

Nightfall

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Chapter 1

*Near Puerto Vallarta, Mexico
One year ago*

Mark Tomlinson was in for the ride of his life. It would also be the last ride of his life. The Range Rover, its transmission in neutral, rolled slowly forward, beginning Tomlinson's journey from this world to the next. It was dark now, but in the moonlight he could identify the familiar scenery on the steep road leading down to the village, south of the big tourist city. But he wouldn't make it to the village, the adopted home he and Heather had come to love so much.

The Range Rover was rolling downhill now, but Tomlinson couldn't press the brake pedal. Both of his legs were broken, useless. He hoped the journey would end quickly, fulfilling his life's only remaining goal: making the pain stop.

Tomlinson had known that this man, or someone like him, would be coming. The calm, stocky figure with the New York accent had been waiting for him in his living room, in the dark, when he'd returned from town. His question had been predictable.

"Where are the copies you tried to give to the blogger, Mark?"

A single, straightforward question. There were any number of answers he could give. But none that would save his life.

The car was picking up speed, weaving but staying within the trench-like path that had been created for the road. Ahead lay a ninety-degree turn to the right, down to the village. But Tomlinson couldn't turn the wheel to stay on the road. Both of his arms were dislocated.

He had held out hope that the insurance policy he had left with his attorney, Dr. Cardenas, would preserve the evidence, if not his life. But the man had quickly qualified his question about the whereabouts of the copies he sought. "Other than the copy you gave to Dr. Cardenas, Mark. We've already retrieved that one. You should have paid him better."

And so the questioning had resumed. And a long night of unimaginable pain had begun. It would end soon.

"You have to have additional copies," the man had said. "Where are they?"

Tomlinson had tried several different answers. But none had been sufficiently convincing. Thus the journey. He had pleaded with the man to simply kill him, but his inquisitor had demurred. "Sorry, Mark. Even in Mexico, they might investigate a non-cartel killing. But not an accident." And in the unlikely event an autopsy was performed, Tomlinson realized, it would find broken bones, dislocated joints, and massive bruises—nothing that couldn't be explained by a car crash.

As the car rushed toward the sharp turn and the high cliff beyond, Tomlinson thought about Heather, his wife, who had died a month earlier. Would he be reunited with her at the end of the journey? And then he thought about the decision that had brought him to this point, made many years ago, to go into business with a man he had always known would turn against him. Against the world.

The tree cover opened up, and the black expanse of the Pacific stretched endlessly in front of him. The Range Rover left the road and soared off the cliff, toward the ocean, toward Heather. Toward the end.

Chapter 2

*Long Beach, CA
Present Day*

I felt the gun at my back, the barrel digging into my spine, prodding me forward in the near-darkness. I moved my wheelchair slowly forward toward an innocuous-looking household appliance. An upright freezer.

“Open it,” the voice behind me commanded.

“No, please.”

“Open it!”

I grasped the wheels of my chair with sweaty, shaking hands. “My God, no.”

The gun jabbed at me again.

I maneuvered my chair to the side and gripped the freezer’s handle. I opened the door to a sight I had somehow known would be there, and yet it shocked me to the core.

The naked body of a woman, now frost-covered, had been stuffed into the confined space. Against my will, my eyes moved over the torso to the face, a face I recognized.

Mine.

I screamed.

I was still screaming when I woke up. I looked around the darkened bedroom; I was alone. I struggled to a sitting position and clapped my hands twice, turning on the light.

Another night, another nightmare. But, looking at the empty space next to me in bed, I remembered that tonight, there was no one with me to share the experience. And that realization hit me with as much force as had the dream.

I looked at the mostly empty wine bottle on my nightstand. I had no idea what time it was, but I estimated that since my final, tearful encounter with James Carter, about one and three-quarters bottles had elapsed. That seemed as good a way as any to measure time.

I was free. And lost. And hung over. And alone, with my nightmares.

The body-in-the-freezer scene had, unfortunately, really happened to me. It hadn't, obviously, been me in the freezer—it had been another young woman. But without a last-second intervention by law enforcers, I would have joined her. Now, two years later, I relived the experience every few nights. Against all odds, I had fallen in love with a man who was willing to weather the nightmares with me. We both wanted the bad dreams to go away, but we couldn't agree on how to make it happen.

I checked my phone on the nightstand. It was 7:40 AM. I reviewed my options. I could stay in bed. Pointless, I recognized. I could get up. Equally pointless, since I had, these days, nowhere to go and nothing to do. And no one to be with. The awful reality rammed me in the gut, and I choked back a huge sob.

James and I had left the door open a tiny crack, separating rather than officially breaking up. But I couldn't even imagine everything that would have to happen to get through that crack, to get us back together again. I'd gotten tired of his nagging about my problems. He'd gotten tired of my stonewalling about my problems. And if he'd understood the full extent of my issues, he would have been even more tired of it.

The nightmares were bad enough, and I couldn't hide them from James, although I could, and did, fudge in telling him how often they occurred on the nights we weren't together. But I hadn't told him that during the last month, I'd begun to suffer anxiety attacks. Almost every day, I'd have an episode of shaking, sweating and hyperventilating, which seemed to be triggered by . . . nothing. I couldn't explain them. And two days

ago, I'd had the worst experience yet: a full-blown flashback, in which I'd actually experienced, while fully awake, the scene of opening the freezer door and seeing the body. A waking nightmare, from which I couldn't escape. It had been terrifying, but it hadn't occurred again.

James's prescription for my troubles, repeated in too many fruitless conversations, was straightforward: serious therapy from a practitioner specializing in post-traumatic stress disorder. *Makes sense*, I'd respond.

"There are meds, too. Some of them can help quite a bit." I was willing to take his word for that. In any event, these drugs probably would have been better than my current medication of choice, which came in the bottles I now used to measure time.

So far, so good. But James could never leave well enough alone. He'd always add, in a tone he probably thought sounded like an afterthought, but which was always the real point of the conversation: "And of course, you've got to stop doing those . . . things you do."

Ah, yes. Those *things*. Those pesky extracurricular undertakings I seemed prone to getting involved in, the wrongness of which James saw as self-evident. That included the quixotic search for corporate saboteurs that had resulted, two years earlier, in my standing in front of a major appliance with a body in it. Another project, obtaining proof against a corrupt congressman, had ended in a shootout with a madman in an aircraft hangar. Then there was the search for my missing nephew, which had led to my near-death in the middle of a busy bridge in Minneapolis.

This last incident had been the final straw for my employer, the US Attorney's office in Los Angeles. Just too much distraction, they'd said. What they really meant was too much publicity, of a type that cast me in a favorable light but didn't benefit my superiors, or worse, reflected poorly on them. Distracting, indeed.

But actually getting me out the door had been a bit awkward, given that my job reviews had been, inconveniently, glowing, that I was both female and handicapped, and that I hadn't broken any laws or rules. But the US Attorney's office is run by, well, attorneys, so they'd found a way. And they'd prudently lubricated the process with a generous payout, taken from some obscure contingency fund. I'd been placed on a leave of absence, which would officially last for thirty days, but which in reality would last forever. And now I, along with my annoying distractions—those *things* again—was supposed to quietly go away.

Looking around my bedroom, I decided to get up, which for me means maneuvering myself into my wheelchair. That done, I went to the bathroom and then rolled out to the kitchen and looked in the refrigerator. There wasn't much there—no bodies, thankfully—but what I did see looked revolting.

I returned to the darkened living room and carefully opened the blinds. Daylight. Another day, which I couldn't face. A glance at my phone told me I had received a text message. I thought about more wine, but I figured I might as well look at the text.

It was from James and had been sent last night. My hand tightened around the phone as I read the message's five words, which made no sense to me: "Pen, please hear her out."

Hear who out? What the hell was this? After all James and I had been through yesterday, he was sending me mysterious, cryptic messages? I tossed the phone onto an end table.

I'd been at rock bottom before. Four years ago. I'd woken up in a hospital bed after a car accident and learned that I would never walk again. It wasn't until two days later, after my increasingly urgent inquiries, that they'd told me the fate of my six-year-old niece, who had been with me in the car I'd been driving. She had been killed. Within months, my fiancé and my employer had both dumped me.

That was pretty low.

And now I was testing the bottom again.

I decided against resuming my appointment with the wine bottle just yet, forcing down some coffee and Advil instead. Then I went back to the bedroom, cleaned myself up, and got dressed, mostly just for something to do. My morning routine was a pain, but after four years as a paraplegic, I was used to it, and I was learning to value the familiar. In due course, I returned to the living room and faced the emptiness.

Disabled, broken-hearted, unemployed . . . was I missing anything? It didn't matter. I had more than enough material for a massive pity party. And I now faced a day of pain a lot worse than the headache had been. At least, I did until somebody knocked at the door.

I figured it must be either my landlady, Eleanor, or Publishers Clearing House with a check for \$10 million. Either way, worth answering. I glanced through the peephole I'd had installed at my eye level. The person outside was not Elvis or the Queen of England, but someone whose presence was even more improbable. I opened my door to Anita Smith Woodruff, ex-wife of James Carter, with two thoughts:

What the hell . . .? Why . . .? and

Please hear her out.

She walked in, a trim, elegant figure, fashionably dressed, with smooth mocha skin. She and James mostly got along now, with James living half a continent away, although he had never backed off his description of his ex as "a pit bull." I had met her just once, during a handoff of James's and Anita's daughter, Alicia, who was now fourteen. Now we just looked at each other for a long moment before I had the presence of mind to ask her to sit down. I realized as she took a chair that the apartment was a mess. And I, of course, looked like complete hell.

"Hi," she said, studying me, giving no hint of what had brought her to LA from her home in Minnesota.

I nodded.

"I was sorry to hear about you and James. I hope you'll be able to put it back together."

I didn't say anything.

"It's just a separation, right?"

"Right."

"Alicia was really upset." I had grown close to Alicia, who lived with Anita and her current husband, Andre, in a Minneapolis suburb.

She continued to study me. *Hear her out.*

"You don't know, do you?" she said.

"Know what?"

"I didn't think so. I guess maybe you've been . . . upset."

"Yeah."

She took a breath. "My husband, Andre, is in jail for murder."

For the first time, I felt fully awake. "What?"

She forced the weakest of smiles. "I guess I'm bad luck."

I stared at her, dumbfounded. Earlier in the year, James had also been accused of murder here in California. I had helped to clear him.

"A pretty nasty coincidence," I said. "What happened?"

"The man he's accused of murdering was his boss, the CEO of his company. His name was Blake Lofton."

The name sounded vaguely familiar, I thought.

"It's kind of complicated," Anita added. "Blake was also his brother-in-law. He was married to Andre's sister, Simone."

"Okay."

"And there's a further complication. Blake Lofton was a nominee for governor of Minnesota."

"Holy—" I cut the thought short. "How strong is the case against Andre?"

"Very strong, unfortunately. Blake was stabbed in his home, probably by someone he knew." She left it at that.

"How is Alicia doing?"

She sighed. "About like last time. It doesn't get any easier."

Alicia had taken it very hard when James had been accused. "Is he going to make bail?" I asked.

"Yes. He'll be out today. In the meantime, I've hired the best criminal defense attorney in Minnesota. His name is Lars Hankinson."

I'd definitely heard that name. Hankinson was a colorful figure with a flair for publicity and courtroom theatrics. His nickname was "Mr. Scorched Earth." I decided it was time to get to the point. "James said I should 'hear you out.' What do you want to tell me?"

"I'd like to hire you."

"To do what?"

"To be one of Andre's defense attorneys. But you'd have only one function: to investigate the murder. To find out who killed Blake."

"I . . ." I paused to collect my thoughts. The idea was ridiculous on so many levels, I didn't know where to begin.

Hear her out.

"The police—" I began.

"The police are done investigating. They think they have their man."

"But Hankinson . . ."

"Uses investigators sometimes. Does some fact-finding. But he is wary of too much investigating, especially if the facts might conflict with the story he wants to spin. I want you working directly for me, to learn the truth."

"Why would Hankinson agree to that?"

"He bitched and moaned about it, but I'm not giving him a choice, and he won't pass up the chance to handle a juicy case like this one. He'll be in charge of the actual defense. You'll investigate for me. You won't have to work with him at all. Just stop in and touch base with him first."

So she had already talked to him about me. She'd prepared an answer to every objection, except the biggest one of all. "Anita," I said, "I'm flattered that you think I could help, and that you flew halfway across the country to ask me, but I'm not an investigator. And I've never worked in homicide, or even in criminal defense. You need to hire a pro."

"You have a talent for uncovering the facts. From everything I've heard, you're resourceful and dogged. But the main thing is, we don't have to worry about your loyalties or priorities. You'll be working for us, and you want to help Alicia, just as we do." She was being unfair, using my fondness for Alicia to soften my objections. And she was catching me off guard; I was exhausted, emotionally spent, and unable to think of a good response to her well-prepared arguments.

I may have been distraught, but I wasn't an idiot. Anita was looking for more than competence; she was looking for control. She thought, or at least hoped, that anything damaging I might learn could be buried under layers of personal loyalty and attorney confidentiality.

"What does James think?" I asked.

Her voice softened. "He still loves you, Pen. He wants what's best for Alicia. But he wants what's best for you, too."

I stifled a sob. "I'm not in great shape, Anita."

"You'll be okay. And we need you."

"I'd have to think about it."

She stood up. "We need you," she repeated. "Don't think too long."

She left, and the apartment was silent. I had no doubt that James still loved me. But it was tough love. Really, really tough. He had encouraged his ex-wife to recruit me for a project that had all the makings of a fiasco. But he knew I needed to be working, not wallowing in self-pity. And, not coincidentally, he was trying to prove a point by involving me in exactly the kind of undertaking that had caused so much conflict between us.

Were there times when I was tempted by the prospect of cozy domesticity? Just the two of us, safe, secure, and happy? Of course there were. It exasperated and mystified James, as well as my two closest friends, Pam and Cassandra, that I had rejected that scenario. Steering Anita to me wasn't revenge on James's part, exactly, but I could well imagine his thought process. *You want interesting, honey? You want to help people who really, really need help? Well, here you go.* I could visualize his smile. But it was his knowing smile. A loving smile. I felt a crying jag coming on and quickly stifled it.

It shouldn't have been like this. And yet it had to be. And that our decision to separate was truly mutual mattered not at all. James and I had come together as wounded people, and we had healed together. But the healing process had worked too well. We had become, or were now revealed as, different people. Now relatively whole and healthy, we wanted different things, and envisioned different futures, than had the broken souls who'd encountered each other nearly two years ago. And now we were both headed back down toward broken.

James had let me go, sent me on my way, acknowledging that the life he had imagined for us was never going to happen. But, at age thirty-seven, I'd seen a lot. I had survived. And I could do it again. I couldn't give up my independence. I couldn't be reined in, constrained from doing what I needed to do.

And what, exactly, *was* I doing?

It's your life's work, asserted a voice from somewhere inside me.

Right, my conscious, rational self replied. *Sounds like a hell of a job.* What that job was, I couldn't describe exactly. It didn't have a title, or an office, or a dental plan. It was risky, messy, and occasionally even dangerous. All I could say was that I felt compelled, and at least somewhat qualified, to help people in sticky, high-stakes situations who needed to learn the truth. It was important work.

And terrifying.

I needed to do the Andre Woodruff job for myself, it was true. I needed to get on with life. And I found it hard to resist a challenge, or to ignore a mystery. But most of all, I needed to do it for a young girl whose stepfather faced life in prison, a girl who'd been through too much already.