

THE BOOK OF JAMES

By Ellen J. Green

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Chapter 1

Nick was dead. The memories of the morning he was buried aren't strung together in my mind in one long continuous chain, but more like a patchwork quilt stitched together loosely. Strange details remain vivid, like the fact that the sleeves on the simple black dress I had chosen were too long. They came down almost to my knuckles and irritated me. I yanked at the sleeves all day long but the material was slippery and fell back down within seconds. And my nose kept running, partly as a result of my nonstop crying and partly because it was cold outside. I do remember the cold. It was only early September but the stiff Portland air came in off the bay and poked at my face like needles, making my long wool coat feel like nothing more than a sweater. I also remember the shiny surface of the casket. If I close my eyes and concentrate I can still see the grain of the cherry wood. I watched as they lowered that polished box into the hole with my husband inside. One white rose was visible amongst the dirt that had been scattered across the top. I stared at that rose and found that I couldn't look away. People were leaving but I didn't look up to watch them go. I sat there in my black dress, thin coat, and runny nose until a cold hand took my wrist.

"Mackenzie, are you ready to go now? Everyone's gone back to the house." I looked up, always surprised by how tall Samantha was. She stood nearly six feet even in flat boots. Her blonde hair was pulled back tight; tiny tendrils had broken free and danced in her face.

"He gave me white roses on my birthday last year, remember?" I asked. I continued to stare at the freshly dug hole. "I need a few minutes alone. To say good-bye."

"Okay, I'll wait in the car for you. Take your time." Her words were soft as she turned and headed for the gate.

I squatted near the gravesite and stared at his coffin. I should have felt some emotion. Something. And although there were tears, I was numb. It was like that black hole that would caress my husband's body forever was really in me. I was the black hole. Hollow, echoing and empty. That numbness followed me from the grave all the way to the car.

The gray roughness of the Casco Bay was a blur through the window on the slow drive back to the house. I lifted my head to get a better look at the water as we moved along. It was cold, dark, ugly. A ship hugged the harbor, fishermen dressed in various shades of rubber busied about the docks talking in huddles, loading, unloading crates of lobster and shrimp. Once this sight would have made me feel at home, alive, content. It was where I'd grown up, where I'd spent most of my thirty-one years, it was where I belonged. So much time, hours upon happy hours, I'd spent in Old Port as a child, eating, walking by those docks. Now, as the car sped by, the smell of raw seafood, the sounds of seagulls fighting over bits of rotten fish and garbage, nauseated me. The harbor looked bleak, industrial, unwelcoming. The city hadn't changed much at all but over time everything inside me had.

I closed my eyes briefly and took a breath, determined to erase that fatal drive to Boston from my mind, the argument we were having when the white truck slammed into us, the impact. Nick flying forward and then sideways across me. My face hitting the airbag. Blinding light, grinding metal and blood. So much blood. It covered his face, splashed across the dashboard. It was on me. All over me. Days later I would sit up in bed from the deepest of sleeps, screaming, still wiping at my arms trying to get the feeling of his blood from my body. That feeling would never really leave me, I knew.

I glanced over at Samantha. She'd been quiet during the ride; her eyes were partially shut. She'd been my closest friend for as long as I could remember, kindergarten maybe, and

had endured each blow in my life with me. This particular loss seemed to take a toll on her. She looked exhausted, spent.

“It’s going to be fine, Sam,” I murmured.

She rubbed her forehead and nodded. “I’m sure it will. But you can’t hold everything in like this. It makes me nervous.”

My silence and steadfast refusal to discuss the accident had upset her. I tried but I couldn’t. The graphic details were mine and mine alone and right now I had them mostly where I wanted them. Tucked carefully in the back of my head in an airtight compartment. Until I tried to sleep and then like Houdini they escaped captivity and danced provocatively before me making me weep and scream until my voice was a whisper. I could only control my conscious thoughts and I refused to give up that teeny pretense of power over my own mind. Not now.

Nick had extensive abdominal injuries as well as a crushed spine when he was finally extracted from the wreckage and rushed to the nearest hospital. The doctors told me they needed to try and stabilize him before they could take him into surgery.

Nick wasn't going to live. I knew it when I looked at his misshapen form connected to tubes and hoses. I knew it when he started mumbling what seemed to be death bed confessions to me quickly, as if his time was about to run out. What began as fragmented lucid conversation twisted into morphine inspired cycles of self disclosure.

In the five years I had known him, he had been resolutely silent about his past. Both his parents died when he was sixteen, within months of one another, he'd told me. He moved to Maine and stayed with family friends until he finished high school. He said little more. It had been a strange uncomfortable void in our relationship but I never pressed him because I assumed it was all so painful.

I didn't leave his side, during those hours before he was finally rushed into surgery to repair the constant bleed from his pancreas. Each time he opened his mouth, I leaned in to listen to his whispers that escaped on exhaled breath. It was an elaborate maze of disjointed thoughts about a house in Philadelphia where he had grown up. Whenever he drifted off, he would wake and begin again to describe the stone structure, the woods that surrounded it, filled with twisted paths and a swimming hole. He told me he could never go back again because something terrible had happened there. In the end it was just a hash of stories without endings. This house had haunted him in some way, if only in his dreams.

The doctors told me not to pay too much attention; he had suffered severe internal injuries, and his concussion might have impaired his thoughts, speech and reasoning centers. But it was in these scattered moments that I felt closer to my husband than in all the moments that had come before.

"You have to go. Find the house. Just don't trust them. None of them. No matter what, don't trust them," he'd said.

"Why? Where is this house?" I leaned down near his mouth to catch his words.

"Promise you'll go. On your mother's grave." He was becoming visibly upset.

"Shhh."

His face was unrecognizable, almost twice its normal size from impact against the dashboard. His eyes were two purple balloons. I could see only a hint of a pupil through one of the bloody slits. "I want you to bury me here, in Maine. Not Philadelphia."

I choked back tears. "Nick you aren't going to die."

“No. This is important. After the funeral someone will contact you, to go to Philadelphia. It will all make sense. But when you get to there, you have to go to the house. It’s the only way.”

“The only way to what?”

“If you don’t, as soon as they know I’m dead, they’ll come after you.”

“What are you talking about?” I squeezed his hand.

“They’ll come after you. Hurt or even kill you. The only way to end this is to get to them first. Stay there. Find James.” These last words floated off into the air as he was wheeled from the room.

Chapter 2

Nick died on the operating table a half hour after his last utterance. But grief pushed his words out of my mind. I chalked his ramblings up to blood loss. Drugs in his system, nothing more. In the days following the funeral I occupied myself by reading cheap mysteries from the used bookstore. My eyes ran over the words but I didn't really comprehend them. I'd wake up in the morning and immediately make a pot of coffee. Then I'd wander back to my chair, mug in hand, and flop down with a book. Coffee and Oreos, that was my sustenance. That and an occasional Bloody Mary because I thought it created a nice balance of salt and sugar in my blood stream and it numbed whatever emotions that made their way to the surface.

Whenever I did get up, I would inevitably stumble upon some remnants of my life with Nick, a dirty coffee cup he'd left on a shelf, his belt carelessly thrown over the towel rack in the bathroom, the sneaker he'd been looking for tucked under the couch. The emotions I'd kept under control finally burst. Tears and more tears.

The thought of returning to work loomed over me; I just kept putting it off. Everyday in the weeks following the funeral, I really did think that before the day was over, I would call work and maybe just stop in for an hour or so. Not to actually see any of the walk-in appointments at the Portland mental health clinic, but to just sit at my desk, to smell the hint of disinfectant that was always in the air, to rifle through my old charts, and talk to the people who'd shared my office for over five years. I did try to adjust my frame of mind to make myself want to go, but sometime around one in the afternoon, I'd give up the pretense and shuffled back to bed. I didn't have the energy to do therapy with the disadvantaged and

downtrodden. As far as I was concerned there wasn't anyone more disadvantaged and downtrodden than me right now.

One afternoon I passed by the mirror in the foyer and inadvertently caught a glimpse of myself. Something that I had not done in weeks. My wildly curly reddish hair jutted up every which way, seeming to defy gravity. Clumps were matted to my scalp where I had slept on it. Purplish bruise-like marks spread out beneath each eye; the rest of my skin was just about the color of Elmer's glue. I stared, aghast

I pulled at one cork screw lock that was hopelessly tangled. "I'll never get this out. I'm going to have to shave my head," I whispered.

That revelation had passed through my lips when my front door flung open with such force that it whipped around and hit the wall. Light poured into my living room; I squinted and backed up. Samantha was there with the day's mail in her hand. She looked almost superhuman with the light at her back and her form nearly filling the doorway. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a French twist. Her tweed suit was chic and form fitting. I wasn't really prepared for company. I didn't want any, not today, not even Samantha.

I knew she'd show up. She always did. She'd been my school yard play mate, my side-kick all through my school years, my confident, my ally against the world and in the end, my family when I no longer really had one. She'd been by my side in first grade when Tommy Evans pulled my red curls hard calling me Ronald McDonald. She'd fought my battles with me, distracted me with chatter during study hall when I was trying to read *Return of the Native*, and held my hand when my mother was dying. Now here she was again when I was dying.

She'd been with me after the accident and at the funeral, but I'd discouraged contact since then. I wanted to be alone. She gazed at me for a few minutes and then took a breath, trying to choose her words carefully.

"I wanted to come by and see you. I'm going on vacation tomorrow." She hesitated. "This can't go on, Mackenzie. You did the same thing when your mother..."

"Don't talk about my mother," I snapped.

My years had never been measured by faded pencil hatch marks against a white wall, but by the significant losses I'd suffered as a child. My grandmother died when I was nine, followed a year later by my cousin Bobby. His death was tragic, a motorcycle accident. He was only eighteen. But my mother's diagnosis of breast cancer shortly after had nearly been my undoing. The two years that followed were a nightmare of hospitals, surgery, chemotherapy, sickness ending with her eventual death. Cancer. The word doesn't mean disease to me. It means grief, despair, empty aching lonely sadness. It ripped my family apart and left nothing in its wake.

My father disappeared into himself after her death and I haven't seen him since. He shuffles about hands in his pockets, a vacant stare in his eyes, refusing to reengage in life. In the absence of a parental figure, a bloody anarchy reigned in our home between my brother and me reminiscent of the Lord of the Flies. It continued until the day I left for college. My mother's death was not just a hatch mark against that wall of losses in my life. It was three furrowed slashes that had taken out my whole family.

"Here. I'm going to the kitchen to get a cup of coffee." She hugged me, handed me my bundle of mail and disappeared.

Flipping through the pile quickly, one stark white envelope stood out amongst the assorted junk mail. My address had been scrawled across the back with black magic marker. The return address was from a law office in Philadelphia. Davis, Lupinski & McBride. The words blurred across the page. A lawyer in Philadelphia was requesting my presence at the reading of Nick's will on Tuesday. *Someone will contact you after I'm gone. They will want you to go to Philadelphia.* I could almost feel Nick's breath in my ear. My hands started to shake and the envelope slipped to the floor

I must have yelled because Samantha appeared beside me. "What? What happened?" she asked.

She saw the paper on the floor and picked it up, scanning it quickly.

She was silent for a few moments. "What will, Mac?" She peered at me through darkened lashes. "Why wouldn't he do it here, in Maine? Why Philadelphia?" Samantha had found her voice.

I chewed at the corner of my lip. I had told no one about Nick's last words, his ramblings.

Samantha was now on the edge of the sofa. She handed me the phone. "Call them."

I dialed the number to the law office and waited for a few minutes to be connected with Mr. McBride. The dead silence was interminable. When he finally picked up his extension, his voice was deep, his speech was rapid and pressured, like he wanted to speak quickly and get me off the phone. Nick did have a will, he said, but he couldn't really tell me much more than until I presented in person. It was sensitive. I tried to pry more out of him but he was formal, stodgy, and wouldn't budge. He was going out of town and wanted to move the reading up to the following day.

“Two O’clock, then, Mrs. Weichmann? In my office. I’ll answer all your questions when you get here.” The line disconnected. I jumped up from the couch and ran up the steps.

Samantha followed me to Nick’s office. “What’re you doing?” she asked.

I didn’t answer. I pushed open his office door and scanned the room. Nick had been a slob. His drafting table was littered with papers and old mail. When he’d needed to use it, he’d just push all the stuff onto the floor. Discarded clothes hung from the back of his chair. Empty potato chip bags, an empty pizza box, a plastic coke bottle and dirty coffee mugs littered the desk and floor. The smell of worn clothes and mold hung in the air. I didn’t care about that right now; I wanted to find a copy of that will.

Samantha leaned against the doorway, one hand on her hip. “Are you going to tell me what you’re doing?” she asked again.

The metal of the file cabinet door screeched when I opened it. I glanced at her. “They want me to come to the law office in Philadelphia tomorrow at two. Where would Nick have kept a copy of that will, do you think?”

I began ripping through his files. Old tax returns from four years ago fluttered to the floor. I went to the next file and then the next. If the architectural firm had not sent me Nick’s life insurance policy he had through them, I never would have found it in this mess.

“I’m sure they have a copy,” she said.

“I know *they* have a copy but I want to see it before I go there. I don’t want to go into this blind.”

She looked at me for a minute without saying anything.

The silence made me glance up. “What?”

She shook her head. “It’s just nice to see you motivated about something, that’s all. Find the will, I’m going to your room and start to pack for you.” She looked at her watch. “If you need to be in Philadelphia tomorrow you better get a move on. It’s going to take at least half an hour to get a comb through your hair.” She turned and left.

I continued to go through every paper in that cabinet, every scrap lying around the room. When I was done, his office was a whirlwind of destruction, and I’d found nothing. My energy spent, I turned off the light and took one last look at the filth he’d left behind. Somehow this room seemed fitting with the rest of his life. And mine.

Less than two hours after ripping that white envelope open, I was stuck in traffic, headed south on I-95 to Philadelphia. My heart was beating a little faster than usual. My thoughts were rolling and spinning, doing back flips, actually. And I think it was because I knew, as well as I knew that Nick was dead, that this will was a bit of his past shining through a teeny crack of a vault that had been sealed shut for years.

Chapter 3

The reception room of the law office was decorated in cold hard edges of glass and lacquer. Old copies of News Week and Architectural Digest were scattered across the table tops. I couldn't even bring myself to look at them. I sat as still as I could in the seat, my right leg jumping up and down at about two hundred beats per minute. Yes, I counted the rhythmic movement of my limb until I finally lost count. My anxiety had produced a twisted braid of thoughts in my brain and I was no longer able to separate any of them.

"Mrs. Weichmann? Mr. McBride will see you now. Go straight down this hallway, last office on the left." The receptionist pointed over her shoulder and went back to typing.

The last office on the left was empty so I was forced to wait again, this time in a padded chair. Mr. McBride blew past me several minutes later and deposited himself behind his enormous mahogany desk.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Weichmann." He appeared to be in his late fifties. His gray hair was frizzy and disheveled, his manner harried. The surface in front of him was completely littered in papers, some hanging off the end and some already on the floor. I was beginning to think that this man had no idea what he was doing. "Your husband's will," he said, more to himself than to me.

"Mr. McBride, I'm confused. Are you sure you don't have the wrong person?" I squiggled around in my chair trying to calm my nerves.

He smiled and his entire face changed. His brown eyes smiled with his mouth and became open and friendly. Dimples appeared in his large round cheeks. "I'm sorry, Mrs.

Weichmann. Let me first start by offering my sympathies for your loss. I knew Nick as a teenager, and I was very upset when..."

"You knew Nick?" I blurted.

He nodded. "His father was a partner here. Bradford and I knew each other well." He looked down at the documents in front of him. "This is a very strange case, but let me try to explain it to you the best I can," he paused and looked up, "for starters, Weichmann wasn't Nick's given name. It was Whitfield. His father, Bradford Whitfield, was a fairly wealthy man." I must have been looking at him like he was crazy because he stopped talking for a moment. "That's why I wanted you to come down here. This isn't the kind of thing I'd discuss on the phone. I know this is a lot for you understand, just bear with me." He stopped and shifted in his chair. "His father left some of his holdings in trust for Nick when he passed away. The terms of the will were such that he could've had access to the money at any time. He chose not to do that. He refused to touch one penny and left it in trust. I called him a couple of years ago and told him that he had to make out a will or we'd all be in a bind if something were to happen to him..."

"You called him?" I felt as if I were sitting through a play of some sort. This was happening to someone else.

He nodded and then paused. "We've been in touch on and off since he left; less so over in the past few years. It took a little digging to find him, actually, but we did. He came down and signed his will. We spent some time together, went to a baseball game and then he was gone, but let me get back to the terms of the will. Nick named you as sole beneficiary with some stipulations."

I searched my memory for a time when Nick went away. The only thing I could come up with was an architecture conference two years ago in Chicago. Or I thought he went to Chicago. "Stipulations? How much money are we talking about?"

His hands which had been folded opened up in front of him. "It's really hard to say. I don't have those exact figures. Much of the money has been invested in limited partnerships, stocks, bonds, real estate. It's complicated. If you pressed me for a figure, and you are entitled to know, I'd have to say his personal assets are somewhere in the neighborhood of fifteen million dollars. In addition, he had a comprehensive life insurance policy that he took out when he came down here. It was based on the total net worth of the trust and the premiums were taken from the trust. That alone is worth nearly five million dollars. You again are the sole beneficiary. Now the stipulations." He stopped talking. I suddenly felt light headed and leaned forward putting my face in my hands. "Mrs. Weichmann?"

I pushed myself upward. "Call me Mackenzie, please." I hesitated, collecting my thoughts. "Do you know that Nick and I had nothing. We had nothing during the four years of our marriage. Most of our fights were about money. Our mortgage was sky high because we put so little money down. We had nothing but bills. Why didn't he tell me about this money? Why'd he change his name?" I stood up and paced. I was so angry at that moment I wasn't sure what I would do. "We were fighting about God damned fucking money when we had the accident. Do you know that?" I screamed. "Why didn't he tell me about this?" I realized that maybe I had been shouting a little too loud when I saw Mr. McBride push back in his chair.

"I can't answer for Nick's motivations, Mackenzie. I want you to understand the stipulations in this will. Please sit down." I took a deep breath and obeyed. "Now, according to this document, you will receive a lump sum of five million dollars. Plus you'll receive the money

from his life insurance policy. That money is yours. The rest of the estate will remain intact. You can have access to five percent of the principle per year plus all the interest on investments, more if you petition the estate. And it is also stipulated that you make up a will immediately if you don't already have one."

"A will? Why?" I asked. "Is there something else I need to know? I mean, is this mob money or something? Is my life at risk somehow if I take it? Was he in the witness protection program? What?"

Mr. McBride shoved his chair back and stood up. He pushed his glasses up onto his nose and shifted in his wingtips. "Mackenzie, make out a will, take the money, go back to Maine and try to get on with your life."

"No, there's something wrong in all of this, you're not telling me the whole story." I stared up into his eyes. "What is it?"

His gaze didn't leave my face, but his voice was flat and emotionless. "There is another potential claimant to the money should you fail to comply with the stipulations, Mrs. Weichmann."

My curiosity jumped a notch and mixed with annoyance. "Another relative?"

He shuffled the papers on his desk, his head down. "Yes."

"Who?"

His eyes darted about, not resting on one particular thing. "Nick's mother. But Nick's will was written in such a way that she will have difficulty trying to contest this..."

Once they know that I am gone, they will come after you. His mother? The mother he had told me died of ovarian cancer fifteen years ago.

I had a queasy feeling in my stomach and I thought I might throw up. "Do you happen to know anyone named James that was connected to Nick?" I ventured.

I watched his expression carefully as my words came out, but there was only a tiny flicker behind the brown eyes.

"James?" He shrugged. "It's a fairly common name. There are at least two associates here named James." He stared directly at me, unblinking. "Do you have a last name?"

Don't trust any of them. "No. No, I don't. I was going through some papers and I thought that maybe it was a high school friend? I wanted to let him know of Nick's passing."

Mr. McBride furrowed his brow; the gray head shook from side to side. After several more minutes of pointless conversation, I forced myself up onto rubbery legs. I had to get out of the room; my head was spinning and I was afraid I was going to pass out.

"Mackenzie, you really need to make out a will in the event that something happens to you..." His deep voice sounded behind me.

Chapter 4

Cora set the newspaper down on the desk and leaned back in her chair. Her gaze turned almost automatically out the window resting on the clapboards of the Cooper house just visible through the dense shrouding of trees. She sat for the longest time, unmoving except for her left hand that ran over the page of her open Bible. The motion of her hand was slight and rhythmic. Her lips were moving, repeating the verse almost exactly as it was printed on the page beneath her fingertips. Someone watching might have thought she was in a trance

When her neck became stiff and she was too uncomfortable to sit anymore, she pushed the chair back and stood. Picking up the folded news paper, she read it again, over and over, until the words blurred on the page and became unreadable.

Nick was dead, the obituary said. A car accident. She lifted her eyes again and looked out the window. Rage was coursing through her brain and body but the fleshy face remained slack, expressionless.

The sun was going down and the light that came into the room was steadily dimming. Cora hardly noticed. She began to pace across the oriental carpet, her movements quick and precise. The gray cotton knit dress swished against her thick knees with each movement. When she reached the wall, she turned abruptly, like a swimmer doing laps, almost pushing off and going in the opposite direction. There were no complete thoughts going through her mind, only fragments of sentences, words and raw emotion.

She stopped suddenly, mid-pace, her eyes narrowing to slits. As she stood there, in the middle of that room on the second floor of her home, she suddenly felt overcome with grief. It wasn't so much the loss her of son that she was grieving. She'd lost him long ago, though she always held a hope that she would get him back. No, it was more than. Each loss in her life had compounded with those before it, growing and growing, never leaving her, never receding. She carried them with her always like a large sack of stones on her back. This stone was perhaps the largest and the heaviest. Adding this to her already unwieldy burden might be her undoing. This sensation caused her to slink, almost without knowing, to the wall. She placed her back against the smooth surface and sunk down on her haunches, her hands moved across her face and through her hair.

"No. No. No," she whispered over and over.

She had already suffered enough losses. Starting with her mother and her brother. Her mother. She had been such a small woman, not even five feet tall. Hardly a woman at all in Cora's mind, more of an elf or maybe a sprite. Something mystical and not quite real.

As a small child Cora would stare at her from her bedroom window, bundled in her coat, walking the perimeter of the grounds in the evening, with no purpose or destination just to escape the house for a while, so isolated, so alone, so afraid. Cora wasn't sure how she could have known that her mother was afraid. Maybe she didn't know, maybe it was just an assumption. Cora wasn't certain which memories were real and which she'd conjured up to keep their relationship alive. It had all blurred together with the passing of time.

Cora had been told that her mother had a hard time birthing her, and the woman that used to clean the house said she could hear her mother's screams clear out in the woods. She lost a lot of blood but she lived and Cora lived. When she was four years old her mother died trying to give birth a second time. Cora had replayed her memory of that day through her mind so many times over the years it had worn a permanent groove in her brain. The slightest thing would set the memories in motion like a train headed down a track. Once they started they couldn't be stopped. As the images ran through Cora's mind, she rocked slightly, her back hitting the wall with each movement.

She heard her mother's screams; saw her lying in the bed, her legs open, the bedclothes cast aside, the women around her, taking turns soothing her mother with their voices and their touch. Of them begging Cora's father to take her to the hospital. She heard his steadfast refusal. All Monroes had been born in this house, this one would be no different, he'd said. Then he had walked away. Finally it was over. This vivid memory that was left with Cora was that of her mother, of her in that bed, her mouth slightly open, her face a colorless white. A small bloody form lay across her chest. The baby, her brother, had been stillborn.

Later that night, as she lay in bed in a fetal position, one of the women came to her room to tell her that her mother was gone. The woman was kind and her voice was soft as she told Cora everything she needed to know about life, death and babies. Cora soaked her pillow with endless tears, feeling abandoned and scared. Her father came to her later, pacing back and forth near where she lay, but didn't so much as look at her. He ranted about having been denied a son. He spoke loudly and harshly about the

woman who had died, as if she had no connection to him, as if he barely knew her, as if her body was not in the other room, the warmth still in her limbs.

That day, she decided she would never, ever have a baby, not the way her mother had. She would not carry the baby of a man she despised. Her son Nick had been born twenty-five years later of a completely different kind of relationship. But he was gone now.

The last in the long line of Monroes and Whitfields was gone. He'd thrown it all away. The money, the property, his place in society. His future. He'd given it all up when he disappeared that afternoon fourteen years before. He'd just walked out, choosing instead a meager existence, scrimping and borrowing for an education, a home. Cora felt her grief subside for a moment and something even worse took its place. Panic. Panic tinged with despair and hatred. Nick had taken something away with him that afternoon. Something more than just his small sack of clothes. He had taken something with him that could destroy her, could destroy everything.

For fourteen years she had waited and wondered when it might come back to haunt her. She always thought he would use it in a moment of anger to rip her life to shreds. But he hadn't. Ironic that it was now, after his death that this should be happening. Cora's eyes darted back and forth across the room like a metronome, fear fixed on her doughy features. Would he have given something so important to this wife he'd left behind, she wondered.

"Not now. I've come too far for this." Her head shook at the thought.

Then she raised herself up from the floor effortlessly like a string was attached to the top of her skull, controlling her movements. This girl, this wife, was the last link to a

past that finally needed to die. Cora placed the paper down onto the desk and ran her hand over the grainy photograph of her son's face.

Nick's wife was out there somewhere. Cora just had to find her.

Chapter 5

Running all the way back to my hotel room from the parking lot made me swelteringly hot, angry and out of breath. The key card slid through the slot in my door but the little green light didn't go on. I rattled the handle but it wouldn't open. Beads of perspiration that had collected all around my forehead dripped down onto my cheek; I brushed them off with the back of my hand.

It had to be at least ninety-five degrees in Philadelphia and the humidity was something I had never experienced before, not in Maine or Boston, or even Florida. The air was so heavy I could almost feel it move to make a space for my body when I walked. Oppressive, that's what it was. The heat and heaviness were pinning me down in this horrible city, making it difficult to put my thoughts together and think. And right now I really needed to think. I grabbed the handle again and shook the door so hard I could feel the hinges vibrate.

"Let me." A maid passing by, seeing my frustration, took the card from me and slid it through the slot. Her movements were quick and miraculously the little green light blinked on.

I didn't bother to thank her, just took the card and pushed the door open so hard it slammed against the wall. Then, because my whole world seemed to be crashing down on me, I shut the door in her face, slumped to the floor and cried.

I thought of Nick and me sitting on a bench in Old Port, eating French fries from a paper container. Our first month together, maybe. It was the first time I had spoken at length about my mother's death. The endless cycles of chemotherapy. For over two years she put up a

good fight but each round made her weaker, less willing to go on. That last trip home from the hospital, my brother and I sat so still in the back seat of our Plymouth Duster, the back of our thighs sticking to the maroon vinyl seats, afraid to move. We didn't want to talk or even breathe. We didn't want to miss any of our mother's words because they were scarce and precious. All she kept telling my father that she was so tired, so tired that she couldn't fight anymore. She just wanted to sleep. I thought she just needed to go to bed for a bit, that tomorrow she'd feel better, but that's not what happened.

I sneaked in and sat there those last couple of weeks, watching her. She did look like she was sleeping, at peace, and I was sure she would wake up when she was all rested, but my father said she was in a coma. I held her hand and talked to her, telling her about my day or what happened at school. I thought she could hear me. I didn't really understand. I spent hours during those weeks bargaining with God. Take anything away from me at all; just don't take my mother. My deal wasn't good enough. She died at home with us in her own bed.

Nick took my story in. All of it. I thought at the time I had his rapt attention because of interest and sympathy. But that wasn't true. He had been contemplating my weaknesses so he could gain some advantage in my life. So he could replicate my story, changing only slight details, and then spoon feed it back to me about his own mother. Like the right key in a complex lock, it worked. Five years it took to discover his deception. Five years.

I needed a shower. My clothes were plastered to me and I needed to get under the water, to wash the grime and all these lies from my body at the same time. My clothes, peeled from my skin, were left in a heap where they'd fallen. A torrent of lukewarm water spilled out onto the floor. I hardly noticed.

A will in the event that something happened to me. That's what the lawyer said. But in the end he'd given me no information about Nick's mother or why he refused the money. McBride refused to tell me where she lived or even her name. Nothing. He'd left me with just fear, confusion, anger. And money. By the time I stepped out of the shower and wrapped myself in a towel I knew that I had no choice. I was going to have to find Nick's mother, who probably lived in the stone house surrounded by woods. And find out if there was indeed a James that might help me to end this insanity.

I walked to the window and stared out at the city below. The hotel was centrally located, a quick choice, the first major hotel in Philadelphia listed on the internet. I'd resigned myself to the expense at the time, thinking I'd be here for only one night. Now I wasn't so sure. Perched on the window sill, I studied the buildings, the people moving along the streets. Was she out there, somewhere, in one of those buildings, having dinner or a drink in a restaurant? Did she know her son was dead? Did she care?

My eyes rested on an older woman walking on the sidewalk across the street. I studied her for a moment. She was wearing green pants and a white sleeveless top, carrying a tan shopping bag. Her hair was grey but she was too far away to discern her features. My eyes followed her until she turned a corner. Was that Nick's mother? Or how about the woman at the bus stop? Was she the right age? Or the gaggle of women that just rounded the corner, maybe one of them? I rubbed my eyes and watched the figures blur in front of me. Nick's mother could be any woman between the ages of fifty and seventy. That was a pretty wide range.

Dressing quickly in shorts and a t-shirt, I grabbed a map of Philadelphia from the lobby and got into my Jeep. 4:10 pm, my watch said. Traffic wasn't heavy yet and besides getting out

of that room, I needed to just get a feel of the city. This had been Nick's home. Part of him was still here somewhere; I just had to find it.

Philadelphia looked worn and grimy, a hodge-podge of old and new, quaint and dilapidated. The city was built low, squat, with a smattering of larger buildings sprouting up as an afterthought. Old colonial had eventually given way to the needs of the more modern. It was all disjointed, haphazard and dirty looking but homey. Like a small town in a big city.

I sat at a traffic light at 16th and Market, listening to the hum of endless rows of cars. People milled about dressed in summer clothes. A statue of a man, William Penn, was perched atop the City Hall building overlooking the city. He wore an enormous Philadelphia Phillies t-shirt. I stared in disbelief and amusement. The end of the baseball season was apparently here; I hadn't noticed.

The Red-Sox games had been a part of my childhood that died with my mother. From April through October my entire family arranged schedules around baseball. One of the most precious memories left to me was when we'd pile into the car and trek to Fenway. My dad tried to get seats near the green monster. The stadium was small, crowded, sometimes cold, the smell of beer and hotdogs all around us. Screaming until we were hoarse, long lines to the bathroom during the seventh inning stretch, falling asleep in the car on the way home, it was all part of the ritual. I squinted up again at statue in the baseball shirt; his back was to me. Philadelphia did rally around their sports teams. I could appreciate that.

A car horn blaring behind me let me know that the light had changed. I waved and moved with the cars in front of me. Circling the downtown area at least four times, I memorized the layout, the urban sprawl between the two rivers, the street names, the art museum near the water.

I pulled into the parking lot near the old waterworks buildings and watched the crew teams scull down the Schuylkill river. The long thin boats cut neatly through the water leaving small waves in their wake. Nick never told me what section of the city he'd grown up in, what school he'd gone to, the name of the street or even what kind of house he'd lived in. I had nothing to go on but teeny fragments of information. Wealthy. Large stone house set back from the road. Woods. It had to be somewhere outside of the city proper. I sat there in the car, looking at the tiny ripples in the water, unclear what to do next.

My eyes cast downwards across the car seat and in that split second, I saw it. Nick's personal effects that were taken from him that night at the hospital. A clear plastic bag I'd tossed carelessly into the side compartment of the passenger side door, left there for weeks. I'd forgotten. In all the haze following his death and funeral, I'd forgotten it. Samantha had driven me back and forth to the funeral home when they were preparing his body for burial. I wanted him to be buried with his wedding band so I'd just grabbed the entire plastic bag and then shoved in into the side door pocket, unthinking. Until now.

I ripped it from the compartment, dumping all the belongings he'd had on him that night onto the seat next to me. His wallet, keys, a scrunched up five dollar bill, some loose coins, a wad of smashed papers, and his cell phone still covered in dried blood, scattered across the seat. I tore at the dark brown leather wallet dropping the contents onto the seat. His driver's license, insurance card, various business cards-all from the Portland area, a receipt from Home Depot for piping and tools when he'd fixed the sink in the upstairs bathroom a few months ago, and a phone card, fell out.

It was the generic kind of phone card you'd buy at the drug store to use at a pay phone. He had a cell phone. He had no need for a phone card. Unless he didn't want to answer questions about strange numbers showing up on our telephone bills, or at work. I dialed the access number on the back and then punched in the pin number underneath. An automated voice told me I had 26 minutes left. He'd used 74 minutes. Over one hour. Talking to someone he obviously didn't want me to know about.

I dropped the card onto the seat and picked up his cell phone. Dried blood flaked off onto my hand. An image flashed through my head that made my whole body shudder. The hospital, his body, smashed and broken being rushed by me on a gurney. Someone leading me away, to a seat, to wait. Handing me his things sometime later in the plastic bag. "His cell phone was in his pocket., the nurse said. It's probably broken"...the voice faded away. I opened it and tried to turn it on. The outside cover was cracked. Uncharged or broken, it didn't respond. I flung it away from me with my fingertips and pulled out into traffic.

My head throbbed. The traffic flow was becoming heavier and I'd driven as much as I could stand when I realized I was back near the law office. The curb near the front of the building was empty so I cruised in and turned off the engine. McBride was the key to this whole thing. He'd been so removed but I could tell he was protecting something or someone. A massive wall of granite behind that big littered desk. Impervious to begging or pleading or even tears. Warning me to go away.

I dug the business card from my purse and dialed the number to the law office. If I had to make out a will, I would use the appointment as an excuse to get the information I wanted.

The Whitfield address, the phone number, something. I wasn't going to leave this city until I did. And then Nick's mother and I were going to have a little conversation.