

FINAL BREATH

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CHAPTER ONE

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"I swear to God, I'm going to kill her," he whispered.

Erin Travino didn't pay attention to the man seated in the row behind her. She switched on her cell phone, activating the little blue display light. It glowed in the darkened movie theater. Erin punched in the code to check her messages again. Up on the big screen in front of her, Judi Dench was reprimanding Keira Knightley for something. Erin hadn't paid much attention to *Pride and Prejudice*. Maybe she should have been. She had a book report due next week, and hadn't even chosen the stupid book yet. If she'd been following the movie more closely, she could have pretended to have read *Pride and Prejudice*. Her English Lit teacher was a sucker for Jane Austen.

Then again, she really didn't have to try too hard at school lately. Most of her teachers were cutting her some slack. Erin simply had to say she was still traumatized over what had happened last week, and her teachers would grant her an extension or raise her C to a B minus.

Erin intended to milk the situation for as long as she could. Along with Molly Gerrard, and that nut job, Warren Tunny, she was prominently featured in all the newspaper articles. The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* even ran a photo of her, the halfway-decent snapshot from her high school ID. At least her wavy, shoulder-length, auburn hair was freshly washed, and the dimpled smile looked natural. Plus she appeared really thin in the picture.

Erin was constantly dieting, even though her friends insisted it was the last thing in the world she needed to do. Tonight, for example, her best friend, Kim, had bought a soda and a large buttered popcorn for the movie. Kim asked if she wanted some popcorn, but Erin just shook her head and sipped her medium Diet Coke. Didn't Kim know that stuff had the fat equivalent of three Big Macs? At least that was what Erin had heard.

She squinted at the illuminated display on her cell phone: NO NEW MESSAGES. Someone tapped her on the shoulder, startling her. Erin almost dropped the phone. She glanced over her shoulder.

"Would you mind putting your phone away?" growled the man behind her. He was in his late thirties—as was the lean, Asian guy with him. "The light is very distracting." Erin shifted in her cushioned seat. "Well, I wasn't talking on it," she whispered, rolling her eyes.

The man glared at her. The light from the movie screen flickered across his handsome, narrow face. "That's the fifth time you've pulled out your phone and switched it on since the movie started. Do you have ADD or something? How about showing a little courtesy for the people around you, huh?"

Her mouth open, Erin let out a stunned little laugh.

Suddenly her phone chimed out this ancient tune, "I Just Called to Say I Love You," in ring tones. She'd programmed it by accident last week and couldn't undo the damn thing.

"Shit," she muttered. A few people in nearby seats shushed her. The man and his buddy were frowning and shaking their heads.

Flustered, Erin grabbed her purse and retreated up the aisle toward the lobby.

Ignoring the filthy looks from several people seated along the aisle, she pressed the Talk button on her phone. "Hello?" she whispered, pushing at the door with her shoulder. She stepped into the narrow, dimly lit foyer. The door swung shut behind

her.

"Hello?" Erin repeated, louder this time.

She heard a click. Frowning, she checked the caller ID: NUMBER NOT LISTED.

With a sigh, Erin headed into the Harvard Exit Theater's lobby. They showed mostly foreign and independent films. Erin got a waft of popcorn smell as she wandered through the large lobby. It had a fireplace, a grand piano, and worn, antique parlor furnishings that were true to the building's 1920s architecture. The concessions stand was in the far corner, and beyond that, a stairway to the restrooms and another theater on the third floor.

Erin paused at the foot of the stairs. She dialed Molly's number and got her machine again. Erin clicked off. She'd already left three messages. They'd arranged to meet in front of the movie theater tonight. But Molly had never shown.

Molly was one of the most popular girls in Erin's class. She was thin and pretty with gorgeous, long, black hair that was right out of a shampoo commercial. Molly wore designer glasses, and somehow managed to look chic—even in just a sweater and jeans. Molly's stock only went up after what had happened last week. Erin's stock soared, too. Suddenly, she mattered.

The day before yesterday, Molly had asked if she wanted to hang out after school. They went to pick up a new pair of glasses for Molly at this store on Capitol Hill. The glasses had square lenses with tortoiseshell frames, slightly nerdy, very funky. Only someone as popular and pretty as Molly could have worn them without looking like a total dork. While in the optical shop with her new friend, Erin wished she had weak eyes so she could get glasses like Molly Gerrard. Afterward, they had Diet Cokes and shared a plate of cheese fries at the Broadway Grill. Erin ate only seven fries and was still hungry, but it didn't matter. She felt so cool, hanging out with Molly.

Kim was an okay friend. But Molly was queen of the "A" crowd, and being friends with her put Erin in the "A" crowd, too. She was devastated Molly hadn't shown up for the movie tonight. Erin wondered if she'd done something wrong. Maybe Molly didn't want to hang out with her and Kim. Kim wasn't "A" list. But no, that wasn't like Molly; she was nice to everyone.

Erin was still trying to figure out what must have happened when she glanced over toward the lobby and spotted one of the older guys who had been sitting behind her. It was the man's friend, the slim Asian guy. He seemed to be headed for the concessions stand, but his eyes suddenly locked with hers. He passed by the concessions counter and came toward her.

Erin automatically turned and started up the stairs. She wasn't afraid of him; she just didn't feel like hearing another lecture about movie theater etiquette. Halfway up the stairs, Erin figured she could duck into the women's room and avoid him altogether. But the cell phone slipped out of her hand and skipped down a few steps.

The man paused on the landing—in front of a huge old poster for An American in Paris. He retrieved her cell phone, climbed the stairs, and plopped the phone in her hand. "Well, I know you couldn't live without this now, could you?" he muttered.

Her mouth open, Erin didn't reply.

Brushing past her, the man started up the next flight of stairs—probably to the men's restroom on the third floor. But he paused and glanced back down at her. "A thank you might have been nice," he said. "You know, you're very rude." Shaking his head, he continued up the stairs.

Erin wanted to say, "Well, screw you!" But instead, she just retreated into the women's room. It was dimly lit and slightly creepy. The partition housing the two stalls was painted dark green, and the floor was old, chipped black-and-white tile—little hexagons. The old sink had separate faucets for the hot and cold water, and there were rust stains on the porcelain.

Erin could hear people laughing in the smaller theater upstairs. Some comedy from Italy was showing.

She caught herself frowning in the bathroom mirror. She flicked back her auburn hair. That guy who had just called her rude would have been asking for her goddamn

autograph if he knew who she was. Obviously, he hadn't seen the newspaper last week. They called her a hero for what she did. A hero.

It had happened last Tuesday in Mr. Gunther's fifth period study hall. Only about half of the students actually studied or did their homework in study hall; the rest napped, doodled, or tried to pass notes to each other. Gunther, a short, wiry, balding, forty-something wannabe-jock, wouldn't let anyone talk while he lorded over the classroom. He was a real hard-ass. He sat at the front of class with his nose buried in the Seattle Times sports section.

Erin was at her desk by the windows in the last row, listlessly paging through her Us Weekly. Gunther was such a Nazi, he'd assigned seats and wouldn't let anyone switch. Erin was stuck with a view of the faculty parking lot on one side and squirrely Warren Tunny on the other.

Warren sat hunched over his sketchpad. He was always drawing these weird cartoon monsters that looked like a cross between SpongeBob SquarePants and Godzilla. Erin never admitted it, but she found his drawings fascinating—gory, graphic, and oddly funny. No one else appreciated Warren's artwork—except maybe his geek buddies, if he even had any buddies. Erin couldn't see what he was drawing at that moment. His arm and shoulder blocked her view. He was probably protecting his sketch pad. It was new. The previous week, while Warren had been at his locker, one of the guys had grabbed his old sketch pad out of his hands and torn it up in front of him. Erin hadn't seen it happen, but she heard Warren had cried.

The guys were constantly picking on him and the girls made fun of him. Warren was skinny, with a pale, splotchy complexion and ugly, kinky, rust-colored hair that he parted on the side. Some of the guys called him "Pubes" because of that awful hair. Erin felt sorry for him, but the guy was definitely weird. Warren wore the same green army jacket to school every day—even in warm weather. And he kept it on all day long.

Bored, Erin tried to peek at what Warren was drawing. She still couldn't see the sketch pad. But she noticed something shiny inside Warren's fatigue jacket. It looked like a gun.

Erin gasped.

Warren stopped drawing and stared at her.

Quickly, she turned away and did her best to look bored. With a shaky hand, she flipped through a few pages of her magazine. After a minute, she swallowed hard and stole a glance over at Warren again. He seemed focused on his artwork once more. She could clearly see it now, the gun handle sticking out of his inside coat pocket.

How the hell had he smuggled a gun past the metal detectors?

Biting her lip, she helplessly glanced around the classroom—at the other students and at Gunther up in front. None of them had a clue.

She was the only one who knew Warren Tunny had a gun.

Squirming in her chair, Erin wondered if maybe—just maybe—the gun was a fake. She tried to catch another glimpse of it. Just then, Warren leaned back, and Erin saw his sketchpad—and what he'd been drawing.

It was a very creepy, detailed rendition of a smiling skull, with a caption underneath it: THEY WILL BE SORRY. Then, below that, he'd drawn a circle with a strange, tilted "V" inside that circle. Below this cryptic image, he'd written in even bigger letters than before, embellished with vines winding around each consonant and vowel: PREPARE TO DIE.

Warren sighed, glanced up at the clock for a moment, and then went back to his drawing.

Erin looked up at the clock, too: 1:05.

She suddenly realized, the tilted "V" inside the circle was supposed to be the hands of a clock. Her mouth open, she watched Warren draw the clock digits around the inside parameter of that circle—1:10 was the time on the clock in his picture. Just five minutes from now.

Was that when he planned to start shooting?

She could be wrong. Still, she wasn't about to wait until he pulled his gun out to know for sure. Her heart pounded furiously, and she could hardly breathe. She had

to do something. Her cell phone was in her purse. Gunther didn't allow people to use them during his study hall, and she couldn't pass anyone a note. Warren was her only neighbor.

Biting her lip, Erin glanced around the classroom again—at all her classmates, looking so bored, so unaware that within minutes there could be screams and blood and chaos. Erin glanced at the clock on the wall again: 1:07. Hunched forward, she took her spiral notebook out of her purse, opened it, and jotted down a few words. She glanced over her shoulder to make sure Warren couldn't see what she was writing. Then she tore the piece of paper from the notebook and folded it. Warren put his pencil down and flipped over the sketch pad. Erin wasn't sure why he'd done that. Maybe his work was finished. He probably didn't want anyone in the class to see it—not just yet. Perhaps it was for later, for the police to discover. Erin felt a chill race through her.

Warren's eyes met hers for a moment. Erin tried to smile, but it was forced, and she quickly looked away. He could probably see her shaking. Warren sat back at his desk and studied the clock by the classroom door. He seemed to be breathing hard. His hand—black ink and pencil lead on the fingers—slowly reached inside his fatigue jacket.

Grabbing her purse, Erin unsteadily got to her feet. "Mr. Gunther?" she said, hardly able to get the words out. Any minute now, she expected Warren to shoot her in the back. Making her way to the front of the classroom, she approached Gunther's desk. She tightly clutched her purse against her stomach. "Mr. Gunther?" she repeated.

He barely looked over the top of his newspaper. "Go back to your seat," he muttered.

Erin cleared her throat. "Mr. Gunther, I need to use the restroom. I have a—a problem." She handed him the note she'd just written, then started for the door. "I said, back to your seat!" he barked. His chair made a scraping noise on the floor as he pushed himself back from the teacher's desk. Everyone was looking at them.

Erin headed for the door. She wasn't sure she would make it. Her hand fumbled for the knob, then she swung open the door and ducked out to the hallway. She could hear people murmuring, and Gunther's voice: "All right, enough! I want quiet!" Erin shut the door behind her. But she still couldn't get her breath. This wasn't over yet. It hadn't even begun.

There was a window in the door—with thin, crisscrossed wire in it. Erin could see Gunther standing at his desk with her note in his hand. But he hadn't looked at it yet. He scowled at everyone in the classroom. "I want quiet!" he repeated. She could hear his muffled voice through the closed door.

Pulling her cell phone out of her purse, Erin switched it on and dialed 9-1-1. It rang twice. Through the window in the door, she watched Mr. Gunther finally glance down at her note.

She hadn't had much time to write anything. All it said was: "Warren Tunny has a gun in his jacket. I'll call 9-1-1."

A click interrupted the third ring tone: "Seattle Police Emergency," the woman said. "9-1-1 operator."

For a moment, Erin was speechless. She was watching Gunther's reaction. Frowning, he set her note on the desk, then glanced in Warren's direction. "Tunny, stand up!" she heard him bark.

Oh, no, no, no, you stupid son of a bitch, she wanted to scream.

Erin became aware of the 9-1-1 operator on the other end of the line: "Police Emergency. Can I help you?"

"Yes, I—I'm not absolutely sure if this is a real emergency," Erin said under her breath. "But—but I think maybe—"

"Could you please speak up?" the operator interrupted. "What's the nature of your emergency?"

While the operator talked, Erin could hear Gunther's voice, raised in anger. Suddenly a girl in the classroom screamed: "Oh, God, no!" Then there were more screams, and it sounded like someone knocked over a chair.

"Oh, Jesus," Erin said, louder this time, her voice cracking. "I'm at-at-James Madison High School, outside room 207, and this guy's got a gun..." Through the window in the door, she could see Gunther shaking his head and raising his hands. He looked terrified. Any minute now, she expected to hear the first shot.

The 9-1-1 operator was telling her to remain calm. The woman wanted to know if anyone had been hurt and how many gunmen there were.

"It's just one guy, a student, Warren Tunny. I'm outside the classroom right now, but I can still see them in there. I—" Erin fell silent as she caught a glimpse of Warren and Mr. Gunther in the window. Warren pressed the gun barrel to Gunther's head. The wiry little hard-ass teacher was cringing and trembling.

"Everyone, just shut up and sit down!" Warren screamed. He shook even worse than Gunther. Warren's face was so flushed it was almost matched the color of his frizzy red hair. "I mean it, shut the hell up, all of you..."

"Oh, my God," Erin whispered into the phone, backing away from the door. "I think he's going to shoot somebody. For Christ's sakes, please, do something! Send the police here..."

"All right, stay calm and tell me your name," the operator said.

"Erin—Erin Travino."

"Erin, I want you to confirm for me that you're calling from James Madison High School on Ridgeway Drive, and right now in room 207, one of the students has a gun and he's threatening people. Is that correct?"

Erin couldn't answer her. She couldn't move or speak, because at that very moment, the door to room 207 was opening. Warren Tunny stood at the threshold, gazing at her—with the gun aimed at her heart.

"Come on back inside, Erin," he whispered.

She gaped at him. Tears welled in Warren's eyes. He looked scared but determined. Erin could hear some girls quietly sobbing in the room. She didn't know where Gunther had gone, but he wasn't in the doorway with Warren.

"Put away the phone, and come here," he whispered.

"Erin? Can you answer me?" the 9-1-1 operator was asking.

With her eyes fixed on the gun in Warren's trembling hand, Erin obediently clicked off the phone and slipped it into her purse. She shook her head. "Please, Warren, don't shoot," she whispered. "Can't we just talk? You—you don't have to do this..."

"Inside," he said, nodding toward the classroom.

Terrified, Erin edged past him and into the room.

Warren stepped in after her and shut the door. There was something so final about the sound of that door closing and the catch clicking. It made Erin flinch.

She saw Gunther in the far corner of the room, facing the blackboard with his hands behind his head. Shaking, he warily glanced over his shoulder at her and Warren. Someone had thrown up, and the horrid smell filled the room. Erin noticed several classmates crying helplessly—and not just the girls. Some students had their heads down and hands clasped in prayer. Others seemed in a state of shock. It was as if they were all paralyzed in their seats. No one would dare move. No one wanted to take the first bullet.

That seemed reserved for her at the moment. Warren still had the gun pointed at her.

From her desk in the middle of the room, one girl cried so hard she started convulsing. The whole desk shook as the mousey, thin, long-haired girl sobbed uncontrollably.

Her neighbor, Molly Gerrard, stood up, grabbed the girl's hand and steadied her.

"Warren, you need to put that gun away," she said, with a slight tremor in her voice. Most of the guys in the junior class were hot for Molly; Warren was almost certainly among them. "You're scaring everyone," Molly said to him. She nervously touched her glasses. "I know you've suffered, but you're better than this—"

"Shut up!" he cried.

Erin felt the barrel of the gun poke the back of her head. She gasped.

"No, Warren," Molly continued, her voice still shaky, but even louder than before.

"You need to hear this. You're so much better than the assholes who have picked on

you. You're not a bully, Warren. You have all the power right now. But you also—you also have an opportunity to show everyone that you're—better than the people who have been mean to you. You're better than them, Warren. You know you are..." Grabbing Erin's auburn hair, Warren snapped her head back. She recoiled and cried out again. Yet at the same time, she realized he was now pointing the gun at Molly. His breathing was even heavier than before, more agitated.

"Listen to her, Warren," she managed to say. "Molly's right. You don't have to do this. You—you're a nice guy, and a good artist. Your cartoons, they're—brilliant—" His grip loosened on her hair. "I don't want to hurt anybody," he muttered. "I know you don't," Molly said. "You're a good person, Warren. So, please, put the gun down..."

"You're only making things worse for yourself, Tunny!" Mr. Gunther called out from his corner. With his hands still raised, he glanced over his shoulder toward Warren. "You're already in a heap of trouble, mister, and I can guarantee—" "Why don't you just shut up?" Molly retorted. "You're not helping!"

Someone in the classroom gasped at her remark. Erin glanced back at Warren for a moment. A smile flickered across his splotchy face, and he lowered the gun. "Warren, don't listen to him," Molly continued. "Listen to your heart. You haven't hurt anyone yet, and I don't think you will. Everyone in this room—right now—realizes that you've gotten a raw deal. And I for one am very sorry. I hope you'll accept my apology..."

Warren said nothing. But Erin felt him let go of her hair. For a moment, no one said anything. Then Erin heard a click. Panicked, she swiveled around and saw it was merely Warren setting the gun down on Mr. Gunther's desk. He started to cry.

At that same time, she heard the sirens shrieking in the distance. Warren must have noticed them, too. Tears streaming down his face, he turned toward the window.

All at once, someone in the front row yelled out: "Grab him!"

It happened so quickly, Erin barely saw the two guys charging toward her and Warren. One of them shoved her out of the way, and she slammed into the teacher's desk. It knocked the wind out of her. Screams filled the classroom—competing with the sirens' wail outside. One guy savagely pummeled Warren, who cried out and fell to the floor. The other student started kicking him. It was utter chaos—with everyone suddenly jumping out of their seats and heading for the door. Desks and chairs were knocked over. All the while, Gunther kept screaming, "Hold him down! Hold the son of a bitch down!" He sprung from his corner and grabbed the gun off his desk.

"Stop it!" Molly yelled. "Stop! You're hurting him!" She ran up the aisle and tried to pull one of the guys off Warren, but he shoved her away. Molly's glasses flew off her face and she tumbled into the front row of desks. "My glasses!" Molly cried, just as someone inadvertently stepped on them.

Dazed, and curled up on the floor by Gunther's desk, Erin tried to catch her breath. The sirens outside were getting louder and louder, almost deafening. When it was all over, Warren Tunny had two cracked ribs, a fractured arm, a broken nose, a black eye, and several cuts and bruises. The police took him to Harborview Hospital. In the ambulance, Warren had insisted that he hadn't intended to kill anyone—just himself. He'd planned to shoot himself in front of his classmates. He'd figured, maybe then, they'd be sorry for treating him so badly.

Of course, no one believed him. By the end of the day, the same people who made fun of Warren were making jokes about what had almost happened, and they were still referring to him as Pubes.

Warren's two study hall classmates, after beating him so severely, had figured they would be portrayed as heroes of the day by the local press. But Molly and Erin garnered all the attention and accolades. They'd been the ones who had defused a potential bloodbath. They'd been the ones who had pleaded and reasoned with the gunman. They'd gotten him to surrender, and the media linked them together as heroes.

Maybe that was the only reason Molly had asked Erin to hang out with her after school the day before yesterday. While picking up those cool new glasses with the

square tortoiseshell frames, they'd talked about Warren and the creeps who had been mean to him. Molly had wanted to visit Warren in the hospital, where doctors and police kept him under surveillance. She'd asked Erin to come along with her and show Warren she had no hard feelings. "You don't have to say yes right now," Molly had told her. "Think about it, and tell me later. I just figure it would mean a lot to Warren if he knew you'd forgiven him, you know?"

Erin hadn't yet committed to making the hospital visit. The notion of seeing Warren Tunny again and being nice to him—so soon after he'd held a gun to her head—kind of freaked her out. At the same time, she didn't want Molly to think she was a jerk. They'd agreed to talk about it later. It had seemed as if they were becoming very good friends.

So Erin couldn't understand why Molly blew off their movie date tonight. Hell, *Pride and Prejudice* had been Molly's idea.

With a sigh, Erin frowned at her reflection in the washroom mirror again. The audience watching the Italian comedy upstairs let out another round of laughter. Erin's cell phone rang once more—that same, stupid "I Just Called to Say I Love You" tune. She quickly retrieved the phone from her purse and switched it on. "Yes, hello?"

"Erin?" the woman said edgily. "Is this Erin?" The voice wasn't familiar.

"Yes. Who's this?"

"Erin, I'm Hannah Gerrard, Molly's mother. Is Molly with you—by any chance? Have you heard from her?"

"No, she's not, Mrs. Gerrard," Erin murmured. "She was supposed to meet me and my friend here at the Harvard Exit for a movie about an hour ago, but she didn't show."

An older woman with short-cropped silver hair stepped into the restroom. She frowned at Erin, then brushed past her and ducked into one of the two stalls. Erin ignored her.

"Listen, Erin," Molly's mother said, a tremor in her voice. "The police found Molly's car an hour ago—on that little road behind Lakeview Cemetery. The car had a flat. The driver's door was open, and the hazard lights were blinking. It—it just doesn't make sense. Molly's got a cell phone, for God's sake. Why didn't she call us for help? We're only five blocks away..."

Erin knew the road: a narrow strip of pavement that ran a few blocks alongside the sprawling cemetery's high chain-link fence. There was a park on the other side of the road—with a smaller, unfenced, old cemetery for Veterans of Foreign Wars. Only a block away, quaint, charming houses bordered the park, but there was still something remote and slightly foreboding about that little back road—especially at night. Surrounded by so many graves, it was an awfully scary spot to have car problems.

But Erin figured Molly had kept a cool head, the same way she had with Warren last week. Molly was a lot braver than her. Still, Mrs. Gerrard was right. It made no sense. Molly's car was found only five blocks from her home—and less than a mile from this very movie theater. Why hadn't she called anyone for help? What had happened to her?

"Young lady?"

Erin swiveled around and gaped at the woman with the close-cropped silver hair. She still had that same haughty look on her wrinkled face as she emerged from the stall. "The use of cell phones is prohibited in public restrooms," she announced. Erin curled her lip at her. "What?"

"You're not supposed to use cell phones in here!" the woman said loudly. "Why are you an exception? There are cameras on cell phones. It's prohibited to be using—" Erin started to wave her away.

"I don't appreciate having my privacy invaded!" the woman declared. "I'd like to take a pee without having it broadcast coast to coast on your stupid cell phone! Why don't you go talk in the lobby, for God's sakes? Why do you have to talk in here?"

Erin held the phone against her breast for a moment as she ducked into the other stall. "Christ, lady, get off my case!" She shut the stall door and locked it.

"Rude!" the woman exclaimed, over the sound of the water running in the sink. Then Erin heard the roar of the hand dryer.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Gerrard," she whispered. Standing in front of the toilet, Erin had her back pressed against the divider between the two stalls. "There's this crazy woman here..."

"The police are combing the neighborhood right now," Mrs. Gerrard explained. "When she left, Molly told me she had to run an errand before the movie. That was at five o'clock, over three hours ago. I keep thinking—if Molly was meeting someone, maybe this person has an idea where she wandered off to. Does she have a new boyfriend she didn't tell me about?"

"I—I don't think so."

"Erin, please, if—if you know what she planned on doing before the movie, and Molly asked you to keep it a secret—"

"I swear, Molly didn't say anything to me," Erin cut in. She didn't know Molly well enough yet that they'd share secrets. She wondered if perhaps Molly might have gone to the hospital to visit Warren without her. But hell, if Molly's car was found five blocks from her house, then she must not have even reached the hospital. The hand dryer shut itself off, and all Erin heard was the sound of the faucet dripping in the restroom sink. She figured the silver-haired woman had left.

"Will you call me if you hear from Molly?" Mrs. Gerrard asked on the other end of the line.

A shadow suddenly swept across the tiled floor, distracting Erin for a moment. She couldn't see anyone's feet in the gap beneath the stall door, but obviously somebody else was there. Was that crazy lady still in the bathroom?

"Erin?" Molly's mother said.

"Um, of course, I'll call you the minute I hear from Molly, Mrs. Gerrard," she said, at last. "I—I'm sure Molly's all right. Could you have her call me when she gets in?"

"I will," Mrs. Gerrard said with a tremor in her voice. "I hope that's soon. Thank you, honey."

Erin heard a click on the other end. Someone passed by the stall again. She spotted a shadowy figure—so briefly—through the crack in the stall door, where it was hinged. Whoever it was, they hadn't gone into the other stall or used the sink. So why were they sneaking around in there? She could still hear the faucet dripping, but no footsteps.

Maybe it was the disconcerting news about Molly that unnerved her, or the fact that two people had just chewed her out for using her cell phone. But she had a feeling something was horribly wrong. She'd had that same awful sensation in her gut last week when she'd been sitting next to Warren Tunny in fifth period study hall. With the phone tightly clutched in her hand, Erin leaned toward the hinged side of the stall door. Something darted past the door again, and Erin gasped.

It was a man. She saw him this time, but she didn't get a look at his face. He moved too fast—toward the stall behind her. It looked like he was wearing one of those clear, thin, plastic rain jackets over his dark clothes.

"Who's there?" she called out, her voice quivering.

No response—just the sound of that faucet dripping steadily.

"I know someone's there!" Erin said loudly. "I'm gonna scream in a minute, I mean it!" She turned and glanced down at the gap under the stall partition and the floor. It didn't look like he'd ducked in to the next cubicle. If someone was playing a perverse joke on her, he certainly would have given himself up by now. But this was no joke.

Trying to catch her breath, Erin focused on the phone in her hand. For the second time in a week, she dialed 9-1-1. She was about to press the SEND button when something flew over the top of the stall.

Startled, Erin recoiled. The small lightweight object bounced off her shoulder, then landed on the tiled floor—right by the base of the toilet.

Erin saw what it was, and all at once she couldn't breathe or move. Paralyzed, she stared down at the pair of glasses with square tortoiseshell frames.

One of the lenses to Molly's new glasses was cracked.

"Oh, my God..." Erin whispered. With a shaky hand, she punched the SEND button on her cell phone.

Suddenly, she felt something sting her just above the ankle. Crying out, Erin looked down and saw a rubber-gloved hand reaching beneath the stall partition. She saw the glint of a knife. It slashed at her ankle again. She felt the blade scrape against her bone this time. Blood sprayed across the black-and-white tiled floor. Erin screamed. She tried to back away. But like a snake, the gloved hand darted under the partition and grabbed her by the ankle. All at once, the cell phone flew out of Erin's hand and fell into the toilet. Water splashed out of the bowl. Erin struggled to keep her balance, but it was impossible. She slammed against the partition wall and then tumbled to the wet, tiled floor. She screamed and kicked. The more she kicked, the more blood spurted from the wounds across her ankle. But he wouldn't let go. He was pulling her through the gap under the stall divider and dragging her across the floor. He still had the knife in his other hand. Terrified, Erin struggled and cried out for help.

But her shrieks were muted by a thunderous wave of laughter from the audience in the theater upstairs.

No one else heard her screams.

Only him.

Lisa Briscoe noticed the two police cars parked in front of the Gerrards' white stucco—three lots down from her own house. She was walking Toby, the family's miniature schnauzer. That was what she got for working late tonight. Her husband had taken the kids out to the Olympia Pizza and Spaghetti House. He'd called from the restaurant five minutes ago, saying none of the kids had walked Toby yet, and he'd bring her back an order of cannelloni.

With one hand clutching the collar of her winter coat and the other holding Toby's extendable leash, Lisa passed the Gerrards' house. She'd heard the Gerrards had been hounded by snoops and people driving by the house at all hours. Some of them even snuck across the lawn and tried to peek into the windows. They wanted to look at Molly, the pretty—and now famous—seventeen-year-old who had been on the TV news and in the papers for thwarting a possible massacre at James Madison High School last week. Lisa had heard the Gerrards had phoned the police twice last week because of those obnoxious people skulking around outside their house. Lisa couldn't believe it was still going on.

The residents of this quiet, upscale neighborhood in northeast Capital Hill weren't used to a lot of activity, much less police activity. The houses, ranging from charmingly quaint to old-world impressive, were close together and not far from the street. While walking Toby, Lisa could see the bell tower of nearby St. Joseph's Catholic Church looming over the tops of the bare trees. She could also see her breath. Shivering, she buttoned up her coat.

Lisa approached her usual stopping point: Interlaken Drive, a dark, winding road through dense woods—with the occasional secluded, ridiculously expensive home. Lisa took Toby only to the edge of Interlaken because those woods were full of possums and raccoons, and she didn't want Toby chasing after one. He was no match for such creatures. Ages ago, when she was a kid, her dad had told her how he'd once seen a German shepherd try to tussle with a raccoon—only to be torn apart in seconds. Lisa had steered clear of raccoons ever since.

There was something else about the dark, lonely, snakelike road that scared her. "Sometimes when I'm on this road, I half-expect to find some guy standing there around the next curve," her husband had said, steering down Interlaken late one night after a party. "I can see the headlights suddenly illuminating this dude in a hockey mask, carrying a meat cleaver. And then, farther up the road, there's this car with a hacked-up body in it..."

"Well, gee, thanks for that image, hon," Lisa had said, squirming in the passenger seat. As a joke, she and her husband often referred to Interlaken as "Hockey Mask Lane."

So, raccoons and possums weren't the only reason she rarely took Toby beyond the

edge of Interlaken Drive.

But on this December night, Toby still hadn't pooped. Plus it was early, and the cops were parked in front of the Gerrards' house—only two blocks away. So Lisa started down Interlaken with Toby. She pulled a small flashlight out of her purse and switched it on. She would give Toby until the first curve in the road, and if he still hadn't done his business by then, she'd turn around. "C'mon, Toby, this is your last half block," she muttered, glancing at the darkened woods around her. "Time to shit or get off the pot."

There was no sidewalk on the road, and the thicket came right up to the curb. A chilly wind rattled the tree limbs. Bushes swayed slightly and dead leaves scattered across the pavement. Toby strained on the leash. He eagerly sniffed at the base of practically every tree and shrub they passed. Suddenly he stopped, raised a paw, and looked deeper into the woods as if he saw something moving in there. He strained at the leash again.

Lisa gazed over in the same direction. Through the trees, she noticed an eerie red glow in the distance—perhaps around the next curve in the road, or maybe even farther. Was it a car with its parking lights on?

Toby was still staring in that direction. His ears moved, and his little body seemed to stiffen.

Lisa shined the flashlight into the woods. The beam cast strange, flickering shadows as Lisa directed it across the trees and shrubs. She couldn't see anything. "Okay, kiddo," she said, in a shaky voice. "Here's where we do a U-turn..." She tugged at the leash, but Toby wouldn't budge. "C'mon now, there's nothing out there..."

But there was.

A few yards away, deeper into the woods, her flashlight's beam caught a shrub moving—as if someone might have just ducked behind it. She heard twigs snapping. Lisa tugged at the leash again. But Toby was immobile, still staring in that direction. He let out a yelp. Again, Lisa saw something move amid the shadowy trees. She directed the flashlight's beam past the base of a tree. Close to the forest floor, she saw two eyes staring back at her. They glinted in the light.

"Oh, my God," Lisa gasped.

The raccoon didn't seem startled or riled. He merely glanced up from his meal for a moment. Then he went back to gnawing at the bloody slash across the dead girl's throat. The pale cadaver was clad in just a bra and panties.

Lisa couldn't move. She watched in horror as the raccoon half-stood on its hind legs, hovering over his feast. Tresses of the girl's long black hair were caught in the creature's claws, and her head turned a little when he moved again.

In the flashlight's beam, Lisa could see her face now.

She recognized the dead girl—even though Molly Gerrard wasn't wearing her glasses.

"The person you are calling is not available," said the recording on the other end of the line. "This call is being forwarded to an automated voice system. Please leave a message for..." Erin's voice chimed in for two words: "Erin Travino." Then the recorded generic voice took over again: "...after the tone."

Standing on the stairway landing of the movie theater's lobby, Kim held the cell phone to her ear and waited for the beep. On the wall behind her was a huge old poster of Gene Kelly dancing with Leslie Caron in *An American in Paris*.

She only reached the automated voice system when Erin switched off her cell phone or her battery was dead, and Erin practically never switched off her phone. Erin's regular message had her own voice with rock music in the background: "Hey, this is Erin, and you know what to do!"

But right now, Kim didn't know what to do.

She'd been sitting in the theater for the last fifteen minutes with an empty seat beside her and Erin's coat draped over the armrest. One of the guys behind her had stepped out and come back in the duration, but that had been at least ten minutes ago. Finally, Kim had gotten up and hurried to the lobby, but she hadn't seen Erin anywhere. So Kim had pulled out her cell phone, dialed Erin's number, and started

up the stairs to the women's restroom.

Beep.

"Hello, Erin?" she said, holding the phone to her ear as she continued up the stairs. "Where are you? Did you ditch me or something? I can't believe this. You've totally ruined a really good movie for me. You're not in the lobby, so I'm about to check the restroom. I'm hoping you're there." She let out an exasperated sigh. "If not, for God's sakes, call me, okay?"

Kim clicked off the line as she approached the women's restroom on the second floor. Pushing open the door, she stopped suddenly. The light was off. As far as she could tell, no one was in there. Past some muffled rapid Italian dialogue from the film showing upstairs, Kim only heard the rhythmic drip of a leaky faucet. She felt along the wall for the light switch.

Her hand brushed against something wet on the wall. Shuddering, she stepped back and gazed at her fingertips. Blood.

He paid for his latte, and then politely asked the barista for the bathroom key. No one in the Joe Bar Café paid much attention to him. As far as he could tell, none of the other customers in the bistro had seen him emerge from the old, three-story brick building that housed the movie theater across the street. He found a small table by the window, with a view of the theater entrance and the lighted marquee. Leaving his latte on the table, he asked the bearded twenty-something man with a laptop notebook at the next table to make sure no one took his spot while he was in the washroom.

"Sure, no sweat," the guy said, barely looking up from his notebook.

He thanked the man, then carried his Nordstrom bag into the bathroom at one side of the barista counter. It was tiny, with a narrow door and barely enough room for the sink and toilet. The walls were painted burnt orange, and the management had posted a reminder above the sink that all employees had to wash their hands after using the facilities. Above that little sign hung a mirror.

He studied his reflection for a moment. His face was clean, and his hair appeared slightly damp. With a sigh, he lowered the toilet seat lid and set down his bag. Then he turned to the mirror again. With his hand, he pressed down on the top of his head, mashing the hair against his scalp. Drops of blood slithered down his forehead.

He quickly grabbed a paper towel from the dispenser above the toilet and dabbed up the blood. Then he ran the paper towel over his head, and glanced at the crimson streaks soaked into the fiber sheet.

He should have worn a shower cap when he'd killed her.

Earlier, in the women's lavatory at the movie theater, he'd quickly rinsed off his face. He'd shucked off the blood-spattered, plastic rain jacket and gloves. They were now in a dark plastic bag stuffed inside the Nordstrom tote. He hadn't much time to clean up in that theater washroom, and the job on Erin had been messy. Molly Gerrard had been much easier—and neater—three hours earlier.

She had been his first kill—ever. He'd tried to kill before, years ago, but it hadn't worked out. That failure was still the source of a lot of bitterness and frustration in him.

So he was surprised to have pulled off Molly's murder without a hitch. He'd been following her around for days now. He knew her car and had overheard several of her cell phone conversations. So he often knew what Molly was going to do before she did it.

Late this afternoon, he'd skulked up the Gerrards' driveway, crouched down behind Molly's Honda, and set a small board with four nails driven through it under the left rear tire. Less than an hour later, she stepped out of the house and hurried into the car. It only took four blocks for the tire to deflate—and in a perfect, remote spot, too.

He pretended he'd just happened by. And Molly looked so glad to see him—right up until the moment he punched her in the face. With one blow, he bloodied her nose, broke her glasses, and knocked her unconscious.

He drove her eight blocks to the ravinelike drive, where she started to regain consciousness. She was dazed and almost docile as he hauled her into the dark, wooded area. But then Molly seemed to realize what was happening. She pleaded with him—employing, no doubt, the same kind of reasoning and logic she'd used in school last week to save the lives of her classmates. Only it didn't work this time. It was hard for Molly to rely on those powers of verbal persuasion once he slashed her throat. Instead of words, a strange gurgling sound came from her mouth during the last few moments of her life.

He'd gotten only a few drops of blood on his glove and on the sleeve of his clear rain jacket. He wiped it clean with two Kleenex.

Along with Molly's broken glasses, he took her cell phone. There were three messages from Erin Travino about the movie: first, saying she'd meet Molly in front of the theater; next, asking Molly what had happened to her; and, finally, saying where she and Kim were sitting if Molly was still interested in meeting them.

As if Erin hadn't already made it easy enough for him to find her, she was the one who kept switching on her cell phone and checking her messages during the movie.

That little blue light had stood out in the darkened theater. He'd followed her—and that blue light—out to the lobby, then up to the women's restroom.

He wondered if someone had discovered her body yet. Standing over the small sink in the coffeehouse washroom, he rinsed Erin's blood out of his hair. He watched the pink water swirl against the white porcelain. With some paper towels, he pat-dried his scalp, then checked for more blood on his jeans and shoes. He'd lucked out, just a few drops on his black sneakers.

After cleaning off the sink, he was about to toss away the used paper towels, but hesitated. They were smeared with blood. He didn't want anyone in the café later linking him to the murder across the street.

He stuffed the bloodied paper towels into the plastic bag, which was tucked inside his Nordstrom tote. Then he stepped out of the bathroom, returned the key to the barista, and headed back to his table. He set the Nordstrom bag down by his chair. Sipping his latte, he stared at the theater across the street. He couldn't help feeling a bit disappointed. Perhaps that was why he took a chance coming here. He would have been better off getting as far away from the theater as quickly as possible. But he needed to see people's reactions to what he'd done. From this front-row seat, he could see their shock and panic. Maybe then it would feel complete.

He heard sirens in the distance.

Across the street, the theater door flung open. He spotted the woman who had taken his ticket earlier. With a look of alarm, she paused at the threshold, a hand over her heart. She anxiously gazed up and down the sidewalk. The pale, stocky, baby-faced guy who worked the concessions stand trotted around from the other side of the building. Like his friend, he, too, was looking in every direction. "Shit, I didn't see anybody!" the guy screamed to the ticket taker. "Jesus, maybe he's still in the theater..."

The girl shook her head and started sobbing. She said something, but her words were drowned out by the sirens. The piercing wail grew even louder. Swirling beams of white and red lights from the approaching patrol cars already illuminated the street.

He noticed other people in the café. They'd stopped talking to their friends or typing on their laptops, and now they were looking toward the window.

He had to contain a smile.

He couldn't stay here much longer. If the police did their job right, within five minutes, they'd hold everyone in this café and question them about who they saw coming out of the theater. He didn't want to stick around for that. Slowly, he got to his feet.

Three police cars and an ambulance raced up the street and came to a halt in front of the theater. But he wasn't watching them. His eyes were on a middle-aged woman with a pea-coat, purple scarf, and a shopping bag. She headed down the sidewalk in the opposite direction. Grabbing his Nordstrom bag and his latte, he hurried out the door, and caught up with the woman—so they were walking almost side by side.

"What do you suppose happened over there?" he asked her as they passed the ambulance and police cars.

She shrugged and shook her head. "Drugs, probably. It's always something around here. This neighborhood has gone to hell in a handbasket—if you'll pardon my French." She picked up her pace—almost as if to avoid him, then she turned down a side street.

His first instinct was to follow her home, maybe even kill her.

Perhaps that would have made him feel better, but he doubted it. He'd been elated for only a few moments tonight, a rush of excitement as he watched them die by his hand. He'd felt so powerful. But the elation hadn't lasted long.

Those girls—as much as they deserved to die—were just substitutes for someone else. He was thinking of that certain someone when he'd killed Molly and Erin tonight. He wondered if their deaths would affect her at all.

It would be a lot harder to get to her. It would take more planning. But he vowed he would make her suffer. He would wage a campaign of terror against her, inflicting so much pain and anguish that she would almost welcome her own execution.

He paused on the corner and watched the woman with the purple scarf disappear in the night's distance. He smiled.

He was thinking about the next time and how it would be better.

CHAPTER TWO

Portland, Oregon—Two years later

"So, sweetheart, I'm thinking of Tom, Bernie, and Pat for my groomsmen," Jared said to Leah as they walked from his car toward one of their favorite haunts, Thai Paradise on Hawthorne. It was 8:40 on a cold Tuesday night in early December. Holiday lights and decorations adorned the storefronts, but right now the street was nearly deserted.

Jared had his arm around Leah's shoulder. They were an attractive couple. Jared, tall and lean with wavy blond hair, blue eyes, and perpetually pink cheeks, looked like a thirty-year-old version of Prince William. Leah was thin and pretty, with short chestnut hair. "Waiflike" was how Jared's mother described her, and Leah wasn't entirely sure if that was meant to be flattering or not.

"You mentioned your cousin, Lonnie, as a candidate if I wanted someone from your side of the family as a groomsman," Jared went on. "But you guys aren't really that close. Maybe Lonnie could do a reading or something..."

Leah didn't say a word. She eyed the restaurant's red awning with green Christmas lights wrapped around the poles. She felt the knots in her stomach tightening.

"Are you pissed off?" Jared asked. "If having Lonnie in the wedding party is really that important to you—"

"No, it—it's fine," she said. But it wasn't fine at all. Everything was so screwed up. Jared didn't know it yet, but she couldn't go through with this wedding.

She needed to break up with him—tonight. That was why she still couldn't settle on a wedding date. Poor Jared—in a role usually reserved for the bride—became preoccupied with wedding plans, and she—like an apathetic groom—merely shrugged and said, "That's fine," every time he told her about some terrific caterer or a really cool place to hold the reception. Last week her mother came over and started talking about the wedding. Then Jared chimed in, and Leah had nuptial talk in stereo. It was all she could do to keep from running out of the room, screaming. It wasn't fair to Jared, stringing him along like this. He was a terrific guy, who did very well at his accounting firm. Leah repeatedly told herself she was lucky to be his fiancée. Everybody else—her family, his family and all their friends—told her the same thing

But she didn't love Jared. Her infatuation with him had petered out two months ago. If she'd had any guts, she would have told him "no" on Thanksgiving night when he'd surprised her with the seventeen-thousand-dollar engagement ring. Thank God he didn't have it engraved or anything. He could still get his money back.

She couldn't marry him. It was that simple.

Leah planned to tell him tonight over dinner in Thai Paradise. She figured he couldn't yell at her or cause a big scene in one of their favorite restaurants. Jared held the door open for her. "You feeling okay?" he asked. "You're awfully quiet tonight."

She shrugged. "I-think maybe I'm just hungry."

The restaurant felt almost steamy after the cold night outside. A blend of sweet and spicy aromas filled the place. The busboy who met them at the door wasn't much bigger than Leah. He was in his mid twenties, with long black bangs that fell over one eye. He had a sweet, handsome face, and he smiled a lot—perhaps to compensate for the fact that his English was horrible. That never stopped Jared from trying to strike up a conversation with him.

Tonight was no different. While the busboy led them past the empty counter area and around the huge tank full of tropical fish, Jared asked how he was, and how business was, and gosh, it sure didn't seem too busy tonight.

The busboy just nodded and smiled—until he sat them in a secluded booth against the wall in the windowless, dimly lit eating area. Leah used to think it was charming the way Jared was so friendly with waitpersons and salespeople. Now it just got on her nerves. It seemed phony and oversolicitous.

Slipping into the booth, Leah shed her coat and thanked the busboy as he handed her a menu.

"Looks like we're just about the only ones in here," Jared said to their busboy.

"Hope we aren't screwing up your chances for an early quit tonight."

He doesn't have a fucking clue what you're saying, stupid, Leah wanted to tell her dear, well-meaning fiancé. But she just kept a pleasant smile frozen on her face, and took a quick inventory. Jared was right. There were only two other customers in the restaurant—in a booth across from them. They were finished with their dinner and donning their coats. Leah's hopes that Jared wouldn't pitch a fit in a restaurant full of people vanished as she watched the other couple head for the door. She and Jared were now the only customers in the place.

The busboy filled their water glasses. Leah waited until he left their table, then she cleared her throat. "I need to talk with you about something, Jared," she said, squirming a bit in the booth's cushioned seat. "This has been really heavy on my mind lately..."

He looked up from his menu. "What is it, sweetheart?"

The busboy returned with their tea in a medium-size stainless-steel pot. "Tea very, very hot," he said, filling their cups. He set the pot on a trivet on their table. Leah's stomach was still in knots. She watched the busboy retreat toward the front of the restaurant. He hung the CLOSED sign on the door. It occurred to Leah that after tonight, she wouldn't want to come back here again. It would always be that place where she broke up with Jared. This was probably her last time in here, and it was too bad, because she loved their garlic chicken with wide noodles.

"What is it?" Jared repeated.

Leah couldn't answer him.

The waitress approached their table. Delicate and pretty, she had a round face and a shy manner. Her black hair was swept back in a barrette, and she smiled a lot—like the busboy. In fact, they were brother and sister. Her English was better than his. After Jared subjected her to his requisite chitchat, she took their drink orders.

Once the waitress withdrew, Leah sighed and nervously drummed her fingers on the table top. "Listen, Jared, if I've seemed distracted and on edge lately, well, there's a reason..."

Staring at her, he put down his menu.

"This just isn't working out," she said finally.

"What isn't working out, babe? This booth? You want one on the other side of the room?"

She quickly shook her head and then looked down at her engagement ring. "No, that's not it. I'm sorry, Jared, but it wouldn't be fair to you if I—"

"No, we closing, we closing!"

Leah glanced up—just past the fish tank, toward the front of the restaurant. The busboy was shaking his head and half-bowing to two men who must have ignored the sign on the door. “We closing now!” he repeated.

But the two men were already in the restaurant, and they didn’t look as if they were ready to leave. One was tall and skinny, with long, greasy, wavy black hair and a goatee. He wore jeans and a black leather jacket, and had a tattoo on the side of his neck. He muttered something to the busboy. Leah was too far away to see what the tattooed image was, and she couldn’t hear what he’d just said. But she had a terrible feeling about this. The meek little busboy was still shaking his head at him and his friend.

“What’s wrong?” the man asked loudly. “Answer me in English, asshole. What? Are you all out of food? Did the kennel stop delivering the dog meat?”

Jared half-turned in the booth and looked over his shoulder. “What the hell?” he murmured.

The tall, creepy man’s friend laughed—a high-pitched cackle. Shorter and stockier than his buddy, he had a marine buzz cut and muscular arms covered with tattoos. Despite the frigid weather, he wore only a T-shirt and jeans. He was all twitchy and seemed hopped up on something. Still laughing, he reached over and slapped the busboy on his shoulder.

“You go, please, we closing!” the busboy repeated. He pointed at the sign on the door.

A hand over her heart, Leah watched as the cook emerged from behind the counter. A thin, older man, he had a red apron over his short-sleeve shirt and baggy black slacks. He, too, was shaking his head at the intruders and pointing to the door. Between his hushed tone and the broken English, Leah wasn’t sure what he was saying. The young waitress hovered behind him.

“Fuck you, old man,” the skinny goon said, laughing.

“Who do these scumbags think they are?” Jared muttered. He started to climb out of the booth, but Leah grabbed his hand to stop him.

“Please, Jared, no—don’t,” she whispered urgently. The scumbags obviously hadn’t yet noticed two customers were still in the restaurant. Part of Leah wanted to stay inconspicuous, just lay low until all of this was over. It seemed like the safest option right now: avoid a confrontation at any cost.

Then the stocky man suddenly pulled a revolver from the waistband of his jeans. His T-shirt had been camouflaging it. All at once, he slammed the butt end of the revolver over the older man’s forehead. The waitress let out a scream as the cook collapsed on the floor. “No, no, no!” she cried, rushing to his aid.

But the stocky man grabbed her. His friend pushed the busboy against the counter and sent him crashing into two tall counter chairs. They tipped over and fell to the floor with a loud clatter while the busboy clung to the counter for balance. The chubby guy thought this was hysterically funny.

Paralyzed, Leah watched in horror. “Oh my God,” she whispered. “Call 9-1-1...”

Jared quickly dug into his pants pocket for his cell phone.

The two assailants still hadn’t spotted them on the other side of the large fish tank.

The skinny one grabbed the busboy by his hair, and then hit him in the face. The waitress screamed out again as her brother tripped over the fallen counter chairs and tumbled to the floor. The thug kicked him in the ribs.

“Who else is back there?” he asked, nodding toward the kitchen area behind the counter. He glanced at the waitress. “You got somebody washing dishes back there?”

Tears streaming down her face, the waitress shook her head and said something. Leah couldn’t hear it. All the while, the hulky creep pawed at her and cackled.

“Do you have a safe in this dump? A safe?” the tall one asked her.

Once again, Leah couldn’t hear her reply. But the man must have heard it. “Fuck!” he hissed. “Okay, so where do you keep the money?”

With the phone to his ear, Jared peered over the top of their booth. His earlier fortitude had disappeared. Leah could tell he didn’t want to be a hero right now any more than she did. This was something for the police—if they ever picked up.

“Yes,” Jared whispered into the phone—finally. “I’m reporting a—a—a robbery in

progress at—um, at Thai Paradise on Hawthorne...No, I'm sorry. I can't speak up. I'm here in the restaurant. It's happening right in front of me..." The busboy let out a frail cry as the tall, skinny creep savagely kicked him again. It broke Leah's heart—and enraged her—to see that sweet, quiet young man brutalized. His sister sobbed uncontrollably in the other thug's clutches. "I'm getting some of this yellow tail before the night is over," he announced, groping her.

"Take her into the can," the one with the goatee said. "Let's move them all in there and get away from this front window. I'll clean out the register. Then we'll cap them all. I don't want any fucking witnesses..."

"Oh, my God," Leah murmured. She'd heard that term cap in a movie about street gangs. It meant shooting somebody in the head.

Jared was still whispering into the phone, explaining he couldn't talk any louder. "These guys have guns!" he said under his breath. He peered over the top of the booth. "They're going to shoot everyone in the place, for God's sake. Please, send help..."

"Where's the restroom?" the skinny one asked the waitress.

She timidly pointed toward the dining area—past the fish tank. The man's gaze followed, and suddenly, he locked eyes with Leah.

She gasped and tried to duck. Jared shrank back in his seat as well. But they were too late. They'd been spotted.

"Shit, we got company," the skinny creep muttered. "Let's round them up."

"My God, they've seen us," Jared whispered into the phone. "Tell the police to hurry. Did you hear me?"

Leah flinched at a loud, tinny clattering sound. Peeking around the edge of the booth, she saw the taller one kicking the fallen counter chairs aside. He grabbed the dazed, beaten busboy by the arm, and pulled him up from the floor. Blood streamed from the young man's nose. He could hardly walk. The tall guy seemed to hold him up as they moved toward the dining area. The stocky thug followed them, his tattooed arms still around the waitress. Both assailants had their guns ready. "Come out of there, you two," the skinny one called.

"Yeah, come out, come out, wherever you are!" his friend chimed in, laughing.

The two hoods stepped into the dining room area with their terrified hostages.

Leah recoiled in the corner of the booth. Sitting up straight, Jared switched off his cell phone and nervously stared back at them.

"Get up," the skinny guy whispered. With one hand, he had the trembling busboy in a choke hold. With the other, he pointed a gun at Leah and Jared. "Get the hell up," he repeated. "We're gonna stick all of you in the restroom for safekeeping."

But neither Jared nor Leah moved. Her heart was racing.

The tall, ugly gunman violently shoved the busboy to one side. The young man collided into a table, knocking it over. Glasses, plates, and silverware flew in every direction. He hit his head on the top of a chair, then fell to the floor, unconscious.

The stocky one cackled. Following his friend's lead, he hurled the poor waitress toward another table. The petite girl slammed into a chair, but somehow managed to keep from falling. Wincing in pain, she clung to the chair and caught her breath. Horrified, Leah sat frozen in the booth, watching it all.

"Yahoo!" the hulky guy yelled. He swiveled around and fired his gun three times—at the large fish tank. There was an explosion of glass and water. He must have hit some electrical wiring, because sparks shot out from the top of the tank. There was a loud bang, and the lights in the restaurant flickered. Water gushed from the broken receptacle, and suddenly the restaurant floor was a quarter-inch deep in water and flopping, floundering exotic fish.

The stupid thug seemed to think this was hysterical, but his skinny friend was visibly annoyed with him. He glanced down at all the water and the fish twitching at his feet. Still chuckling, his buddy went to step on one of them.

Leah gazed at them. Then she turned and glanced at the stainless-steel teapot on their table. Something kicked in—maybe anger, maybe a survival instinct. Whatever it was, she suddenly grabbed that teapot by the handle and flung it at the tall

man's face.

She was close enough to hit her stationary target dead-on. The lid flew off just as the pot struck his cheek. He let out a startled howl. Scalding tea splashed his face. It must have burned his eyes, because he dropped the gun and immediately covered his eye sockets. Staggering back, he spewed a stream of obscenities—between loud, high-pitched, agonizing shrieks.

Before the stocky guy seemed to realize what was happening, Jared shot out of the booth and rammed into him. The body blow sent him careening toward the broken fish tank. They tipped over chairs and tables in their path.

Meanwhile, Leah snatched up the tall thug's revolver. She almost slipped on the wet floor, but caught her balance. The tall man wasn't so lucky. He blindly staggered around the dining room until he tripped over a chair. He fell down on his knees.

Leah aimed the gun at him, but hesitated before pulling the trigger. He was incapacitated, defeated. The guy couldn't hurt anyone now.

But apparently, the waitress didn't feel that way. Wiping her tears, the delicate young woman picked up a chair and cracked it over his head.

The man collapsed on the wet floor. A couple of fish struggled and splashed around him in the thin layer of water.

"Son of a bitch!" bellowed the stocky thug—over the clatter of dining room furniture.

Leah swiveled around in time to see him punch Jared in the face. His fist connected with Jared's eye. He staggered back from the blow, but didn't collapse. Wincing, Leah aimed the gun at the big man, but Jared charged him again. Jared slugged him in the gut—a sucker punch.

The chubby man reeled back and grabbed the top of the shattered fish tank to steady himself.

Suddenly, the lights flickered again, and the big man froze. His mouth opened in a silent scream. He started to shake violently as the electric currents raced through his body. Sparks arced out from where he clutched the top of the fish tank.

Jared started to back away. Leah reached out to her fiancé, touching his shoulder. He turned and wrapped his arms around her. Clinging to each other, they tried to catch their breath. But they couldn't yet.

Only a few feet in front of them, the thug stood with his hand seared on top of the fish tank. Spasms racked his body. He wouldn't stop twitching and convulsing, and yet that stunned expression seemed stuck on his oafish face. His skin turned red. Smoke enveloped his feet.

Leah heard a hissing, sizzling sound. It could have been the electrical charges making that noise. Then a new pungently sweet odor wafted through the dining room—just as the stocky man teetered and fell facedown to the floor.

Leah stared at his corpse, and realized what she'd heard—and what she still smelled.

It was human flesh cooking.

Six months later

"With wedding bells and jingle bells on their minds, a Portland, Oregon, couple, Jared McGinty and Leah Dvorak, stopped by their favorite Thai restaurant one night last December for a late dinner. They were making wedding plans..." The anchorman punctuated this lead-in with a dramatic pause. The program was *On the Edge*, a prime-time TV newsmagazine. The handsome newscaster, with a tan and premature silver hair, was Sloan Roberts, recently voted one of *People Magazine's* Ten Sexiest Bachelors.

This was a rerun. The man watching the TV program in his Portland hotel room had seen this episode about Jared and Leah before—shortly after the incident had happened, six months ago, around Christmastime. Still, his eyes were riveted to the TV.

The screen-within-the screen just to the right of Sloan's shoulder bore the words: *Movers & Shakers*. Appropriately enough, the letters in these words kept shaking and twitching.

"Jared and Leah had no idea they were about to come face-to-face with death," Sloan

continued—in an ominous tone. “On this week’s segment of Movers & Shakers, Sydney Jordan tells us how Jared and Leah fought the bad guys, fought the odds, and survived—thanks to a little teamwork.”

The picture on the TV screen switched to a pretty, thirty-nine-year-old, swaddled in a trench coat. Her wavy, tawny-brown hair blowing in the wind, Sydney Jordan stood under the red awning of Thai Paradise, and spoke into a handheld mike. Her breath was visible that night back in December when they’d originally filmed the segment.

“Jared McGinty and Leah Dvorak are ‘regulars’ here at Thai Paradise in Portland’s charming Hawthorne District,” she announced.

The picture switched to Jared and Leah, sitting in front of a fireplace in twin chairs. Except for Jared’s black eye, already starting to fade, neither of them showed much sign of the trauma they’d endured just three nights before. “Well, we almost always order the same thing when we go there,” Leah said with a timid smile. “Creatures of habit, I guess. The garlic chicken with broccoli and wide noodles is my favorite.”

“I usually order the Pad Thai,” Jared said, giving Leah a goofy grin. “But Leah always ends up eating most of it.”

She laughed, and slapped his arm. “Oh, I guess that’s true!”

“Thai Paradise is a family business,” Sydney Jordan announced. The cozy image of Leah and Jared together dissolved into a still photo of the owners proudly posing in front of the restaurant on its opening day. “It was started by Som and Suchin Wongpoom, who immigrated to the United States with their nephew and niece, Nuran and Sumalee, just five years ago. Som and Suchin do most of the cooking—old family recipes. Nuran and Sumalee are on the waitstaff...”

A lullaby with an Asian lilt provided the soundtrack for a brief montage of old family photos and video clips of the Wongpooms interacting with customers at birthday parties and other special occasions in the restaurant.

“It didn’t take long for Portlanders like Leah and Jared to discover the wonderful food and warm atmosphere in this family-run restaurant.” The camera returned to Leah and Jared sitting together, zooming in for a close-up of Leah’s hand as she caressed his arm. It was hard to miss the diamond ring that sparkled on her finger. “Leah and Jared were engaged three weeks ago,” Sydney Jordan chimed in—over this image. “They still haven’t set a date yet...”

The picture changed back to Sydney in front of the restaurant again. “The couple were discussing their wedding plans when they stopped in here at Thai Paradise for dinner late last Tuesday night.” The brunette reporter gave a nod over her shoulder. “Jared and Leah had no idea that just down the street, parked in a stolen car, two men were hatching a plan of their own...”

It was jarring to see the TV screen suddenly filled with side-by-side police mug shots of the skinny, long-haired man and his stocky friend. “Dwight Powell and Harvey Ray Loach were both convicted felons—career criminals—who met while serving jail time at California’s Folsom State Prison,” Sydney Jordan explained in voice-over. “Police were already searching for the duo in connection to a Portland convenience store robbery in which a twenty-three-year-old clerk was murdered.” There was grainy footage—obviously recorded by the store’s security cameras—of the robbery in progress. The two gunmen approached the counter with their guns drawn while a young, gangly clerk raised his hands and backed away from the register. Even at a distance, and even with the poor quality of the videotape, the boy looked scared. On the Edge or their Movers & Shakers correspondent, Sydney Jordan, had the good taste not to show the terrified young clerk casually—and mercilessly—gunned down.

Sydney Jordan gave an account of what had happened at Thai Paradise that night. She briefly interviewed the busboy, Nuran, his face still bruised, and his sister, Sumalee. They still seemed traumatized. At one point—in the bottom corner of the screen—the camera caught a glimpse of the young waitress clutching Sydney Jordan’s hand while she tearfully spoke in her broken English.

More airtime was given to Jared and Leah, who seemed like a sweet couple, very much in love. At one point during the interview, Leah started to cry. “When I heard they

planned to—to take us all into the bathroom and shoot us, I was just so scared,” she admitted.

Jared put his arm around her, and—on camera, at least—Leah seemed to gather some strength from him. Jared said he managed to stay focused and keep his head throughout the whole ordeal because Leah was there. She claimed the same thing about him.

Sydney Jordan stressed it was teamwork that enabled the young couple to overcome the two armed, murderous thugs.

Harvey Ray Loach was pronounced dead—from electric shock—at the scene. Dwight Powell was treated for a mild concussion and second-degree burns on his face and neck. The scalding tea had indeed temporarily damaged his eyes, and he was blind for a few days. “But my sources here say Dwight Powell should regain his sight in time to watch this broadcast from his jail cell at the Multnomah County Sheriff’s Office, where he’s being held without bail.” Sydney Jordan announced.

The picture switched to Sydney, walking with the elder Wongpooms through the wreckage of their restaurant. Sydney Jordan was limping slightly. There were close-ups of broken chairs, and all the shattered plates and glass on the water-damaged carpet. The camera pulled back to show Suchin pointing and wincing at the mess. The older woman started weeping on Sydney’s shoulder. The reporter gently patted her back. Her voice-over continued, “Som and Suchin’s insurance won’t completely cover the cost of water damage, the destroyed aquarium and all its fish, as well as business lost while Thai Paradise remains closed for repairs.”

They cut to Sydney Jordan flanked by Leah and Jared, and about a dozen other people outside Thai Paradise. Everyone looked chilled to the bone, but they were smiling. “That’s why Jared, Leah, and several of their neighbors—all regulars here at Thai Paradise—have so far collected four thousand eight hundred dollars to help offset repair costs for Som and Suchin.”

“Oh, Thai Paradise is one of my favorite places to eat,” said one middle-age woman, in close-up. “And they’re really wonderful people, too.”

“My wife and I are regulars,” said a forty-something man with a baseball cap. “It’s the best Thai food around.”

Sydney Jordan turned to Jared and Leah. “Some people might say you two have already done enough to help Som and Suchin and their restaurant. But I understand you don’t intend to quit until you’ve collected eight thousand dollars for them.”

Leah snuggled up to her fiancé. “It’s the least we can do for these nice people who have had us over to dinner so many times.”

The pretty news correspondent turned toward the camera. “I’m Sydney Jordan—with two very special Movers & Shakers here in Portland, Oregon. Now back to you, Sloan.”

The picture switched to dapper, silver-haired Sloan Roberts at his news desk again. Seated beside him was his pretty blond co-anchor. “Here’s an update on that story since it aired last December,” Sloan said. “Thai Paradise opened its doors again in early January. If you’d like to eat there, reservations are recommended. It’s so popular, Som and Suchin plan to open Thai Paradise II some time next year. As for Jared and Leah, they’ve set a date and will be married in September.”

“Maybe they could have the reception at the restaurant,” chirped Sloan’s co-anchor. Grinning, he nodded. “They’re sure to get a discount. Thank you, Sydney Jordan—for that moving story. Stay tuned for more as On the Edge returns.”

A commercial for margarine came on.

The man in the Portland hotel grabbed the remote and switched off the TV. Funny, they reran Sydney Jordan’s Movers & Shakers segment with Leah and Jared tonight. He’d started making plans for them shortly after watching that piece when it had originally aired six months ago. He’d been watching Leah and Jared for nearly a month now. He knew the old five-story apartment building where they lived in Portland’s Northwest district. He’d learned how to get inside the place undetected. He’d acquainted himself with every inch of it—from the roof to the dark, dank recesses of the basement. He’d even broken into their apartment already, just long enough to study the layout and go through their closets to make sure they didn’t keep a gun on the premises. Before making his clandestine exit, he’d left a calling card. He’d peed in their bathroom, left the toilet seat up, and hadn’t flushed.

He'd imagined Leah later bitching out Jared for being such a pig, and that had made him chuckle. Yet a part of him had wanted them to know someone else had been inside the apartment. Part of him had been daring them to figure it out. Last week, he'd been cocky enough to take risks like that.

But not anymore. He had to be very careful now that their Movers & Shakers segment had been recycled for On the Edge. Jared and Leah were in the limelight again, maybe not for long. But he had to pull back for a while, maybe even delay his plans for a few more days.

Turning away from the TV, he glanced down at the hotel's king-size bed, where he'd laid out his burglary tools—a collection of files, skeleton keys, and wires. He'd used them to break into Leah and Jared's building and their apartment. On the ugly maroon and hunter green paisley bedspread, he'd also set out a pair of gloves, a knife, and a 9-millimeter Glock handgun. And on the pillow was a neatly folded, lightweight, clear plastic rain jacket.

Everything he needed.

Just a few more days, he thought. He could wait. He was a patient man.

And then Sydney Jordan's friends, Jared and Leah, would be on the news again.

"You're clearly limping here in this scene," the hotshot, twenty-something exec said. He had black, spiked hair, designer glasses, and a black designer suit—with no tie. He also had a Bluetooth phone attached to his ear. Leaning back in his chair at the conference table, he unclasped his hands from behind his head to point to the big TV screen for a moment. "See what I mean?"

His assistant, a young East Indian man, worked the DVD remote control. With a flick of the button, he backed up the scene on the big-screen TV of Sydney Jordan assessing the wrecked restaurant with the Wongpooms.

"Yes, I'm clearly limping," Sydney said tonelessly. "It's from an old spinal cord injury, Brad."

Brad was an image consultant the network had hired to review her work. He'd shown the old Jared and Leah story to a test audience, and Sydney had flown from Seattle to New York to hear the test findings. She still had some jet lag. Her hair was swept back in a ponytail, and she wore a blue sleeveless dress.

There was only one other person at the long conference table, a young woman in a power suit from the network's public relations department. She took notes and said nothing.

"Well, people don't want to see you limping, Sydney," Brad said. "The test audience was split right down the middle—the ones who knew about your accident and the ones who didn't. The ones who didn't wondered why you were limping. The ones who knew about your injury didn't want to be reminded of it. Made them feel bad. Plus it's distracting, and not very glamorous."

"In the future, I'll try not to walk when we're taping," she replied. Sydney wondered how much the network was paying this guy. Watching this DVD of her work and getting a blow-by-blow analysis reminded Sydney of her figure-skating days, when her coach used to analyze videotapes of her routines. Those screening sessions, which she'd always loathed, had at least focused on her work from the day or week before and helped her to correct her recent mistakes. But this segment from Movers & Shakers was six months old, for crying out loud.

So much had changed in the last six months. Back when she'd gone to Portland to cover Leah and Jared's story, she'd still been based in Chicago and still happily married. Her only real heartaches in life had been her slightly faltering walk and occasionally having to be away from her husband and son while she filmed her stories. Sydney's Movers & Shakers segments profiled athletes, inventors, philanthropists, eccentrics, and everyday people who had done something extraordinary. Sydney loved meeting these individuals and profiling them in her video shorts. She'd always searched for subjects and story ideas in Chicago, so she wouldn't have to go on the road. She'd loved her life at home.

Gazing at herself on the TV, Sydney thought about how that woman up there on the screen had no idea her life was about to fall apart.