

Chapter 12

Chris muttered something in his sleep. Hope rolled over and looked at him. This was the first time she had spent the night with him, the first time she had shared her body with him.

He looked so good. Like some big, fierce Viking, with his blonde hair and blue eyes. He was tall and athletic. She felt the incredible power in his arms as he held her tight. She was thrilled with his strength, yet felt perfectly safe in his arms.

Hope wasn't a virgin, but she had never felt this way about a man before. Something about Chris was so right.

She liked his house. It was an old Craftsman-style home built before World War II just north of the University of Washington. Chris's dad had bought it for Sarah and him to live in while they went to school.

Chris was showing signs of prosperity now that he was a full-fledged lawyer. He had redone the kitchen and painted and updated all the rooms. The bathrooms were a little crowded, but had the latest fixtures, all in keeping with the house's style.

"Whatcha thinkin' señor," she whispered.

"Hmmm . . ." Chris said. "I was just thinking about what a lucky guy I am." He rolled to her and smiled. He reached out with one of those big, powerful hands and cupped her face. He pushed a few strands of her long, loose black hair from her face. "What did I ever do before I met you?"

"You walked through life an empty shell," she teased. She crawled over him and brushed her lips gently against his.

"You know, I'm not used to this pillow talk," Chris said. "It's been a very long time . . ."

"I know. Teddy told me all about Meagan. He says you haven't had a steady girl friend since she died."

“He told you what? That rat bastard. He’s not supposed to talk to anyone about that stuff.”

She nestled her head into his shoulder. “Don’t blame him. I made him talk. He can’t keep a secret from Esperanza.” Hope rarely used her Mexican name, Esperanza, which meant Hope in English.

There was a long moment of silence.

Hope surveyed Chris’s bedroom. It was still done in purple and gold, the colors of his University of Washington Huskies. That would have to change. The Husky emblemed comforter on the bed was just about the ugliest thing she’d ever seen.

“Do you want to talk about her?” Hope asked, touching his face. “It’s okay. I’m a good listener.”

“What’s there to talk about? She was great. I thought I was in love. I was thinking about asking her to marry me. Then she was gone.”

Hope saw moisture glistening in the corner of Chris’s eye in the faint light of the clock radio.

“What happened Chris? How did she die?”

Chris pulled himself up on one elbow and looked at her. “You mean that rat bastard brother of yours didn’t tell you?”

“No, he wouldn’t talk about it. I think it was too painful for him too. He just said she was killed by terrorists.”

“We were sailing up the Inside Passage on my dad’s old boat, the *Defiant*.” Chris got a faraway look in his eyes. “We stumbled on this cell of al-Qaeda terrorists who were plotting to blow up a cruise ship.”

“Ted said your dad was on that ship?”

“Yeah, Dad and Candace and my sister Sarah. They were all there for Dad’s wedding. Anyway, we tried to stop the terrorists. They shot up the *Defiant*, that’s where I got this.” Chris rubbed the ugly white scar on his chest.

“I wondered about that.” Hope leaned over and kissed the scar. “I was afraid to ask.”

"I took a bullet. If not for your brother, I wouldn't be here right now. I owe him my life. I'd do anything for him."

"You pretty much showed that down in Mexico. If it makes you feel any better, he feels the same way. He'd put his life on the line for you."

"Anyway, Meagan was shot at the same time. There was this big explosion and the terrorists' boat and the *Defiant* were blown up. By the time the Canadian Coast Guard fished us out of the water, Meagan was gone."

"That's what I sense in you." Hope gently kissed Chris's chest. "I sense the fear. You're afraid to get close to anyone else aren't you?"

Chris stared at her for a moment.

"First I lost Mom. To cancer. Then I lost Meagan. It seems like everyone I love dies. I . . . I guess I just don't want to put myself out there again."

"Well, Mr. Macho Stud, you don't have to worry about me. I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to be around for a long, long time." She pulled his face down to her.

He kissed her long and hard.

"That's good," he finally said when he came up for air. "Sarah is close to me again. For years, after Mom died, she was lost in her own little world. She became a Goth and hated the world. When she was almost killed, when I was almost killed up there in Canada, she changed. She's back to my little sister again, but she's living in San Francisco now. I hardly get to see her. We make it a point to Skype each other at least once a week, but it's not the same. Sometimes I feel like I don't have anyone to talk to."

"What about Spiderman. Don't you talk with Ted?"

“That’s different. We talk about guy stuff, sports and work and stuff. Every now and then, he shares his feelings with me a little, but mostly we keep it pretty sterile. You really can’t talk about your feelings with a guy.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that anymore. Esperanza is here for you now.” What was she feeling for this big goof?

She reached down below the covers and grabbed him. “Let’s see what Mr. Winkie is up to.”

The nice split level with the neatly maintained yard was in the middle class suburb of Edmonds, about twelve miles north of Seattle. The sun peaked out from behind the clouds and the cool crisp air smelled of cedars. Crispy, dry leaves littered the sidewalk under the flowering plum trees.

Catrina pulled her burgundy Ford Explorer to the curb and checked her notebook. Yes, she had the correct address.

Dressed in jeans, a white oxford shirt and a brown corduroy blazer, she stepped out of her vehicle and walked gingerly up the sidewalk to the front porch. She pushed the door bell and heard a dog barking inside.

“Put Jasper away,” she heard a woman’s voice on the other side of the double doors say.

The doors opened to reveal a slightly dumpy middle aged woman with short chestnut hair.

“Yes?” the woman asked.

“Mrs. Hallstead? I’m Katrina Flaherty. I spoke to you on the phone. Your sister-in-law has hired me to find your brother.”

“You mean Karen. Don’t call her *my* sister-in-law. She’s nothing to me.”

“May I come in?” Katrina asked.

Mrs. Hallstead looked at Catrina for a moment. "Sure, why not? I suppose someone should find out what happened to Dick. God knows the police aren't doing anything." She stood aside and let Catrina enter. "By the way, my name's Anne." She held out her hand.

"Hi, Anne. Nice to meet you." Catrina climbed the half-flight of stairs to the living room.

The living room and adjoining dining room were painted a terra cotta red with white borders. The white carpet showed signs of aging. A floral print sofa and overstuffed chair sat below the bay window that looked out over the front yard.

"Nice house you have here," Catrina said. "I love your yard."

"Thank you. Sit. Please." Anne blushed slightly. "I guess I'm a bit of a gardener."

"Don't let her fool you." A male voice came from the kitchen. "She has a green thumb. She's a master gardener." A tall, thin man with horn rimmed glasses and very little hair entered the room with a tray. On the tray was a pitcher of lemonade and three glasses. "I'm Anne's husband, Matt. May I offer you some lemonade?"

"Thanks, that would be nice." Catrina sat on one side of the sofa.

Anne sat on the other end of the sofa and Matt put the tray down on the coffee table.

"I understand you're looking for Dick." Matt said as he poured three glasses of lemonade.

"Yes, Karen, his wife, has hired me to find out what happened to him. When was the last time you heard from him?" she asked.

Anne accepted a glass from her husband. "I don't know. Maybe a week or so ago. We don't talk every day, you know. We get together at holidays and family events. Other than that, it's not unusual to go a month or so without hearing from him."

"A week or so ago would be just before he disappeared. What did you talk about?"

“He was really upset. He thought that his lawyer had failed him. You know, done a sloppy job. He was afraid that he was going to jail. And he didn’t commit any crime. It was all a mistake. The girl lied to him about her age.”

“And then what happened?”

“He said he was worried. He was afraid that something would happen to him.”

“I see.” Catrina sipped her lemonade. “Did he say what he thought might happen?”

“No. But it was Karen. That woman’s capable of anything. She killed him. She dumped his body somewhere out in the desert. I don’t know why she hired you when she knows what happened to Dick.”

“It’s all about money,” Matt Hallstead said. “You know that Karen is trying to take over his business. She wants it all.”

“What can you tell me about Dick’s relationship with his wife?” Catrina asked.

“Which one?” Hallstead said.

“Matt, be kind.” Anne shot a deadly look at her husband.

“Well, he’s had so many. Karen is what? Number 5? And she’s on her second time around with him. If Dick had a weakness, it was the ladies.”

“Matt . . . “

“I’m just telling the truth. He was a hound dog. He’d sleep with anything in a skirt. That’s why he got into this coffee shack business, to have access to more girls.”

“He was just a confused soul,” Anne said. “He was always looking for love. He needed a perfect love and there’s no such thing.”

“Honey, you always make excuses for your little brother. He was a dog.”

Anne glared at her husband.

“He had a new one, you know. Some young chippie down in LA. He kept making trips down there to see her and she was up here this summer. I guess they met on the Internet or something.”

“He said she was really nice,” Anne chimed in. “He said she was a nurse. She worked in a retirement home down there somewhere. He said that he thought she was the one.”

“He thought everyone was the one.” Hallstead refilled his lemonade.

“Have you heard from Dick?” Catrina asked.

“No. And I don’t expect to,” Hallstead answered. “That woman did him in all right. But she doesn’t have the guts to do it herself. She hired someone. She paid to have him killed and now she’s going to get the return on her investment.”

“She wants his business,” Anne repeated.

“I hear that he wasn’t doing too well,” Catrina said. “I heard that the bank was about to foreclose on his houses.”

“Don’t let him fool you,” Hallstead sat back in the overstuffed chair. “He was smart. He knew how to hide his money. I have a feeling that Karen will never find where he kept it. Serves her right.”

“How did he hide his money?” Catrina asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. I know he had a good cash flow” Hallstead said. “I know he had nice things, a nice car, took trips. If the house was being foreclosed on, he probably did that to cut Karen out. If he filed for divorce, she would get half of everything. If he hid his money somewhere, she couldn’t get to it.”

“Did he have some special place that he liked to go? Some hideaway maybe?” Catrina asked.

“No.” Anne fingered her glass. “He spent a lot of time in Vegas, but he didn’t go there much recently, because of his problems with Karen.”

“How about vacation spots? Where did he like to go?”

“He took a couple of cruises. They went to Alaska once. And the Caribbean. He loved to the Caribbean cruise he took with his previous wife, Josey.”

“Yeah,” Hallstead said. “He always talked about the Caribbean. Where did they go honey? Puerto Rico, the BVI? Anyway, he always said that he’d like to retire there.”

Catrina got up. “Thank you. You’ve been really helpful. If you hear from Dick, or you can think of anything else that would be helpful, please give me a call.” She handed Anne her business card.

Leah Sykes cut a comical figure, even without sitting in front of Katrina’s desk, crying her eyes out. Leah stood six feet tall, but walked with the posture of a question mark, to try to hide her height. Her kinky hair resembled nothing so much as a red Brillo pad.

Catrina’s eyes ran up and down the tall, willowy woman. She was about Katrina’s age. Her face was pleasant enough, she had a dazzling smile and sparkling blue eyes, but somehow all the pieces didn’t add up to beauty. She was the whitest woman Katrina had ever seen, her skin almost translucent.

She could have been an attractive woman, but she reminded Katrina of Bozo the Clown instead.

Leah must have gotten a lot of teasing in grade school. Her feet, always clad in flats, were ridiculously long and thin. Katrina could imagine her as a gangly scarecrow of a girl.

Leah reached across Katrina’s desk for a Kleenex. Her long, delicate fingers reminded Katrina that she was an accomplished pianist.

“I can’t believe I was so stupid,” Leah said. “I have no one to blame but myself.”

“What is it?” Katrina had known Leah for years. Leah was a forensic accountant that Katrina often used in divorce cases to find a husband’s hidden assets.

“Oh, Cat. I’m so stupid. I thought I loved him.”

Catrina got up from her desk and came around to sit next to her friend. “That happens, honey. What did he do?”

"I let him take pictures of me. You know . . . nude." Leah let out another wail and stuffed the Kleenex in her face. She dapped at her eyes and blew her nose. "I didn't know about the video. He had a hidden camera."

Catrina patted Leah's hand. "Video?"

"Yeah. Of us. Making lov . . . no. Of us having sex. It wasn't love. He never loved me."

Catrina put her arm around her friend. "Oh, sweetie."

"And they're on the Internet." Leah let out a blood curdling wail. "He sent me a link." She sobbed for a moment. "What if my parents see them? Oh God. That would kill my mother."

"They're on the Internet?"

"Yes, some kind of web site where men post pictures of their exes. It's a kind of revenge thing."

"Oh Lord. You know that once something gets posted on the Internet, it never goes away."

"I know." Leah sniffed for a moment, then started talking again. "Can you help me? Can you find a way to take them down?"

Catrina got up and stepped back to her side of the desk. "Let me call Ted. He needs to look at this."

"No . . ." Leah let out another shriek. "Not a man. I don't want any man seeing me . . . Those pictures. . . They were, ah, lewd?"

"You know Ted, Leah. He's all right. He wouldn't be working with me if he wasn't"

"I know. But if he sees them. I couldn't stand working with someone who has seen me naked. Doing those kinds of things." Leah cried some more and grabbed for more Kleenexes.

"Leah, you have to find someone who can help. No one's better than Ted. And don't worry about him seeing you. He's really discreet. I trust him completely."

Leah dropped her head.

"Ted, can you come in here?" Katrina said into her phone. "I have a problem you can help with."

She turned back to her friend. "He'll be here in a second. You need to pull yourself together a little. He'll want to ask you some questions."

"Ohhhhh."

The dark haired young man entered Catrina's office. "What's up, Cat? " He noticed the crying woman. "Oh, Leah. What's wrong?"

"Her ex posted some pictures of her on the Internet." Catrina answered. "Sit down. Let her tell her story. Leah?"

Ted sat in the chair next to Leah. "What happened?"

"I . . . I made a stupid mistake. I just broke up with my boyfriend. It was ugly. Now he's posted nude pictures of me, videos, on the Internet."

"Where? Where did he post them?"

Catrina could see the color rising in her partner's face.

"On revenge.com. He sent me a link."

"The bastard. Let ol' Teddy handle this."

"Can you really do something?"

"Ted can do anything with a computer." Catrina smiled at her partner. "You can, can't you?"

Ted grinned. "When I get done with them, they'll be sorry they messed with you."

"Thank you, Ted." Leah's sobbing subsided. "I feel better all ready." She reached over and patted Ted's arm. "I don't think I can work today. Can we look at Randall's finances tomorrow?"

"No *problemo, querida*. Just let me know when you're ready. I've got some good stuff on him. In the meantime, those bastards at revenge.com have a date with Spidey."