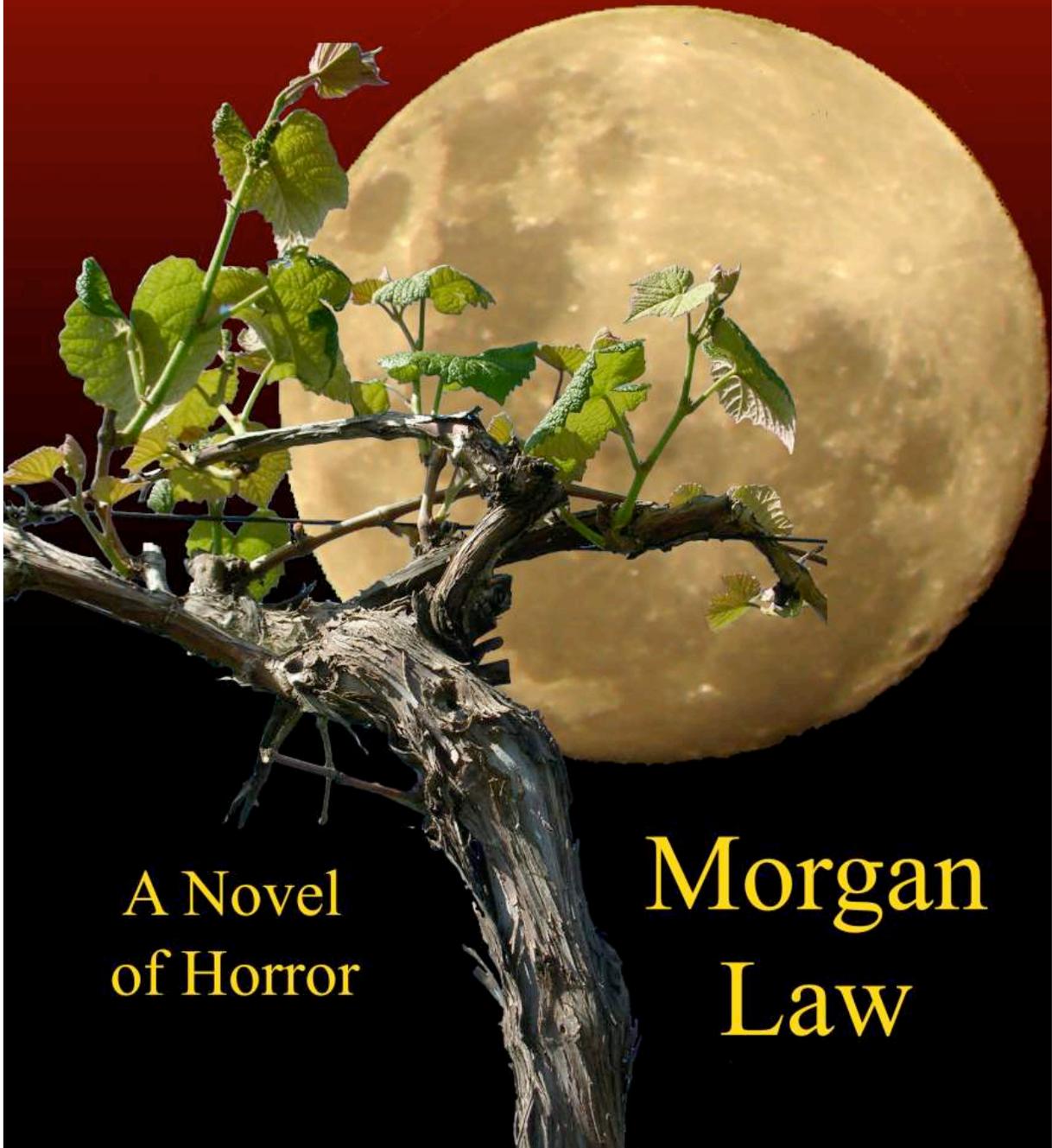


A Very Exclusive Vineyard



A Novel
of Horror

Morgan
Law

A Very Exclusive Vineyard

by

Morgan Law

(Sample chapters)

This is a work of fiction. References to people, places, organizations, cultures, racial/ethnic groups, incidents, and other publications either are products of the author's imagination or are intended only to lend a sense of reality and authenticity to the novel. Characters in the work are fictional and are not intended to portray actual persons, living or dead.

Copyright © 2011 by Morgan Law

eBook Edition July 2011

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in articles and reviews.

e-mail: author@booksbyMorganLaw.com

website: BooksByMorganLaw.com

ISBN-13: 9780983614616

ISBN-10: 098361461X

Prologue

Something was wrong with Kevin's brain. He had sensed it within seconds of waking up that morning, and the feeling had persisted. He had a vague feeling he should be alarmed, but he wasn't. If he were in pain—or in any kind of physical discomfort—he might have been seriously worried. As it was, though, he didn't have any clear symptoms. Instead, this was something so slippery and subtle that he would have been hard pressed to describe it to anybody.

He simply felt strange—like he was walking around in a cheap, rented body. His arms and legs had felt awkward and jerky all day, as if he were a wind-up doll, and he was definitely out of focus mentally.

His roommate had noticed something, too. While he was drinking his morning coffee, with his souvenir Mardi Gras mug feeling clumsy and foreign in his hands, Tim had laughed at him from the kitchen doorway. “You look like something a cat threw up, old son.”

When Tim had pressed him about what was wrong, Kevin had been tempted to describe his odd symptoms, but then his head had suddenly felt like it was stuffed with cotton balls. Instead, all he had said was that he felt a little weird.

Now, as Kevin pulled out of the apartment parking garage, granules of ice rattled dryly on the roof and windows of his sleek little silver Mazda. “Sleet,” he growled. Tim had warned him about the weather earlier—hadn't he? The memory had such a hazy, distant feeling to it that Kevin was confused. Maybe it was something he had dreamed instead of something they had talked about.

Either way, this was definitely a bad storm, and Kevin knew he would have to go slow and be extra-careful. After five or six blocks, it occurred to him that he really should go back home, but the thought fell apart as quickly as it had formed, and he kept right on driving.

As he turned south onto the Loop 1 expressway, Kevin frowned unhappily. The freeway was already in bad shape, and it was obviously going to get worse rapidly. He also could not help noticing that for once,

people were apparently taking a storm seriously and were staying off the streets. He tried to hold onto those insights long enough to explore their implications, but they drained out of his mind like water through a colander and vanished.

Since focusing on anything seemed to be almost impossible at the moment, he decided to give up trying. He allowed his mind to drift and kept on driving south.

Kevin did not even notice a maroon eighteen-wheeler charging up behind him until just before it nudged his bumper. The Mazda swerved violently, and Kevin almost lost control. Thankfully, his driving reflexes were working better than the rest of his brain, and he neither overcorrected nor hit his brake. A couple of heartbeats later, he had wrestled the car back under his command.

“Shit!” he cursed aloud. “Shit!” Then, white-faced and unnerved, he looked in the rearview mirror. The big truck was still right behind him.

A second surge of adrenaline coursed through Kevin’s bloodstream, and he mashed on the accelerator. Suddenly, for the first time all day, he felt awake—and good and scared. Since the big rig could not conceivably have hit him by accident, Kevin could only assume that the trucker was a nutcase. It was true that Kevin had been in the left lane, and in deference to the weather, he had been driving well below the speed limit. Under the circumstances, however, he couldn’t believe his slow speed would have been enough of a problem to provoke a road-rage incident.

Whoever was driving the truck, and whatever his mental state might be, Kevin clearly needed to stay out of his way. As he edged the Mazda up to sixty-five to put distance between him and the truck, he scanned the horizon anxiously, hoping to see other traffic. The center of town was well behind him by then, however, and to his dismay, the icing freeway remained eerily unpopulated.

The trucker had apparently noticed the same thing. Emboldened, perhaps, by the complete absence of witnesses, he now began toying with Kevin quite openly. He raced the big rig forward until it almost kissed the Mazda’s bumper. Then he abruptly slowed and allowed the

gap between the vehicles to widen to fifteen or twenty feet. After only a few seconds of respite, he sped up and repeated the menacing gambit.

Beads of sweat blossomed on Kevin's forehead. His breathing went shallow from rising panic as he realized that he might literally be dealing with a homicidal maniac. The only good news was that his mind was working better now—no doubt from all the adrenaline. He recognized with some clarity that his best hope of escape was to get the hell off the freeway, but then his gut tightened sickly as he remembered how few off-ramps would be coming up.

The third time the truck fell back, Kevin began slowing for the first available exit. To disguise his intention, he let off on the gas gradually and did not touch his brakes. As he watched nervously in the rearview mirror for a reaction, the maroon behemoth closed on him again until it was a scant four feet from his bumper. Then it slowed to match Kevin's deceleration and hung right there on his tail.

At the precise moment Kevin should have committed to the exit, the truck leaped forward and struck the rear of the Mazda again. This time the collision was much more than a little bump. Kevin heard glass shatter and felt metal crumple. The little car lurched, skidded, and spun out sickeningly towards his right. Again Kevin ignored the temptation to slam on his brakes, and he instinctively steered into the skid. As the Mazda spun through 180 and then 360 degrees, he thought he had lost it. Partway through the second spin, however, the tires found traction, and he was able—barely—to jockey the car back under control.

Kevin had lost track of the semi as he spun, but he assumed it had passed him and continued southbound. Now, as he forced himself to check, its grille filled his rearview mirror. The front of the truck towered behind his smashed rear bumper like a beast threatening to pounce and crush the life from him.

Now terrified, Kevin gave in to the impulse to run. As rapidly as he dared, he accelerated through fifty, fifty-five, and sixty, increasingly wary of the ice.

The eighteen-wheeler sped up smoothly in tandem, never falling more than eight or ten feet behind the car. In desperation, Kevin put on

another burst of speed. The little car gained a few precious feet, but the trucker reacted immediately. Within seconds, the rig was right back in position on the Mazda's tail.

At seventy-five miles an hour, as he approached an overpass that had neither entry nor exit ramps, Kevin lost his nerve. Freezing rain was coming down along with the sleet, and the road now had both the look and feel of black ice. It would be suicidal to go any faster on the glassy road, and he damn well knew it. He leveled off his speed and frantically tried to come up with another plan.

The sole purpose of the upcoming span was to route through-traffic over a buttonhook loop of the two-way access road, which was centered directly beneath it. Since the next exit was well over two miles away, Kevin vowed to head directly for the access road, without the benefit of an exit, the second he reached level ground again on the other side of the overpass. Meanwhile, in preparation for crossing the icy concrete bridge span, he allowed his speed to drop to forty-five and then to forty. He would hold his speed there all the way across the overpass. Then he would slow even further—to thirty or thirty-five, he imagined—just before he whipped off-road to the right. With his decision made, he put away all other thoughts and concentrated on getting safely across the treacherous, un-sanded overpass.

As Kevin started up the incline, the trucker sped up, swung out into the left lane, and started overtaking the Mazda. Kevin was nearing the peak of the arch when the semi swerved back into the right lane and hammered hard into the Mazda's left front quarter-panel.

Kevin's air bag did not deploy because he had stupidly had it disabled a few months before. He watched in growing horror as the little car shot off to the right like a bullet and blasted through the guard rail as if it were made of tin foil.

The Mazda seemed to hang suspended for one weightless, silent moment, and then it dropped like a rock. As the ruined car raced towards the sleet-covered access road below, Kevin had just enough time for one last hellish scream.

* * * * *

For Ash Thorne, everything started coming unraveled the day of the ice storm. Two nights earlier, she and her fiancé Kevin had made plans to see each other in the afternoon. That, however, had been before the forecast turned ugly.

Just before noon, Ash started trying to call Kevin to make sure he was not coming over, but all she could get was an out-of-service message. She supposed it was either associated with the weather or that Kevin had let the battery on his cell phone go dead—which happened with irritating regularity.

Around two o'clock, she made the first of several calls to Kevin's roommate Tim. To her enormous frustration, his calls were going directly to voicemail, and it was not until after four that Tim finally returned her series of increasingly frantic messages. He had just gotten home from an all-day study session in an apartment a few doors down, and he had not seen or heard from Kevin, either.

"Please tell me you don't think he would have tried driving out to our house in this mess," Ash pleaded.

Tim paused and then sighed. "Hell, Ash," he finally answered. "I hope not, but who knows? I didn't ever talk to him except for a few minutes over coffee this morning. For whatever it's worth, he did say something about feeling weird, and he looked like he was pretty dragged out. Did you guys go out partying last night?"

"No. I don't even know where he was last night."

"Well, I don't want to be telling any tales here, or getting the boy in trouble, but he was definitely not himself this morning."

"Do you think he was coming down with the flu or something? Maybe he's sitting in the waiting room over at the Student Health Center with a dead cell battery."

"Maybe. He didn't say anything about feeling sick, though—just about feeling weird. Mainly, I don't think he was quite firing on all his cylinders."

"What do you mean?"

“I don’t know. He seemed...fuzzy. Like, when I mentioned the storm, he apparently had no clue it was coming in.”

“How could he possibly have missed knowing that?”

“I have no idea. Anyway, I told him he shouldn’t even think about driving in it.”

“And what did he say?”

There was a second of silence, and then Tim cleared his throat. “Well, he didn’t really say anything. He just looked sort of spaced out, like he hadn’t really been processing what I was saying. I don’t know what his deal was, Ash, but I guess I’m damn worried about him now, too.”

After they rang off, Ash’s anxiety ratcheted up with every minute that passed. At 5:02 according to the screen on her iPhone, another call came in. Ash’s heart immediately froze. It was not Kevin calling, but his invalid father up in Colorado. In a low, mournful voice that he could not keep from cracking, he explained to Ash that Kevin had been in an accident—a very bad accident.

There were no witnesses. The police believed Kevin had been traveling at an unsafe, high speed when his beloved little Mazda spun out of control on the ice. The car had broken through the guardrail at the top of one of the freeway overpasses between his apartment and Ash’s home and had crashed onto the frozen roadway below.

By the time Kevin’s father called Ash, the entire Central Texas area was iced in, and driving to the downtown Austin hospital where Kevin had been taken was completely out of the question. All Ash could do was to call periodically and wring as much information as she could out of his ICU nurses.

As usual, it was Ash’s mother Remi who was there for her both physically and emotionally that night. Her father—also as usual—was out of town on a business trip. Remi sat up with Ash all through the long night and the endless morning that followed. When the roads finally became passable, it was Remi who drove Ash in to the hospital.

Part of Ash would be trapped forever in the corridor outside of the ICU cubicle listening to a young internist run through the litany of Kevin’s

injuries. When he was finished, he jammed his hands into the pockets of his starch-rigid, white lab coat, sighed, and offered his unhappy prognosis.

After the doctor left, Ash stepped into Kevin's cubicle and stared vacantly at the monitors and machines that seemed to be the only living things present. They blinked, beeped, dripped, sighed, clicked, and made ugly sucking sounds while Kevin lay silent and unmoving.

None of it seemed real. The tube-wreathed lump in the bed could not possibly have been her Kevin. Her Kevin was tall and blonde and happy and strong. He was constantly in motion, as if he were wired directly into the master energy source that fuels the universe. He was more vital and alive than anyone she had ever known.

Ash's knees did not want to support her any longer, and she wilted, shaking, into the visitor's chair beside Kevin's antiseptic-looking bed. She had refused her mother's offer to stay at the hospital with her, and now she wished she hadn't. Ash had never been seriously ill herself—or been around anyone who was. All alone in the little fishbowl room so full of Kevin's absence, she was confused and stunned and hurt and had no idea what she should do.

Suddenly, she remembered a magazine article she had once read. It had described a number of cases involving deeply comatose patients who eventually recovered and gave accurate accounts of activities and conversations that had taken place in their rooms while they were unconscious and unresponsive.

Immediately, Ash felt an inner shift. It was like stepping through a portal from a harsh and barren mental landscape into a green and peaceful valley. She now knew what to do. No matter what ultimately happened, she could and would give Kevin the simple but precious gift of knowing she was there beside his battered body, loving him. It might be the last gift she would ever be able to give him—and one he might all too soon carry with him into eternity.

Ash suspected that Kevin's white-coated young physician would reject the whole idea of awareness during coma, and she found that she didn't care. She chose in that moment to embrace without reservations the

belief that Kevin could hear her and know she was there, and she pledged to do everything in her power to shower her loving presence on him both night and day. It was a giving and a gift that no turn of fate, however evil, could steal from the two of them.

Although Ash's revelation left her feeling oddly serene, her heart was still leaden in her chest. What little she could see of Kevin looked grotesquely pallid and shrunken and slack. Her courage wavered, and she felt foolish and inadequate again. She sat stiffly on the edge of the visitor's chair with her eyes closed tightly, willing herself not to cry.

"Are you okay, sweetie?" The nurse's voice from the corridor outside was both calm and kind.

Ash turned to face the nurse and nodded, but then she turned quickly away. She knew it was irrational, but it suddenly seemed imperative that her next words be spoken to Kevin. That, in turn, changed the dynamic of the moment for her: it meant she could not allow her own self-consciousness to inhibit her any longer.

She leaned forward and laid the palm of her hand gently on the bulge under the cotton waffle-weave blanket that was Kevin's shoulder. Then, with a supreme effort, she made herself speak to his inert form. "I'm here, Kevin," she whispered through dried and cracking lips. The act felt completely alien to her, but only during that first, awkward moment. As soon as she spoke, a wonderful, light feeling of rightness began to well up inside her, and her next words were strong and sure beneath the softness of her voice. "It's Ash. I'm here, and I love you. I love you no matter what."

That was the beginning of a completely different relationship between Ash and Kevin. It would last almost as long as their original relationship—the one between two whole people—had lasted.

Ash stopped attending her college classes and soon withdrew altogether. She spent every possible moment with Kevin—helping the nurses groom and care for him, reading to him, talking to him, or simply sitting beside him in silence. Once he got out of ICU, she spent most of her nights on the foldout bed in his room.

After Kevin had languished in a deep coma for three weeks, he was transferred to a skilled nursing facility, where Ash continued her vigil. She could count on one hand the times when she had a strong feeling—for no reason she could identify—that Kevin knew she was there. She was immensely grateful for those fleeting moments, for they were her only defense against despair as she watched his strong young body continue to wither and fail.

Late in February, Ash held Kevin's pasty, contracted hand as he took his final, faltering breaths. The death had long been expected, but she still stumbled like a zombie through the week of the funeral. It was a numb, gray, wooden time that seemed almost as endless as Kevin's descent into death, and it left her utterly drained and wounded.

Chapter 1

Ash lurched out of a sweaty, unsatisfactory sleep to find her mother sitting at the foot of her bed. She had been having a bad dream of some kind, and she felt both tired and dull.

“It’s time to get up, honey,” Remi said. “Your father’s already left to pick up the U-Haul.”

Ash sighed. “Okay. I wasn’t sleeping very well, anyway.”

As she looked down on Ash, Remi thought as she so often did that her daughter was one of the most striking young women she had ever seen. Nicer still, she did not seem at all conceited—or even to be aware of her extraordinary beauty. Her hair alone was like a living work of art. It was not a single shade, but a naturally streaked mélange of colors ranging from light brown through strawberry to summer-blonde. It hung well below her shoulder blades, and the colors seemed to change and re-create themselves magically with the slightest change of light.

Nor had Remi ever seen anything quite like her daughter’s liquid, yellow-green eyes. They were huge and vaguely Oriental in shape, and darker green flecks seemed to float in the irises like three-dimensional, luminescent islands in a bottomless golden sea. Remi suspected that most men would happily drown there

Now, Remi frowned with fresh concern over the listlessness in Ash’s voice. The cost of her tireless watch at Kevin’s bedside had been heartbreakingly clear to Remi as those terrible weeks had crept by, and since Kevin’s death five months ago, Ash had been in physical and emotional free-fall. Instead of working through her grief, she seemed to be slipping farther and farther away from any real engagement with life and into an increasingly zombie-like existence. She ate like a sick sparrow, and she spent an alarming amount of time staring blankly into space.

Already slender, Ash had lost weight to the point of gauntness. Her face had thinned dramatically, further accentuating her high cheekbones. Her eyes no longer sparkled with health and life, and her lion-colored hair

had lost its bounce and sheen. Her carriage remained proud and unbeaten, and her almond skin had paled by only a trace, but she chronically looked and acted exhausted.

Ever since she considered Ash to be an adult, Remi had done her best to avoid over-mothering or interfering in her life, but worry about Ash's condition now trumped that policy. "Are you sure I can't talk you into going up to the urgent care center to see a doctor this morning?" she asked softly. "You look so tired and sad and unwell that I'm really very worried about you. With this move piled on top of everything else, maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea for you to let a doctor look you over and give you a prescription for an anti-depressant or something before we leave."

Ash shook her head. "No way, Mom. There's nothing wrong with me that a doctor can fix, and you know perfectly well that I won't take drugs—*any* drugs—unless there's absolutely no other choice. I'm surprised you're even asking."

"I wouldn't, if I weren't so concerned. Maybe this is one of those rare times when a little short-term help from drugs would be a good thing."

Ash smiled wearily. "I can't believe my own mother is trying to push feel-good pills on me."

"No, I'm not!" Remi protested. "I feel the same way about drugs that you do. But I can't stand to watch you spiral down any farther than you already have, and I don't know what else to suggest. You've been stonewalling me for months on going to see a grief counselor, you aren't getting any exercise, you don't eat enough to count, and you don't seem to be interested in anything at all."

Ash's mouth twisted in acknowledgment of the ugly truth. "I really can't argue with you, Mom, and I do appreciate the suggestions you've made about seeing a counselor and making myself go to the gym and all. I think they're all good suggestions."

"But you haven't taken any of them to heart."

Ash shrugged helplessly. "I just haven't felt up to it."

“That’s the insidious thing about grief and depression, honey,” Remi said, in a voice both sad and gentle. “Once they get their hooks into you, they start feeding on themselves. If you can’t manage to break out of that cycle, it can get to be the emotional equivalent of a pool of quicksand that keeps on sucking you down.”

Ash eyed her mother with heightened interest. “That has a ring of personal experience to it. Is there something I should know?”

Remi hesitated before she replied—to Ash’s finely attuned sensibilities, for a telltale beat too long. “Not really. I’ve been pretty down a couple of times, but compared to what you’ve been through, I’ve generally been lucky in life.”

“I’d actually like to hear about your down times and your good times both, Mom. You almost never talk about yourself, you know.” At forty-one, Remi was still a very attractive woman with classic, patrician features and thick, dark brown hair that she wore in a jaw-length bob. Although Ash could easily see where she must have been much sought-after in her youth, her mother’s past remained largely a mystery to her.

A flicker of a smile lifted the corners of Remi’s lips. “After we get past this move—one day when you want to be bored to tears for an hour or so—we can sit down and talk about me.”

“I’m considering that a promise, then, and I won’t let you wiggle out of it. And by the way: now that I’m all grown up, I expect to hear every bit of the juicy stuff.”

Remi’s heavy mood lifted for a moment, and she laughed. The relief was fleeting, though, like a shaft of sunlight that broke through boiling clouds for a moment and was quickly snuffed out again. She ached for her beautiful daughter, for the suffering both she and her fiancé had been forced to endure. She tried with little success to sound lighthearted. “I’m afraid there’s not much juicy stuff to tell you—which I may regret in my dotage—but I’ll tell you what there is,” she said. “In the meantime, why don’t you do your mother a favor and go see about getting on some kind of medication to help you get back on track.”

“If you insist on nagging me,” Ash retorted mildly, “I’m going to throw it right back at you and suggest you go get a pill stash of your own.”

“What? Why?”

“I’d have to be deaf not to know you’ve been having big-time trouble sleeping,” Ash said. Then, lowering her voice and speaking in a confidential hush, she added, “And I hate being the one to tell you, but you’re starting to get dark, smudgy circles under your eyes.”

Although Remi had not noticed the sooty area that was developing under her hazel eyes, the news hardly came as a surprise. Sometime over the winter—she could not recall with any clarity when—she had started having nightmares. What she had assumed would be a nasty but fleeting episode had instead become a chronic and worsening problem. Virtually every night now her rest was seriously disturbed, and her body was paying for it. She felt the increasing toll every morning when she woke up. She felt it when she exercised, and she especially felt it an hour after dinner most evenings when she had to fight to keep from nodding off

The cause of the bad dreams remained an enigma to her. She had been incredibly healthy her whole life, and she had no accompanying symptoms that would suggest the nightmares were a byproduct of illness. A psychological cause seemed to Remi—at least in the abstract—to be more likely. Identifying one to her satisfaction, however, had proven to be difficult. For one thing, she remembered almost nothing about the dreams after she woke up from them. She was also more than half convinced that she had a mental block of some kind that was preventing her from thinking about them with any clarity. Whenever she tried, her brain would go rogue on her, and her thoughts would simply drift away. She had an unformed suspicion that the nightmares were related to her general level of unhappiness, but that was as far as she could seem to get.

All Remi knew for certain was that her enthusiasm for life was slowly but surely being leached away, and that her wretchedness was now almost more than she could bear alone. Because she would rather have flogged herself than add to Ash’s ordeal, however, she had been doing everything in her power to conceal her growing misery.

Her concern for Ash still came first, and Remi now forced a cheerful shrug for her benefit. “When you’re as old and creaky as I am, it hardly matters if you have raccoon eyes,” she said.

Ash groaned. “You aren’t old and creaky, Mother. And it does matter if you have raccoon eyes—just as much as it matters that *I’m* so messed up.”

Remi’s eyebrows formed into hopeful arches. “Are we teetering on the brink of a breakthrough here?”

“‘We?’ I don’t get the ‘we’ part, since you still haven’t owned up to having serious issues of your own.”

For several months, Ash had been hearing the sounds of Remi’s nocturnal distress, which sometimes raised gooseflesh on her own depleted body. Once she realized the problem was getting worse instead of better, she had started asking Remi with some frequency whether she was feeling all right, whether something was bothering her, or whether anything was wrong. Remi, however, had consistently replied that she was fine.

Now, sensing a moment of vulnerability, Ash continued in a much softer voice. “This would be a really good time for you to drop the loving-mother-spare-her-grieving-daughter-any-worry thing that you’ve been doing,” she said. “You thrash around and whimper in the night, and sometimes you yelp like you’re being hurt. I couldn’t ignore it even if I wanted to—which I don’t—and I very much wish you would talk to me about it.”

“You’ve gone through a horrible, horrible time, honey, and the last thing you need is to go borrowing trouble from me.”

“I love you all the more for trying to spare me, but I would much rather know than not know. I’ve been trying to get you to open up to me for weeks and weeks now.”

“I can’t. Not when you’re still suffering so much over Kevin.”

“I promise I can take it, Mom—whatever it is. So please: tell me what’s going on.”

Remi's face drooped, and she blinked slowly in defeat. She finally reached out, took Ash's hand in hers, and sighed. "All right then, sweetie. You win. I'm too tired and beaten down to keep trying to put up a good front any more, so here it is. I've been having some problems, too."

"You're not sick with cancer or something awful like that, are you, but you didn't want me to know?"

"No. I don't think it's anything like that. As far as I know, I'm still healthy as a horse, except for being so tired from not sleeping well. I don't think...I really don't think a disease is the cause."

"Then...what?"

Remi sighed heavily. "The short answer is, 'I don't know.' The main problem I've been having is nightmares, but as far as figuring out what's causing them, I'm basically at a loss. For one thing, I never remember them when I wake up, except for being aware that they were awful."

Ash thought back to her own first wakeful moments that morning and felt a tiny flutter of unease. "That's weird," she said. "As it turns out, I had something like that happen last night. But back to you. I hate to even think it, but can brain tumors cause nightmares?"

Remi shrugged. "That's possible, I guess, but I don't have any other symptoms that might point to a tumor, like headaches or losing my balance, or trouble finding words. "

"So...what? You're thinking this is a psychological problem, then?"

Remi nodded mutely.

"What kind of a psychological problem?"

Remi shook her head. "I have no idea, honey. What I *do* know is that we'd better shelve any further discussion about this until later. Paul will be back with the U-Haul any minute, and I'm sure he would be considerably less than delighted to find us wasting valuable time talking to each other. "

Ash grimaced. "Right. Silly me! Of *course* he'd be less than delighted. But the conversational door is now officially open between us, isn't it?"

“Yes. We’ll definitely talk. And can we also agree to keep our minds open to the possibility of getting professional help once we get through this move?”

“As in, from a doctor, counselor, shrink, or whatever?”

“Yes.”

Ash pursed her lips in thought. Finally she smiled slyly and said, “Okay. Since I’m betting that professionals will be in very short supply out in the farthest reaches of West Texas, I will agree to keep an open mind.”

Remi huffed and scowled. “Well, you clever little weasel!”

Grinning unrepentantly, Ash said, “Did I tell you I might switch to prelaw when I go back to school? I’m just kidding, of course. Quit fussing over me now, and go pack a box or something.”

Remi levered herself off the bed and gazed down on her only child. “I never fuss over you,” she said. “I just hyper-mother sometimes. Which reminds me: I have fruit, cereal, and whole grain English muffins set out in the kitchen for you. Come grab whatever you want.”

“You’re the best, Mom! I’ll be out in a couple of minutes.”

As the door shut behind Remi, however, Ash made no move to rise. Instead, she let her eyelids droop closed. As she rested against the day ahead, she thought again about her mother’s tortured nights.

Most caring daughters, she assumed, would have talked to their fathers about their mothers’ problems—but most caring daughters did not have Paul Thorne for a father. Ash strongly doubted any good would have come of a discussion with him. Her frank assessment of her parents’ relationship was that they barely knew each other now—if indeed, they ever had.

Paul was a technical consultant of some sort in the wireless broadband industry. He apparently made very good money doing whatever it was—which she supposed was only fair, since his job made him an absentee husband and father who was home only one or two days a week. That made little difference to her, though. Even when Paul was at home, he was rarely to be seen. He spent most of his time closeted in his home

office and habitually worked through the dinner hour and late into the night.

Since Paul was chronically AWOL from their lives, it was entirely possible he had not even noticed Remi's problem. Worse, the sad truth was that if he *had* noticed something wrong, he would not necessarily have bothered to ask Remi about it. Even on his best days, he was profoundly lacking in the warmth and empathy departments.

In any event, since Remi was opening up to her, it was highly unlikely that Ash would ever bring the subject up with Paul. She now found she was relieved that she hadn't, because she realized that talking to him would have felt like a betrayal of her mother.

Since Ash loved her mother dearly and felt close to her, she also found it more than a little strange and unsettling to have no real idea what might be causing her bad dreams. People undoubtedly lost sleep all the time because of the stress of moving, but loss of sleep was a different matter than chronic, terrible nightmares. Besides which, Remi and Ash had made so many "career moves" with Paul that it was almost second nature to them. She therefore tended to discount stress related to the move as the villain.

On the other hand, she could see where increasing frustration and disenchantment with their entire, semi-nomadic life with Paul might be playing a significant compounding role. A few weeks earlier, in an uncharacteristically candid moment, Remi had complained to her with obvious bitterness about their tumbleweed existence and the isolation it produced.

"Every time I start feeling settled and making a few friends," Remi had railed, "we have to jerk up our poor, stunted little roots again and go off to someplace new. Every single time, Paul promises it will be the last move, but of course, it never is. I don't think even he believes that anymore." A moment later she had added, "That said, since I would rather live almost anywhere on Earth than where we're headed now, I should actually be hoping this *won't* be our last move."

Even so, the severity of Remi's sleep disturbances seemed to Ash to be disproportionate to the total package of stress associated with their

rootless lifestyle and getting through the mechanics of packing and moving again—which led Ash to wonder whether some X-factor associated with this particular move was upsetting her mother. On the surface that seemed plausible, since she knew that both Paul and Remi had been raised in the tiny town of La Sima. It was entirely possible that Remi had some historical baggage that was fueling her reluctance to move back. Ash tried to recall whether she had seen or heard anything specific that would tend to support the hypothesis, but absolutely nothing came to mind. In the course of thinking about it, however, she was surprised to realize that she could not remember either how or when she had first learned they were moving to La Sima.

She knew she had been oblivious to almost everything but Kevin and her grief, but a memory gap like this one did seem fairly extreme. She was certain she already knew about the impending move the day Remi had complained to her, but beyond that, she drew a blank. If she had not been so exhausted and depressed for so long, she would be worried about it. As it was, although she did find it very odd, in her still dark frame of mind, it did not rise to the level of being a significant concern. In point of fact, worrying about her mother was still just about the only thing that seemed to matter to her. For her own part, she could not have cared less about why they were moving, what their new home would be like, or even whether she was losing her mind.

“Ash!” Paul’s sharp voice and three loud raps on the bedroom door snapped her to attention.

“I’m up,” she called. “I just need a couple more minutes.”

“Well, get a move on, will you?” Paul grumbled. “There’s still packing to do before we can start loading.”

“Okay, okay,” Ash said. After another moment, she summoned the strength to swing her legs over the side of the bed, got up, and plodded into the bathroom. She took a shower, but as usual since Kevin’s accident, it was a flat experience that had almost no effect on her levels of energy and alertness.

Thankfully, as she was blow-drying her hair, Remi knocked at the door and handed in a steaming mug of green tea. “I love it when you pamper me like this,” Ash said. “You make me feel like a little lost princess.”

Twenty minutes later, after nibbling at the edges of an English muffin and sipping at a second mug of tea, Ash started working side by side with Remi. Together, they packed the linens, the kitchen, and the bathrooms. Paul, meanwhile, broke down the entertainment center and the beds. He was obviously unhappy in his self-assigned tasks, for at regular intervals Ash heard him cursing angrily. “What a grouch,” she murmured.

Shortly before noon, one of Paul’s associates from work arrived to help him load heavy items into a large U-Haul truck. Paul did not bother to introduce the man, which suited Ash fine, since she very soon came to dislike him. Repeatedly, she caught him eyeing her and her mother with a greasy, speculative look that made her feel vulnerable and faintly contaminated. Her discomfort soon drove her to change from short cutoff jeans and a tank top into conservative khaki shorts and a matching camp shirt. The man’s behavior did not change, but Ash at least felt more shielded from his gaze. She was greatly relieved when Paul finally walked his colleague out, and he drove away.

After they finished packing, the women started cleaning. Mid-afternoon found Remi scrubbing vigorously at the floor of her shower. “The cleaning is probably what I hate most about moving,” she complained to Ash.

“Why don’t we ever hire a maid service to do it, then?” Ash asked.

Remi shrugged. “I always ask, and Paul always says, ‘No.’”

“Why? What’s his problem with it?”

“I have no idea. Far be it from Paul ever to give a reason. He just says, ‘No,’ and that’s the end of it. And since I refuse to turn over a less than clean house to the new owners, you and I get to enjoy hours of cleaning on top of the packing.”

“I’m sure the buyers will appreciate your thoughtfulness, Mom—or perhaps compulsiveness is more what’s really driving you. Either way, if

you insist on disinfecting the house molecule by molecule, you aren't going to have any energy left for the drive and the other end of the line." Ash had been operating on autopilot, swabbing out the toilet with little interest in the quality of her work. Now, she frowned in distaste as a tiny splash of Lysol-water made a dark ring on the leg of her shorts.

Remi sighed. "You're right, of course, but I'm still not going to stop. I won't feel right unless I leave it really clean."

They were still scrubbing and polishing at four thirty when Paul walked into the kitchen whistling. "I'm all finished," he announced. "The U-Haul is loaded and dogged down, and the Lexus is set up on the auto transport. So it's time to wash the soot off your faces, my lovely Cinderellas, and ride off in your little silver carriage."

Remi stared up at her husband with both disbelief and guarded resentment showing on her face. Her own shoulders were sagging under a heavy load of fatigue and depression, but Paul looked morning-fresh and sounded ridiculously bouncy and cheerful. The muscles in her jaw tensed angrily. "Well, unfortunately, we're not quite done," she said. "It will take us at least another half-hour to finish up in here."

Beneath his blonde military buzz cut, Paul's expression turned stormy. Frowning, he shook his head. "No, Remi," he said. His voice was flat and cold. "The house is clean enough. You're done."

Remi blinked at him once and then a second time while she tried and failed to come up with a heated, rebellious reply. Whatever verbal barb she might have hurled at him was stillborn in her brain, and the will to defy dissolved like a sugar cube in a spoonful of water. As if from a distance, she heard herself caving in to her husband in the hated, mousey little voice that always seemed to come out of her after he issued one of his orders.

"If you honestly think it's clean enough, then I guess we'll wrap it up," Remi said. Even as she spoke, she wondered what had possessed her to give in to him like that yet again. The thought, however, like her little spike of rancor, passed almost as quickly as it had come. She stared down blankly up her cleaning tools and supplies, suddenly unsure

whether she had enough energy left even to gather them up and take them out to the car.

Paul's mouth curled into a crooked grin. "It baffles me why you all worked yourselves up into this ridiculous cleaning mania in the first place, but whatever. It's all over and done with now. The house is fine, and once we get on the road, you won't give it another thought."

At his mention of the road, Remi's head popped back up, and she exchanged a guilty glance with Ash. Only minutes before Paul came in, they had been talking about the long drive to West Texas and how exhausted they already were.

"Leaving tonight isn't a very good idea, Mom," Ash had said. "Neither one of us is fit to drive. We'd be like a rolling time bomb out there."

By contrast, Paul seemed unaffected by the full day of packing and loading, and he was plainly still itching to start the trip. Now, as he caught the look that passed between mother and daughter, his mouth turned down again, and all traces of boyish good humor vanished. He studied them for a moment, his cobalt blue eyes cool on theirs. "So what's the problem now, girls?" he asked at last. His voice was crisp, with a definite edge.

Remi and Ash both shifted uncomfortably. "The problem is that Ash and I are both completely whipped," Remi confessed at last. "We don't think it would be safe for us to drive, so we were talking about waiting until early morning to start the trip."

"We agreed we would leave tonight," Paul snapped. "That's been the plan all along, and both of you knew it. If you had spent more time working yesterday and less time sitting on your butts, you wouldn't have a problem."

The women sneaked another uncertain glance at each other, and then both of them dropped their eyes. "It's not like we're doing this on purpose or trying to sabotage your plans," Ash murmured in their defense. "Everything just took longer than we expected, and after working all day, we're pooped." She could not bring herself to meet her father's impossibly blue eyes and kept her gaze on the floor instead.

“All three of us have already put in a long, hard day,” Remi added, daring to look up again. “You must be exhausted, too, even if you don’t look it.”

“No,” Paul sneered, “I’m not. Unlike my poor little Cinderellas, who are apparently incapable of planning ahead, I’m fine.”

Anger flared up anew in Remi. “Why are you making such a big deal out of this, Paul? But if you want to play blame games and it makes you happy, then it’s totally our fault. Okay?”

“I thought we had already established that,” Paul retorted. His voice was like a whip.

Remi’s voice rose and began to quiver. “All right! That’s enough, Paul! It doesn’t change the fact that Ash and I are too tired to be driving. We need to rest and get some sleep before we get out on the highway.”

Paul did not reply. He only looked at the two women with unconcealed contempt.

His silence made Remi cringe inwardly, and her stomach wall started pumping out acid, but she nevertheless plunged ahead. “Why don’t we get a couple of rooms up at the Hampton Inn, grab showers, and sleep for a little while. We could get up and be on the road by midnight or one. What would be wrong with that?”

Paul’s eyes locked into hers. When he finally spoke, his voice was measured and chilly, and he spoke to her as if she were an errant four year old. “We agreed on a plan,” he said. “We made arrangements in La Sima based upon that plan. Did we not?”

Remi licked her lips anxiously and nodded. “Yes, we did.”

“And we have guaranteed rooms waiting for us in La Sima, do we not?”

“Yes.”

“What happens if we don’t check in there tonight?”

“We have to pay for them anyway.”

“That’s right. We still have to pay for them. And do we have workers scheduled to help unload the truck tomorrow morning?”

“Of course we do,” Remi almost whispered. “But if we’re balancing a little money and inconvenience against safety, safety should obviously come first.”

Paul shifted his piercing gaze to include Ash and went on in his cool, condescending tone. “Before we throw away that money, and before I have to try to reschedule our laborers literally at the very last minute, I want you to humor me and reevaluate how you’re feeling. I know how strong both of you are, and I can’t believe you’re all that tired. I think you’ve just talked yourselves into feeling worn out. Sure, you did some work today, but I know damn well you can handle this.”

Then his voice and face both moderated. “The hard part is already behind you. The real work is done. All you need to do is to stop being so negative and give yourselves permission to feel better. Take a few minutes and give your second winds time to kick in. You’ll bounce right back, and if we get on the road quickly, we should roll into La Sima sometime around one. So...come on, girls. Make Daddy Paul happy on this. Tell me you feel okay, and you’re not going to wimp out on me tonight.”

As Paul finished speaking, Ash realized that she was feeling better. She was by no means in top form, but she did feel less fatigued than she had a short time before. She sought out her mother’s eyes, hoping to read whether Remi, too, was getting her second wind and rethinking their objection to leaving now. She saw only an odd, unfocused blankness on Remi’s face.

Shrugging, Ash turned back to Paul. “Maybe you’re right, after all. I am definitely starting to feel better.”

Paul smiled. “See? What did I tell you, beautiful? Are you ready to go ahead, then?”

“I...yeah. I guess I’m okay with going on tonight—if Mom agrees, that is.”

Remi neither agreed nor disagreed, because she was trying to cope with a truly bizarre sensation. She could only liken it to having been fogged with an anesthesia. She didn’t feel bad, she didn’t feel good, and she didn’t feel numb. For several moments, it was as if she either had no

body or all status messages from her body to her brain had been suspended—including the reports of exhaustion that had been registering much of the afternoon.

Paul was clearly impatient for her to respond to Ash's query, but Remi was too stunned to speak. She stared at him helplessly.

"Has the cat got your tongue there, Remi? Or maybe you just can't stand admitting that I'm right. And you know damn well that I'm right, don't you? So how about it? Go ahead and eat a little crow, and let's just get started, shall we?"

Remi's nerve pathways seemed to be firing normally again, but she hesitated for another few seconds, trying to shake off her peculiar feeling. In that time, she realized that as much as she hated for Paul to be right and to give him any more fodder for his smugness, she did feel considerably better. She also had a vague sense of *déjà vu*, as if the seeming disruption of her nervous system paralysis was something she had experienced before—perhaps on more than one occasion. She could not, however, call up a specific memory of another time it had happened. She found the whole interlude alarming, but it was not the time either to think or talk about it just then. She forced herself to put it away and made a mental note to explore it further, when things were calmer again. Right now, Paul's eyes were boring into her, demanding an answer, and the bottom line was that she did feel fresh enough to make the drive. Given that, and given that it would please Paul—which always made her life decidedly more pleasant—she didn't see how she could refuse.

"Well," Remi said slowly, "I don't think I have to eat any crow, because for a while there, I did feel like I might topple over and never get up. But I do seem to be getting my second wind now, so I guess we might as well go on. I can make it if Ash can."

Paul smiled broadly and blew a two-handed kiss at the women.

"Terrific!" he exclaimed. His voice was genial and enthusiastic again. "I knew when push came to shove, I could count on my girls. So it's all settled, then. I thought I'd go in front in the U-Haul and let the two of you follow me in the Honda. Does that suit you?"

“Sure,” Remi said. “Whatever.” Even as she spoke, however, an attenuated but unmistakable wave of fatigue broke over her. It swamped her, and it showed no sign of retreating. A prickle of unease quickly followed. Her body was suddenly giving her strange, ping-pong messages about how it felt, and she had no idea why. Maybe she had been dead wrong earlier when she assured Ash that nothing was wrong with her physically. Maybe she had a brain tumor or neurological disorder of some kind after all, that was causing her nightmares as well as problems with body-brain communication.

There was a more pressing issue, however. If she stabilized at her current level of tiredness, kept yo-yoing in and out of exhaustion, or got worse, falling asleep at the wheel loomed as a significant risk. Unfortunately, Remi also felt certain that if she tried to take back what she said, Paul would fly into a rage. She hated herself for it, but she simply did not have the strength to fight him, even if it meant being a menace on the road.

Chapter 2

Ash took the first shift driving her mother's Honda Civic. She followed Paul west on Highway 290 through the Texas Hill Country. Both tourists and hunters paid good money to enjoy what nature had provided there, but the oak-studded, rocky region held little attraction for Ash. The geography was nothing new to her, and her focus at the moment was getting through the area without having a wreck.

The surge of renewed energy she experienced before they left Austin proved to be disappointingly short-lived—especially since she and Remi had committed themselves to covering over five hundred miserable miles. She noticed herself falling off sharply somewhere between Stonewall and Johnson City, and even before their first fuel stop, she felt like she had been cast into a highway-driving version of purgatory.

Both women had assumed Paul would be stopping at a restaurant somewhere along the way to have dinner and a take a break. Instead, he pulled into a hamburger stand in Ozona and bought sandwiches and soft drinks at the drive-through window. All Ash and Remi had time to do was stretch their legs for a few minutes and switch places in the Honda. Then, with no discussion, Paul handed two bags of food to the women, returned to the U-Haul, and drove off.

With Ash's help, Remi ate one-handed as she followed the U-Haul truck and auto transport down a now inky, almost unpopulated Interstate-10. She was furious with Paul for not stopping for a sit-down dinner, and her temper flared even higher when a clump of shredded lettuce and a mustard-coated dill pickle chip slid messily down her blouse.

"Oh, hell!" Remi cursed under her breath. "What is the *matter* with that man, that he wouldn't even let us stop long enough to have a civilized meal?"

"I wish I knew, Mom," Ash said softly. "I really do wish I knew."

A few minutes before midnight, quite awhile after they had left the interstate for a succession of state highways, Paul pulled into a brand new, well-lighted gas station at a fork in the road called Puma Junction.

Remi followed him in but stopped at a different island. She shut off the engine and sagged limply behind the steering wheel. “I’ll pump, if you’ll go in and pay,” she proposed to Ash.

“Okay,” Ash agreed. “I have to go to the bathroom, anyway.”

“Would you pick up a bottle of green tea for me? I desperately need caffeine.”

“Sure.”

When Ash got out of the car, her long, shapely legs protested against the hours of confinement. “Aw, cripes,” she wailed. “I’m almost paralyzed, and I’m so tired I can barely see straight. If I didn’t have to pee so bad, I’d sit down on the curb and cry.”

Remi gathered her own flagging resources and spoke with exaggerated heartiness. “Go take care of your bladder and get a tea or something for yourself, too,” she advised. “Everything will seem better after that.”

“I appreciate your lame little attempt to cheer me up,” Ash said, “but there’s no way it’s going to work. I’m having far too much fun wallowing in my pain.” Her mother’s soft laughter followed her as she hobbled stiffly away towards the mini-market.

The night cashier, whose name tag read “FRANK MACKLIN,” was a heavy-featured man who appeared to be in his late twenties. He had puffy, pale skin and scars from serious adolescent acne. He wore his poorly cut, mouse-brown hair in an outdated Prince Valiant style that was never intended for hair as thin as his. He had the oily, furtive look of someone chronically embarrassed by dandruff.

When Ash approached him to pay for her purchases, the man leaned halfway over the counter and leered at her. “Hey, tall babe,” he said slickly. “Got plans for the rest of the night? I get off work in a couple of minutes, and we could go have us some fun.”

“What?” Ash gasped.

“I said let’s go out and have some fun together—make it a special night. What do you say, sweet cheeks?”

Ash could not believe the unattractive and crudely spoken store employee was actually coming on to her in the middle of the night, in

the very center of cultural and geographical nowhere. “No!” she barked. “No way!” To avoid any chance of incidental physical contact with him as she paid, she dropped two twenties next to the cash register to cover the fill and two bottles of green tea.

“Your loss,” the cashier snapped. He was obviously not taking her rebuff well, and he was now making a show of undressing her with his hungry eyes.

Instinctively, Ash showed no sign of submissiveness. She kept her now narrowed eyes on his and spoke in a strong, flat voice. “I would like to have my change now,” she said.

The man spoke back in an aggressive, greasy tone. “Oh, sure thing, of course. Anything that pleases you, I’d just *love* to do.” Incredibly, he parted his lips and flicked his tongue at her suggestively.

Ash recoiled in disgust. “One more word or obscene gesture, Mr. Macklin, will earn you a formal complaint with your employer,” she said. She deliberately used his name to underline the seriousness of her threat.

The cashier’s pockmarked face flushed with anger. Glowering at Ash all the while, he dipped into his cash drawer, slapped Ash’s change down on the gray laminate counter, and shoved the bottles of tea into a small plastic bag.

By then, Macklin’s eyes were glittering so dangerously that Ash felt ill as she picked up her change and drinks. She was afraid she had miscalculated badly: Frank Macklin might not be just some loser of a clerk hitting on a late-night customer, but a full-blown psycho instead. And she had managed to set him off. She sensed a black sickness in him that seemed to ooze through his skin and seep out into the room like a foul vapor. Even if she got out of the store without any further ugliness, she now felt a moral obligation to report him to the company.

As if he were reading her mind, Macklin leaned towards her again and smiled knowingly. “Decided to tattle on me, didn’t you? Decided to get my ass fired, for sure.”

In spite of her more than ample justification, Ash flinched guiltily, and Macklin chuckled. “It’s not like I’m stupid or anything, bitch. I can read you like a fucking book. And since I really can’t afford to lose another job right now, I’m going to have to make you reconsider.” His voice was low and thick with menace.

Suddenly, the front door opened and Paul’s voice hissed venomously from behind her. “Has this slimy little bastard been bothering you, sweetheart?”

Frank Macklin’s face went corpse white and slackened with fear that Ash thought might well be justified. All it would take was one word from her, and her father would, at a bare minimum, chew Macklin up and spit him out. The only question was whether Paul would stop at a tongue-lashing—which Ash seriously doubted—or beat the younger man to a pulp.

When Ash turned to look at her father, his face was like cold marble, and his fists clenched and unclenched restlessly at his side. Ash hesitated. She was convinced that Macklin was a very sick and dangerous person, but all he had actually done was to slime and threaten her. Since she did not feel his offense rose to the level of the punishment he was likely to take at her father’s hands, she decided to be charitable. She would call in a complaint first thing in the morning but would spare Macklin the full force of her father’s wrath.

“It’s okay, Daddy,” Ash finally said. “There’s no problem.”

“Really.” Paul’s disbelief was manifest.

“Really, Daddy,” she lied. “He wasn’t bothering me.” She flashed a counterfeit smile at her father and said, “Let’s go have some more fun on the highway, shall we?”

Without waiting for a reply, Ash turned and walked away as casually as she could. As she butted her way out the glass front door, she glanced back at the two men. If looks could kill, Frank Macklin would already have been dead, but her father had apparently decided not to get physical with him.

Relieved but shaken, Ash hurried back out to the Honda. She opened the driver's side door, handed the plastic bag through to Remi, and folded herself into the driver's seat.

"Thanks," Remi said. "With luck, this may keep me awake for five or ten minutes more." She removed the bottles of tea from the bag, opened them, and set them in the drink holders on the console.

A minute later, Ash was back on the road, picking up speed behind the U-Haul and actually glad to be back inside the little car. After the unpleasant experience with Frank Macklin, sitting behind the steering wheel felt wonderfully safe and normal. Since there were almost no other cars on the two-lane state highway, she was able to follow Paul with ease.

Remi, who looked both exhausted and preoccupied, had lapsed into silence. That suited Ash fine. She had no wish to relive what had happened in Puma Junction by telling her mother about it, and since she did not feel like making idle chitchat, she made no effort to start a conversation.

It was Remi who eventually spoke first. While Ash was in the mini-market, she had allowed herself to dive headfirst into her own bitterness. Now, as the lights of Puma Junction receded behind them, she felt too burdened and lonely to keep silent any longer. "I can't believe this is happening to us," she muttered.

Ash had been wondering whether Frank Macklin could have been spying on her while she was in the restroom, and it took her a moment to shift gears and process her mother's utterance. "You can't believe *what* is happening to us, Mom?"

Abruptly, a feeling that she was about to do something dirty and wrong reared up in Remi's brain like a great, gray cobra flaring its hood in warning. The impulse to confide in her daughter and reveal her private thoughts now made her stomach lurch with anticipatory guilt and anxiety. Along with the rush of negative emotions came a strong compulsion to stifle her tongue.

Remi almost gave in to the strong, internal mandate to remain silent. Then—perhaps because there was both an unnatural and an

unwholesome feeling to it—she scowled into the darkness and made herself plunge ahead.

“Since the day I left La Sima for college,” she said with a quaver in her voice, “I have never once gone back. Not for reunions, weddings, funerals, or anything else.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. And that was not by accident. I never wanted to set foot in the damn place again. Now, here we are driving back to La Sima at this perfectly ungodly hour, with all our worldly goods in tow.”

Ash’s face tightened with concern. “I don’t remember you ever talking about La Sima except in passing. In fact, about the only thing I remember you saying is that you and Daddy both grew up there. If you hated it that much, why are we moving there?”

“The short answer is, ‘Your father.’ As you may have noticed, he’s practically ecstatic about it, by Paul standards, anyway. And keeping him happy—or at the least keeping him from being *unhappy*—is of course worth a great deal to me.”

“Let me make sure I have this right,” Ash said. “You’re telling me you think it’s worth it to agree to something that will make you miserable in order to keep your notably short-tempered husband relatively happy?”

Remi frowned in the darkness. “Maybe I can put the past behind me, and if I can, then maybe I won’t be miserable this time around.”

“Since I have the impression that you’re already pretty stressed out and unhappy because of moving back, I have to question whether that’s a realistic hope.”

Remi sighed. “Well, you’re right that I’m already a little stressed out and unhappy about it. In all fairness to Paul, though, it’s also entirely possible that I’ve gotten myself worked up for no good reason. I go back and forth a lot on whether I think I can stand it there, or not.”

“I even found myself wondering if worrying about the move might be what’s causing your problems at night,” Ash ventured.

Remi cocked her head in thought and then gave it an uncertain shake. “I don’t know. Maybe. I can’t remember for sure what happened first, but I

think I was probably having the nightmares before going back to La Sima came up.”

“Okay, but here’s another thing. If Daddy knows you’re not happy about the move, how can *he* still be willing to go ahead with it? You did tell him how you felt about it, didn’t you?”

Remi did not reply for a moment. Finally, she shrugged. “I don’t know what to say. From the first second it came up, Paul was about as lit up as he ever gets. When I told him how I felt, he gave me one of his mini-lectures that went something like, ‘You’re being irrational, Remi. You’re injecting ancient memories and feelings into the equation when you have no idea how you’ll really feel once we’re settled out there. You think you’re going to hate it, but *I* feel sure you’re going to be happy.’ He also said he couldn’t see letting my imaginary emotional problems get in the way of such an enormous financial boon.”

“Is it?” Ash asked. “An enormous financial boon?”

“I don’t think I’d go quite that far, but it’s definitely attractive from a financial perspective. We’ll have thirty-thousand acres and a house, all totally debt-free, and our insurance and property taxes will be preposterously low out there. Paul says it will set us up beautifully for our so-called *golden years* and make it possible for him to retire pretty soon.”

“So in essence, you let money *and* keeping Daddy happy take priority over your own feelings. And he got his way, as usual.”

“That probably about sums it up,” Remi said almost in a whisper. “Yes. Paul got his way, as usual.” She paused for a second and then went on in a faux cheerful voice. “But, hey! There’s a good chance he’s right. You know how much of an alarmist and pessimist I am, and I may turn out to be very happy in La Sima. Besides, even if I’m *not* blissfully happy, how bad can it possibly be?”

Ash produced a laugh that was more like a snort. “You’d know that a lot better than I would, Mother. You’re the one that grew up out there.”

“And therein lies the crux of the problem,” Remi said, already sounding glum again. “Unfortunately, my pessimism is based on firsthand experience with living there.”

After a moment of reflection, Ash said, “Well, since this is a done deal, I hope for your own sake that you can keep from prejudicing yourself too much. In all honesty, it does sound like your attitude has room for improvement.”

“You’re right. It does—to the point that I feel a little guilty about it. Sometimes I even think I’m being a total, selfish ingrate. I wish I could somehow just blot out all of my preconceptions, because at least on the surface, it really should be a good move. Even though Paul will still be working for a while—which he can do from La Sima with no problem—we’re basically inheriting a place in the local, landed aristocracy.”

Ash sniggered in spite of herself. “Wow! I’m so impressed! I had no idea that soaring social status was going to be part of the package. Will you have to start using blue hair coloring in order to be recognized as a legitimate matriarch?”

Remi laughed. “I don’t think that’s an absolute requirement until after I’m fully gray.”

“How disappointing. I think you’d look terrific in a bouffant blue do. Anyway, while we’re on a positive note, what else will there be to like?”

“Well, if you like high mountain desert scenery, you’ll have plenty of that to enjoy.”

“Okay. What else?”

“Our lungs will get a break, since traffic will be nonexistent, and after Austin, the summers will seem refreshingly cool.”

“No more summer-long steam bath?”

“No more summer-long steam bath. On the other hand, of course, we’re leaving behind a lot of great restaurants, gourmet and organic food stores, state-of-the-art movie theaters, fast broadband, shopping malls, and high quality, live entertainment of all kinds.”

“What will La Sima have to offer in that regard?” Ash asked.

“At the time I left, the answer would have been, ‘Pretty much nothing,’ I’m afraid. As I understand it, though, La Sima and several other little near-ghost towns have been morphing into artists’ colonies and retreats for exhausted glitterati. Cattle ranchers and Border Patrol agents probably still outnumber the artists, but I gather that change is in the wind, and that the outlander surge is rapidly translating into restoration, renovation, and blossoming amenities. Even so, I’m sure they still roll up the sidewalks by nine o’clock, and we’ll definitely have some lifestyle adjustments to make.”

“Lots of plain old peace and quiet might be nice though, Mom,” Ash said wistfully. “I assume that’s the main attraction for all newcomers.”

“Oh, I’m sure it is,” Remi agreed. “Plus ‘the amazing light,’ as the artists say. I don’t think many of them actually live out here, either, by the way. They come visit for a few days or weeks or months, and then they fly back out to LA or New York or Paris or wherever.”

Ash smiled. “Well, if we start craving the bright lights and big city, we can always throw a suitcase in the Honda and cruise off to El Paso or San Antonio or Houston or Dallas for a few days, can’t we?”

Remi nodded. “Sure. But after a few days away, we’ll have to go right back to living out in the boonies and under the microscope.”

“‘Under the microscope’?”

“Oh, yeah! La Sima used to be small-town America with a vengeance, and it can’t have changed all that much. You can expect everything you do to become public knowledge—and I do mean *everything*.”

“Hmm,” Ash mused. “I hadn’t thought about that. It sounds like it will take some getting used to. But on balance, it sounds like La Sima might not be all bad.”

“Hopefully, it will not.”

“But we still can’t move you from the Pessimistic to the Optimistic column.”

“No. Not quite yet, at least. I’m sorry, but I just can’t help it, honey.”

“Explain this to me better, then. What happened when you were growing up there that turned you so completely against La Sima?”

Remi exhaled loudly and chewed at her lip. Another strong feeling of anticipatory guilt for talking out of school surged up in her. She fought it, but this time it was almost impossible to break through it and open up to her daughter any farther. “You’ll think I’m losing my mind,” she finally said.

“I’ve suspected that for some time now, so please don’t worry about it.”

Ash’s attempt at lightness found no traction with Remi, who went on in a somber tone. “All right, then,” she said. “The bottom line is that it completely creeps me out.”

“It creeps you out? What in the world do you mean by that?”

“If I think about La Sima, I start feeling weird and creepy—like there’s something to be afraid of there. Something really bad.”

“Such as?”

Remi’s mouth twisted, and she sighed in frustration. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “I can’t even begin to tell you where it’s coming from, but when I think of La Sima, I get this feeling of...I don’t know. Dread. It’s a clammy kind of a feeling—a little like when you’re walking alone in the dark and you get scared something is going to jump out and grab you.”

As Ash heard the underlying fear in her mother’s voice, goose pimples tried to come up all over her arms and back. “I have no idea how to respond to that,” she breathed, “or what to make of it.”

“I don’t either, honey. But at least you know where I’m coming from now.”

“Have you told Daddy about this?”

“Oh, God, no! And I don’t want you to mention it to him, either. He’d probably have me committed.”

“All right, I won’t. My lips are sealed. But how do we cure you from being spooked?”

“I’m not sure I *want* to be cured,” Remi said in a grim, tight tone. “For all we know, being afraid may be an adaptive behavior in La Sima.”

“Oh, come on now, Mother,” Ash chided her gently. “You don’t really think there’s a resident bogeyman lurking in La Sima, do you?”

Remi tucked her hair behind her ears and frowned out her side window at the night. “No, I guess I don’t,” she finally said. “There’s no such thing as a bogeyman, in La Sima or anywhere else.”

* * * * *

Ash had reached that hollow, punch-drunk state in which stationary objects beside the road can ripple and change almost at random. She was guiltily aware that she was drifting in and out of being a hazard to other motorists, but she continued driving anyway. She justified her action by telling herself that there were almost no other cars on the road, and that they were getting very close to La Sima. They had been driving down backcountry roads for hours, and La Sima had finally started appearing on the road signs. The town that was apparently the last one before La Sima, called Madrone, was behind them, and if she could hang on, she expected the grueling trip to be over in less than half an hour.

Turning the wheel back over to her mother for the last few miles was simply not an option. Remi had put up the best front she could, but Ash had easily seen through the pretense, and she knew that her mother was in even worse shape than she herself was.

Remi had stoutly refused when Ash urged her to crawl into the back seat and take a nap. Instead, she made a valiant effort to stay awake and alert and keep talking to Ash. Just after they passed through Madrone, however, the effects of stress, fatigue, and weeks of disturbed sleep finally proved too much for her. Three times, Ash watched her doze off with her head bobbing like a dashboard doll and then jerk back awake. Each time, Remi snapped back to an ever more tenuous wakefulness.

Ash was worrying about the possibility of whiplash when Remi finally sighed, muttered something unintelligible, and slumped against the doorframe. While Ash was glad her mother seemed to be snoozing fairly comfortably, listening to her regular breathing made it even harder for Ash to stay awake.

It was perfectly clear to Ash that she should pull off at a rest stop to take a nap or at the very least to stretch her legs. It was both stupid and dangerous to risk an accident by continuing to drive. Stopping, however, would bring Paul's anger down on her head, and that was a penalty she would prefer not to pay.

She was painfully aware that her dilemma made pitiful statements about her relationship with her father as well as her personal and moral shortcomings. Even so, rather than making him angry, she simply kept on driving. She was doubly depressed by the certainty that Remi would feel and behave in exactly the same way if she were behind the wheel right then.

Less than ten miles east of La Sima, the tail lights of the U-Haul turned smeary ahead of Ash, and her grainy eyes began to cross and slide shut. A moment later, the Honda's right front tire dropped off the pavement onto a low gravel shoulder. Reacting purely by instinct, Ash swerved back onto the road before the tire sank into the soft sand beyond. Her heart thumped wildly in her chest, and she drank in gulps of air. If she had been a fraction of a second slower, the car would probably have flipped. Even worse, she could easily have crashed into a concrete culvert that had been only yards ahead.

The thought made Ash shudder. For her, one of the worst possible fates was the one that Kevin had suffered, and that was exactly what she had been courting—for Remi, for herself, and for complete strangers out on the road. Anger and self-loathing surged through her in concert with her pulsing adrenaline. Almost immediately, her fury and disappointment also channeled themselves to her father, for having pushed her and her mother into such an untenable situation.

The near crash had yanked Ash back to full alertness, but she still rolled her window part way down and let the outside air blow in on her face. Where the jolt of the tire leaving the road had failed to awaken Remi, the wind noise now made her whimper and stir restlessly.

A few minutes later, while Ash was still berating herself, she followed the U-Haul over the crest of a significant hill. Suddenly, the two vehicles were barreling through an orange, halogen light perimeter that marked

the city limits of La Sima. She had to bite her lower lip to keep from sobbing.

Ahead of her, Paul abruptly slowed all the way down to twenty-five, forcing Ash to do the same. Decaying buildings loomed like dark lumps on both sides of the highway. When Ash noticed only one structure that was being renovated, she could not help but question the veracity of any claims of an ongoing renaissance.

Nor did Ash see a single other vehicle, a pedestrian, or even a stray dog on the streets of the tiny, night-silent town. Literally the only sign of life was a blinking yellow light where the highway intersected the town's main thoroughfare.

The noise of the U-Haul engine was shocking in the high-desert stillness, and Ash shivered. She was essentially a creature of the city, and the complete absence of activity now struck her as sinister rather than restful.

About six blocks beyond the caution light, Paul drove under a graceless arch into the barren asphalt reception area of the Welcome Inn. Even as exhausted as she was, Ash could not find the motel inviting. The office and the property's nine cabins, which were arranged in a U-shape around a bedraggled courtyard square, appeared to have been built sometime in the 1930s or 1940s. Throughout, the graying white stucco on the walls was still decorated with egg-shaped protrusions arranged in a regular pattern. The owners had clearly not yet been caught up in the spirit of local renewal.

As Ash came to a stop in a parking space near the office, groaning inwardly, Remi stirred and rubbed at her eyes. "Are we finally here?" she asked.

Ash sighed. "Oh, yeah. We're here."

"You don't sound happy," Remi said over a yawn.

"The Welcome Inn isn't exactly what I was expecting. It's...kind of moldy looking, Mom."

Remi sat up straight, blinked, and looked out the windows. “Oh, crap,” she said. “There’s supposed to be a new Holiday Inn Express just west of town. I thought Paul had booked us into that.”

“I guess not,” Ash said in a dejected voice.

Just then, Paul sprang out of the U-Haul cab smiling, flashed a V-sign in their direction, and walked into the motel office. There was an obvious bounce in his step, and after her narrow escape on the road, Ash found it deeply annoying. “Doesn’t he ever run down?” she asked sourly.

“Not as far as I can tell,” Remi said, yawning again. “Believe me: if I knew where his battery compartment is, I’d take them all out and hide them.”

They watched through the plate glass office windows in silence as a surprisingly young and animated desk clerk completed their registration. Minutes later, Ash let herself into her cabin, which turned out to be tiny but sufficiently clean. In spite of the hour, she took time for a relaxing soak in a tub of steaming hot water. Then she pulled on a cotton nightshirt, collapsed on the bed farthest from the door, and got started on the six hours of much-needed rest that her father had allocated.

Chapter 3

After previewing the Bonus Breakfast at the Welcome Inn, which consisted mainly of Danish pastries still in the packages, Remi was glad she had taken time to pack a cooler full of food for their first few days in La Sima. She returned to her room and set out a much more palatable mini-buffet of fresh fruit, boiled eggs, juice, and bakery department bear claws for the three of them to visit on their own schedules.

At nine thirty, Paul checked out of the motel while Remi and Ash tucked themselves into the Honda. He came out of the office whistling, hopped nimbly into the big truck, and drove ahead of the women to the gas station that doubled as the local U-Haul yard.

Ash pulled in and parked in front of the restrooms, which were just around the corner from the office door. Both she and Remi rolled down their windows so the still cool morning air could circulate and settled down to wait.

After a brief consultation with the proprietor, Paul re-emerged, backed his black Lexus off the auto transport, and pulled it into a vacant parking space. Then he drove the truck to an area on the edge of an adjacent vacant lot and unhooked the transport. When he was finished, he more strutted than strolled over to the Honda and leaned down to peer inside. "Everything's working out just great," he crowed happily. "This guy is very, very accommodating. I'm going to leave my car here, and I'll pick it up when I bring back the U-Haul. So let's head on out to the home place, ladies."

After they left town, the final sixteen-mile segment of their journey was on a wide but severely rutted dirt road. Ash had no experience with poorly maintained rural roads, and she drove nervously and badly. Whenever the little car started to washboard, she went too quickly for the brake, which only caused further bumping and loss of traction. The huge soil conservation humps that crossed the road in the flats were even worse problems for her. Twice, her faulty technique on the humps bounced both of their heads off the ceiling.

“My God!” Remi bleated after the second time. “I should have given you lessons before I turned you loose on this road.”

Ash glared at her. “What? You could do better?”

“Yes,” Remi laughed. “A thousand times, yes I could.”

“And exactly how would you accomplish that?” Ash challenged.

“The trick on the humps is to coast the last third or so of the way up and then accelerate slightly just as you top out. Aside from that, the main thing is to go at it slowly and steadily and to avoid slamming on your brakes. On a dry, rough road like this, braking suddenly tends to make you skid out.”

“Well, thank you, Mario Andretti.” Ash’s tone was caustic, but she immediately tried out her mother’s advice. As a result, both her driving performance and her confidence quickly improved. Only then was she able to steal glances at the grass-covered high desert plateau that surrounded them, and the foothills and towering blue mountains beyond.

“Now that it’s daylight,” Ash said, “I can begin to see why artists and photographers would love it out here. Hermits and fugitives, too, of course.”

“It is pretty if you like the high desert, and it is mostly unspoiled out here,” Remi said grudgingly. “I will at least give it that.”

When the U-Haul and the trailing Honda jounced to a halt in front of the Thorne family homestead, it was almost ten thirty, and the sun was getting hot.

Even after the suffocating dust raised by their arrival had dissipated, Remi and Ash sat for many seconds in silence. Much of the house was concealed behind an enormous thicket of half-dead weeds and wild sunflowers. The little they could see beyond was hardly more promising. Weatherworn, gray composition shingles crowned peeling, Federal-blue eaves, and the walls of the old house were coated with an ancient-looking finish of cement colored, cottage cheese stucco.

Remi found her voice first, but her tongue felt thick with dismay. “Oh, dear God,” she whispered. “This is much worse than I expected, and I didn’t expect all that much.”

Swallowing her own grave disappointment, Ash did her best to be reassuring. “Well, it obviously needs lots of work. Once the weeds are gone, though, maybe it won’t look so bad.”

“I’m just sick,” Remi said. “That damned estate lawyer said it was ‘a little overgrown.’ I had no idea that meant we’d have to hack our way up to the front door with a machete. I just hope our work crew is prepared for what they’re going to be up against.”

Ash was peering into the rearview mirror at an awkward angle. “I see what looks like a miniature dust storm back down the road a little way. At a guess, that might be the crew now. If so, they’re arriving precisely on cue and on schedule.”

“You sound surprised.”

“I am. I figured people in a sleepy little town like La Sima would have a pretty laid-back attitude toward the clock.”

“A lot of them probably do, but not Ben Walker. Not unless he’s completely changed his personality since I knew him.”

Ash exhaled reluctantly. “Well, no rest for the weary, in any case. Let’s get our much-used derrieres out of this tin can and see about getting down to business.”

The women shouldered open their respective doors and stepped out onto what remained of a pea gravel parking area after years of erosion and neglect. Paul had already gotten out of the U-Haul, and he stood leaning against the side of the cargo compartment. His arms were crossed over his chest, and he had a Cheshire-cat smile plastered on his still youthful-looking face.

“You like weeds that much, do you?” Ash asked, rankled by his good humor.

“I like what’s behind them,” Paul said easily. “I like what’s around them. I like owning all of this. And I just love the view.” He gestured gracefully with his hand, like a magician’s assistant, directing the women’s attention to the vista around them. “So will both of you.”

Ash swiveled on the balls of her feet to take in the full panorama from the rise on which they stood. To their south, a narrow, flat valley

stretched all the way back to La Sima and beyond, but to the east and west, undulating, grass-covered hills rolled away until they bumped up against mountains that seemed to change color from second to second. Something inside of Ash softened as she drank in the scenery, and she found she was sorry she had not been able to pay more attention to it on the drive out. “Actually, you’re right, Daddy,” she said. “It is quite beautiful.”

“You still love it, too, don’t you, Remi? Over the years you may have forgotten how magnificent it is, but now that you’re back and seeing it in person again, you find it amazingly beautiful, too, don’t you?”

“Sure,” Remi growled. “It’s lovely.”

“Oh, come on!” Paul pressed. “Drop all your damn prejudices from the past, Remi, and admit that you love this country. And that you can be happy back here at home.”

Remi did not reply for a moment. Finally, barely above a whisper, she said, “I... Okay, Paul. I admit it.” He was right, of course.

She had always loved the raw natural beauty of this unique high desert area, where the pure, intense colors of and sky and mountain and prairie constantly shifted and competed for attention. How could she possibly have forgotten, she wondered, and why had she not looked around and remembered that feeling on her own, before Paul had to prod her into it? And if she would only put aside the past and make an honest effort, there was really no reason she couldn’t be happy here.

Ash’s voice intruded on Remi’s introspection. “How much of this do we own, Daddy?” she was asking. “Where’s our property line?”

Paul chortled. “Our little ranchito more or less goes from that mountain...to that mountain...and then back to the third-to-the-last cattle-guard we crossed as we drove in.”

“My God!” Ash exclaimed. “It’s huge!”

“Not really,” Paul said. “Not by West Texas standards.” He grinned smugly. “Even so, I think it will probably be large enough to meet our needs.”

With his self-satisfied smile still in place, Paul briefly retraced the perimeter of the homestead with his eyes and then focused his attention on the road. “So. Here comes good old Ben,” he said. Ash thought she saw his eyes narrow ever so slightly as he spoke.

All three of them turned to watch the approach of Ben Walker’s dented and filthy Suburban. The dark blue van roared across the wide, dry creek bed just to their west, at the base of the rise, and bounced up the steep, badly washed incline to the house. A late-model, gray Toyota truck in pristine condition followed at a discreet distance.

Once he was parked, Ben bounded out of the Suburban and trundled over to the Thornes. He approached Paul with a hand out and a smile on his tan, leathery face. “Paul,” he said. “It’s been a long time.”

Paul shook his hand, his own face impassive. “Ben,” he nodded. “Nice of you to help us out today.” He paused and gestured towards Remi, his left eyebrow arching noticeably. “You remember Remi, of course.”

Apparently taking that as permission, Ben turned to Remi with outstretched arms. “Remi, Remi, Remi!” he crooned. “Give me a big old hug!” He enveloped her in his hairy arms, and for a breathless second he crushed her merrily against his ample girth.

Remi was laughing as he released her. “Ben, it’s so good to see you again.” She thought how like he was to a great, joyous, hyperactive black bear—but a bear that had not aged very well. She suspected that his career as a Navy hospital corpsman, which had reportedly involved working in combat zones as well as in the carnage left by several terrorist bombers, had a great deal to do with that.

She now turned and waved Ash forwards. “Ash, please meet our old friend, Ben Walker. Ben, this is our daughter Ash.”

As Ben reached out to shake hands, he studied Ash for a moment before speaking to her. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ash,” he said. Then he turned back to Paul and Remi, grinning broadly. “You’ve raised yourselves an absolute beauty here. There’s nothing else to say.”

Paul’s mouth curved upward with self-congratulation. “We certainly think so,” he agreed.

Ash, who was now squirming self-consciously, was saved by the driver of the gray Toyota truck. She judged him to be about six feet four inches tall, and the frame under his navy T-shirt and faded Levi's was slender but well-muscled. His short, curly hair was jet-black—almost blue-black—and heavy whiskers were already beginning to frost his jaws with midnight. As he sauntered over to the little group, he transferred his work gloves to his left hand and wiped his right palm on his jeans.

Ben's eyes sparkled, and his smile was wider than ever as he spoke. "Remi, Ash, and Paul, this is my son Russell. Russ, this is Remi Thorne, Paul Thorne, and their daughter Ash..." He trailed off and paused for a moment. "Thorne? It is still Thorne, isn't it?"

"Ah, yes sir. It is." Ash was unexpectedly flustered. Russ belonged on a movie screen or on a Los Angeles firefighters calendar page, not standing almost toe-to-toe with her in the dirt of a West Texas summer. "I..." she said, and then she faltered, finding a lump in her throat. "My fiancé passed away last winter."

Ben's face fell. "I'm very sorry to hear that," he said. "And please forgive me. I didn't mean to pry."

"I don't consider that you were, and it's not a problem. Really." Thankfully, thinking about Kevin even briefly had helped to restore her composure. She now turned to Russ and extended her hand. "It's nice to meet you, Russ," she said.

Russ held rather than shook her hand, and during three heartbeats of silence, she was forced her to meet the challenge of his penetrating, slate blue eyes. By contrast, his words, when they finally came, were conventional. "I'm sorry for your loss," he said in a smooth, deep baritone.

"Thank you," Ash breathed. She tore her gaze away and withdrew her hand, but not before she felt an unaccustomed tingle.

Russ shook Remi's hand and then Paul's, politely saying, "Ma'am," and "Nice to meet you, sir."

Paul eyed Russ at some length and then studied Ben with an almost mocking expression on his face. "You know, it surprised a lot of people

around here when you married and had a child. They didn't think you would ever marry."

"Well, I did." Ben's reply was short, to the point of being curt.

Paul picked up Remi's hand and stroked it possessively. "She's still a beautiful woman, isn't she?"

"Very," Ben agreed in a gravelly voice. He cleared his throat and quickly changed the subject. "Well. I brought two other men with us. I thought we'd let them work on the weeds while Russ and I make sure the house is in good enough shape for you to move in. Then we can start getting that truck unloaded for you."

"Great!" Remi said, too quickly. Her cheeks were hot with embarrassment, and her voice sounded much too animated, even in her own ears.

Ash, taken aback by the sudden level of tension in the air, wondered what in the world was going on. It almost seemed to her that her father was baiting Ben. The first chance she got, she would have to wring an explanation out of her mother.

"Come on, Russ," Ben said. "Let's go get dirty." Ben gestured to his two workers, who were now standing beside his Suburban, indicating they should come join him. Then he and Russ walked over and began trampling and kicking at thick plant stalks with their heavy Wolverine boots.

After several minutes, when the four men had forged a passageway to the start of a splitting and uneven concrete sidewalk, Russ went and asked Paul for a house key. Then, dragging cobwebs down with a dried sunflower stalk as he went, he led the way to the door.

From the walkway, the disappointing style and condition of the house were even more apparent to Remi and Ash. It was rambling and eclectic, an ill-advised mating of Old South and Western Ranch architectures. The best feature was a twelve-foot porch with black wrought iron support grills which appeared to run all the way around the house. Wooden shutters had once flanked all six visible windows, but four had fallen off completely, and all of them were in critical need of paint and repair.

Over the objections of the unused tumblers, Russ unlocked the heavy, paneled front door. He pushed it open halfway, tentatively, causing the hinges to creak noisily. Then he stopped, cocked his head, and listened intently for a moment. “Good,” he said finally. “I don’t hear any wildlife running around, so let’s go on inside.” Smiling reassuringly, he pushed the door open the rest of the way and preceded the Thornes across the threshold.

Remi stood in the dim light of the interior and tried to breathe in as little as she could of the musky smell that assaulted her nose. The second thing she noticed was the temperature. “It must be five or ten degrees cooler in here than it is outside,” she observed.

“Yes, ma’am,” Russ said. “That’s because of the wide porch and being up on this little hill. You should get a nice cross-breeze through here when all the windows are open. Whoever built this old place really understood how to use the natural airflow.”

“Whoa, wait!” Ash cried in alarm. “Are you implying there’s no air conditioning?”

Russ laughed easily. “That’s right, but there’s no need to panic. You honestly won’t need it in here.”

“Uh-huh, sure,” Ash said unhappily.

“Actually, Ash, he’s right,” Paul said. “You’ll find that it’s perfectly comfortable. You’ll never even miss the AC.”

Ash groaned. “Reassure me. Tell me that we at least have indoor plumbing and electricity.”

“Of course we do,” Paul snapped. “And everything is supposed to be turned back on today.”

Russ reached out to a wall switch and flipped it up and down with no result. “Nothing yet, but the guys that work for the city are usually reliable. If they promised to get it done today, I expect they’ll be along pretty soon. Since the house has been vacant so long, I would think they’ll be coming out in person, to make sure there aren’t any problems.”

“That’s what they told me,” Paul said crossly. “I just wish they’d hurry the hell up.”

Russ shrugged. “Unless we get some of those weeds knocked back first, they’ll be pretty hard put even to find the connections.”

Paul eyed him coolly. “I really don’t care whether they’re hard put or not. I want my utilities hooked up, and I want us to sleep here tonight.”

* * * * *

The whole house was dark and coated in a thick layer of dust, but Remi and Ash explored it with growing excitement. As they entered the master bedroom, Ash said, “You told me there was a some furniture left inside, but I had no idea there would be this much.”

“I didn’t either. The estate lawyer strikes again. All he said was that some of Paul’s mother’s furniture was still sitting in the house. Instead, the house is full of it, and it’s beautiful old stuff.”

Ash studied her mother curiously. “You act like you haven’t ever seen it before.”

“I haven’t.”

“So you’re telling me that in all the years you’ve known and been married to Daddy, you were never inside this house?”

“Nope, I never was.”

“Isn’t that a little bit strange, or am I missing something here?”

“Well, his family was totally dysfunctional.”

“Meaning?”

Remi started to speak and then stopped. She blinked in the gloom for a moment, then stepped back and glanced furtively down the hall. “I don’t think I want Paul to hear us talking about this,” she said, feeling extremely uneasy.

“Why is that?”

Remi shook her head and pushed the bedroom door closed behind her. “I don’t really know. I just don’t want him to hear.”

“Okay. What’s so awful that you don’t want him to hear you talking about it?”

Again, Remi shook her head. She did not understand why she was feeling so paranoid. “I just don’t think I want him to hear me saying anything at all about his family.”

“So talk quietly, but talk, weird Mother. He’s not going to hear what you say.”

Remi sighed and shrugged. “I don’t actually even know all that much,” she said. “Not first-hand, at least. Living in such a small town, I saw his parents around from time to time, but that was about it.” She paused and glanced behind her at the door again. Why was it making her feel so nervous and guilty to talk about them?

When she resumed, her voice was hushed and confidential. “People used to say Paul’s mother hated him from the day he was born,” she said. “I’m not sure it went quite that deep with his older brother, but it was widely known around town that Paul was seriously estranged from him, as well. Anyway, when Paul was in the sixth grade, his father died from multiple rattlesnake bites.”

“Rattlesnake bites!” Ash exclaimed. “Oh, that’s too creepy!”

Remi’s face twisted in distaste. “Yeah, it is. He apparently went into a little cave somewhere on the ranch looking for Indian artifacts and blundered into a nest of rattlers.”

Ash shuddered. “Yuck! What about his mother?”

“She died from a heart attack not long after Paul and I left for college.”

With her fingertip, Ash drew a frowny face in the dust on top of a carved oak dresser. “So what happened to the brother and the house after that?”

“The mother left the house to Paul’s brother, along with everything else. He never spent any time here, though. He was already living up in Canada by then, and he chose to stay up there.”

“If he didn’t want the place himself, why didn’t he give it to Daddy? Or sell it to him, at least?”

“Most people think there was so much bad blood between the two of them that he simply didn’t want Paul to own it.”

“But, why? That kind of animosity doesn’t come out of nowhere, you know.”

“I have no idea what happened between them to cause it,” Remi said.

“Okay,” Ash said slowly. “How did you all come to get the house, then? Did Daddy and his brother eventually reconcile?”

“Oh, no. No way. Paul inherited it by default. His brother died in a freak ski accident late last year. He had never married, he had no kids, and he didn’t leave a will.” She paused. “I suppose that was an oversight on his part. If he’d had some warning, he probably would have left a will naming somebody other than your father as his heir.”

“What does Daddy say about it? Doesn’t he ever talk about any of this?”

Remi shook her head. “No. Never. He’s always shut me out of that whole part of his life.”

“Haven’t you been dying of curiosity all these years? I wouldn’t have been able to stand it.”

“Oh, sure,” Remi acknowledged. “I’ve always wondered about it, but I’ve never been willing to poke around on it with your father.”

“How come?”

Remi frowned, because she realized that she wasn’t sure. “Well,” she stammered, “I mean...the whole thing must be very painful for him.”

Ash, who had been listening with growing disbelief, snorted rudely.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Mother! Maybe you can sell that to a stranger on the street, but you sure can’t sell it to me!”

“What do you mean?” Remi asked warily.

“Crippling, deep-seated emotions are simply not a problem for my father. So I’m having a lot of difficulty with the idea that you never asked him questions in order to spare him pain.”

Remi felt a sudden wave of dizziness. It was strong enough to make her look down at the floor and reach out to steady herself against the wall.

“Are you all right?” Ash asked, alarmed.

“Not really. I just got a little dizzy, and a little bit out of breath.”

“Then you need to sit down in the chair over there and put your head between your knees,” Ash said, and she moved to support her mother. She was quite concerned, and the possibility that Remi had a brain tumor leapt into her mind again.

“There’s no need,” Remi said. “I’ll be okay in a second. I’m already better.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. It must just be the altitude. Don’t worry about it, okay?”

“All right. If you say so.”

“I do say so: I’m fine. Where were we?”

Now it was Ash’s turn to frown. “I believe we were just winding down on the subject of why you never pressed your husband to tell you more about his relationship with his brother.”

“I don’t know what more to say about it, except to remind you of something I’m sure you already know: Paul and I don’t talk about much of anything with each other.”

Ash squeezed and released Remi’s upper arm and then stepped away.

“I’m sorry, Mom. I didn’t mean to be critical of you. And since I’m the one that’s itching to know, I should just ask him myself sometime.”

“Good luck even finding a night when he’s home, much less getting him to sit down and talk to you about family history. It may be easier, once I have assumed my rightful place in the community, if I try to tap into the full reservoir of local gossip about the Thorne family.”

“What are you talking about? What rightful place in the community?”

“My rightful place as a bridge biddy, what else?”

Ash laughed, but her laugh died quickly, and then she peered at her mother closely. “While we’re still talking behind a closed door, what was that little thing between Daddy and Ben out there?”

“That ‘little thing’?” Remi echoed.

“Yes, that little thing,” Ash insisted. “The way Daddy was acting made me wonder whether you and Ben didn’t have something going, once upon a time.”

Remi cleared her throat. “Well, I...I haven’t thought about that in a very long time.” She paused, blinking. “I wouldn’t say that we had something going, exactly, but there was a time when Ben and I were...definitely attracted to one another.”

“Nothing more than that? Come on, Mom. Confess!”

Remi felt confused, like she couldn’t quite remember the words to a favorite song, and she shook her head. “Well,” she said slowly, “I don’t think there was anything too terribly...heavy between us.” She frowned for barely a second, and then her face cleared. “It doesn’t matter, though, you know. Once Paul took an interest in me, that was pretty much that.”

“Mmm,” Ash rumbled. “I wonder whether—”

At that moment, Ben’s cheerful voice came booming out of the den.

“Hey, Thornes! Y’all come in here and check out your neighbor’s little shack.”

“A shack? Oh, great!” Remi muttered. She and Ash left the bedroom together and joined Ben in the den. A French door opened from the oak-paneled room onto the twelve-foot porch that ran all the way around the house. Ben’s crew had cleared away most of the weeds beyond it, and the view to the north was now fully visible.

Perhaps two miles away, only slightly east of north, a huge, walled estate filled the area between two rocky crags. In the foreground, thirty cultivated rows ran roughly west to east and parallel to the estate wall. A wide, landscaped median with what appeared to be a paved road in the center divided the rows into equal northern and southern sections. On each side of the median, in a chromosomal array, stood four barely visible, rectangular structures. They appeared to be windowless, and to have been cleverly painted to blend in with the landscaping around them. To the northeast of the cultivated area, the road and median terminated at an immense white mansion perched on the sculpted shoulder of a rocky peak.

“Good God,” Remi wheezed. “I think that may be the biggest house I’ve ever seen!”

Ben chuckled. “It may be the biggest house ever built, for all I know. And if you look way back over at the left, you can also see part of their airstrip. It’s long enough for personal jets to land on, and they have a whole separate pad for helicopters.”

“Well, you could knock me over with a feather!” Remi exclaimed. “And am I way off base, or is that thing actually faced with marble?”

“Uh-huh,” Ben said, “it is. I heard that’s the same Italian marble that was used on the LBJ Presidential Library up in Austin.”

An irrational aversion to the whole Hollywood-scale property suddenly burned like a hot coal in Ash’s brain. “It’s about the same size as the LBJ Library, too,” she snarled. “Maybe we’ll have an earthquake, and the whole damn mountain will come down on top of it.”

Remi gasped in surprise, and Ben stared at Ash in silence. “Ash!” Remi cried. “That’s an awful thing to say!”

Ash blinked rapidly in puzzlement, for her outburst was every bit as shocking to her as it was to Ben and Remi. “I’m sorry,” she whispered at last. “I have no idea why I said that. I just...had a very bad reaction to the place, for some reason. Maybe it’s because it looks so pretentious and absolutely reeks of selfish wealth.”

“That hardly justifies wishing it would be buried in an earthquake.” Remi finished scolding her daughter and turned her face to Ben’s. “Well. Please pardon my daughter’s little outburst, and tell us about this obviously mega-rich neighbor who has already earned her wholesale disapproval.”

“In actuality, it’s a vineyard and winery up there,” Ben said, “in addition to the home of the owner.” In the wake of Ash’s flare-up, his voice was noticeably subdued.

“A vineyard and winery?” Remi asked. “Here?”

Ben nodded. “The Chateau Terroir Winery. I think I said that right, but then, I’m never sure. The French always seem to me to waste the last few letters of words by not pronouncing them, if you know what I mean.

Anyway, it's owned and operated by a wealthy recluse named Nix. He's from somewhere up in the East, I think. Maybe New York State, or maybe it's Vermont. I forget."

"A vineyard," Remi marveled. "Back when, nobody did anything but raise cattle out here. How long has it been there? I've never read or heard a word about it."

"Well, I don't really know when they first started producing wine, but it probably hasn't been more than six or eight months since they finished the mansion."

They stared out at the estate in silence for a few more seconds until Ben shuffled his feet. "Well. If you'll excuse me, ladies," he said, "I'd better get back to work." As he turned to leave, he almost collided with Paul, who had slipped noiselessly into the room behind them.

"Oh, hey! I didn't hear you come in!" Ben yelped. "You scared me, for a second there."

Paul smiled charmingly. "I have that effect on people. I gather that you've all been standing here admiring the chateau."

"Seeing it, anyway," Ben said. "In all its glory."

"Do you drink wine, Ben?" Paul asked.

"Not much. I usually prefer a good cold beer, or a frosty margarita."

"I figured you for a beer man." Paul's voice purred with silky condescension. "I'm a wine drinker, myself. To me, there's no substitute for an excellent glass of red. At ambient temperature, of course."

Ben shrugged. "Then I guess you're going to love having the winery for your neighbor." He flicked a smile at Paul and brushed past him, out the door.

Paul stepped between Remi and Ash and draped an arm around each of them. "That's what I'd call a damned impressive sight."

Not wishing to argue the point, neither woman responded.

"It's all rather lost on you, isn't it, my Cinderellas? Terroir is a French term that translates literally into something like, 'a sense of place.' What it refers to in the world of wine is how the special characteristics of the

rocks, soil, geography, and climate affect particular varieties of grapes. In this case, it has all worked out splendidly, and Chateau Terroir has turned out to be a most excellent and very exclusive boutique vineyard.” A second later, Paul spun on his heel and left the den, humming contentedly.

Remi, however, hunched her shoulders and looked unhappy. “A very exclusive winery whose name I can’t even begin to pronounce correctly,” she said at last. “I was sort of awestruck at first, but the longer I look at it, the less I like it, either. I think you and I both have a deep-seated dislike and distrust of people who use their money to build monuments to themselves instead of helping other people or species or the environment. In any case, there’s something about the place that I find unpleasant, too.”

Ash was pleased and comforted to learn that her mother shared at least the echoes of her own disquiet. Even so, she was loath to describe to Remi how her initial, intuitive reaction seemed to have taken on a life of its own. Without conscious effort and even against her will, it had evolved and sharpened. As she stared out at the huge estate, she shivered. A cold, unreasoned fear now coiled sluggishly in her belly.

Thank you for reading sample chapters of *A Very Exclusive Vineyard*.

If you would like to continue reading the book, *A Very Exclusive Vineyard* is available as a Kindle eBook for only \$2.99 through the Amazon.com bookstore.

Please visit BooksByMorganLaw.com for more information about

- the author and all of her books
- how to obtain free eBook reading software for use on the PC, iPad, iPhone, or other devices
- how to purchase Law's books.

Contact Morgan Law at author@BooksByMorganLaw.com