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**SWEET REVENGE**



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# Table of Contents

[Also by](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Prologue](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Thirteen](#)

[Fourteen](#)

[Fifteen](#)

[Sixteen](#)

[Seventeen](#)

[Eighteen](#)

[Nineteen](#)

[Twenty](#)

[Twenty-One](#)

---

[Twenty-Two](#)

[Twenty-Three](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Teaser chapter](#)

[Teaser chapter](#)

[Copyright Page](#)



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## Prologue

Isabelle Flanders walked out of her apartment, careful to lock the door behind her. She sniffed the cold February air, then drew a deep breath. The fresh air smelled wonderful. It was mid-morning and it was Valentine's Day. Always a romantic, she smiled. She wondered if she was too old to hope for a special valentine from a special someone. Yep, she was too old. She took another moment to savor the crisp, cold air.

She'd been confined to her apartment for the last three weeks with a gruesome case of the flu. It had all started at New Year's with both Myra and Charles coming down with the miserable bug. Then, one by one, the sisters had all gotten the flu. She was the last to recover and she knew her colleagues were waiting for her at Pinewood to start her mission, which was already five weeks past schedule.

While she was in a hurry to get to Pinewood, it was still Valentine's Day, and she had something she had to do. Something she had done on this day every year since the accident that had rendered her helpless for longer than she cared to admit.

Isabelle started the engine of her Honda and waited for the heater to kick in before she slipped the car into gear. She knew she was punishing herself by driving past her old office today of all days. So what if fellow architect, Bobby Harcourt, her one-time fiancé, bought into her downfall and then dumped her after the dark stuff hit the fan? So what if Bobby ended up marrying the very woman who brought about her downfall? So what? That was then. This is now. Now, with the aid of the Sisterhood, she was finally going to get her revenge for what Rosemary had done to her. Bobby, too.

She was driving now, mindful of the time and how long it was going to take to drive out of Pinewood in McLean, Virginia. First, though, she had to rub her nose in her own stupidity one more time.

How could she have been so wrong about Rosemary and Bobby? Back then, she'd been on top of the world with her business, her engagement, and the rosy life that lay ahead of her. Being Architect of the Year gave her every right to expect things to progress accordingly. How wrong she'd been.

Isabelle pulled the Honda to the curb and parked. She stared out the window at the building where she'd labored eighteen hours a day to build her business. It was now a real estate office. She wondered if any of the employees of that real estate office ever slept there at night the way she used to sleep on the sofa when she was under the wire. Did it matter? Those days were gone.

Still, she didn't move, her mind wandering back to what she called her lost years. Years spent trying to earn a living, trying to forget Rosemary Hershey's betrayal—Bobby's, too. In the beginning, after the trial, after Rosemary Hershey, she'd cautioned herself to take it one day at a time. But that hadn't worked so she'd taken the physical route—exercising, running, hiking and biking. She knew now that all those things had kept her going, kept her sane, kept her alive to fight another day. And always in the back of her mind was the hope, the desire, the determination to get her license reinstated so she could go back to the work she loved.

Now, if things went the way she hoped they would, she'd climb back to the top. She had the guts to do that. She was prepared to claw her way back if she had to and, in the end, she'd make Rosemary Hershey and Bobby Harcourt sorry they had ever tangled with her.

Revenge was going to be so sweet. Her eyes sparkled with what was to come.

The next stop was St. Andrew's Church where she had expected to marry Bobby Harcourt on Valentine's Day. A lifetime ago? Damn close.

Isabelle watched an elderly lady wearing a black shawl over her head trying to maneuver the steps with her walker. Isabelle opened the car door and sprinted forward to offer help. The woman smiled up at her.

“What a sweetheart you are for helping me. I can do it but it takes me forever. I come here every day as I live just around the corner.”

The steps safely conquered, Isabelle returned to her car. Sitting here wasn't going to do anything for her. Right then, she made a promise to herself that she would never go down this section of Memorial Lane again.

Her eyes still burning, she turned on her signal light and moved slowly into the traffic. An hour later she cruised through the open gates of Pinewood and pulled up next to the row of parked vehicles. All of the women were here. Parked next to Alexis's Mini Cooper was Kathryn's eighteen-wheeler. Next to Kathryn's rig was Nikki's BMW and beside that was Yoko's nursery van. All present and accounted for. Well, almost. Julia wasn't here, would never join them again. And yet she *was* here; her spirit was with them all.

The kitchen door opened. A grin blossomed across Isabelle's face when she saw Myra and the rest of the Sisterhood with their arms outstretched in welcome.

“I'm here! I'm here!” she shouted as she ran forward.

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## One

The women laughed and hugged each other as Myra and Charles stood to the side, beaming with pleasure. Myra reached for Charles's hand and snuggled her own with his.

"Just in time for lunch," Charles said. "In honor of this cold, blustery day, we have vegetable soup and home-made bread. Unfortunately, Myra tells me it isn't quite as good as the bread she received as a tip in Kalorama during Nikki's mission. But she did say it was good. I regret to say I didn't chum the butter, but it is soft."

"I'll take it," Kathryn said. Everyone knew about Kathryn's ravenous appetite. It was said that she would eat anything that wasn't nailed down.

Charles added two more logs to the kitchen fireplace and Myra carried one of her heirloom soup tureens to the table.

"It smells heavenly, dear," she said, real happiness ringing in her voice. "Charles started the soup at five o'clock this morning. He made an apple pie, too, with apples from the root cellar. Remember when you girls picked them in the fall?"

They ate lunch and chattered like magpies, happy to be together again after their long hiatus. And then it was time to adjourn to the war room to begin business.

Myra Rutledge called the meeting to order and then Charles stepped down from his bank of computers that would have been the envy of the White House war room itself if they had ever known this particular room existed.

"Let's run through old business first. Before you can ask, Nikki, there is no news on the Barringtons, who were to be your original mission. I personally take responsibility for that fiasco. I'm not giving up on my attempts to locate them, nor do I want you to give up hope either. The main thing we can be grateful for is that all the horses are safe and the Barrington farm is deserted. Not only is the farm deserted, it is crumbling to the ground. Five days ago, the property went up for sale. From what I've been able to gather, it appears that the property was turned over as a quitclaim deed and the new owner immediately put it up for sale. Myra has placed a bid on the property, but we haven't yet heard if the bid has been accepted or not. The reason I'm telling you all of this is because it enters into Isabelle's mission. But before I get to that, do any of you have anything to say? Any questions?"

"Is there any news on Paula Woodley or her husband, the National Security Advisor?" Alexis asked.

Charles allowed himself a brief smile. "It's not beneficial to any of us to continue a dialogue with any of the parties after a mission is completed. When we walk away, we walk away completely, never to return. However, I did pick up a few tidbits on the Internet. Mr. Drudge seems to have information that had not previously been released."

"And that would be . . . what?" Kathryn asked.

"That the NSA is back in the loving arms of his wife. He resigned his post with the administration—under pressure, according to Mr. Drudge. In addition, it seems the President has not seen fit to call or visit his NSA. Mr. Drudge speculates on the why of that, but has no concrete answers. It appears we will have to stay tuned for further *informative* gossip."

"What about the three special agents found in the NSA's backyard? The President's secret little force?" Nikki asked cautiously.

"'Hogwash,' says the President. The three men in question did not belong to a special presidential squad as was reported, since no such squad exists. The President said the three men were in fact FBI



agents. The *Post*'s star reporter, Mr. Ted Robinson, says he has proof that what he reported is no hogwash. His proof is being held by the *Post*. It's over and done with and we're all moving forward now. It won't behoove any of us to dwell on the past. Having said that, I suggest we get down to business and decide how best to help Isabelle with her case."

Myra pointed to the orange folders that had been placed in front of each of the women. "We can follow along with Isabelle, but I think it will be better if she tells us in her own words what happened to her and what she wants done."

Isabelle took a deep breath as she looked around at the women. She cleared her throat. "As you all know, I'm an architect. I had my own business, which I worked at eighteen hours a day. I designed shopping malls, high-rises, churches . . . you name it and my name was on it. I moved three times to accommodate my business as well as my staff. At the time, I was also engaged to a man named Bobby Harcourt. I was supposed to get married on Valentine's Day. That was several years ago. . . .

"I hired a young woman called Rosemary Hershey. She had just passed her boards and I thought she was just right for our office. She was a real go-getter. Dedicated, beautiful, made a great impression. She was a sharp dresser and a hell of an architect, with great, innovative ideas." Isabelle looked over at Nikki. "Rosemary was my Allison Banks, the woman who almost ruined you. *Almost* is the key word in your case. In my case, Rosemary Hershey did ruin me.

"In less than six months, Rosemary became my right-hand woman. I started to depend on her more and more. In a way it was a godsend because it freed me up to spend more time with my fiancé. Isabelle's voice turned wistful. "I was so happy during that time. Then I came down with a vicious head cold that ended up settling in my chest. I started to doctor myself because I was stupid and didn't want to take the time to sit in a doctor's office. I was a hair's breath away from having to give a presentation to pitch for the contract for a new shopping mall in Pennsylvania. Everyone in the office worked together to help, including Rosemary.

"The day I had to make my presentation I was sick as a dog and was swigging cough medicine from the bottle. I was also running a fever, so Rosemary drove me to the presentation. On the way, there was . . . there was an accident." Isabelle licked at her dry lips as she struggled to continue. "I was knocked unconscious. When I woke up I was in the hospital and I couldn't remember a thing about the accident. Then I developed pneumonia. They told me the alcohol content in my blood was . . . was high, that I was drunk and had run a stop sign. A family . . . a mother, a father and a little two year-old girl were killed, and Rosemary was severely injured, too. Everyone sued me. I believed what they said that I had been driving. Bobby made himself scarce and finally disappeared altogether. I lost everything trying to defend myself.

"When I didn't think it could possibly get any worse, it did. Rosemary said I'd stolen her design for the shopping mall. She said we were arguing in the car and that's how I ran the stop sign. I couldn't prove otherwise. Rosemary saw to that. In the end they believed her and I lost my license and my business.

"It took almost a year for my memory to return, and even then it was just in little bits and pieces. But by then all the damage had been done. Another year went by as I tried to earn a living. I went to see Rosemary, to plead with her. She laughed in my face. When I was leaving her big, plush office, I ran into Bobby and found out that he and Rosemary were engaged. He couldn't look me in the eye. A couple of months later, I saw in the paper that they'd gotten married. Of course, I wasn't invited to the wedding. Shortly after that, I went to see Nikki. Without any kind of proof, there was nothing her firm could do for me. She helped me get a job that paid the bills, but I couldn't work in my field again."

"And you didn't scratch that bitch's eyes out!" Kathryn barked, outraged.

"I knew if I touched her, I would have killed her. The only thing I could do was walk away. Rosemary is at the top of her game now, clients standing in line to hire her. Bobby is her partner

Since Charles got my license reinstated I've started over and actually have several small clients. I have to supplement my income with odd jobs just to make my rent, but I'm surviving."

Myra tapped her pencil on the tabletop. "What would you like to see happen to this awful woman, Isabelle?"

"I'd like her to tell the truth. Then I want to see her stripped of everything she holds dear. Including that miserable husband of hers. I don't want to believe he was in on it with Rosemary, but common sense tells me she needed a cohort. By the way, the two of them took all my clients. Something also needs to be done for the family who were killed. My insurance didn't pay the family's heirs that much. Rosemary got there first with her lawsuit and got just about all of it. My umbrella policy was for three million dollars. She got two and a half million and the family got the other five hundred thousand. When I went to see Rosemary, I asked her if her conscience bothered her about that family. Do you know what she said to me? She said, 'Get real, Pollyanna.'"

"We'll just have to make Ms. Rosemary eat those words, now won't we, girls?" Alexis drawled. The others nodded.

Charles stepped down from his computers and said, "Myra and I have come up with a plan. We would like you to consider it when you think about Rosemary's punishment. Our plan depends on the sale going through on the Barrington property next door, so at the moment it is nothing more than an idea."

Nikki settled herself more comfortably in her padded swivel chair. "Let's hear it then, Charles."

Charles looked like a Cheshire cat as he smacked his hands together. "Since Myra has the wherewithal," he said, referring to Myra's vast fortune, "to do pretty much as she wishes, we took the liberty of renting a very posh, high-end suite of offices on K Street in the District. It will be the new offices of Isabelle Flanders, architect. Anyone wanting to confer with Ms. Flanders can only do so by appointment. Since you've had your license for a year now, Isabelle, we've managed to give you an impressive résumé to match your offices. Courtesy of some of my friends," he added, false modesty ringing in his voice.

If the women wondered about the why or the how of what Charles was saying, they didn't mention it out loud. They knew better. In their eyes, Charles, a former MI6 operative, could do anything thanks to his network of spooks, spies and the covert world he'd worked in until his cover was blown. When Myra had told the girls that Charles was on first-name terms with the Queen, they never again questioned anything he did or asked of them.

"What that means is that Isabelle can take credit for designing a theme park owned by a friend in California. She can also take credit for a brand-new mall that's about to open in Chicago. Another friend. Anyone curious enough to make inquiries will run up against a brick wall.

"The new offices will have impressive plaques, citations, blow-your-mind pictures of Isabelle with dignitaries. There will also be an article in the papers today, courtesy of the AP wire service announcing that my friend on the other side of the pond is requesting Isabelle's presence for a memorial she is considering. It doesn't matter if the event materializes or not."

"Whoa! Way to go, Charles!" the girls squealed in unison.

Charles preened and bowed low. In spite of himself, he burst out laughing. "Sometimes it pays to have friends in high places."

Myra was so excited she almost broke her pearls, which she was never without. "Can you imagine the look on this Rosemary's face when she hears about *that*? Whatever would we do without this dear man?"

Charles's cheeks turned pink as he cleared his throat so he could continue. "Now, if the sale goes through and Myra is able to purchase the adjacent property, she's going to contact several architects to bid on the project she's considering. There are several very large firms in the District, but the two v

are going to be interested in are Rosemary's and Isabelle's. Rosemary will know she's being pitted against the woman she ruined. It should prove interesting."

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"Charles, that is so devilishly clever," Nikki said in awe.

Charles twinkled. "Yes, I thought so. Since today is Valentine's Day, I'm taking my lady love to town. We're going to pick up Judge Easter and have a nice dinner out. You're all more than welcome to stay or leave. We'll reconvene tomorrow at the same time."

Nikki felt enormous relief. She'd been wondering for hours how she could possibly get away to join Jack on this all-important lovers' day. She did her best to feign indifference by saying, "I think I'll head for my office. I'll see all of you tomorrow."

Isabelle was the only one who opted to stay at the farm. The others said their goodbyes and drove away.

Left to her own devices, Isabelle sat down at the kitchen table and sipped at her cold cup of coffee. A mighty sigh escaped her lips. What would she do when her mission was over and she was vindicated? Neither Charles nor Myra had said anything about her continuing to work in the fancy new offices and she didn't have the nerve to ask if she could take it over. The rent alone scared her out of her wits. Maybe she could open a small office somewhere and just be a one-woman operation. The thought of being vindicated left her feeling light-headed. Maybe she needed to go outdoors and run to clear her head. She dropped.

She wished then, as she often did, that she had family to call on, but there was no one but a great aunt who was so distant she couldn't even remember her name. All her friends were gone and she hadn't bothered to make new ones. The Sisterhood was her family now, Myra and Charles her surrogate parents. Maybe someday she'd meet a man who would make her blood sing the way Bob had. So many maybes.

Life was suddenly becoming interesting again.

Isabelle smiled, then grabbed her lightweight jacket and went for her run. Seven miles today.

In the car, Nikki called Jack on her cell phone. "I've been sprung. I'm all yours for the rest of the day and night."

Jack groaned. "Nik, I can't get away until at least four. I'll try for earlier but I can't promise."

"Do your best. I'll cook us a nice dinner and . . ."

"And?"

Nikki laughed. "And I'll leave it to you to fill in the blanks. Bye." She heard Jack groan again as she ended the call.

Jack gathered up his topcoat and briefcase and left his office. He had fifteen minutes to get to court. It was sleeting when he hit the street, the stinging spray hitting him smack in the face. He walked with his head down, hunkered into his topcoat.

"Hey, Jack, slow down!" a voice called to be heard over the driving wind. Jack turned to see Ted Robinson on his right.

"Can't. Gotta be in court. Walk along with me. I hope to hell you aren't here to ask me what to do about your lady love, the one with the bodacious ass, for Valentine's Day."

The reporter loped alongside Jack, his breathing heavy. Finally, he had to slow down. "Well, yeah, that too, but I need to talk to you about something else first. How long are you gonna be in court?"

"Thirty minutes if all goes well. Wanna grab some lunch? Listen, I have to sprint the rest of the way. I'll meet you in the lobby, OK? Forty minutes tops."

"Yeah, sure."

Jack felt bad for his friend as he sprinted off. Ted still wasn't up to snuff since he'd had his spleen removed following an almost-fatal beating by some very special federal agents. Jack had taken care

that little matter, but he still felt guilty over the beating Ted had suffered.

~~Jack barreled through security and raced down the hall to Judge Easter's courtroom. He blew in like a gust of wind, shrugging out of his topcoat as he raced to take his place just as Judge Easter stomped her way to the front of the room and saw Jack wiping at the sleet on his face.~~

"All stand. The Honorable Judge Cornelia Easter presiding," the bailiff shouted to be heard in the back of the courtroom.

"Nice to see you this morning, Mr. Emery," she barked.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Your Honor," Jack replied, grinning.

The judge settled in her chair.

Forty minutes later Jack was on his way to the ground floor where Ted Robinson was waiting for him.

"How about the Rusty Nail?" Jack asked, referring to a steak house a block away.

"Sure. I'm in the mood for a big thick steak with onions and mushrooms. I'm getting tired of eating tofu. Maggie is a vegetarian so I have to be carnivorous on my own time. So what do you think, Jack? Flowers, candy, jewelry, or all of the above? What? Are you seeing anyone? What are you getting her? Who is it?"

"Like I'm really going to tell you her name! Tomorrow I'll see it in that damn paper of yours. I'm going the flower route. Champagne-colored roses. I ordered them yesterday. You're only going to get leftovers now. Why'd you wait so long?"

"Because I didn't know what to get her. She does have a bodacious ass, doesn't she?"

Jack held the door to the Rusty Nail open for Ted to enter. "That she does, my friend. Now, if you really want to win some points with Maggie, get something for her dog. Women love it when you include their pets. I read that somewhere, so don't blame me if it doesn't work." He shrugged out of his wet topcoat and hung it up next to the booth. Then he plopped down and swiped at his wet head with a wad of napkins. "What a shitty day," he mumbled. "So, I know damn well you didn't come all the way to the office to ask me about Valentine's Day. What's up?"

Ted grimaced as he waited for the waitress in her skimpy, almost non-existent uniform to take the order. "I'll have a porterhouse steak, medium, twice-baked potato and a side of onion rings and I'll have a Miller Lite."

"I'll have the same," Jack said.

"She must be freezing," Ted said, jerking his head in the waitress's direction.

"Nah, those girls have to hustle. In case you don't know this, buddy, they wear those skimpy outfits so dumb schmucks like us tip big. So, what's up?"

"I don't know for sure. Maybe something, maybe nothing. I'd like your spin on it." Ted whipped up a folded section of the *Post*, a small column highlighted in yellow.

Jack reached for the paper, his eyebrows shooting upwards. *Shit, shit, shit!* The ladies of Pinewood were on the march again.

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## Two

The moment Nikki heard the ping of the alarm system going off, she ran to the foyer to throw herself into Jack's arms.

"Ohhh, I've missed you! It's been . . ."

"A whole week. I missed you more," Jack said, nuzzling her neck, loving the way she always smelled like wildflowers, even in the dead of winter. He held out the florist's box with its huge red ribbon.

Nikki accepted the box, *ooohing* and *aaahing* over the gorgeous champagne-colored roses—her favorite. She quickly put them in a vase and then carried them into the living room to the coffee table. That way they could both enjoy the flowers while they cuddled on the couch after dinner. She wiggled her finger to show Jack she was wearing her engagement ring. He smiled from ear to ear, knowing that in the morning it would go back on the chain around her neck and then under whatever she was wearing for the day. She could wear it on her toe for all he cared, as long as she wore it.

"How's the weather out there?" Nikki asked as she led Jack back to the little breakfast nook where they would have their romantic candlelit dinner.

"Rain, sleet, a little snow. The roads are freezing. By morning, if this keeps up, we'll be soaked in Jack wiggled his eyebrows to show what he thought about that. "What's for dinner?"

"Your favorite. Leg of lamb, Irish potatoes, mint jelly, baby carrots. I made yeast rolls. And I baked a blackberry cobbler. Just for you, Mr. District Attorney."

Jack looked down at the pretty table setting, the linen tablecloth, the matching napkins, the fine crystal, the gleaming silver and the decorative china. What he really liked were the blue candles that smelled like blueberries. His sister always used to chastise his mother for never using her fine things. "They're for company," his mother would always say. The only thing was, they never had company. Not even at Christmas. Nikki said she liked to use her things every day because they made her feel good. She even had a Baccarat crystal glass in the bathroom that she used to gargle with. Now he had one, too. His glass was on the left, Nikki's was on the right.

"Give me a minute to change my clothes and I'll be right back."

"Take your time. By the way, I have a present for you, too."

Jack took a swipe at her rump as he left the kitchen. He was back in ten minutes wearing jeans and a navy-blue sweatshirt that said Georgetown Lacrosse on the back. He was like a kid again. "Can I open my present now?"

"Well, sure," Nikki said as she settled platters on the table and then opened a bottle of Jack's favorite Merlot. She sat down and waited for him to untie the ribbon and open the small flat box. Finally, when he had ripped at the paper and at the Scotch tape holding the box together, he stared down at the present.

"Oh, wow! Uh-huh. This . . . I can see you put a lot of thought into this. I don't know what to say. Honest to good God, Nik, I'm speechless."

Nikki leaned across the table, the light from the blue candles casting her in an almost iridescent glow. Her voice was soft, solemn. "The big question is, will you accept this gift from my heart?"

Jack stared at the woman he loved and replied just as solemnly. "I accept. The big problem is this: with such a tribute, where can I . . . put it? I'm assuming it's a secret?"

Nikki reached for the burlled-walnut plaque with the bronze faceplate that proclaimed Jack Emer

an honorary member of the Sisterhood. “This makes it official, Jack. You don’t have to accept. You said you were committed to me, and committed to me means you’re committed to the Sisterhood. It’s not too late to back out.”

Jack reached for her hand over the leg of lamb. “I’m in. I’ll do whatever I can to help you. In secret, of course.”

“Of course.”

“Now, can we eat?”

“You betcha.”

Hours later, after dinner, the pair cuddled on the comfortable sofa.

“Bring me up to date, Nik,” Jack said.

When Nikki was finished outlining the plan they had for Isabelle’s mission, Jack fished around in his briefcase to show her the article Ted Robinson had given him at lunch. “He’s already on to you and your guys. I have to say, you’re pretty clever. What are the chances of Myra getting the property?”

“Actually she has it, but she may not know it yet. Isabelle called from the farm around three and said that the Realtor had called to say her client had accepted Myra’s offer. She said she tried calling both Myra and Charles but their cell phones must be off. So, yes, she’s got the property and it’s a go.”

“Is that guy Charles so influential he got the Queen to go along with him on that news release that just hit the paper?”

“Yep.”

“Damn!”

“Jack, can you dig out the old files on Isabelle’s case? I have them in the office but I don’t want to pull them out now and draw unwanted attention. The firm has picked up a few more clients through word of mouth from some of our more loyal clients. I’m not going to replace Jenny. I learned my lesson when I hired Allison to take Barbara’s place. Perhaps down the road, if our client base increases, I’ll give it some thought. Right now, Jenny’s death is still too raw with me—and all the other partners at the firm. What’s going on in the DA’s office?”

Jack poured from a second bottle of wine. “Same old, same old. Crime never stops, you know that. I had to appear before Judge Easter late this morning. She’s no fun anymore. She used to crack up the courtroom with her one-liners. She’s all business these days, and I understand that. I did wish her a Happy Valentine’s Day, but she gave me the evil eye so I shut up.”

“Ted?”

“Yeah, well, Ted is something else. Ink runs in that guy’s veins. He’s got something going with Maggie Spritzer these days, so what he doesn’t come up with, she does. He was pretty excited about the little article I showed you. He sees political intrigue and governments colliding, that kind of thing. He knew immediately who Isabelle Flanders was. Not because of the lawsuit way back when, but because she’s a member of your . . . ah . . . little group. Now he’s on the alert. Maggie, too. Don’t worry, I have the inside track with Ted, and he owes me now.”

Nikki twisted around in the corner of the sofa so she could see Jack better. “Does he know about us? That you’re staying here?”

“Not to my knowledge. He fishes around from time to time, wanting to know if I’m seeing anyone. If push comes to shove, I’ll call in Marcey, one of my assistants, to pose as my girlfriend. She’s engaged to a really nice guy, so don’t get worried. If it happens, it will all be playacting for Ted’s benefit. Ted knows I’m staying here in Georgetown but I don’t know if he knows it’s your place or not. I tend to think he doesn’t know or he would have needled me. In other words, so far so good.”

Nikki yawned elaborately. “Are you really OK with being an honorary member of the Sisterhood?”

“Yes, I am, and I’m going to hang my plaque on my side of the bathroom. You should call it the Sisterhood Plus One Brother.”



Nikki laughed. "You bank the fire and I'll lock up. First one in bed gets to . . ."

~~Jack was like a living, breathing streak of lightning as he beat Nikki to the bed with a minute spare. "You were saying . . ." He grinned.~~

"Charles, I feel so guilty about fibbing to the girls."

"Myra, you didn't fib. Cornelia said she would have dinner with us and then she changed her mind. You didn't know she was going to cancel when you told the girls we were going to stay in town for the evening. It's too late now, we're almost to Sunstar Farms. It will be so nice to see Nealy again."

"Charles, isn't she the most fascinating woman? She's just this little bit of a thing and yet she rode to a Triple Crown for Blue Diamond Farms. She said she loves being back at her old homestead here in Virginia with Hatch. They're retired, the way you and I are supposed to be retired. I know she's going to jump at the chance to help us. My father took me to Blue Diamond Farms when I was about sixteen. It was just wonderful and beautiful but it wasn't the famous horse farm that Nealy turned into in later years. Actually, Blue Diamond Farms has the distinction of being the most famous horse farm in the world, with so many Kentucky Derby winners that I've lost track. All thanks to Nealy. My father and my mother knew Maude and Jess, Nealy's adoptive parents, for years. Nealy had just come there to live when I first met her. We lost track of one another for a while, but when I got back from Europe, I made it my business to look her up again. We may not see much of each other, but we never lost touch."

Charles was almost giddy. "When news of Nealy Diamond Clay coming to our neck of the woods gets into the papers, Rosemary will pitch a fit. I have the whole script in my head, Myra. We'll have to get Isabelle to pose for pictures with her."

"I know, dear. Oh my, it's starting to sleet. That is sleet, isn't it?"

"Yes. We only have a mile or so to go. Everything looks so depressing in February. I think it's the worst month of the year. Nealy is expecting us, isn't she?"

Myra waved her hand under Charles's nose. "Earth to Charles! No, dear, she is not expecting us. Nellie only told us she couldn't do dinner on our drive into town. You and I decided on the spur of the moment to drive here. Not to worry, Nealy loves company just the way we do, as long as it's the *right* company. Oh look, there's the arch and the sign. We're here and not a minute too soon. Tap the horn, dear. I so love it when people are waiting in the doorway to welcome you. Ooh, I can't wait to see Nealy. I think it's been three years, maybe four. We spoke on the phone last week, though."

Charles smiled at the excitement in Myra's voice. He loved to see her so happy and excited. He was looking forward to spending time with Hatch, Nealy's husband. The ladies could gossip and he and Hatch would smoke good cigars, drink fine brandy and tell tall tales. He obligingly tapped the horn.

"Look, the door is opening. They're waiting for us! Oh, this is so wonderful!" Myra squealed. "Nealy!" she shouted as she ran toward the front porch before Charles could even bring the car to a complete stop.

"Myra!" Nealy said, running down the steps to embrace her old friend.

Charles went over to greet Hatch, who towered over Charles by at least eight inches. The men shook hands and manfully clapped one another on the back. Nealy offered up one of her famous Black and Decker handshakes before she loosened her grip to hug Charles.

"This is such a nice surprise! Come in, come in. Hatch and I are bored out of our minds. We were doing crossword puzzles to pass the time."

"I know I should have called ahead," Myra said, linking her arm with Nealy's, "but it was a spur of the moment decision. Charles and I need your help but we can talk about that later. Let's visit. Coffee would be nice. Do you have to do anything for the horses?"

“It’s all taken care of. I have wonderful people these days. Hatch and I are just like two old fogies waiting around for someone to need us. When they don’t call on us, we do crossword puzzles. You know the coffee is always on in my house. Hatch is a little worried as we’re expecting an ice storm. It looks to me like it’s under way. You and Charles may be marooned here for a few days. What could be nicer?”

Myra laughed. “There’s nothing better than spending time with old friends over a good cup of coffee. Let’s sit in the kitchen and catch up.”

“Wonderful!” Nealy beamed.

\* \* \*

Three days later, on a cold but bright and sunny February afternoon, the ladies of Pinewood sat around the kitchen table eating lunch while they waited for Myra and Charles to get back from their trip.

“Are you sure it’s the same Nealy Diamond, the one who won the Triple Crown?” Alexis asked.

Nikki laughed. “The one and the same—and she’s agreed to help us with Isabelle’s mission. Only her name these days is Nealy Littletree. And yes, she rode her horses to the Triple Crown, not once but twice. The first woman to do it, too! The town will turn out the red carpet for her since this is horse country. She’s a great lady. I only met her twice but she sure is a woman you never forget. Being in the horse business and all, I’m hoping she might know or maybe have heard something about the Barringtons.”

“I don’t understand, what can she possibly do for Isabelle?” Alexis asked.

“Window dressing. Photo ops for Isabelle. It’s Myra’s PR machine kicking in. To make Rosemary livid in the hopes she does something stupid. It will be obvious to everyone that Isabelle will have the inside track. That will make Rosemary green with envy. She’s going to start poking around, trying to find out how Isabelle got back on her feet and how she got her license reinstated. Since she’s the devil in the woodwork, wouldn’t you be a little nervous as well as angry that the woman you ruined is back on top?” Nikki said. “Myra is hosting a dinner party at the Silver Swan to kick off this huge endeavor and will invite every notable she can find. Even the governor. Photo opportunities out the kazoo. Rosemary’s invitation will conveniently get lost in the mail only to arrive in her mailbox *after* the dinner party. How’s that for devious?”

The women laughed for a long time.

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## Three

The sign outside the building was simple and stark with a single name on it: Rosemary Hershey. Anyone caring enough to wonder who Rosemary Hershey was had to enter the building and ask the skinny receptionist with the see-through hair and fake nails. If Rosemary was within earshot of the person doing the questioning, her reply was always succinct: “K.I.S.S.” Keep It Simple, Stupid. Then she’d blow an airy kiss to the person who had asked the question and walk away.

Bobby Harcourt didn’t like the sign and had had many heated conversations with his wife about her name not being on it even though he was a full partner. During each one of those conversations Rosemary would remind her husband that she’d used her settlement money to buy the building and start up her own firm. Bobby had been in the picture at the time of the accident and she’d made him buy into her firm, but by that point the sign had already been commissioned and there was no room for his name on it.

Bobby had gone along with the whole thing because of the bedroom gymnastics. But, as in most cases, even that side of things had worn thin and he’d later married Rosemary and bought into her firm because it seemed reasonable at the time. Now, though, the whole thing was starting to get under his skin. He was a damn good architect and had made Architect of the Year two years in a row. Rosemary had won the award once. He was the workhorse of the firm and Rosemary was the show horse. Filly, you will. All three plaques hung in the lobby of their office building.

Bobby no longer looked at the sign on the door or the plaques on the lobby wall. Today, just as on every other day, he entered the building, the morning paper tucked under his arm, and headed straight for his office with its spectacular view of the Washington Monument.

He stopped at the receptionist’s desk for his messages, hating how sleazy the young woman looked. He’d spoken to Rosemary about the receptionist’s appearance and all she’d done was cluck her tongue and ask him if he wanted a lawsuit on his hands. It wasn’t just the way the young woman looked, it was her stupid name as well. Sasha. No one named their kid Sasha except maybe a Russian mother. This Sasha was from Mud Creek, Mississippi. White trash, all ninety pounds of her. He rather suspected that Rosemary kept her on because Sasha made her look beautiful, which she was, but she was also a cold, relentless, heartless bitch of a woman. He’d found that out as soon as the honeymoon was over, much to his regret.

Bobby looked at his watch. Ten-fifteen. Time to ruin his wife’s day. He smiled as he crossed the hall to her suite of offices. He rapped on the door and opened it without waiting for a response.

“Got a minute, Rosemary?”

“Yeah, sure. How’d the Rotary breakfast go? Any gossip?”

Bobby looked at his beautiful wife. Spun sugar candy was what she always reminded him of. No matter what time of the day or night, she always looked like she just stepped out of a bandbox. Perfectly coiffed, expertly made up, exquisitely dressed, subtle perfume that never seemed to fade and always with her twenty-four-carat smile that was as phony as the caps on her pearly white teeth.

“Actually, I did hear quite a bit of gossip,” he said, feeling smug, “but you aren’t going to like it. You know, Rosemary, it was your turn to do the Rotary breakfast this month.”

“Oh, poo, you good old boys didn’t need me there. All you do is tell risqué jokes and pretend to shock me. So, what’s the gossip? And for heaven’s sake, why won’t I like it?”

Bobby shrugged inside his tweed jacket. “Because, my darling, it has to do with Isabelle Flandre

and we both know how much you despise her.”

If he was expecting a reaction, he wasn't disappointed. Rosemary stopped what she was doing and just glared at him. Bobby thought for a minute that she looked frozen! But she recovered quickly. “That crazy woman, What did she do now?”

“Evidently something good. The Queen of England commissioned her to design some kind of memorial. She did get her license reinstated a while back. I saw it in the newsletter, so you must have seen it too, even though we never discussed it. Roscoe Cummings, who heads up the realty board, said Isabelle signed a lease on some very impressive office space. She's got contractors working round the clock. Roscoe said, and this is a direct quote, ‘Her offices will make yours look like a dump, Bobby.’

“Really?”

Tongue in cheek, Bobby said, “*Really*. Terry McGovern said he spoke to Isabelle one day last week about some of the furnishings she's buying—which, by the way, according to Terry, are the high end of high. Lots of plush furniture, paintings, tons of marble and mahogany. He said it's probably costing her about three hundred grand just to outfit the place. Nine rooms in all, so you can imagine the kind of rent she'll be paying. Rumor has it she paid for a full year in advance. But it's just a rumor. Max Turgold said he heard Isabelle enticed two heavy-hitters from New York to join the firm and another guy from California who is hotter than hot. They're bringing along their own roster of clients. Guess Isabelle hit the mother lode. If all that's true, this outfit is peanuts compared to what she's starting out with. Guess we better look to our laurels.”

Rosemary fingered a set of blueprints but Bobby could see she was upset. “Wait till they find out about her past,” she snarled.

Bobby wagged one of his fingers. “Now it's funny you should say that. Roscoe said everyone knows about it; Isabelle didn't pull any punches. She's got *beaucoup* bucks so who cares? And the rumor is that now that she has all those *beaucoup* bucks, she's talking about reopening her case. She said she was shafted. I always thought the same thing myself,” he added slyly. “You know why I always thought that, Rosemary?” Not bothering to wait for a response, he continued. “Because Isabelle never drank. She was a one glass of wine kind of person and she never even finished that. Sometimes she'll have a beer and she'd never finish that, either. Yet, they said she was drunk. They said it because you told them that.”

Rosemary bared her teeth. “The next thing you'll be telling me is you made a mistake dumping Isabelle and marrying me. She was drunk that day. Go check the police report. They did blood alcohol tests on her.”

Bobby ignored this. “See ya. Gotta get ready to go to that Pioneer luncheon, unless you want to talk at my place.”

“For God's sake, you just had breakfast. All right, I'll go, you weasel,” Rosemary snarled.

Bobby walked across the hall to his office, closed the door and flopped down on his ergonomic chair. He felt lower than a snake's belly at his sense of satisfaction. He should have walked out of his marriage and this partnership a long time ago. Bobby Harcourt, last one out of the gate. His claim to fame.

He thought about Isabelle then because he always thought about Isabelle when he was unhappy. They'd had a good thing going back then. Back then. Isabelle with the laughing eyes and ready smile. Workaholic Isabelle. Isabelle who never drank. He'd tried telling that to the police, but they wouldn't listen to him. He'd testified in court, but no one had believed him. They didn't believe him when he said Isabelle was a cautious driver and would never have run a stop sign. They didn't believe him when he said Isabelle would never steal someone else's work. Of course, he'd testified after Rosemary. Poor, poor Rosemary with her injuries, wearing all those different braces, crying into a lace handkerchief. With nine men on the jury, Isabelle was dead in the water.

He'd tried to visit Isabelle in the hospital but he hadn't been permitted to see her because he wasn't family. He didn't know until much later that she'd almost died with pneumonia. After the trial Isabelle went off somewhere to lick her wounds. He'd tried everything he could to find her but she seemed to have dropped off the face of the earth. Little did he know at the time that she had just moved across town.

Wounded to the quick over Isabelle's rejection, he'd allowed himself to wallow in Rosemary's attention. Before he knew what was happening, he was having a torrid affair with her that was more about lust than anything else.

Bobby looked at his day planner. Meetings out the kazoo. Screw the new clients. They now had so many they couldn't handle them all. He called through to the secretary he shared with Rosemary.

"Cancel all my appointments. I'll be back by three o'clock. If Rosemary wants to know where I am, tell her something came up. If she needs me for anything, tell her to call my cell phone." Bobby reached for his overcoat and left the office. Brad Olsen was an old friend. He'd see him even if he had to cancel someone else to fit him in. It was time to find out where he stood legally, both business-wise and marriage-wise. His gut told him it was time to bail out. Something was going on and he sure as hell didn't want to be around when it all went down.

Rosemary tugged at her short powder-blue skirt before she opened the door to the meeting room at the Holiday Inn. If there was one thing she hated it was these civic meetings where everyone had to make nice to each other and then, when the meeting was over, the little cliques tore each other to pieces. The meeting was nothing more than a gossip session under the guise of what's-new-in-our-field.

The Pioneer Club dated back to the 1930s when Cyrus Canfield, the town's leading architect, formed it after being forced into retirement at the age of seventy-three. It was a way for Cyrus to keep his hand in the business and to stay as up-to-date as he could with the young whippersnappers who were fighting tooth and nail for their share of the building boom. When the club first met, it boasted seven members. Today there were a good three hundred—not that they all showed up at these little monthly luncheons, where everyone had to pay for their own lunch and drinks. It was still a gossip session and most of today's members were young in comparison to Cyrus Canfield and his original band of retired architects.

These days the Pioneers allowed women, but only because Sadie Longberry had filed a discrimination suit against them. Sadie had said in her lawsuit that even on her worst day she could outthink, outrun, outwork and outdrink any member of the Pioneers and that just because she was a woman they had no right to exclude her. Judge Cornelia Easter had heard the case. She had agreed with Sadie and had ordered each member of the club to pay Sadie two hundred dollars. Sadie walked away with a little over twenty-four grand. Then she did what any red-blooded fifty-year-old woman would do. She got a facelift and perky breast implants and managed to find a toy boy hot enough to melt her brand-new acrylic nails, and all within three weeks. Then she took the rest of the money and ran full-page ads in the local paper denouncing the Pioneer Club until the money ran out. And she never once set foot in a Pioneer Club meeting. Sadie then proceeded to form her own organization that boasted four hundred active members. Isabelle Flanders had been president four years running. Bobby was the treasurer. Rosemary had never joined.

Rosemary gave her mini skirt another tug and plastered a smile on her face before she entered the meeting room. She was aware instantly of two things. One, the tension was high. Two, Maggie Spritzer from the *Post* was sitting at the table munching on a chunk of cheese right next to the *Post*'s star reporter, Ted Robinson. Because the meetings were always as boring as the lunch itself, the reporters usually opted to call the president after the meeting to find out if anything new or noteworthy had gone on.

She looked a little farther down the long table and was stunned to see the *Chronicle's* leading reporter Zack Elderman. Her belly did a flip-flop.

Her smile intact, her expensive perfume wafting about, Rosemary greeted everyone at the table she took her seat. This was not going to be an ordinary meeting of the Pioneer Club.

Toby Wiseman brought the meeting to order. He whittled away at the dry, boring business on his agenda before he finally said, "And now, ladies and gentlemen, there's a new game in town with a whole new bunch of players. We're all going to have to watch our p's and q's from here on in."

"What are you talking about, Toby?" Rosemary asked, as if she didn't know the identity of this new player in town.

"I'm talking about Isabelle Flanders. Surely you heard. It's all over town. My God, woman, the Queen herself has commissioned Isabelle to do some sort of memorial for Buckingham Palace. It doesn't get any better than that."

Rosemary feigned indifference. "Oh, that," she drawled. "I'm not impressed. I wonder whose work she'll steal this time to pass off as her own. I'd like someone to tell me how she got her license back."

"Oh, I can tell you that, Miss Hershey," Maggie Spritzer chirped. "The board only suspended her license for five years and gave her a two-hundred-thousand-dollar fine. The board said they wouldn't give back the license until she paid the fine. Miss Flanders paid the fine, and then donated another fifty thousand dollars to the board to disperse to ailing and retired architects housed in the nursing home you all had built years ago. The board lifted the suspension five months ahead of schedule and Miss Flanders is back in business. I'm surprised you didn't know that. It was in the paper last week."

Ted Robinson flipped open a dog-eared notebook and said, with relish, "Miss Flanders issued a statement through her office manager. While I don't want to quote her verbatim, what she said in essence is this: 'I'm back and I remember all the people, my colleagues, who turned away from me when the case against me was circumstantial at best. I'm reopening my old case because the statute of limitations has not run out.' In the meantime, she plans to aggressively seek new business for her new firm. She also said that all those people who testified against her had better hire some damn fine attorneys because she's going to war."

The smile on Rosemary's face finally slipped away. "Why are you all looking at me like that? Isabelle wants to go after everyone involved in that ugly mess, let her. I certainly have nothing to hide. A jury found her guilty and saw fit to award me compensation for my injuries. The board revoked her license, not me. The woman is just another architect like the rest of us. She's no Frank Lloyd Wright for God's sake."

Ted Robinson looked down at his notebook. "According to Miss Flanders's spokesperson, Miss Flanders used the word 'perjury' quite a few times when preparing her statement. However, she didn't name names. Is there anyone here who would like to make a comment?"

"Don't insult me," Rosemary said. She looked around the table, mentally counting all the men she had slept with over the past five years. She noticed they had a hard time meeting her gaze.

Tamara Wheatley, a mousy woman with thin hair and oversized glasses, leaned toward the two reporters. "Do either of you know if it's true that Myra Rutledge bought the Barrington farm and is going to turn it into something like that famous racing farm in Kentucky? I think it's called Blue Diamond. Owned by the woman who won the Triple Crown. I heard that she's a personal friend of Mrs. Rutledge and she's called on her for help. Supposedly she's going to be asking for bids from a number of us. If what I've heard is true, that's a hundred-million-dollar project. Possibly more. That's going to be fodder for the newspapers for months to come."

Rosemary felt sick to her stomach. She reached for a piece of cheese she didn't want. She could feel the heat of the moment start to creep up her neck into her face.

"It's true," Maggie Spritzer said. "Mrs. Rutledge is going to close on the Barrington property."



sometime this week. I called her myself yesterday and she confirmed it. She said she's going to host a dinner party at the Silver Swan and will be inviting all the dignitaries, the governor, and all your architects so she can tell you what she wants in person. She said Nealy Diamond Clay will be in attendance to further elaborate on what is needed." Maggie looked around at the shocked and awestruck expressions on everyone's face. "I'm surprised none of you knew this. Would anyone care to give me a quote, make a comment?"

Rosemary nibbled on the cheese in her hand. She wondered what her voice would sound like if she made a comment. She decided silence was her best friend.

Carla Peabody said, "Aside from the dinner at the Silver Swan with some dignitaries, what makes this deal so spectacular? Of course, my firm will submit a bid, but why this huge interest? My client, Mrs. Rutledge is a wealthy woman and does stuff like this all the time. A racing stable is not new to the state of Virginia."

Ted Robinson closed his notebook and stuck it back in his pocket. "This is just my opinion, ladies and gentlemen, so hear me out. I think it's news because it's rumored that your outcast, Isabelle Flanders, has the inside track. What say you now?"

The group was saved from replying as the huge double doors opened to admit waiters and waitresses ready to serve lunch.

"OK, I'll just report that you were all dumbfounded," Ted said, getting up and then holding Maggie's chair for her. "Enjoy your lunch, ladies and gentlemen. It looks . . . ah . . . interesting."

Rosemary Hershey jabbed her fork into her fillet of sole, wishing it was Isabelle Flanders's neck.

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## Four

Outside in the blustery February wind, Ted Robinson walked Maggie Spritzer to her car. They eyed each other warily, their reporting instincts kicking into high gear. Both their noses had picked up something in the Pioneer meeting and neither of them was willing to confide in the other. They might share a bed these days, a bottle of wine, hold hands and whisper sweet nothings in each other's ear but they would never consider sharing thoughts, notes, nuances on a possible story. When it came to byline, it was every man for himself and no hard feelings.

"See ya tonight?" Ted said. It was more of a question than a statement.

"Not tonight, baby, I have things to do." Maggie's eyes twinkled. "I'll call you."

Ted frowned. His eyes didn't twinkle. "That's supposed to be my line." Damn, being a woman Maggie had probably picked up on some hot tidbit he'd failed to notice because he was a miserable shit-kicking man. The twinkle in her eyes was all the proof he needed that she had an edge. Well, he'd never groveled in his life and he sure as hell wasn't going to start now. "Dinner, breakfast?" he asked groveling.

"Sorry, can't. I'll call you."

Well, once a groveler, always a groveler. "When?"

"When you hear your phone ring, it might be me. Answer it. If it isn't me, wait for the next ring."

"Bitch!"

"Bastard!" Maggie said, driving away.

Ted walked back to his car. He should follow her. He really should. Instead, he shrugged and started his engine. Another visit to Jack Emery was called for.

Ted drove across town to the courthouse, parked, worked his way through security and finally made it to Jack's office, where the District Attorney immediately threw his pencil across the room at the sight of him.

"Jesus, Ted, what now? I'm up to my eyeballs in a high-profile capital murder case. It's looking like I'm going to have to try this one myself, which means I will have to move in to this place as I be here twenty-four-seven." Jack could feel his stomach muscles crunch into a knot. He hoped he'd feigned indifference to whatever Ted was going to tell him was working.

"You get a break morning and afternoon. It's the law, so take it now and then I'll get out of your hair. We can go to the cafeteria."

"Are you nuts? If you step foot in that place you get sick. OK, OK, we can go to Mo's for coffee. Fifteen minutes and that's it, Ted."

"I'll take it. I want to run something by you."

"I thought you had a reference desk at the paper. When did I become your primary source?" Jack said, holding the door of the elevator.

"When you got lily-livered and told me about the ladies of Pinewood. Suck that up, Mr. DA."

"Yeah, well, that was then and this is now. I'm outta that mess. I thought when I squared it for you that you were going to let things lie."

Ted walked through the revolving door, the wind driving him backward. "It's supposed to get warmer tomorrow."

"Oh yeah, how warm?" Jack asked, struggling to walk against the wind.

"Maybe forty."

“Shut the hell up, Ted. Forty is for Eskimos. Tell me it will be eighty degrees tomorrow and you will have my undivided attention,” Jack said as he opened the door to the greasy spoon called Mo Place. It was so hot and steamy indoors that Ted’s glasses fogged up straightaway. Jack started to sweat as he shouldered his way to a spindly table at the back of the diner where he bellowed for two coffees. Everybody bellowed for coffee at Mo’s.

“Christ, this is even worse than the last time I was here,” Jack griped. “It tastes like licorice and someone’s sweaty sneakers. Spit out whatever you brought me here for before this shit kills me.”

“One of the ladies of Pinewood is flying high, Jack. She’s throwing money around like she’s printing it herself. From low income and qualifying for food stamps, all of a sudden she’s spending like she won the lottery. Since she belongs to that little group out there in McLean, my gut tells me Myra Rutledge has got to be backing her.”

Jack tried another sip of coffee. It wasn’t any better than the first. He slid the heavy mug to the center of the table. “Myra Rutledge is a philanthropist. So what? What’s that bloodhound nose of yours telling you? Who are you talking about, anyway?”

Ted gulped at his own coffee. “I can’t believe you don’t like this coffee. Isabelle Flanders, that’s who. It tells me the ladies of Pinewood are getting ready to pull another . . . event. It’s been about four months since they hit the National Security Advisor, and don’t even pretend they weren’t responsible for that stunt. We both know they were.”

Jack sighed. “What do you want from me? Did I tell you I’m involved in a high-profile capital crime? I am. I don’t have time for this crap.”

Ted settled his glasses more firmly on his nose. “You’re good, Jack, I’ll give you that. You know what I think, old buddy? I think you’re involved up to your eyeballs with those women. I hate to admit, that never occurred to me before. Maggie also pointed it out to me. That would make you a pimp or a shill, Jack. Maggie’s got a lot on the ball. She also blew my mind when she asked me why you were doing living in Nikki Quinn’s house in Georgetown. I didn’t know that, Jack. I felt like a fool when she told me.”

*Shit, shit, shit!* “And you’re bent out of shape because you think I should have told you that, right? Well, old buddy, I hate to prick your bubble, but there’s a logical explanation. Nikki is living out of the farm. I asked her if I could rent the house until I found a place of my own. We don’t have a hate on for each other, Ted. We were engaged at one time. We’re still friends. At least I hope we are. We share a lot of good memories. I traded on those memories when I asked for the lease. She obliged. Here, take a look,” Jack said, flipping open his wallet. He withdrew a single sheet of paper folded over enough times to fit in his wallet. He unfolded it and handed it over. “All properly notarized and everything. I pay her eleven hundred bucks on the first of every month. I have to change the light bulbs, take out the trash, water the plants, shovel snow, rake the leaves, etcetera. Satisfied?”

“Do you always carry your lease around with you? I don’t even know where mine is.”

Jack grimaced as he drummed his fingers on the tabletop. “I don’t have to explain how and why I do what I do, but because I’m a nice guy, I will. I didn’t have my briefcase with me the day I signed the lease. I just folded it up and put it in my wallet. To tell you the truth, I forgot about it till just the minute. If you want, I’ll fax Maggie a copy of it for her perusal.” Jack was relieved to see Ted shrug. The lease had been Nikki’s idea to cover his ass.

“Anything else?”

“Do you know Bobby Harcourt?”

“Can’t say that I do. Should I?”

“At one time Bobby Harcourt was Isabelle Flanders’s fiancé. I did a story on him a while back. I thought he was a stand-up guy. He used to fly Tomcats in the Navy. Any guy who can pull nine and a half Gs in a Tomcat has got to be a good guy. He married the chick that ruined Isabelle Flanders. So

where I'm headed with this?"

~~"No, Ted, I don't see where you're headed with this. Flying airplanes makes someone a good guy. A grown man going by the name Bobby? Is he a pretty boy?"~~

Ted favored his friend with a sour look. "Maggie seems to think he's good-looking. Tall, works out, dresses well, good architect. Gets manicures, blow-dries his hair. Why is it that women notice studs like that? Harcourt made Architect of the Year twice in a row and his wife made it once. That Flanders woman made it twice, too. Now, *she's* a looker. The Hershey broad, not Flanders."

"And this means . . . what?"

"I don't know. I was hoping you could tell me something."

"You're on your own. Did I tell you I'm working on a high-profile capital murder case?"

"Shit, yes, three times, Jack. Give it a rest. You're in charge of that office, so don't pull the garbage with me. Help me out here. Those ladies at Pinewood are going to go after Bobby's wife, aren't they? Myra is shilling for Flanders and the others are helping. It makes sense."

Jack rummaged in his pocket for money to pay for the coffee. He slapped some bills on the table. "Is that your assessment or Maggie's?"

"Contrary to what you might believe, Jack, just because I'm sleeping with Maggie doesn't mean I share my sources or my info. I also have a mind of my own that I use on a regular basis. Maggie and I are independents—and adversaries to a certain point."

"I bet Maggie is just using you for sex. Think about this, Mr. Reporter, you gotta sleep sometimes. Women are sneaky. They go through your things when you're asleep. Especially after you just had sex and you're down for the count. They have all these little tools—hairpins, nail files, hat pins that can pick a lock. Chew on that one for a while and just remember, you heard it from me. I really have to go back to the office. What's your next move, you intrepid reporter, you?" Jack guffawed.

"Like I'm really going to tell you," Ted said huffily as he shouldered his way through the crowd that was waiting in line for their table.

"Tsk, tsk, then don't come sniffing around my office, and when that lady you're sleeping with screws you over, don't come crawling back to me for help."

Outside in the driving wind, Ted pulled a watch cap out of his pocket and settled it on his head. Jack's hair started blowing in all directions. He pulled his coat collar up as high as it would go and stared at his friend.

"Let's cut the shit, Jack, and get serious. You said you wanted those women caught. If you don't feel like that any longer, I'll fade into the night and not bother you again. Wherever the chips fall, the chips fall. I just feel that I'm closing the gap between me and them. Reporter's instincts."

Jack pretended to think. "I still feel like that," he lied. "I just don't see how I can be of any help. Sometimes, you're like a bull in a china shop. You need to cover your ass, Ted. Those women are smarter than both of us put together—and remember, there are seven of them, plus that English guy, not to mention the English guy's buddies. Those guys are still out for your blood—and mine, too. Just because we took out the first string doesn't mean the second string isn't warming up in the bull pen. Be careful, Ted, OK? Did I tell you—"

"You have a high-profile criminal case to prepare for. Yeah, three times. I get it, Jack. See ya."

Jack watched his friend trudge off into the wind. He pushed his way through the revolving door, smoothed down his hair and then walked over to a quiet corner where he called Nikki to tell her what just happened.

Was he a snitch? Hell, yes, he was a snitch, but he was also a bona fide honorary member of the Sisterhood. He didn't want his ass to get kicked out of the organization by a bunch of savvy women who wouldn't think twice about slicing off his dick and pickling it just for fun.

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