

*New York Times* Bestselling Author

# NANCY BUSH

*He won't stop  
till he finds you...*

# Nowhere To Run

**"Nancy Bush always delivers edge-of-your seat suspense!"**

**—Lisa Jackson**

“It’s just Liv . . . please . . . and, yeah, someone’s after me.”

“Who?”

---

He was studying her in a way that made her extremely uncomfortable.

“I don’t know, but it’s always been there. I’ve always known it, felt it. I think this—*massacre*—has something to do with me.” She raked her fingers through her hair. “I can’t explain it. I don’t have any proof. I know you won’t believe me. Why would you? But it’s a feeling I have, and it’s *real*. . . .”

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## **Books by Nancy Bush**

CANDY APPLE RED

ELECTRIC BLUE

ULTRAVIOLET

WICKED GAME

UNSEEN

BLIND SPOT

WICKED LIES

HUSH

NOWHERE TO RUN

NOWHERE TO HIDE

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# Nowhere To Run

NANCY BUSH



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## Prologue

*Then . . .*

He stood outside the house, staring at it from the backyard. They didn't know he was there. They didn't know that he stood in the backyard of many houses, watching, thinking, plotting.

He could see her outline through the kitchen window above the sink. Her figure was hazy beneath the dress, but he smiled to himself as he watched her. He knew what she was like, what they were all like.

A yellow square of light from the window set in the back door fell onto scraggly grass. As he watched, she moved from the window above the sink to the one in the back door, peering out. For a moment his heart squeezed with the thrill of the hunt. Could she see him? Could she *know*?

But no. She couldn't know. She didn't know about the others though the newspapers and television reporters were squawking about the missing women whose bodies had yet to be discovered. She didn't know about *him*. How close he was . . . how she was in his sights . . .

His eyes burned and he wondered if she could feel his desire and fury, but she turned away, her back to him. The curve of her white nape was beautiful as she tilted her head as if listening.

*Do you hear me, bitch? Do you?*

He felt himself harden as he thought of her, and his cruel smile widened as he reached down inside his pants and began rhythmically stroking himself, part of the ritual, part of the beginning . . .

*Do you feel me?*

*I'm coming for you . . . now. . . .*

Livvie Dugan looked in the mirror and said, "I'm six years old today." She was missing one of her front teeth and she dragged her lips back in a snarl and stuck her little finger through the hole, just to see what it looked like. Pulling her pinkie back out, she next stuck her tongue through the space and squinted one eye and said, "Arrrgh, me mateys!" Just like pirates did.

It had been a grand day. Mama had gotten her a big cake with pink roses on it, and she'd blown out all the candles at once! Her brother, Hague, who was only two and a half and didn't know diddly-squat, according to their dad, tried to blow them out first, which made Livvie so mad that she stomped her foot. Livvie knew Hague was special; Mama said he was even though he seemed like he couldn't do diddly-squat but that didn't mean he got to blow out *her* candles! No way! She'd pushed him out of his chair and he'd toppled to the floor, and started crying like a big, big baby and Livvie kinda thought that's what he was, anyway, a big, big baby. But Mama had scooped him up and soothed him and then shot Livvie *that look*—the one that said she was really mad but would hold it in till later.

Then Mama sat Livvie in front of the cake and she sucked in tons of air and blew with all her might. The candles had flickered and gone out. All of them at once! It was grand, Mama said. Grand. But she'd still been mad about Hague, though, so she didn't smile too much. She got Livvie and Hague each a paper plate with a slice of the white cake with the pink filling and a small cup of milk. Livvie had asked for apple juice but Mama hadn't seemed to hear her, so she'd said it louder and Mama got it for her, kind of like one of those robots, like Mama didn't know what she was doing. Then Hague had gone down for his nap with a loud, "Nooooooooo!" as Mama carried him away, which was what he always said. Livvie thought he deserved to be put to bed and left there forever. After all, he'd tried to blow out her candles.

Livvie had finished her cake and smashed the crumbs with her finger and sucked them into her mouth. But Mama never came back, so Livvie had finally left the kitchen and wandered into the den and that's where she'd found Mama, just sitting on the couch. "What are you doing?" Livvie demanded. Mama had just left her in the kitchen and gone to the den! And the TV wasn't even on! It was just a dark square, but Mama was staring at it anyway, as if it were playing *General Hospital*, her favorite show.

"Why aren't you watching TV?" Livvie asked, upset. It was *her* birthday! Mama hadn't answered so Livvie declared, "I want to watch cartoons!"

Mama got up from the couch and stuck a tape in the machine. They had a videotape of some of her favorites though Mama said it wasn't going to last much longer and that was because Hague had grabbed it and pulled out some of the dark ribbon. Livvie had wanted to *kill* him, but Mama had put them back together and swept up Hague while Livvie wailed that Hague had ruined it! Well, he *had*. But the tape still worked okay sometimes.

Livvie settled herself onto the couch and though Mama usually left her to watch alone, today Mama had stayed and sat with her a long while which was kinda weird, but then Hague woke up and she went to get him. Livvie had expected Mama to come back and shoo her outside because Mama didn't like her watching cartoons too long, but today she didn't. It was Livvie's birthday, after all. When the tape ended, Livvie rewound it and watched it again. After that, she was kinda bored, so she grabbed up the new box game she'd gotten for her birthday, Hungry Hungry Hippos, and because it was no fun playing by herself, she went back to the kitchen and asked Mama to play with her. Mama was just standing at the sink, staring outside like she was in a trance. (That's what happened on cartoons, too. They went into trances sometimes and sort of floated around.) Hague was on the floor by her feet playing with some blocks, pounding one on top of another.

Mama said she couldn't come play right then, but maybe Hague could play with her? "No way!" Livvie yelled back, then quickly scooted back to the den. She played the game by herself, then watched some more cartoons. After a while Mama called her in for supper and she ate a Swanson turkey TV dinner. Mama knew it was her favorite, and Hague saw it from his high chair and said "Um, um, um!" 'cause he wanted some, so Mama gave him some leftover mac and cheese from lunch which he threw on the floor, of course. He pointed to Livvie's plate but Mama ignored him, for once. Livvie then smushed around her food when Mama wasn't looking and asked if she could have more cake.

She was kinda surprised when Mama brought her a piece, but she had to clap her hands over her ears when Hague, seeing Livvie's piece, started howling.

"Stop it!" Livvie yelled at him. "Mama, make him stop! It's my birthday! He's ruining it!"

"He's not ruining your birthday," she said as she gave him some cake, too.

Livvie was upset. "He can't have my cake. He's too little. And he didn't eat his mac and cheese!"

"He can have a bite."

"That's a whole piece! It's *not fair!*"

But Mama went back to the sink and stared out the window again. She kinda stood there, her hands braced on the counter, like she was having trouble staying on her feet.

Mad, Livvie glared at Hague who smacked away on his cake. Livvie dug into hers, too, but she couldn't quite eat it all because Mama had cut her a very big slice. A *grand* slice. Then, when she couldn't eat anymore, Livvie slid from her chair and left the room, and Hague said something to her. He couldn't talk right 'cause he was too little, and anyway, he didn't know diddly-squat, but it sounded like he said, "Kill you."

Mama turned and stared at him and he grinned at her with his little teeth.

Livvie then wandered back to the den and turned up the volume, loud. Mama rushed in and said



“Turn it down!” in that hissy whisper she used when she was really, really mad. “I’m putting Hague down for night-night and it’s too loud!”

“Sorry,” Livvie mumbled, but she really wasn’t.

Mama switched down the sound and left in a hurry. Livvie heard her putting Hague to bed and heard her wailing, “Noooooo!” and she crossed to the dial and turned it up again, just a little. She waited listening, but when Mama came out of Hague’s room she went right past the den back to the kitchen.

Hague howled for a while, then finally quieted down. Livvie rewound the tape and watched some of the cartoons again, but after a while she got bored and wandered down the hall toward Hague’s room. She kinda still felt mad at him. It was her birthday. Hers! Not his.

“He doesn’t know any better,” she said to herself, pausing outside his door.

She almost knocked. She kinda wanted to wake him up. Or, she wanted Mama to come back and sleep down with her in the den but Mama never did. After a while, she walked backward to the den, trying not to look around and not to run into any walls. She wondered if Mama was going to put her to bed soon, too. That thought turned her around and sent her scurrying back to the den couch where she slumped herself face down. If she was really, really quiet, maybe Mama would forget.

Then Mama cried out. Livvie lifted her head. What was that? She got to her feet and went to the den door, opening it a little.

“Mama?” she called softly, peeking out from the den. She wasn’t too far from the kitchen, just down the hall and around the corner, but she felt really scared all of a sudden. Carefully, her head jumping around in her chest, she tiptoed toward the kitchen. She could just see Mama; she was sitting at the table and her leg was shaking. When Livvie came up to her she saw that Mama was holding the side of her face with one hand. Underneath her hand the skin looked red and she was staring toward the open back door. There were tears in Mama’s eyes.

“What happened?” Livvie cried, alarmed. “Mama, what happened? Why is the door open? Is someone there?”

Mama looked around the room in a kind of scary way, Livvie thought, but when the policeman asked her later if when she said “scary” she really meant “blankly” Livvie just clammed up. She didn’t know what he meant.

The policeman had also repeated, “The back door was open,” to Livvie, like he didn’t really believe her, and Livvie had pretended she couldn’t hear him anymore and just sent herself away into a quiet world where no one else was. A place she went sometimes ’cause it felt safe.

But at that moment Livvie cried, “Mama! Is there somebody out there? *Who’s out there?*” Mama had used her mean voice and said, “Go back to the den, Olivia!” Livvie had started to cry. It was her birthday! Why was everyone so mad?

She’d run back to the den and slammed the door, still crying, waiting for Mama to come charging and send her to her room or something. But when that didn’t happen, she got mad, too. She stuck out her chin and crossed her arms. She sat down on the couch and stared at the door. She was going to stare at it and stare at it until Mama walked through.

But then . . . Mama never came and Livvie sorta forgot . . . and fell asleep. ’Cause suddenly she woke up and it was a lot later than she usually stayed up, she could tell. She’d drooled on the couch pillow and that reminded her of her tooth, so she went into the bathroom and stuck her tongue through the hole, squinted one eye, said, “Arrgh, me mateys!” and ran over the rest of the events of the day in her head.

She concluded that a pirate probably deserved another piece of cake, maybe even with ice cream this time.

She tiptoed back to the kitchen. But as she got close, her arms broke out in goose bumps. She stopped short. Her heart was speeding up, and she felt scared. “Mama?” she whispered.

No sound.

~~She stepped into the kitchen, looked, and started screaming. Screaming and screaming.~~

Because Mama was hanging in the air, her face all puffy and her tongue sticking out like she was joking around.

But she wasn't.

Livvie knew she was dead.

Dead. That's what it was.

Mama was dead.

Livvie kept on screaming and went to her safe place and that was the last thing she remembered for a long, long time....

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## Chapter I

*Today ...*

Liv swam up from the nightmare, soaked in sweat, an aborted scream passing her lips. Heart racing, she blinked in the faint, early-morning light sneaking beneath her bedroom window shade. What time was it? Five? Five-thirty?

Closing her eyes, she willed her galloping heart to slow down, aware of the fragments of her dreams but unable to completely grasp them. Didn't matter. She'd had enough nightmares to know this wouldn't be the last one—far from it—and though the dreams weren't exactly the same, they represented a deep trauma that years of therapy had never completely uncovered and erased.

At Hathaway House Dr. Yancy, who'd had enough compassion and understanding to actually make Liv believe she was really trying to help her, had once said, "I think it's something you saw."

Like no shit, Sherlock. She'd seen her mother after she'd hanged herself.

But Dr. Yancy had shaken her head slowly when Liv had been quick to point that out. Liv was always quick to defend herself. One of the problems, apparently, that had landed her in Hathaway House in the first place.

Dr. Yancy had then added, "You saw something else. Something you can't—or won't—let yourself remember."

That had caused a quickening in Liv's blood. An inner jolt of truth that had sent perspiration instantly rising on her skin as if she were having a hot flash. Her mind had clamped down hard, or so Dr. Yancy had told her, when she'd insisted she couldn't remember anything other than the horror of her mother's suicide.

But, though Liv denied Dr. Yancy's claim, she didn't completely disagree with it, though she never said so at the time. There did feel like there was something she did feel. And with it was the sensation that she was being followed. Stalked.

Now, years later, the question of whether her stay at Hathaway House had helped or hindered her still remained unanswered. None of the other so-called doctors and quacks at Hathaway House would have ever committed themselves to the kind of bold statements Dr. Yancy put forth; they all hid behind compassionate expressions and deep frowns and not much else. At the time even Dr. Yancy hadn't really wanted to show her hand to her contemporaries because they would have undoubtedly berated and dismissed her. Liv knew enough about the institution's politics to read between the lines and consequently she thought they were all a bunch of chickenshits with minimal understanding of the human condition and maximum interest in hanging on to their jobs.

But that wasn't really the question, was it? The question was: had Olivia Dugan been "cured" of her sweat-soaked nightmares and dark depression—the very reasons why, as a teenager, she'd been shuffled off to Hathaway House in the first place? Had Olivia Dugan learned to combat the triggers that sent her heart palpitating, palms shaking, thoughts colliding around inside her skull like pinballs firing the wrong neurons, causing her to make wild, unreliable choices?

The answer? A resounding no. Though she had lied and pretended and acted and done every damn thing she knew how to do to be released from Hathaway House, as far as a cure went, the answer was still no. She didn't know how to combat the triggers that started the nightmares and increased the depression. Even if she knew what they were. Even if she told herself to stay away from them.

Because last night, one of the triggers had been pulled. A blinking red light had welcomed her

home. The answering machine. A warning beacon. A voice from a stranger. She'd reluctantly picked up the receiver and listened to the phone message.

---

*The phone message . . .*

Now, Liv threw off the covers, shivering a little. She climbed out of bed and padded to the kitchen on a journey that took about ten steps across the tired carpeting of her one-bedroom apartment.

*The phone message.*

Lawyers had found her home phone number and left her a message. That was the trigger for her nightmare. She'd tried to ignore the blinking light when she'd tossed her keys on the counter. She asked herself for about the billionth time why she kept the phone and voice mail at all. Most of the time she liked the idea of being off the grid completely. That's why she didn't carry a cell phone. That made her a Luddite, then so be it. She was a little frightened of technology anyway. She didn't want to be on someone else's radar. It just didn't feel safe. Dr. Yancy had told her she was hiding from something, and she supposed it was true but she didn't care.

Still, Crenshaw and Crenshaw had found her phone number, so she'd phoned back and the lawyer—Tom Crenshaw—had asked her for her address. She'd been reluctant to give it to him. Not that he couldn't find it, she supposed; he was just asking to be polite.

He said he wanted to send her something—a package. But he was cagey as hell about what the package contained, and only when they'd gone back and forth and he'd finally convinced himself that yes, she was definitely the Olivia Margaux Dugan whom he was searching for, did he come through and say that his firm had a package for her—from her mother.

*Her mother?*

After that Liv had simply dropped the phone receiver, stumbled into bed and fallen into a coma-like sleep that she'd just woken up from.

Now she wondered if it was all a mistake. Her mother was dead. Had been since Liv's sixth birthday. The package could *not* be from her mother.

She gazed at the phone receiver. It dangled along the side of the cabinet, tethered to the base unit by a long cord, hanging in a way that made her stomach wrench. She could still see her mother's soft swaying body, the protruding tongue; an image that didn't fade with time.

Sucking in several deep breaths, she squeezed her eyes closed, then opened them again, picked up the receiver and placed it back in the cradle. More old-school technology. She didn't have a hand-held receiver. She didn't even have a satellite phone in the bedroom. Her brother, Hague, had real issues with paranoia—worse than Liv's by far—and some of his paranoia had definitely penetrated her way of thinking as well. There *was* a bogeyman out there. Maybe more than one. Better to be safe than sorry.

She did, however, have voice mail and that nagging, blinking red light on the base unit meant she had another call. The lawyer had undoubtedly phoned back. For a moment Liv considered the paradox that was her life. Here she was running away from almost all technological communication and yet she worked for a *software* company that made simulated war games mainly played by adolescent boys. Okay, she was little more than a low-level bookkeeper for Zuma Software; she'd always been good with numbers. But the irony of her situation did not escape her. She smiled faintly to herself, screwed up her courage, and pushed the answering machine's button.

The lawyer's disembodied voice came through the speaker: *Ms. Dugan, this is Tom Crenshaw again, of Crenshaw and Crenshaw, Attorneys-at-Law. Please call us back so we can send you the package from Deborah Dugan addressed to her daughter, Olivia Margaux Dugan. Per our earlier conversation, this package was left in our care to be sent to you on your twenty-fifth birthday. As that date has passed, we need to make certain you receive this package soon.* A pause. As if he wanted to say a lot more, then simply, *Thank you*, and a return phone number and the law firm's hours.

Liv pushed the button a second time and listened to the message again. It was too early to call Tom Crenshaw back. She didn't even know if she wanted to anyway. She felt hot and headachy and strange just thinking about receiving something from her mother. *Her mother*. Nearly twenty years after her death.

Putting the number to memory, she got ready for work, then drove her Honda Accord by rote to the business park which housed Zuma Software. The company was situated in a private cul-de-sac separated from the other buildings by a long drive bordered by arborvitae, isolating it, giving it the illusion of more importance than it truly deserved. Or maybe it was more important. Zuma's owner Kurt Upjohn, certainly projected an "I'm better than you" attitude.

Liv skirted the front parking lot and drove to the west side of the building, the unofficial employee parking lot. The building itself was concrete on all four sides, with a glass atrium entryway complete with double doors and a guard of sorts, Paul de Fore, a total tool, in Liv's biased opinion.

Liv parked nose out, climbed from the driver's door, remote locked the Honda and started around the front of the building. She didn't even think of using the back door as Upjohn wanted all his employees to enter through the front. The back door automatically locked whenever it was used, and could only be accessed from inside. Upjohn was very, very cautious about anyone learning anything about his newest game models created by the nerds/techies who worked in the upstairs office with its glowing screens and simulations and miles of computer code. Liv had only peeked in once when Aaron, Kurt's son, had practically dragged her up the stairs with him, and she'd been half-awed at the way the room looked like a control room straight out of some high-tech adventure movie.

Now, as she entered through the mahogany front door—a door surrounded by windows—Paul gave Liv a narrow-eyed once-over, as if he'd never seen her before. Liv clutched her purse harder, an automatic reaction she couldn't quite repress even though she would never bring her handgun to the office. She wasn't *that* crazy.

Jessica Maltona, Zuma's receptionist, smiled at Liv as she entered, then slid a sideways look toward Paul who was still standing by the front door, arms crossed, watching Liv walk across the polished floor to her cubicle on the far side of the large room. Though the two women weren't friends exactly—they didn't know each other that well, Liv's fault mostly—they shared a silent communication about Paul whom neither could stand.

Liv smiled at Jessica as she passed. *He's a tool, all right*. To which Jessica, as if hearing her, nodded emphatically.

Settling herself at her desk, Liv stuffed her purse into a lower cabinet with a lock. She twisted the key and pocketed it, then settled down to the night before's bookkeeping entries. It wasn't an exciting job. It was rote, by and large. But rote work was exactly what kept her from thinking and imagining and worrying. No, she wasn't bipolar. No, she wasn't schizophrenic. She was just . . . damaged . . . for lack of a better word. From the moment she'd discovered her mother's body, she hadn't been the same.

An hour into the job, safely ensconced at her work station, which was about a hundred feet from the front doors and the floor-to-ceiling windows splayed with the Zuma Software red neon logo in script backward from inside the building but dramatic nonetheless, she picked up the phone and dialed the number before her brain, with its strong governor, could stop her.

"Crenshaw and Crenshaw," a woman's voice answered in that slightly bored, slightly snooty tone that seemed to invade the better law firms.

"This is Olivia Margaux Dugan returning Tom Crenshaw's call."

"Mr. Crenshaw is not in yet." There was a small rebuke there, as if she felt Liv should know someone of Mr. Crenshaw's importance wouldn't deign to get to work so early. "Would you care to leave a message?"

“Just give him this address.” She told the woman Zuma Software’s street address and finished with “If he wants me to have the package in his care from Deborah Dugan, he can send it here.”

“May I tell him what this is concerning? Something further?” she asked, sounding a bit miffed by Liv’s high-handedness.

“He’ll know what it’s about.” And she hung up.

Two hours later the package arrived by special messenger. Liv looked up from her computer firm with annoyance, then surprise at the speed, then trepidation, as Paul de Fore walked toward her holding out the 8 ½ x 11 manila envelope. Liv had been inputting figures into a computer program compiling information to be turned over to Zuma’s accountant, who in turn would pore over the data as if it held the answer to the universe’s deepest questions, who would then pass it along to Kurt Upjohn, the original developer of the war-game-type video games that had put his software company on the map. Her head was full of numbers and seeing Paul coming her way pulled her out of that world and into the present at hyperspeed. She almost felt motion sick.

Paul slapped the envelope on her desk without so much as a word. He was no conversationalist, which suited Liv just fine.

Gingerly picking up the package, she looked it over, her gaze jumping to the return address of Crenshaw and Crenshaw. She’d been alarmed when Tom Crenshaw had asked her birth date, where she grew up, the names of her parents, and a myriad of other questions. She in turn had demanded to know to whom she was speaking. How had he found her number? What did he want really? What were his credentials? He explained about Crenshaw and Crenshaw and what a long-established, trusted firm they were. Then he told her about the package and when he invoked the name of Deborah Dugan she dropped the receiver.

But now here it was. The package from her mother, nineteen years after her death. It was a large manila envelope with her name typed on a label affixed to its center. She laid it carefully on the desktop. She almost wanted to poke it with a stick, though it was clearly just some papers. Papers about what, though? She couldn’t think of anything that—

“Hey!” Aaron Dirkus snapped his fingers in front of her face.

Liv sat bolt upright, as if goosed. “Aaron,” she said tightly to Kurt Upjohn’s son, her only “friend” at Zuma.

“Didn’t mean to scare you,” he answered affably, though he clearly didn’t care one way or another. Aaron’s last name was different than his father’s, due to some undefined wrangle between Kurt and Aaron’s mother—Kurt had only managed to marry her after Aaron was born and that pissed her off but good, so much so that she’d given her son her maiden name rather than Upjohn. Then later, she and Kurt had divorced anyway. The story went something like that. Liv had never quite got it in full detail, but it didn’t really matter. She’d never wanted to question Aaron further because that would have given him carte blanche to ask her about herself and she didn’t want to go there. Ever.

“You’re kinda in a fog. C’mon, let’s go out back and have a smoke,” Aaron said.

“I’ve got some work to catch up on.” She wasn’t interested in smoking anything, especially Aaron’s type of cigarettes.

“Bullshit. You work too hard as it is. You’re giving the rest of us slackers a bad name.”

“The boss is your father. You can get away with it. I can’t.”

“People are starting to hate you around here, you know that? You gotta come with me.”

He wasn’t going to take no for an answer, and he’d been known to actually pull her out of her chair to get her to comply, so she reluctantly got to her feet. Truthfully, she really didn’t take enough breaks, according to the law, so she followed him to the back door on the first floor and outside to the enclosed patio-type area, with its overhang and its gate that led to the employee parking lot. Her black Accord was three in, facing out as if ready to take off.

Aaron normally stuffed a brick-sized rock in the door to keep it ajar, but today he actually pulled out a key and unlocked it from the outside, so that the door would stay open until he relocked it.

“Where’d you get that?” Liv asked.

“Kinda lifted it,” he admitted. “Don’t worry. I’ll lock up before we leave tonight. I just can’t stand walking by that asshole de Fore every time I want to breathe some fresh air.” He shot her a quick smile as he pulled a joint and lighter from his pants pocket.

Aaron liked to smoke “maree-wanna,” as he called it. Liv stayed away from all drugs; she’d been encouraged to take enough during her yearlong treatment at Hathaway House to last her a lifetime and then some. She liked a clear head and, apart from a very occasional drink, mostly steered clear of alcohol, too.

“You don’t say much,” Aaron observed with a sideways look as he belched out a lungful of smoke. “I like that about you. Although you’re kind of shut down.”

Remembering her six-year-old self, Liv felt a pang of sorrow for the loss of the independent, headstrong little girl she’d once been. That girl had apparently died along with her mother.

She stood to one side, leaning against the gate to the parking lot, gazing out. Occasionally she’d lean the building this way when Aaron had propped open the door. She completely agreed with him that bypassing Paul de Fore was worth breaking some rules. Paul was just one of those guys no one could stand, the type who took his job too seriously and made it hell on everyone else.

Being too serious, though, wasn’t Aaron’s problem.

“Tell me something about yourself,” Aaron said now. He had long hair and wore a plaid shirt over a T-shirt, slacker-style. It hardly mattered since his dad was the boss, but truthfully the programmers and game designers who were on the upstairs floor kind of dressed the same way. Slacker, hacker, computer techie, video game designer . . . there seemed to be an unspoken dress code with them that thumbed its nose at accepted business attire.

Only Liv and Jessica Maltona dressed in legitimate office wear: skirts or slacks, blouses, vests, jackets, sensible shoes, tasteful jewelry and makeup. Paul de Fore wore a navy shirt and pants as if they were a security uniform though there was really no such dictum.

“Well, I’m a Leo,” she said. “I like Italian food and expensive coffee and live in an apartment with a three-hundred-pound cat.”

Aaron coughed out some smoke on a laugh. Liv had never so much as hinted that she might have a personality and she’d taken him by surprise. She wasn’t even sure why she’d said it. She’d just wanted . . . to not be so serious for once.

“Cool. What’s the cat’s name?” he asked.

“Tiny.”

He grinned at her and Liv smiled back at him. It was the most playful conversation they’d had on a date and though Liv was simply talking to talk, Aaron peered at her as if she were something he’d just discovered.

“Who are you?” he asked. “You’re too good-looking to be this mousy bookkeeper you want us all to think you are.”

Too good-looking? She had straight brown hair, hazel eyes and a mouth and jaw that were set too tightly, or so she’d been told. “I’m kind of average-looking.”

“Look in the mirror, sometime.”

She shook her head. Whenever she looked in the mirror she saw a woman with anxious eyes whose personal life was nonexistent and whose professional one was practically invisible, too.

He flapped a hand at her and sucked in his last toke. “You’re good-looking and you’re too serious. You should have some of this.” He held out the teensy little end of the joint.

“Nah.”

“Or a glass or two of wine, or a few mojitos, or some Xanax. You just need to let go.” He pushed open the gate and let himself into the back parking lot.

“You’re going to piss off your father by ignoring security,” she warned him.

“A guy’s gotta do what a guy’s gotta do. You go out this way sometimes, too.”

It was true. Though Liv generally played by the rules, there was this inner part of her that occasionally liked to flout authority. Most of the time she pretended it wasn’t there. But sometimes she stretched and peered around like a waking beast, looking to prowl. Was it because she’d spent time constrained by others? Or, the fact that the police had left an indelible impression on her since her mother’s death, and not a good one. Or, maybe it was just a side of her personality that she mostly ignored and that surprised her and others now and again when it suddenly popped up. She wasn’t the meek worker bee everyone thought she was, though she took pains to make others see her that way. A kind of camouflage, like an animal’s coat or a bird’s feathers.

By the time she left work she still hadn’t opened the package and when she got back to the apartment she dropped it on the kitchen counter while she threw together a quick meal—microwavable TV dinner with limited calories and limited taste; her eating habits hadn’t evolved over the years, either.

She went to bed at ten-thirty and stared up at the ceiling through the dark. She could hear the comfortable sounds of the refrigerator humming and the tinny voices from her neighbor’s television which seemed to be right behind her head, set against the paper-thin wall that separated their units, her bedroom butting up against theirs.

She fell asleep, then came to abruptly at midnight, wondering what had woken her. There was moaning from behind the wall. It had been her neighbor Jo’s last climactic shriek during lovemaking—something that happened regularly enough—that had penetrated her sleep.

Sleep . . . That’s what some people called it, though Liv was pretty sure her sleep was different than others’; she’d learned that over the years. Hers was disturbed by images that kept coming back, creeping into a dream that had nothing to do with whatever the dream was about, images burrowing inside, memories from her childhood that simply wouldn’t go away. Gruesome visions. The kind that had sent her to Hathaway House, a place for troubled teens who were recovering from serious issues: drug addiction, suicide attempts, self-mutilation . . . whatever. She’d been sent there because she was “disturbed,” or so said her evil stepmother—yes, she really did have one—who had convinced her father to seek help for his nutso daughter. Only it hadn’t helped, apart from making Liv realize that her problems were small compared to some of the other kids’ at Hathaway House.

But because she was underage and had no choice, Liv put in her time there and finally, much to the evil stepmother Lorinda’s dismay, had been pronounced “in recovery” sometime in what would have been her senior year of high school. She was released into her family’s care and she went on to earn her GED. She’d learned by then that the best thing to do was just not to tell anybody about the powerful images she had of her mother’s body hanging limply from a noose that had been attached to the rustic kitchen rafters of their old home. Images that stole her sleep. Images of a suicide that had left Deborah Dugan’s two children, Liv and her brother, Hague, in the hands of a stunned father who quickly took a new bride.

Liv blinked in the darkness. The television next door was now tuned to an old sitcom that ran in the off hours and every so often the canned laughter would burst out in little fireworks of *har, har, ha*. Liv listened to it and thought of the couple who lived adjacent to her in Apartment 21B. Young and in love, around her own age, they seemed to live on pizza and Diet Coke. At least the girl did. The guy had a penchant for beer. “Whatever’s on special,” he told Liv one day when she met them on the outdoor balcony and he was lugging a six-pack of Budweiser. They were trying to hug, kiss and giggle with each other while he also was threading the key into the lock and then they sort of fell inside and



slammed the door shut behind them.

Liv had opened her own door and was greeted by the scent of loneliness and lost opportunities.

The next-door couple's name was Martin and though they hadn't formerly introduced themselves, she knew the shrieker was Jo. His name started with a T . . . Travis, or Trevor, or something kind of cowboy-sounding to Liv's mind. She should know what it was as she'd heard Jo scream it out enough times while they were making love, but it always made her feel like an auditory voyeur and therefore Liv covered her head with her pillow whenever they went at it.

The worst of it was that their lovemaking reminded Liv of the two times she'd gotten close to sex and the third time that she'd actually gone through with it and had been left wondering, what the hell. Where were the bells and flowers and rainbows and endorphins? She'd mostly felt sort of depressed and wondering if sex, too—touted as a supposedly wonderful expression of love—was just another part of life that she wasn't able to experience like everyone else.

Cynical. That's what she was. And afraid . . . afraid to open a package from someone who'd sent it to her long, long after her death.

The following morning she went through the shower, dressed in black slacks and a black, long-sleeved T-shirt, drank a glass of orange juice and ate a piece of peanut-butter toast, her gaze on the envelope. She grabbed her purse and keys and headed out the door, then turned around abruptly and went back for the package, ripping it open while her heart pounded. She fought the crippling anxiety that sometimes overtook her and left her gasping for air and practically in the fetal position and shook the package's contents onto the counter.

Out tumbled several pictures and a couple of folded pages.

She saw her mother with several other people in one of the pictures, and she staggered backward to the couch and sat down hard, the photo in her hands; the other papers flew to the floor—someone's birth certificate among them . . . hers.

Drawing a long breath, she tried to stem a tsunami of coming panic. Her ears roared. She couldn't think. Couldn't see. Could scarcely recall where she was.

Her vision went inward, to the memory of a long ago, cool, summer evening, the air breezing inside the kitchen through the opened back door. The toes of her mother's shoes drifted from side to side . . . her face purple . . . her tongue fat and sticking out....

Liv squeezed her eyes shut. Attempted to shove the image into blackness, but it shone white on the insides of her eyelids like a negative. Her eyes flew open again, and for just a moment her mother was standing right in front of her.

"I'm done," Mama said, then the mirage *poofed* into mist.

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## Chapter 2

Liv drove home from the office during her noon hour, even though there really wasn't enough time even though she would probably skip lunch entirely. She'd left the package opened and spread across the coffee table. She couldn't look or touch any part of it when she'd left for work this morning, but the way everything was exposed had haunted her inner vision all morning.

Now, she took the steps up from the apartment parking lot to the second level of the L-shaped building where her apartment lay one in from the end unit. She threaded the key in the lock and pushed open the door before she felt someone behind her.

She screamed. One short, aborted shriek and stumbled into the apartment, turning, facing the intruder.

"Whoa, whoa! Sorry!"

It was her neighbor, Trevor or Travis or something. He was standing there in shock, holding up his hands. Liv felt the energy drop out of her and she leaned against the wall, near collapse, quivering inside.

Worried, he grabbed for her and said, "Geez, sorry."

She flinched away. "I'm okay. What . . . are you doing?"

"Come on." His arm was around her shoulders and he started to help her to the couch against her protests, her legs moving forward, but feeling detached from her body.

"What do you want?" she asked, trying to keep all traces of fear from her voice.

The pictures from the package were scattered across the coffee table as was her birth certificate and the note from her mother. She glanced at them, then at him, but he was only looking at her. "Just wanted to invite you over tonight," he said apologetically. "Didn't mean to freak you out."

"Oh." She didn't know what to say. She was working to get her pulse under control.

Then his gaze swept over the photos and he focused on one where an angry-looking man was stalking toward the cameraman, his hand up as if he were about to rip the offending camera away. The same man was in several other photos with Liv's mother, but he was always turning away, frowning, as if he didn't want his picture taken.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"I don't know," Liv said stiffly.

"Looks really pissed. This an old photo?"

The color had leached out of the print and the women's permed hair and over-the-shoulder tops and black stretch pants, straight out of *Flashdance*, spoke volumes about the date of the picture. "Yeah."

"Huh." He turned back to her. "So . . . Jo and me . . . we're just havin' some drinks and pizza. We don't get goin' till late. That work for you?"

"Thanks, but I've already made some plans." It wasn't exactly a lie. She'd determined over the course of the morning that she was going to show her brother the contents of the package. Hague had his issues, but he was strangely insightful as well.

He'd only been a baby when their mother died, but maybe there was something buried in his psychology that could offer some explanation. "Another time, maybe? I've gotta run. I'm on my lunch break."

"If you change your mind, just stop by," he said.

"I'll do that." And she hustled him out the door.

The apartment where Liv's brother, Hague, lived was on the third/top floor of an older, industrial building on the east side of the Willamette River that had been converted into loftlike units during the '60s. Those lofts had subsequently grown tired and in need of maintenance over the intervening years, but the place still had a spectacular view toward Portland's city center, its westside windows looking back over the river. Hague's unit was in the northwest corner and would have commanded an amazing slice of Portland skyline had he ever opened his blinds.

Liv parked her blue Accord a block and a half from Hague's building, the closest spot she could find. She hurried toward his apartment, the package tucked beneath her coat, feeling unseen eyes following her, though there were probably none. It was more likely her own paranoia, always on the prowl. She usually could hold it at bay, but there were times when it simply took over and she was powerless to do anything but feel its paralyzing grip.

She wished fervently, like she always did, that she could change the past, but it was impossible. She'd lost her mother and huge parts of her life—days, weeks, months, years—and there was no getting them back. She could still remember the policeman's probing questions after she'd woken from her trauma-induced coma. She was in a hospital with its bad smells and gray walls.

\* \* \*

*"Did you see anything when you were in the kitchen?" he'd demanded. She didn't know he was a policeman at first. He didn't have the clothes of a policeman.*

*"I saw Mama." She forced the words out. Her lips quivered uncontrollably.*

*"Anything else? Something?" He threw an impatient look toward the woman who'd come with him. A social worker of some kind, she knew now, but she hadn't understood at the time.*

*Livvie's quivering lips were replaced by out-and-out sobs.*

*"Useless," he muttered.*

*"She's just a child," the woman responded tautly.*

*He turned back to Livvie. "The back door was open. Did you notice that?"*

*She nodded jerkily.*

*"Did you walk outside? Look outside?"*

*"NOOOOOOOO!"*

*"Calm down," he told her. "Was there anyone—anyone—around?"*

*"H-Hague was in his bed," she stuttered, plucking at the covers. "He—he started crying. . . ."*

*"Any adults!" His mouth was smashed together like he was holding back something mean to say.*

*She felt the tears rain down and the woman walked over to her, patted her hand, glared at the man, and said, "Let the poor child be!"*

*"Maybe her mother killed herself because she knew something about those dead women out in the field behind her house."*

*"Shhhh." The woman's mouth was a flat line, too, but Livvie was glad to see it, understanding that it was for him, not her.*

*"Or, maybe somebody thought she knew something and decided to take care of her himself?"*

*The woman marched right over to him and said in a low voice, "This child found her mother! It was suicide, and it was tragic, and she's been terribly traumatized. Try to remember that."*

*He gave her a mean, mean look, and said, "I'm trying to catch a killer. You should try and remember that."*

With the hindsight of age Liv now realized the man had been a plainclothes policeman with the

small Rock Springs police force and completely out of his realm working with children. But that didn't excuse him. And he hadn't given up after that first interview. Oh, no. He'd come back to the house as soon as she'd gotten out of the hospital. By that time she and Hague had a neighbor woman taking care of them but Liv would not go into the kitchen. She was in the den when the officer came to interview her, and this time she was on her own with him . . . and the panic started to rise.

He tried a little harder, but Liv had lost trust completely.

*"Try to think back to the night your mom died," he told her, smiling at her through his teeth. She recognized that he was trying to be kind, but his smile just creeped her out all the more.*

*"Okay," she said in a small voice.*

*"Don't think about your mom. Think about the kitchen."*

*Panic swelled. She saw the table and the sink and the window. "It was really dark. The outside was coming in," she said.*

*"Yes. The back door was open," the officer said, nodding. "Do you know who went out the door?"*

*"My dad?"*

*"You think your dad went through the door?"*

*"Mama was holding her face."*

*"Your dad told me they had a fight. Do you know what the fight was about?"*

*That made Livvie think hard, but she shook her head.*

*"Have they fought before?"*

*"Yeah . . . Mama hit him once."*

*"Your mama hit your dad?"*

*"I think he hit her, too," Livvie said solemnly. "That's why she was holding her face." Then remembering Mama, she started shaking and hiccupping.*

*"Now, be a big girl and stop crying. I need your help. Your mama needs your help."*

*"Mama's dead. Mama's dead!!!"*

*"You can help her."*

*"You're lying! Mama's dead!" Livvie wailed and clapped her hands over her ears and the policeman left the den, said something mean to the neighbor lady and slammed the front door.*

After that the police gave up trying to interview her, though the social worker questioned Livvie further about her parents' relationship, which created havoc for her father and was probably partially to blame for their chilly relationship ever since. The police questioned Albert Dugan thoroughly, and he'd been furious with Liv for telling tales. Still, he admitted that he and Deborah's relationship had been tempestuous. He might have slapped her . . . once . . . or twice . . . but she'd hit him, too. He admitted to slapping her the night of her death before he'd stalked out the back door. Deborah had bitten him and he'd struck without thinking. But he was so sorry. So, so sorry.

It was also why Mama had said, "I'm done," Liv was pretty sure.

Even so, to this day Liv wasn't sure what the truth had been between her parents. Her father swore they'd loved each other . . . well, at least he'd loved her . . . but then she'd taken her own life and there had to be a deep-seated reason for that, and he just couldn't understand it. He'd never agreed that Deborah had committed suicide. Wouldn't talk about it. Within the year after her death he married Lorinda, and the whole family moved from the house with too many memories to another one across town. Employed by the forestry department, Albert pushed his old life behind him, and made a new one. Liv understood he was as haunted by the events of that night as she was, maybe in a different

way, but in one just as powerful. Deborah's death had affected and shaped his life from that day forward.

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As it had Hague's . . .

Now Liv climbed in the rattling elevator with the accordion door, slamming the handle shut and watching the floors pass as she headed for the third story. She let herself onto the hallway with its scarred wooden surfaces and scents of floor wax and dust and overcooked vegetables, and walked quickly to Hague's door.

After their mother's death, the policeman had interviewed Hague, too, for all the good it did. Hague had babbled about "that man." The authorities had looked around for help but no one seemed to know what he was talking about. Liv asked him later, when they were alone, and he squirmed under the blankets of his bed and said, "Zombie man. Kill you. Kill you!" And he was crying and laughing and crying some more.

He'd scared the living daylights out of Liv, who ran to her own room, hiding beneath her covers. Later Hague said Mama had a friend. "A friend!" he'd yelled at the authorities. "Mama's friend!"

They, in turn, labeled "the friend" Deborah Dugan's Mystery Man.

Liv never mentioned Hague's zombie man comment to the police, nor that he'd also said *kill you* the same reference, like he'd said when he'd been sitting in his high chair, if that's what he'd said that day; she'd never been completely sure. And she didn't know then that his words were the first inkling of the behavioral changes that would send Hague down, down, down in a descending spiral that would last until his life to date.

"Hello, Olivia."

Della Larson, Hague's companion, stood in the open doorway, answering Liv's knock. She leaned her head back and crossed her arms, assessing Liv suspiciously; behind her the place looked like a dark hole. Hague didn't like lights, or fresh air, or anything remotely *different*. Unless, of course, he chose to do an about-face himself, which happened occasionally.

Della was older than Hague by about a decade and was a nurse-cum-attendant-cum-friend and maybe lover. She'd been with Hague for most of his adult life, ever since his release from Grandview Hospital, the mental institution for teens where he'd been sent briefly while Liz was at Hathaway House. Even though Liv had been adopted by the Dugans—a fact the birth certificate she'd just received spelled out clearly—and wasn't related to Hague by blood, it sure seemed like mental illness relentlessly plagued their family. Hague was a genius with a 160 IQ but it didn't mean he knew how to live in this world. *Maladaptive* was the word often used to describe his behavior. On that, Liv was way ahead of him, though her problems had been diagnosed as derived from mental trauma, not from a mind that moved in ways the rest of the so-called normal humans couldn't understand. As the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer once said—as quoted by Della more often than Liv cared to count—"Talent hits a target no one else can hit; Genius hits a target no one else can see."

That and a dollar would buy you a newspaper. Maybe.

Della's white-blond hair was scraped into a bun at her nape and her icy blue eyes raked over Liv as if she were someone she'd never seen before. It irked Liv, but then she knew it really was a reflection of the suspicions her own brother held inside himself as well.

"You didn't call ahead," Della said.

"Hi, Della," Liv said. "The last time I called the line was disconnected."

"It's been reconnected for over a month."

"Under whose name?"

She hesitated briefly. "Mine."

"No matter what you may think of me, I'm no mind reader," Liv said. "I'll leave that to Hague."

Her nose twitching in annoyance, Della stepped aside and Liv was allowed into the dim recesses

her brother's den. The place smelled like bleach and lemon and everything clean, which was a relief given the fact Liv's eyes were adjusting to a whole lot of clutter. Hague might be a hoarder of sorts but everything had to be squeaky clean, per his decree and by Della's hand.

"He's in his room," Della said, leading the way to the northwest corner of the apartment. She knocked on the door panels and when he barked, "What?" she said, "Your sister is here."

A long silence ensued, before Hague bellowed, "Well, let her in!" as if Della's interference were just that, interference. She ignored his tone and opened the door and when Liv crossed the threshold Della was right on her heels.

Hague sat in a brown leather chair that nearly swallowed him whole. He was lithe to the point of wispieness but he was tall like Albert—his biological father and Liv's adoptive one. He looked a lot like Deborah, too, Liv realized, seeing those hauntingly large blue eyes of her dreams stare at her from Hague's thin face.

"What do you want?" he asked gruffly.

"Nice way to greet me. I came to find out if you know anything about this." She held up the manila envelope and his eyes followed it, a frown creasing his brow.

"What is it?"

"Guess that answers my question."

"What is it?" he demanded more loudly and Della moved to his side and laid a comforting hand on his shoulders.

"It's from the law firm of Crenshaw and Crenshaw. Ever heard of them?" Liv asked.

"No."

"They were directed to send me this package when I turned twenty-five."

"Last Friday. Happy birthday."

She smiled faintly. Hague didn't live by the world's time line though he understood it perfectly. "I had pictures of our mother and some other people inside." She handed him the series of pictures she'd pored over throughout the last two days. This morning she'd decided to go visit her brother directly after work and see what he made of the package's contents. "And it has my real birth certificate and several other papers."

"Who directed the lawyers?"

"Our mother."

His eyes caught hers. "What?"

Liv explained how the lawyers had gotten hold of her and sent the package. "She—Mama—wanted me to have this, but I don't really understand why. My birth certificate, okay, and personal stuff, but who are these people?"

"That's our father."

In one of the pictures Albert was standing beside Deborah in a grassy field, possibly the one behind their old house.

"But who's this?" she asked, pointing to the man trying to grab for the camera.

Hague was ignoring her as he selected a piece of paper, holding it up between his thumb and index finger, away from his body, as if it might bite him. He glanced at her expectantly.

Liv had read the missive, knew what it was. She said carefully, "It's a note from Mama to me."

Hague was utterly silent. Liv gazed at him and her heart squeezed. Framed by his scruffy hair and beard were a pair of glittering blue eyes and a handsome face that he would never—could never—apparently—let the world see.

"Read it," Liv urged him gently.

Hague brought the note closer and stared at it hard for several seconds, then he said in a monotone, "*Livvie, my sweet girl, if you're reading this then everything I've feared has come to be, and I'm not*

~~around to tell you these things for myself. You know you were adopted. Your biological parents are listed on your birth certificate. I've enclosed some snapshots for you to have of me. Know I love you . . . Mom.~~ He peered at the photographs, then up at her quizzically. "Why these pictures? They're not even that good of her. I have better ones."

"Do you remember anything about those other people?" Liv asked.

Hague glanced at the photographs again, zeroing in on the one Liv had pointed to with the angry man. His shoulders tucked in and his head tilted back, his gaze glued to the photo.

"There he is again," he said in a strained voice.

Liv looked at the man in the picture. "Again? You've seen him before?"

"Zombie," he said.

*Kill you . . . Kill you!*

Liv's head spun a bit. "This is the zombie man?" she demanded, pointing to the picture.

"They keep their hands in their pockets and wear rigor smiles." His eyes rolled away, stretching wide as he looked into some distant horror only he could see.

"Hague," Della said uncertainly.

"He follows me," Hague said in a harsh whisper. "If I look, he's always there. Out of the corner of your eye. Just there . . . almost . . . there . . . *there!*" He jerked violently and Liv and Della both jumped, too.

"Hague," Liv said sharply, recognizing the signs that he was leaving reality. She hoped to keep him with her. "Hague!"

But his eyes closed and he drifted away. Into one of his fugue states.

Gone...

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## Chapter 3

“You put him in a trance!” Della snapped.

Liv looked at Hague with resignation. She wanted to call him back, but it was too late. It was futile to try to rouse him when he disappeared into his own world.

She slid a glance at the photograph. *Zombie man* . . .

Della fussed over Hague, tilting his head back in the La-Z-Boy recliner he practically lived in. Hague didn't trust computers or telephones, especially cell phones; he was more of a Luddite than Liv. He was absolutely certain malicious groups bent on evil and destruction were tracking him. He spent hour upon hour calculating figures on lined yellow paper with an ink pen. Della worked part-time as a care assistant at a nearby assisted living/nursing home facility. Hague, who'd never been able to keep a job, received government assistance, and she thought maybe her father subsidized them as well. However, that would only be if Lorinda, the evil stepmother, didn't know about the tap on Albert's finances, which was questionable.

As if she could read Liv's thoughts, Della said, “Albert's coming by.”

Liv reached for the pictures, note and birth certificate and she saw that her hands were trembling. She felt guilty enough for sending Hague into the trance; Della's accusation hadn't been necessary. “He is?” Liv couldn't remember the last time she'd seen her father.

“*He* called,” she said with a certain satisfaction.

Ignoring that, Liv asked, “Does he see Hague often?” Since Lorinda had entered their lives, both Liv and Hague's relationship with Albert had suffered, and in Liv's case it had become basically nonexistent.

“Now and again. He's not good with Hague, either.”

“When is he showing up?”

Della shot a glance at the old grandfather's clock, which stood against the living room's far wall. Hague was the kind that was wound with a key. Hague liked to limit their amount of electricity use in any way he could, and it wasn't that he was trying to lessen his carbon footprint, he just wanted to make himself smaller and more indistinct in the world, and therefore less traceable. The less information the “government” or “powers that be” had on him, the better.

“Anytime, now,” Della answered.

“I've got to be going,” she said.

“Oh, no, stay. Maybe Hague'll come out of it. . . .”

Liv arched a brow. She and Della both knew Hague's fugue states were unpredictable, but it was rare that he snapped back within a few minutes.

Della added, “We could go down to Rosa's Cantina and talk. Hague has his own table there.”

Rosa's Cantina was on the street level of the apartment building. Liv had seen its bright green and yellow neon sign when she'd entered. She knew Hague went to Rosa's; his only habitual place of business, and she suspected his “own table” was the establishment's way of appeasing him, and she wondered what would happen were someone already at his table should Hague arrive. An ugly scene, no doubt.

In any case, he wasn't going to make it there tonight, and Liv wasn't interested in going there with Della. “Is Albert bringing Lorinda?” she asked.

“I'm sure.” Della made a face. Their mutual dislike of Lorinda was the only thing Liv and Della totally agreed upon. “Can I get you a cup of tea?” Now she was accommodating with a capital A.



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