she knew what to expect, knew what she'd have to contend with. He'd be sprawled on her bed, naked, a grin on his face. That was the way he'd greeted her the last time. This time she'd toss him out, clothes or no clothes. This time he'd be in for a surprise.

The bedroom was dark. She switched on the lights.

He was sprawled on the bed, as she'd predicted. His arms were flung out, his legs tangled in the sheets. And he was naked. But it wasn't a grin she saw on his face. It was a frozen look of terror, the mouth thrown open in a silent scream, the eyes staring at some fearful image of eternity. A corner of the bed sheet, saturated with blood, sagged over the side. Except for the quiet tap, tap of the crimson liquid slowly dripping onto the floor, the room was silent.

Miranda managed to take two steps into the room before nausea assailed her. She dropped to her knees, gasping, retching. Only when she managed to raise her head again did she see the chef's knife lying nearby on the floor. She didn't have to look twice at it. She recognized the handle, the twelve-inch steel blade, and she knew exactly where it had come from: the kitchen drawer.

It was her knife; it would have her fingerprints on it.

And now it was steeped in blood.

* * *

Chase Tremain drove straight through the night and into the dawn. The rhythm of the road under his wheels, the glow of the dashboard lights, the radio softly scratching out some Muzak melody all receded to little more than the fuzzy background of a dream—a very bad dream. The only reality was what he kept telling himself as he drove, what he repeated over and over in his head as he pushed onward down that dark highway.

Richard is dead. Richard is dead.

He was startled to hear himself say the words aloud. Briefly it shook him from his trancelike state, the sound of those words uttered in the darkness of his car. He glanced at the clock. It was four in the morning. He had been driving for four hours now. The New Hampshire-Maine border lay ahead. How many hours to go? How many miles? He wondered if it was cold outside, if the air smelled of the sea. The car had become a sensory deprivation box, a self-contained purgatory of glowing green lights and

elevator music. He switched off the radio.

Richard is dead.

He heard those words again, mentally replayed them from the hazy memory of that phone call. Evelyn hadn't bothered to soften the blow. He had scarcely registered the fact it was his sister-in-law's voice calling when she hit him with the news. No preambles, no are-you-sitting-down warnings. Just the bare facts, delivered in the familiar Evelyn half whisper. *Richard is dead*, she'd told him. *Murdered. By a woman....*

And then, in the next breath, *I need you, Chase.*

He hadn't expected that part. Chase was the outsider, the Tremain no one ever bothered to call, the one who'd picked up and left the state, left the family, for good. The brother with the embarrassing past. Chase, the outcast. Chase, the black sheep.

Chase, the weary, he thought, shaking off the cobwebs of sleep that threatened to ensnare him. He opened the window, inhaled the rush of cold air, the scent of pines and sea. The smell of Maine. It brought back, like nothing else could, all those boyhood memories. Scrabbling across the beach rocks, ankle-deep in seaweed. The freshly gathered mussels clattering together in his bucket. The foghorn, moaning through the mist. All of it came back to him in that one whiff of air, that perfume of childhood, of good times, the early days when he had thought Richard was the boldest, the cleverest, the very best brother anyone could have. The days before he had understood Richard's true nature.

Murdered. By a woman.

That part Chase found entirely unsurprising.

He wondered who she was, what could have ignited an anger so white-hot it had driven her to plunge a knife into his brother's chest. Oh, he could make an educated guess. An affair turned sour. Jealousy over some new mistress. The inevitable abandonment. And then rage, at being used, at being lied to, a rage that would have overwhelmed all sense of logic or self-preservation. Chase could sketch in the whole scenario. He could even picture the woman, a woman like all the others who'd drifted through Richard's life. She'd be attractive, of course. Richard would insist on that much. But there'd be something a little desperate about her. Perhaps her laugh would be too loud or her smile too automatic, or the lines around her eyes would reveal a woman on the downhill slide. Yes, he could see the woman clearly, and the image stirred both pity and repulsion.

And rage. Whatever resentment he still bore Richard, nothing could change the fact they were brothers. They'd shared the same pool of memories, the same lazy afternoons drifting on the lake, the strolls on the breakwater, the quiet snickerings in the darkness. Their last falling-out had been a serious one, but in the back of his mind Chase had always assumed they'd smooth it over. There was always time to make things right again, to be friends again.

That's what he had thought until that phone call from Evelyn.

His anger swelled, washed through him like a full-moon tide. Opportunities lost. No more chances to say, *I care about you*. No more chances to say, *Remember when?* The road blurred before him. He blinked and gripped the steering wheel tighter.

He drove on, into the morning.

By ten o'clock he had reached Bass Harbor. By eleven he was aboard the *Jenny B*, his face to the wind, his hands clutching the ferry rail. In the distance, Shepherd's Island rose in a low green hump in the mist. *Jenny B's* bow heaved across the swells and Chase felt that familiar nausea roil his stomach, sour his throat. *Always the seasick one*, he thought. In a family of sailors, Chase was the landlubber, the son who preferred solid ground beneath his feet. The racing trophies had all gone to Richard. Catboats, sloops, you name the class, Richard had the trophy. And these were the waters where he'd

honed his skills, tacking, jibbing, shouting out orders. Spinnaker up, spinnaker down. To Chase it had all seemed a bunch of frantic nonsense. And then, there'd been that miserable nausea....

Chase inhaled a deep breath of salt air, felt his stomach settle as the *Jenny B* pulled up to the dock. He returned to the car and waited his turn to drive up the ramp. There were eight cars before him, out-of-state license plates on every one. Half of Massachusetts seemed to come north every summer. You could almost hear the state of Maine groan under the the weight of all those damn cars.

The ferryman waved him forward. Chase put the car in gear and drove up the ramp, onto Shepherd Island.

It amazed him how little the place seemed to change over the years. The same old buildings faced Sea Street: the Island Bakery, the bank, FitzGerald's Café, the five-and-dime, Lappin's General Store. A few new names had sprung up in old places. The Vogue Beauty Shop was now Gorham's Books, and Village Hardware had been replaced by Country Antiques and a realty office. Lord, what changes the tourists wrought.

He drove around the corner, up Limerock Street. On his left, housed in the same brick building, was the *Island Herald*. He wondered if any of it had changed inside. He remembered it well, the decorative tin ceiling, the battered desks, the wall hung with portraits of the publishers, every one a Tremain. He could picture it all, right down to the Remington typewriter on his father's old desk. Of course, the Remingtons would be long gone. There'd be computers now, sleek and impersonal. That's how Richard would run the newspaper, anyway. Out with the old, in with the new.

Bring on the next Tremain.

Chase drove on and turned onto Chestnut Hill. Half a mile up, near the highest point on the island, sat the Tremain mansion. A monstrous yellow wedding cake was what it used to remind him of, with its Victorian turrets and gingerbread trim. The house had since been repainted a distinguished gray and white. It seemed tamer now, subdued, a faded beauty. Chase almost preferred the old wedding-cake yellow.

He parked the car, grabbed his suitcase from the trunk and headed up the walkway. Even before he'd reached the porch steps the door opened and Evelyn was standing there, waiting for him.

"Chase!" she cried. "Oh, Chase, you're here. Thank God you're here."

At once she fell into his arms. Automatically he held her against him, felt the shuddering of her body, the warmth of her breath against his neck. He let her cling to him as long as she needed to.

At last she pulled away and gazed up at him. Those brilliant green eyes were as startling as ever. Her hair, shoulder length and honey blond, had been swept back into a French braid. Her face was puffy, her nose red and pinched. She'd tried to cover it with makeup. Some sort of pink powder caked her nostril and a streak of mascara had left a dirty shadow on her cheek. He could scarcely believe this was his beautiful sister-in-law. Could it be she truly was in mourning?

"I knew you'd come," she whispered.

"I left right after you called."

"Thank you, Chase. I didn't know who else to turn to...." She stood back, looked at him. "Poor thing, you must be exhausted. Come in, I'll get you some coffee."

They stepped into the foyer. It was like stepping back into childhood, so little had changed. The same oak floors, the same light, the same smells. He almost thought that if he turned around and looked through the doorway into the parlor, he'd see his mother sitting there at her desk, madly scribbling away. The old girl never did take to the typewriter; she'd believed, and rightly so, that if a gossip column was juicy enough, an editor would accept it in Swahili. As it turned out, not only had the editor acquired her column, he'd acquired *her* as well. All in all, a practical marriage.

His mother never did learn to type.

“Hello, Uncle Chase.”

Chase looked up to see a young man and woman standing at the top of the stairs. Those couldn't be the twins! He watched in astonishment as the pair came down the steps, Phillip in the lead. The last time he'd seen his niece and nephew they'd been gawky adolescents, not quite grown into their big feet. Both of them were tall and blond and lean, but there the resemblance ended. Phillip moved with the graceful assurance of a dancer, an elegant Fred Astaire partnered with—well, certainly not Ginger Rogers. The young woman who ambled down after him bore a closer resemblance to a horse.

“I can't believe this is Cassie and Phillip,” said Chase.

“You've stayed away too long,” Evelyn replied.

Phillip came forward and shook Chase's hand. It was the greeting of a stranger, not a nephew. His hand was slender, refined, the hand of a gentleman. He had his mother's stamp of aristocracy—straight nose, chiseled cheeks, green eyes. “Uncle Chase,” he said somberly. “It's a terrible reason to come home, but I'm glad you're here.”

Chase shifted his gaze to Cassie. When he'd last seen his niece she was a lively little monkey with a never-ending supply of questions. He could scarcely believe she'd grown into this sullen young woman. Could grief have wrought such changes? Her limp hair was pulled back so tightly it seemed to turn her face into a collection of jutting angles: large nose, rabbity overbite, a square forehead unsoftened by even a trace of bangs. Only her eyes held any trace of that distant ten-year-old. They were direct, sharply intelligent.

“Hello, Uncle Chase,” she said. A strikingly businesslike tone for a girl who'd just lost her father.

“Cassie,” said Evelyn. “Can't you give your uncle a kiss? He's come all this way to be with us.”

Cassie moved forward and planted a wooden peck on Chase's cheek. Just as quickly she stepped back, as though embarrassed by this false ceremony of affection.

“You've certainly grown up,” said Chase, the most charitable assessment he could offer.

“Yes. It happens.”

“How old are you now?”

“Almost twenty.”

“So you both must be in college.”

Cassie nodded, the first trace of a smile touching her lips. “I'm at the University of Southern Maine. Studying journalism. I figured, one of these days the *Herald's* going to need a—”

“Phillip's at Harvard,” Evelyn cut in. “Just like his father.”

Cassie's smile died before it was fully born. She shot a look of irritation at her mother, then turned and headed up the stairs.

“Cassie, where are you going?”

“I have to do my laundry.”

“But your uncle just got here. Come back and sit with us.”

“Why, Mother?” she shot back over her shoulder. “You can entertain him perfectly well on your own.”

“Cassie!”

The girl turned and glared down at Evelyn. “What?”

“You are embarrassing me.”

“Well, that's nothing new.”

Evelyn, close to tears, turned to Chase. “You see how things are? I can't even count on my own children. Chase, I can't deal with this all alone. I just can't.” Stifling a sob, she turned and walked into the house.

the parlor.

The twins looked at each other.

“You’ve done it again,” said Phillip. “It’s a lousy time to fight, Cassie. Can’t you feel sorry for her? Can’t you try and get along? Just for the next few days.”

“It’s not as if I *don’t* try. But she drives me up a wall.”

“Okay, then at least be civil.” He paused, then added, “You know it’s what Dad would want.”

Cassie sighed. Then, resignedly, she came down the steps and headed into the parlor, after her mother. “I guess I owe him that much....”

Shaking his head, Phillip looked at Chase. “Just another episode of the delightful Tremain family.”

“Has it been like this for a while?”

“Years, at least. You’re just seeing them at their worst. You’d think, after last night, after losing Dad, we could pull together. Instead it seems to be driving us all apart.”

They went into the parlor and found mother and daughter sitting at opposite ends of the room. Both had regained their composure. Phillip took a seat between them, reinforcing his role as perpetual human buffer. Chase settled into a corner armchair—his idea of neutral territory.

Sunshine washed in through the bay windows, onto the gleaming wood floor. The silence was filled by the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece. It all looked the same, thought Chase. The same Hepplewhite tables, the same Queen Anne chairs. It was exactly the way he remembered it from childhood. Evelyn had not altered a single detail. For that he felt grateful.

Chase launched a foray into that dangerous silence. “I drove by the newspaper building, coming through town,” he said. “Hasn’t changed a bit.”

“Neither has the town,” said Phillip.

“Just as thrilling as ever,” his sister deadpanned.

“What’s the plan for the *Herald*?” asked Chase.

“Phillip will be taking over,” said Evelyn. “It’s about time, anyway. I need him home, now that Richard...” She swallowed, looked down. “He’s ready for the job.”

“I’m not sure I am, Mom,” said Phillip. “I’m only in my second year at college. And there are other things I’d like to—”

“Your father was twenty when Grandpa Tremain made him an editor. Isn’t that right, Chase?”

Chase nodded.

“So there’s no reason you couldn’t slip right onto the masthead.”

Phillip shrugged. “Jill Vickery’s managing things just fine.”

“She’s just a hired hand, Phillip. The *Herald* needs a real captain.”

Cassie leaned forward, her eyes suddenly sharp. “There are others who could do it,” she said. “Why does it have to be Phil?”

“Your father wanted Phillip. And Richard always knew what was best for the *Herald*.”

There was a silence, punctuated by the steady ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece.

Evelyn let out a shaky breath and dropped her head in her hands. “Oh, God, it all seems so cold-blooded. I can’t believe we’re talking about this. About who’s going to take his place....”

“Sooner or later,” said Cassie, “we have to talk about it. About a lot of things.”

Evelyn nodded and looked away.

In another room, the phone was ringing.

“I’ll get it,” said Phillip, and left to answer it.

“I just can’t *think*,” said Evelyn, pressing her hands to her head. “If I could just get my mind working again....”

“It was only last night,” said Chase gently. “It takes time to get over the shock.”

“~~And there’s the funeral to think of. They won’t even tell me when they’ll release the—~~” She winced. “I don’t see why it takes so long. Why the state examiner has to go over and over it. I mean, can’t they *see* what happened? Isn’t it obvious?”

“The obvious isn’t always the truth,” said Cassie.

Evelyn looked at her daughter. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Phillip came back into the room. “Mom? That was Lorne Tibbetts on the phone.”

“Oh, Lord.” Evelyn rose unsteadily to her feet. “I’m coming.”

“He wants to see you in person.”

She frowned. “Right this minute? Can’t it wait?”

“You might as well get it over with, Mom. He’ll have to talk to you sooner or later.”

Evelyn turned and looked at Chase. “I can’t do this alone. Come with me, won’t you?”

Chase didn’t have the faintest idea where they were going or who Lorne Tibbetts was. At that moment what he really wanted was a hot shower and a bed to collapse onto. But that would have to wait.

“Of course, Evelyn,” he said. Reluctantly he stood, shaking the stiffness from his legs, which felt permanently flexed by the long drive from Greenwich.

Evelyn was already reaching for her purse. She pulled out the car keys and handed them to Chase. —I’m too upset to drive. Could you?”

He took the keys. “Where are we going?”

With shaking hands Evelyn slipped on her sunglasses. The swollen eyes vanished behind twin dark lenses. “The police,” she said.

Two

The Shepherd's Island police station was housed in a converted general store that had, over the years, been chopped up into a series of hobbit-size rooms and offices. In Chase's memory, it had been a much more imposing structure, but it had been years since he'd been inside. He'd been only a boy then, and a rambunctious one at that, the sort of rascal to whom a police station represented a distinct threat. The day he'd been dragged in here for trampling Mrs. Gordimer's rose bed—entirely unintentional on his part—these ceilings had seemed taller, the rooms vaster, every door a gateway to some unknown terror.

Now he saw it for what it was—a tired old building in need of paint.

Lorne Tibbetts, the new chief of police, was built just right to inhabit this claustrophobic warren. In fact, there was a height minimum for police work, Tibbetts had somehow slipped right under the requirement. He was just a chunk of a man, neatly decked out in official summer khaki, complete with a height-enhancing cap to hide what Chase suspected was a bald spot. He reminded Chase of a little Napoleon in full dress uniform.

Though short on height, Chief Tibbetts was long on the social graces. He maneuvered through the clutter of desks and filing cabinets and greeted Evelyn with the overweening solicitousness due a woman of her local status.

"Evelyn! I'm so sorry to have to ask you down here like this." He reached for her arm and gave it a squeeze, an intended gesture of comfort that made Evelyn shrink away. "And it's been a terrible night for you, hasn't it? Just a terrible night."

Evelyn shrugged, partly in answer to his question, partly to free herself from his grasp.

"I know it's hard, dealing with this. And I didn't want to bother you, not today. But you know how it is. All those reports to be filed." He looked at Chase, a deceptively casual glance. The little Napoleon Chase noted, had sharp eyes that saw everything.

"This is Chase," said Evelyn, brushing the sleeve of her blouse, as though to wipe away Chief Tibbetts's paw print. "Richard's brother. He drove in this morning from Connecticut."

"Oh, yeah," said Tibbetts, his eyes registering instant recognition of the name. "I've seen a picture of you hanging in the high school gym." He offered his hand. His grasp was crushing, the handshake of a man trying to compensate for his size. "You know, the one of you in the basketball uniform."

Chase blinked in surprise. "They still have that thing hanging up?"

"It's the local hall of fame. Let's see, you were class of '71. Star center, varsity basketball. Right?"

"I'm surprised you know all that."

"I was a basketball player myself. Madison High School, Wisconsin. Record holder in free throws. And points scored."

Yes, Chase saw it clearly. Lorne Tibbetts, rampaging midget of the basketball court. It would fit right in with that bone-crushing handshake.

The station door suddenly swung open. A woman called out, "Hey, Lorne?"

Tibbetts turned and wearily confronted the visitor, who looked as if she'd just blown in from the street. "You back again, Annie?"

“Like the proverbial bad penny.” The woman shifted her battered shoulder bag to her other side. “S when am I gonna get a statement, huh?”

“When I have one to make. Now scram.”

The woman, undaunted, turned to Evelyn. The pair of them could have posed for a magazine feature on fashion make-overs. Annie, blowsy haired and dressed in a lumpy sweatshirt and jeans, would have earned the label Before. “Mrs. Tremain?” she said politely. “I know this is a bad time, but I’m under deadline and I just need a short quote—”

“Oh, for Chrissakes, Annie!” snapped Tibbetts. He turned to the cop manning the front desk. “Ellis get her out of here!”

Ellis popped up from his chair like a spindly jack-in-the-box. “C’mon, Annie. Get a move on, ’less you wanna write your story from the inside lookin’ out.”

“I’m going. I’m going.” Annie yanked open the door. As she walked out they heard her mutter, “Geez, they won’t let a gal do her job around here....”

Evelyn looked at Chase. “That’s Annie Berenger. One of Richard’s star reporters. Now a star pest.”

“Can’t exactly blame her,” said Tibbetts. “That’s what you pay her for, isn’t it?” He took Evelyn’s arm. “Come on, we’ll get started. I’ll take you into my office. It’s the only private place in this whole fishbowl.”

Lorne’s office was at the far end of the hallway, past a series of closet-size rooms. Almost every square inch was crammed with furniture: a desk, two chairs, a bookcase, filing cabinets. A fern wilted unnoticed, in a corner. Despite the cramped space, everything was tidy, the shelves dusted, all the papers stacked in the Out box. On the wall, prominently displayed, hung a plaque: *The smaller the dog, the bigger the fight.*

Tibbetts and Evelyn sat in the two chairs. A third chair was brought in for the secretary to take accessory notes. Chase stood off to the side. It felt good to stand, good to straighten those cramped legs.

At least, it felt good for about ten minutes. Then he found himself sagging, scarcely able to pay attention to what was being said. He felt like that wretched fern in the corner, wilting away.

Tibbetts asked the questions and Evelyn answered in her usual whispery voice, a voice that could induce hibernation. She gave a detailed summary of the night’s events. A typical evening, she said. Supper at six o’clock, the whole family. Leg of lamb and asparagus, lemon soufflé for dessert. Richard had had a glass of wine; he always did. The conversation was routine, the latest gossip from the paper. Circulation down, cost of newsprint up. Worries about a possible libel suit. Tony Graffam upset about that last article. And then talk about Phillip’s exams, Cassie’s grades. The lilacs were lovely this year, the driveway needed resurfacing. Typical dialogue from a family dinner.

At nine o’clock Richard had left the house to do some work at the office—or so he’d said. And Evelyn?

“I went upstairs to bed,” she said.

“What about Cassie and Phillip?”

“They went out. To a movie, I think.”

“So everyone went their separate ways.”

“Yes.” Evelyn looked down at her lap. “And that’s it. Until twelve-thirty, when I got the call....”

“Let’s go back to that dinner conversation.”

The account went into replay. A few extra details here and there, but essentially the same story. Chase, his last reserves of alertness wearing thin, began to drift into a state of semiconsciousness. Already his legs were going numb, sinking into a sleep that his brain longed to join. The floor began

look pretty good. At least it was horizontal. He felt himself sliding....

Suddenly he jerked awake and saw that everyone was looking at him.

“Are you all right, Chase?” asked Evelyn.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “I guess I’m just more tired than I thought.” He gave his head a shake. “Could I, uh, get a cup of coffee somewhere?”

“Down the hall,” said Tibbetts. “There’s a full pot on, plus a couch if you need it. Why don’t you wait there?”

“Go ahead,” said Evelyn. “I’ll be done soon.”

With a sense of relief Chase fled the office and went in search of the blessed coffeepot. Moving back down the hall, he poked his head into the first doorway and discovered a washroom. The next door was locked. He moved on and glanced into the third room. It was unlit. Through the shadows he saw a couch, a few chairs, a jumble of furniture off in a corner. In the sidewall there was a window. It was that window that drew his attention because, unlike a normal window, it didn’t face the outside; it faced an adjoining room. Through the pane of glass he spied a woman, sitting alone at a small table.

She was oblivious to him. Her gaze was focused downward, on the table before her. Something drew him closer, something about her utter silence, her stillness. He felt like a hunter who has quite unexpectedly come upon a doe poised in the forest.

Quietly Chase slipped into the darkness and let the door close behind him. He moved to the window. A one-way mirror—that’s what it was, of course. He was on the observing side, she on the blind side. She had no idea he was standing here, separated from her by only a half inch of glass. It made him feel somehow contemptible to be standing there, spying on her, but he couldn’t help himself. He was drawn in by that old fantasy of invisibility, of being the fly on the wall, the unseen observer.

And it was the woman.

She was not particularly beautiful, and neither her clothes nor her hairstyle enhanced the assets she did have. She was wearing faded blue jeans and a Boston Red Sox T-shirt a few sizes too big. Her hair, a chestnut brown, was gathered into a careless braid. A few strands had escaped and drooped rebelliously about her temples. She wore little or no makeup, but she had the sort of face that needed none, the sort of face you saw on those Patagonia catalog models, the ones raking leaves or hugging lambs. Wholesome, with just a hint of sunburn. Her eyes, a light color, gray or blue, didn’t quite fit the rest of the picture. He could see by the puffiness around the lids that she’d been crying. Even now she reached up and swiped a tear from her cheek. She glanced around the table in search of something. Then, with a look of frustration, she tugged at the edge of her T-shirt and wiped her face with it. It seemed a helpless gesture, the sort of thing a child would do. It made her look all the more vulnerable. He wondered why she was in that room, sitting all alone, looking for all the world like an abandoned soul. A witness? A victim?

She looked straight ahead, right at him. He instinctively drew away from the window, but he knew she couldn’t see him. All she saw was a reflection of herself staring back. She seemed to take in her own image with passive weariness. Indifference. As though she was thinking, *There I am, looking like hell. And I couldn’t care less.*

A key grated in the lock. Suddenly the woman sat up straight, her whole body snapping to alertness. She wiped her face once more, raised her chin to a pugnacious angle. Her eyes might be swollen, her T-shirt damp with tears, but she had determinedly thrown off that cloak of vulnerability. She reminded Chase of a soldier girded for battle, but scared out of her wits.

The door opened. A man walked in—gray suit, no tie, all business. He took a chair. Chase was startled by the loud sound of the chair legs scraping the floor. He realized there must be a microphone

in the next room, and that the sound was coming through a small speaker by the window.

“Ms. Wood?” asked the man. “Sorry to keep you waiting. I’m Lieutenant Merrifield, state police.” He held out his hand and smiled. It said a lot, that smile. It said *I’m your buddy. Your best friend. I’m here to make everything right.*

The woman hesitated, then shook the offered hand.

Lieutenant Merrifield settled into the chair and gave the woman a long, sympathetic look. “You must be exhausted,” he said, maintaining that best-friend voice. “Are you comfortable? Feel ready to proceed?”

She nodded.

“They’ve read you your rights?”

Again, a nod.

“I understand you’ve waived the right to have an attorney present.”

“I don’t have an attorney,” she said.

Her voice was not what Chase expected. It was soft, husky. A bedroom voice with a heartbreaking quaver of grief.

“We can arrange for one, if you want,” said Merrifield. “It may take some time, which means you’ll have to be patient.”

“Please. I just want to tell you what happened....”

A smile touched Lieutenant Merrifield’s lips. It had the curve of triumph. “All right, then,” he said. “Let’s begin.” He placed a cassette recorder on the table and pressed the button. “Tell me your name, your address, your occupation.”

The woman sighed deeply, a breath for courage. “My name is Miranda Wood. I live at 18 Willow Street. I work as a copy editor for the *Island Herald*.”

“That’s Mr. Tremain’s newspaper?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s go straight to last night. Tell me what happened. All the events leading up to the death of Mr. Richard Tremain.”

Chase felt his whole body suddenly go numb. *The death of Mr. Richard Tremain*. He found himself pressing forward, against that cold glass, his gaze fixed on the face of Miranda Wood. Innocence. Softness. That’s what he saw when he looked at her. What a lovely mask she wore, what a pure and perfect disguise.

My brother’s mistress, he thought with sudden comprehension.

My brother’s murderer.

In terrible fascination he listened to her confession.

* * *

“Let’s go back a few months, Ms. Wood. To when you first met Mr. Tremain. Tell me about your relationship.”

Miranda stared down at her hands, knotted together on the table. The table itself was a typically ugly piece of institutional furniture. She noticed that someone had carved the initials JMK onto the surface. She wondered who JMK was, if he or she had sat there under similar circumstances, if he or she had been similarly innocent. She felt a sudden bond with this unknown predecessor, the one who had sat in the same hot seat, fighting for dear life.

“Ms. Wood? Please answer my question.”

She looked up at Lieutenant Merrifield. The smiling destroyer. "I'm sorry," she said. "I wasn't listening."

"About Mr. Tremain. How did you meet him?"

"At the *Herald*. I was hired about a year ago. We got to know each other in the course of business."

"And?"

"And..." She took a deep breath. "We got involved."

"Who initiated it?"

"He did. He started asking me out to lunch. Purely business, he said. To talk about the *Herald*.

About changes in the format."

"Isn't it unusual for a publisher to deal so closely with the copy editor?"

"Maybe on a big city paper it is. But the *Herald's* a small-town paper. Everyone on the staff does a little of everything."

"So, in the course of business, you got to know Mr. Tremain."

"Yes."

"When did you start sleeping with him?"

The question was like a slap in the face. She sat up straight. "It wasn't like that!"

"You didn't sleep with him?"

"I didn't—I mean, yes, I did, but it happened over the course of months. It wasn't as if we—we went out to lunch and then fell into bed together!"

"I see. So it was a more, uh, *romantic* thing. Is that what you're trying to say?"

She swallowed. In silence she nodded. It all sounded so stupid, the way he'd phrased it. A more romantic thing. Now, hearing those words said aloud in that cold, bare room, it struck her how foolish it all had been. The whole disastrous affair.

"I thought I loved him," Miranda whispered.

"What was that, Ms. Wood?"

She said, louder, "I thought I loved him. I wouldn't have slept with him if I didn't. I don't *do* one-night stands. I don't even do affairs."

"You did this one."

"Richard was different."

"Different than what?"

"Than other men! He wasn't just—just cars and football. He cared about the same things I cared about. This island, for instance. Look at the articles he wrote—you could see how much he loved this place. We used to talk for hours about it! And it just seemed the most natural thing in the world to..." She gave a little shudder of grief and looked down. Softly she said, "I thought he was different. At least, he seemed to be..."

"He was also married. But you knew that."

She felt her shoulders droop. "Yes."

"And did you know he had two children?"

She nodded.

"Yet you had an affair with him. Did it mean so little to you, Ms. Wood, that three innocent people..."

"Don't you think I thought about that, every waking moment?" Her chin shot up in rage. "Don't you think I hated myself? I never *stopped* thinking about his family! About Evelyn and the twins. I felt evil, dirty. I felt—I don't know." She gave a sigh of helplessness. "Trapped."

"By what?"

“By my love for him. Or what I thought was love.” She hesitated. “But maybe—maybe I never really *did* love him. At least, not the real Richard.”

“And what led to this amazing revelation?”

“Things I learned about him.”

“What things?”

“The way he used people. His employees, for instance. The way he treated them.”

“So you saw the real Richard Tremain and you fell out of love.”

“Yes. And I broke it off.” She let out a deep breath, as though relieved that the most painful part of her confession was finished. “That was a month ago.”

“Were you angry at him?”

“I felt more...betrayed. By all those false images.”

“So you must have been angry.”

“I guess I was.”

“So for a month you walked around mad at Mr. Tremain.”

“Sometimes. Mostly I felt stupid. And then he wouldn’t leave me alone. He kept calling, wanting to get back together.”

“And that made you angry, as well.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Angry enough to kill him?”

She looked up sharply. “No.”

“Angry enough to grab a knife from your kitchen drawer?”

“No!”

“Angry enough to go into the bedroom—your bedroom, where he was lying naked—and stab him in the chest?”

“*No! No, no, no.*” She was sobbing now, screaming out her denials. The sound of her own voice echoed like some alien cry in that stark box of a room. She dropped her head into her hands and leaned forward on the table. “No,” she whispered. She had to get away from this terrible man with his terrible questions. She started to rise from the chair.

“Sit down, Ms. Wood. We’re not finished.”

Obediently she sank back into the chair. “I didn’t kill him,” she cried. “I told you, I found him on my bed. I came home and he was lying there....”

“Ms. Wood—”

“I was on the beach when it happened. Sitting on the beach. That’s what I keep telling all of you! But no one listens. No one believes me....”

“Ms. Wood, I have more questions.”

She was crying, not answering, not able to answer. The sound of her sobs was all that could be heard.

At last Merrifield flicked off the recorder. “All right, then. We’ll take a break. One hour, then we’ll resume.”

Miranda didn’t move. She heard the man’s chair scrape back, heard Merrifield leave the room, the door shut. A few moments later the door opened again.

“Ms. Wood? I’ll take you back to your cell.”

Slowly Miranda rose to her feet and turned to the door. A young cop stood waiting, nice face, friendly smile. His name tag said Officer Snipe. Vaguely she remembered him from some other time from her life before jail. Oh, yes. Once, on a Christmas Eve, he’d torn up her parking ticket. It had

been a kind gesture, gallantry offered to a lady. She wondered what he thought of the lady now, whether he saw *murderer* stamped on her face.

She let him lead her into the hall. At one end she saw Lieutenant Merrifield, huddled in conference with Chief Tibbetts. The polite Officer Snipe guided her in the opposite direction, away from the pair. Miranda had gone only a short distance when her footsteps faltered, stopped.

A man was standing at the far end of the hall, watching her. She had never seen him before. If she had, she certainly would have remembered him. He stood like some unbreachable barrier, his hands jammed in his pockets, his shoulders looming before her in the cramped corridor. He didn't look like a cop. Cops had standards of appearance, and this man was on the far edge of ruffled—unshaven, dark hair uncombed, his shirt a map of wrinkles. What disturbed her the most was the way he looked at her. That wasn't the passive curiosity of a bystander. No, it was something far more hostile. Those dark eyes were like judge and jury, weighing the facts, pronouncing her guilty.

"Keep moving, Ms. Wood," said Officer Snipe. "It's right around the corner."

Miranda forced herself to move forward, toward that forbidding human barrier. The man moved aside to let her pass. As she did, she felt his gaze burning into her and heard his sharp intake of breath as though he was trying not to breathe the same air she did, as if her very presence had somehow turned the atmosphere to poison.

For the past twelve hours she'd been treated like a criminal, handcuffed, fingerprinted, intimately searched. She'd had questions fired at her, humiliations heaped upon her. But never, until this man had looked at her, had she felt like a creature worthy of such disgust, such loathing. Rage suddenly flared inside her, a rage so fierce it threatened to consume her in its flames.

She halted and stared up at him. Their gazes locked. *There, damn you!* she thought. *Whoever you are, take a look at me! Take a good, long look at the murderess. Satisfied?*

The eyes staring down at her were dark as night, stony with condemnation. But as they took each other in, Miranda saw something else flicker in those depths, a hint of uncertainty, almost confusion. As if the picture he saw was all wrong, as if image and caption were terribly mismatched.

Just down the hall, a door swung open. Footsteps clicked out and stopped dead.

"Dear God," whispered a voice.

Miranda turned.

Evelyn Tremain stood frozen in the washroom doorway. "Chase," she whispered. "It's her...."

At once the man went to Evelyn and offered her his steadying arm. Evelyn gripped it with both hands, as if holding on to her only lifeline. "Oh, please," she murmured helplessly. "I can't stand to look at her."

Miranda didn't move. She felt paralyzed by guilt, by what she'd done to this woman, to the whole family. Though her crime might not be murder, still she had committed a sin against Evelyn Tremain and for that she would always be tormented.

* * *

"Mrs. Tremain," she said quietly. "I'm sorry...."

Evelyn buried her face against the man's shoulder. "Chase, please. Get her out of here."

"He loved you," said Miranda. "I want you to know that. I want you to know that he never stopped loving—"

"Get her out of here!" cried Evelyn.

"Officer," said Chase quietly. "Please. Take her away."

Officer Snipe reached for Miranda's arm. "Let's go."

~~As she was led away Miranda called over her shoulder, "I didn't kill him, Mrs. Tremain! You have to believe that—"~~

"You tramp!" shouted Evelyn. "You filthy whore! You ruined my life."

Miranda glanced back and saw the other woman had pulled away from Chase and was now facing her like some avenging angel. Strands of blond hair had fallen free and her face, always pale, was now a stark white.

"*You ruined my life!*" Evelyn screamed.

That accusing shriek echoed in Miranda's ears all the way down that long walk to the jail.

Drained of resistance, she quietly entered the cell. She stood there, frozen, as the door clanged shut. Officer Snipe's footsteps faded away. She was alone, trapped in this cage.

Suddenly she felt as if she were suffocating, as if she would smother without fresh air. She scrambled over to the one small window and tried to pull herself up by the bars, but it was too high. She ran to the cot, dragged it across the cell and climbed on top. Even then she was barely tall enough to peek over the sill, to gulp in a tantalizing taste of freedom. Outside the sun was shining. She could see maple trees beyond the fenced yard, a few rooftops, a sea gull soaring in the sky. If she breathed deeply, she could almost smell the sea. Oh, Lord, how sweet it all seemed! How unattainable! She gripped the window bars so tightly they dug into her palms. Pressing her face against the sill, she closed her eyes and willed herself to stay in control, to keep panic at bay.

I am innocent. They have to believe me, she thought.

And then, *What if they don't?*

No, damn it. Don't think about that.

She forced herself to concentrate on something else, anything else. She thought of the man in the hallway, the man with Evelyn Tremain. What had Evelyn called him? Chase. The name stirred a memory; Miranda had heard it before. She snatched desperately at that irrelevant strand of thought, concentrated hard on dredging up the memory, anything to crowd the fears from her mind. Chase. Chase. Someone had said it. She tried to bring back the voice, to match it to the utterance of that name.

The memory hit her like a blow. It was Richard who'd said it. *I haven't seen my brother in years. We had a falling-out when my father died. But then, Chase was always the problem kid in the family..*

Miranda's eyes flew open with the revelation. Was it possible? There'd been no resemblance, no hint of familial ties in that face. Richard had had blue eyes, light brown hair, a weathered face always on the verge of sunburn. This man called Chase was all darkness, all shadow. It was hard to believe they were brothers. But that would explain the man's coldness, his look of condemnation. He thought she'd murdered Richard, and repulsion was exactly what he would feel, coming face-to-face with his brother's killer.

Slowly she sank onto the cot. Lying there beneath the window she could catch glimpses of blue sky and cloud. August. It would be a hot day. Already her T-shirt was damp with sweat.

She closed her eyes and tried to imagine soaring like a sea gull in that bright blue sky, tried to picture the island far below her.

But all she could see were the accusing eyes of Chase Tremain.

Three

He truly was the ugliest dog on earth.

Miss Lila St. John regarded her pet with a mixture of affection and pity. Sir Oscar Henry San Angelo III, otherwise known as Ozzie, was a rare breed known as a Portuguese Water Dog. Miss St. John was not quite clear as to the attributes of this particular breed. She suspected it was some sort of geneticists' joke. Her niece had presented the dog to her—"to keep you company, Auntie"—and Miss St. John had been trying to remember ever since what that niece could hold against her. Not that Ozzie was entirely without redeeming value. He didn't bite, didn't bother the cat. He was a passable watchdog. But he ate like a horse, twitched like a mouse and was absolutely unforgiving if you neglected to take him on his twice-daily walk. He would stand by the door and whine.

The way he was doing now.

Oh, Miss St. John knew that look. Even if she couldn't actually see the beast's eyes under all that fur, she knew what the look meant. Sighing, she opened the door. The black bundle of fur practically shot down the porch steps and took off for the woods. Miss St. John had no choice but to follow him, and so off into the woods she went.

It was a warm evening, one of those still, sweet twilights that seem kissed with midsummer magic. She would not be surprised to see something extraordinary tonight. A doe and fawn, perhaps, or a fox cub, or even an owl.

She moved steadily through the trees in pursuit of the dog. She noticed they were headed in a direct line toward Rose Hill Cottage, the Tremains' summer camp. Such a tragedy, Richard Tremain's death.

She hadn't particularly liked the man, but theirs were the last two cottages on this lonely road, and on her walks here she had occasionally seen him through his window, his head bent in concentration over his desk. He'd always been polite to her, and deferential, but she'd suspected much of it was automatic and not, in any sense, true respect. He'd had no use for elderly women; he simply tolerated them.

But as for young women, well, she'd heard that was a different story.

It troubled her, these recent revelations about his death. Not so much the fact of his murder, but the identity of the one accused. Miss St. John had met Miranda Wood, had spoken to her on several occasions. On this small island, in the dead of winter, only green thumb fanatics braved the icy roads to attend meetings of the local garden club. That's where Miss St. John had met Miranda. They'd sat together during a lecture on triploid marigolds, and again at the talk on gloxinia cultivation. Miranda was polite and deferential, but genuinely so. A lovely girl, not a hint of dishonesty in her eyes. It seemed to Miss St. John that any woman who cared so passionately about flowers, about living, growing things, could simply not be a murderess.

It bothered her, all that cruel talk flying about town these days. Miranda Wood, a killer? It went against Miss St. John's instincts, and her instincts were always, always good.

Ozzie bounded through the last stand of trees and shot off toward Rose Hill Cottage. Miss St. John resignedly followed suit. That's when she saw the light flickering through the trees. It came from the Tremain cottage. Just as quickly, it vanished.

At once she froze as an eerie thought flashed to mind. *Ghosts?* Richard was the only one who ever

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