Walker’s Father

By Lynn Clarke

Prologue

*Key West, 1973*

Mort crouched on the shore and watched the small boat make its way across the blue gray water as the sun began to sink behind him. The motor cut out. Through his binoculars Mort saw men climb over the side and drop into the shallow water of the sandbar. A man remaining in the boat tossed long ropes to them and they began to half-walk, half-swim, pulling the tiny craft to shore. How had it held them all? The men in the water pulling the boat were young and rangy, thin as rails, but not small. Mort wondered why he hadn’t expected them to be so tall. Of course they were. And one, the tallest, still in the boat, was big as a bear. Corpulent and blonde. Gotta be Rasnitkov.   
 But where was the woman? And the child. There was supposed to be a bastard, right? That’s what all the fuss was about. How many people would get killed because Comrade Rasnitkov couldn’t keep his dick in his fucking fufaikas? Worse, he wanted to bring his darling little family to Ameerika when his Soviet overlords and her crazy Pashtun brothers couldn’t decide who gets to kill them first. Years of work keeping an eye on the Soviets who were keeping their eyes on whatever the Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his military were cooking up because they didn’t like the Afghani Prime Minister du jour, Daoud, and his Pashtun-friendly policies. And Rasnitkov has to pick now to defect? Tipping the Soviets off that the good ol’ U.S.A. has eyes and ears on the ground in Pakistan, by using our undercover Pakistani spooks to get his family from the Afghani/Pakistani border region to Cuba and then using his connections with some definitely shady, probably mob, Soviet business types in Cuba to help him make a run for the Keys. Talk about playing with fire. So where are the mama and baby? Maybe huddled in the bottom of the boat? Maybe so. Either that or the crew dumped Rasnitkov’s family overboard somewhere between here and Cuba. You just never knew with these assholes.   
 As they reached the shore Mort was impressed with the crew’s ragged shorts, tie dyed T-shirts, filthy bandanas and pony tails. If he didn’t know the truth, he would have easily taken them, well, not the one still in the boat, he looked like a Nazi in a hippie costume, for cryin’ out loud, must be Rasnitkov, but the rest of them could easily pass for the marijuana smugglers that slipped ashore almost every night in the Keys. Goddamn potheads, didn’t they know there was a war on? In his day, you signed up. You didn’t run to Canada or burn your draft card. He’d joined the spooks, the CIA, right out of college. If they hadn’t taken him, he’d have gone to Korea with the Marines or the Army or the Navy or whoever would take him. Damn straight.   
 But these weren’t potheads. No, these were commies. And a Paki. Two, if you counted the half commie/half Paki bastard. Mort made sure his radio was off.  
 By the time they were all on shore, the last light was fading. Mort turned on a flashlight, blinking it on and off twice. The signal was returned, just barely visible in the deepening twilight. Mort stood up and they made their way toward him. He could see the silhouette of the woman with them now, just behind the large man he assumed was Podpolkovnik, or Lieutenant Colonel, Rasnitkov. The woman was carrying a bundle that he assumed was her child. And Comrade Lieutenant Colonel Asshole’s child.   
 “You here for me.” More of a demand than a question. At least the S.O.B. spoke some English.   
 “Da. Yes. From the United States government. If you are Lieutenant Colonel Andre Petrovich Rasnitkov, I am here to take you and your,” what to call her, “young woman, and er, child, family, to safety.” Mort turned to the other men. “The rest of you have to leave now. You’re guaranteed safe passage back to Cuba.” Safe from us anyway. “You must leave immediately.” Mort hoped they spoke English. He pointed at them, and then at their boat. “гэт лост” They looked exhausted, but his orders were to get all of them back in the boat with as little time on U.S. soil as possible. With as little use of force as possible.   
 No one moved. Rastnitkov said something in a low voice, almost a growl. The men began shuffling back toward the water and the boat.  
 Then it went all to hell. One of the smallest of the men pulled out a gun, a handgun for shit’s sake. Mort didn’t even really see it in the now almost total darkness, but he saw enough of the man’s movement, that familiar motion of pulling out a gun when you mean to use it, familiar both because Mort had seen others do it and had done it himself too many times, so he knew, he absolutely knew, he was about to be drilled by a bullet. Only he drew and shot faster, something he’d also done before, just enough times to still be breathing, to still be alive, when the assholes who meant to kill him were six feet under. Bullets were coming at him from everywhere. Did they all have guns? Damn it seemed like even the baby must have been packing because in seconds, Mort was diving for cover and bodies were dropping as he shot everyone that stood, moved or breathed. Later he would tell himself he tried not to shoot Rasnitkov and the woman. He even put that in his report.   
 Mort waited, listening to the unanswered screams of the infant. He took off a shoe and waived it in the air above the dune where he was hiding. No shots. He crept on his belly out toward the bodies. One at a time he crept up to each one. All dead. The woman too. Beautiful even in death, he had to admit that. The face that launched a motor boat and got him to drive down to Florida in his beater of a Chevy. For all it mattered now.  
 Still ignoring the baby, he dragged each body down to the water’s edge and loaded them in the boat. Only then Mort picked up the infant, who was so distressed he was gasping between howls. Mort held him close, crooked in one arm. He pushed the boat, loaded with corpses, with his other arm, navigating the sandbar. When the water deepened he put the infant in the boat and then climbed in, started the motor and headed out for the burials at sea.   
 Hours later, long past midnight, Mort knocked on the back door of the rectory. It was next to the school where nuns taught kindergarten through high school. A middle aged priest answered after several minutes of pounding on the door. He sighed when he saw Mort. “It’s late.”  
 “I’m dropping off this baby. You need to keep your mouth shut about it, Padre. I’ll be back for him as soon as I get the paperwork together. In a week or two. No questions. And don’t tell anyone. If any of the nuns see or hear anything, just say it was one of those babies left on the doorstep by an unwed mother, which it sort of is, except I ain’t nobody’s mama.”  
 “I can’t take an infant. We’re not an adoption agency. We’re a school. This is impossible.”  
 “Did we or did we not let you transfer Father Scott, Padre? Without doing anything with the pictures. We still have the pictures, did you forget that? And all we wanted was for you to agree we could hide someone here once in a while. Like now. If you want, you can think of it as giving this little guy asylum, or sanctuary, whatever you wanna call it.”  
 “No, I’m telling you, it’s just not possible.”  
 “You don’t want me telling my command that you forgot your part of our bargain, now do you? ‘Cuz those guys don’t forget theirs. No, they never forget. And they pay back, only not just eye for eye. They pay back big time. Because it’s not that you didn’t hold up your end of things, it’s that they trusted you, see, and you crossed them. The people who sent me, they don’t take that kind of betrayal lightly. They sure don’t. And they’ll tell you it’s not that they’re vicious bastards, pardon my French, even if they are in fact vicious bastards. They’ll let you know, oh yes they will, that they do what they do because it’s in the national interest, see? They’ll make you and everybody involved, right up to the Pope if they have to, wish you were never born, and tell you it’s just patriotism. Protecting mothers and apple pie. And babies.” Mort thrust the baby at the priest.   
 “Ok, ok.” The priest put his hands up, but didn’t take the baby from Mort. “What about the child’s parents? Where is the infant’s mother?”  
 “This one’s an orphan. He’s gonna be adopted and you need to hide him until I get back. Tell no one. Got it?”  
 “No one? You’re expecting me, alone, to provide the care for this baby? Me?”  
 A young woman, she couldn’t be more than sixteen at the most, appeared in a doorway down the hall. “I’ll look after him, Father. I can do it. I have lots of younger brothers and sisters at home. I can hide him right in my room. I’m the only one on my hallway since the other novice, well, since she had to leave. So suddenly.”  
 “I told you to wait in my office.”  
 “C’mere.” Mort held out the baby to the young woman. She came forward and he put the infant in her arms. “You look after this baby for me and I’ll be back. You hide him for me for a week or two and I’ll tell you what. This guy touches you and you can call me at this number. He handed her a card with a number with a 716 exchange. You tell whoever answers, you want to speak to Mort. You understand what I’m telling her Padre?”  
 “Yes, yes. Get out. Leave the baby with our postulant and get out.”

Chapter One

*A Mid-Sized City in the Mid-Atlantic in Mid-Fall, 2013*

“He wants the paternity test.” Jane knew her husband Ansel probably couldn’t hear her from where she was standing in the hallway. Jane pushed the button on the receiver and listened to the voicemail message again. It hadn’t changed. The jerk still wanted a paternity test. No word from Roy for five years and now he wants her son tested. Unbelievable. What a jerk.   
 Ansel was in the bonus room practicing on his drumset with their son, not Roy’s son, stupid tests be damned, their son, Walker, on his lap. Jane stood in the doorway to the bonus room.

“Mommy!” Walker grabbed a drumstick from his father’s hand, slid down from his lap and ran toward Jane. “Play drums with Daddy and me.”

“Hey there, big guy,” Ansel said. “Come back here with that drumstick.” Ansel, tall and handsome, still sporting a full head of hair, even at forty, moved easily across the room and scooped Walker up in his arms. He carried him back toward the drums. Walker laughed as Ansel swung him through the air.

“Can you leave Walker with the drums for just a minute?” Jane said. “I need to talk to you about something. In private. Out here.” Jane’s large blue eyes looked worried. She twisted a strand of her shoulder-length straight brown hair.

“Sure.” Ansel reached for a higher stool and put Walker down on it in front of the drumset. “Work on your basics. Like we’ve been doing. I’ll be right back.” Ansel turned to Jane. “This won’t give us more than a minute.”

Ansel and Jane went out to the hall.

Jane wanted to whisper, but Walker was banging on the drumset. “There’s a message on the phone. From Roy Adams. He wants a paternity test. No word from him for five years and now all of a sudden he wants to be a part of Walker’s life. I can’t believe it.”

“So what? Didn’t you always say that you’d give him visitation if he wanted it? Especially if he is the father.”

You’re Walker’s father. It’s been five years. What’s wrong with you? Jane couldn’t decide which to say first. Was it because Ansel was adopted himself, and didn’t care about finding his own biological parents? Was that why he wasn’t threatened by Roy? Jane knew Ansel thought of his adoptive parents, Mort and Eleanor, as the best parents in the world, no matter what, but couldn’t he see how important it was to keep Roy out of their lives? Even if Ansel never looked for his biological parents, hadn’t he read about cases where a biological parent bursts into already settled lives and changes everything? Intruding and disrupting everything?  
 When Jane was pregnant six years ago with Walker, she wasn’t sure if Roy was her baby daddy or if Jane’s ex-husband, Jeff, was the father. Ansel wasn’t in the picture, not really, and Roy didn’t want any part of parenthood if Jane wasn’t sure who was the baby’s biological father. Then Jeff died, so Jane’s plan was to raise Walker by herself, as a single mom.   
 Then Ansel, sweet, gentle and kind Ansel, swept her off her feet in a whirlwind courtship and marriage. Ansel with his wiry, tangled hair, tall and handsome, with olive skin and light brown eyes that always looked at Jane with love. Ansel who always saw the best in Jane and everyone, really. Such a godsend that he stepped up in her life almost from out of nowhere, when she was feeling so alone. And Ansel’s name was on their marriage certificate and Walker’s birth certificate. So Ansel was Walker’s father now, period.   
 For five years, all of Walker’s life so far, he’d been a great dad. A great dad. The best, right? Well, nobody’s perfect. But a great dad. When he was home, anyway. He traveled a lot with his band. So it wasn’t that he didn’t want to be home. He needed to travel to work. To get his band’s music out there. But when he was home, he was a devoted, terrific father. Right? So why couldn’t he understand that Roy couldn’t be allowed to stroll back into their lives now? That he had to be stopped.

Walker came out into the hallway. “I finished practicing. Can we go outside and play ball? Can we?”

Ansel looked at Jane. “Ok?”

No, not ok. “We really need to talk about this. It’s important.”

“Honey, sure, but I’m going to need to get downtown to the Dime right after dinner. This is all the time I’ve got to horse around with my little man here.”

“Please Mom? Please? And I’m not little. I’m a big man, like you Dad.”

“Of course, my big man. You’re a giant.” Ansel picked up Walker and swung him up onto his shoulders.

“See Mom, I’m ten feet tall. I am a giant. Can Dad and I go play outside?”

“Watch out for the ceiling fan. I don’t know, I guess, go on outside.”

“Yay! Bye Mom.”

Jane caught Ansel’s sleeve. “We still need to talk about this later. We’re not done with this.”

Ansel went to the fridge and got a beer. He put Walker down and took his jacket and Walker’s off hooks on the wall by the back door. “Don’t worry, sweetheart.” He gave her a kiss and headed out to the yard with Walker.

Jane woke up when she heard Ansel turn off the burglar alarm as he came in through the side door downstairs. She reached over to her bedside table and pressed the button on the top of her alarm clock to illuminate the dial. 5 a.m. The Thin Dime, a dive where Ansel and his band East End had played covers and a little original music on weekend nights for what, the past seven or eight years, now wanted them only on Saturdays. The manager at the Dime replaced East End for the Friday night gig with a younger band, you know how it is, we need the younger crowds. Just business, you understand. East End still had the Saturday gig, which was prime time, right? So Ansel needed to be out late on Saturday nights. Very late. But not this late. Not until 5 a.m. Sunday morning.  
 The Dime closed at 2. Even with time for packing up the band’s equipment and the commute home, shouldn’t he get home by 4 at the latest? But lately it was 5 or even 6, more and more often. Even on weeknights, when they didn’t have a gig. Ansel said they needed to practice or he was just hanging out. I mean, why not? If he wasn’t working a shift as a paramedic, supposedly his regular job. Only it wasn’t so regular these days.   
 Jane tried not to think about how, truth to tell, she worried about him less when his band was on the road, and he wasn’t home at all for months at a time. Which had been a lot during the years they’d been married. Ansel was gone for months at a time, at least a stretch or two, or even three times, each year. Gigs on cruise ships or as openers out of town for bands she’d never heard of. If she added it up, he was probably gone more than he was home.   
 Jane thought, and pushed away the thought, more than once, that lately, even when he was home, he was somehow still absent. Had he always left a trail of beer cans? Was she noticing more, or were there more of them, here and there? Empties on their side tables, countertops, left on top of the fridge or on the floor by his drum set in the bonus room. Imagining Ansel as the caring, creative, handsome man she’d married, not so long ago, was so much easier when he was on the road instead of here but late or absent or making excuses or wrecking his car.   
 Ansel dropped his clothes on the bedroom floor and slid into bed. Even without his clothes he smelled of stale booze.

“Ansel?”

“I’m home, sweet Lady Jane.”

“Ansel, it’s 5 in the morning. Why so late?”

“I don’t know. We were into playing even after closing. Donny has some new music he wanted us to try. C’mere.” He reached for Jane, put an arm around her and pulled her close. He felt so warm and familiar. Jane sensed no meanness or deceit in him. Just love and his kind heart shining through as always. The man she fell in love with. And she still loved him so much. So why did she feel like they were heading right off the edge of a cliff?

Later that morning Jane took Walker to Church. Jane wished they could go together as a family, but Ansel said he just didn’t have much use for organized religion. Before they were married, Jane assumed that because Ansel felt so strongly about family and creativity, he would also be spiritual, which she guessed he was, but for Ansel, spirituality didn’t involve organized religious practice. Did he believe in God? Jane made a mental note to ask him sometime.

Jane dropped Walker off by his Sunday school classroom and then looked for her mom in the Sanctuary.

“Hi sweetheart.” Jane’s mom scooted over to make room for Jane in the pew.

“Hi Mom.”

The sermon was about Jesus turning water into wine at the Wedding at Cana. The pastor talked about how ministers sometimes struggle with the text because healing the sick or the blind or raising Lazarus from the dead seemed like miracles that were somehow more worthwhile. She pointed out that Jesus is making alcohol, something often thought of as an indulgence, or even as sinful, especially when people drink to excess. Jesus made wine from water at a celebration where the guests have already had a few, maybe even more than a few. Is that a proper miracle? Is propriety the right question to ponder, when it comes to miracles?

After Church Jane took Walker to her mom’s house for lunch. She let him run around the fenced-in yard behind her mother’s house while she helped her mom fix a green salad and chicken loaf sandwiches. Jane could see Walker from the window over the sink.

“Roy Adams left two messages on my phone,” Jane said. “I haven’t seen or heard from him in five years and now all of a sudden he wants a paternity test.”

“Oh no, honey, not now. It’s too late, right?”

“I don’t know. I’ll have to talk to somebody who knows more about custody rights.”

“Have you told Ansel?”

“He says he thinks we should agree to the test.” Jane cranked open the window, “Walker, no climbing on the fence.” Jane ran out the back door and pulled Walker off the plastic bike he was trying to stand on to climb the fence. “Let’s go have some lunch with Grandma, sweetie pie.”

“I’m not sweetie pie. I’m Superman.”

“Of course. Give me a kiss, my super little man.”  
 “I’m not little.”  
 “C’mon, it’s lunchtime. Race you.” Jane put Walker on the ground and they ran to the house.

After lunch Jane bundled Walker into his jacket and Jane’s mother followed them out to Jane’s car. “You’ll call me soon about the phone calls from Roy?”

“As soon as I know more about what I need to do to fight it.”

“Can Ansel give permission even if you don’t want the test?”

“Mom, I can’t talk now.” She nodded her head toward Walker who was fidgeting in his car seat in the back of Jane’s new Sierratti X-6. And anyway, if giving permission involved paperwork, even if Roy somehow sent Ansel something to sign, even with a ‘sign here’ sticker on it, lately Ansel was so out of it, he’d never get it back to Roy. She could count on that.

When had it gotten this bad? Ansel was the one who got their marriage license. And when he had to go work on a cruise ship for several months before they were married he was careful to make arrangements for his parents to get his mail. He sent money from his account so they could pay his bills on time. He even called Jane to make arrangements for someone to look after his two cats, Bugsy and Annabelle, while he was gone. And he’d been so organized with his music files on his computer. He had this easy pride in his appearance and the knowledge he’d gained in his training and practice as a paramedic. Where did all that go? Jane felt as if she’d looked away for a minute and suddenly Ansel was this person who couldn’t remember anything except that he needed to stop at the corner store for beer. Had she missed something along the way?

“Mom, Mom, can we get Daddy and go to the movies?”

“Daddy needs to sleep, honey. He’s got to be at work by four o’clock and work until midnight. Way past your bedtime.”

“Can we go sometime soon?”

“Maybe. Was there something you wanted to see?”

“I like popcorn.”

“Me too, honey. Me too.”

Once again, Jane woke up as Ansel came in the front door downstairs and reset the alarm. She pressed the light button on top of her alarm clock. 4 a.m. His paramedic shift for a small, private ambulance service ended at midnight.

“Are you ok? It’s 4 a.m.”

“I’m ok. Well, not exactly ok, but we can talk about it tomorrow.  
Jane was wide awake. “What’s going on?”

“I had a problem at work. A misunderstanding. But I’m beat and you have to get up in an hour. We can talk when you get home.”

“No way. I’ll never get back to sleep now. What happened at work?”

“I don’t know how I could be so stupid. I had these extra scrubs in a gym bag and sometimes during a shift it’s good to have some extra. You never know what you’ll get on them. Somebody’s vomit or piss or blood. And I totally forgot I had this weed in there. Donny’s been into it and gave me some. I totally forgot.”

“Donny’s been into weed? And gave you some? When?” Had Jane said that out loud, or just to herself?

Ansel lay down on the bed. He didn’t say anything. After a few moments, Jane realized he was asleep.

Did she want to wake him up? Did she want to hear the rest of this story? Jane couldn’t imagine Donny sharing a cup of tea, let alone just handing out weed. And so what if Ansel had a baggie of it in his gym bag? Did anyone still care about weed? It was illegal in this state, and having it while on duty as a paramedic was no doubt frowned upon, but they wouldn’t fire him just for that. Would they? And even if he hadn’t been lighting up on the job, the way he spoke, Jane was willing to bet he’d tossed back a few beers or maybe shots of something stronger, between the end of his shift and now. If she woke him up and demanded to hear more about what happened at work would he even remember the conversation? She looked at her alarm clock again. 4:23. She turned it off and headed for the shower.

“Hey big bear, out of bed. School day.” Jane rubbed Walker’s thick mop of straight dark brown hair. He opened his bright blue eyes and then, smiling, shut them and rolled over, pulling the covers over this head. What was that Jane learned back in high school bio class about genetics and peas? Tall pea plants and short ones? If Jane and her ex-husband Jeff both had blue eyes and Roy Adams had brown eyes, did that mean Roy wasn’t Walker’s biological father? Blue was recessive, right, and brown was dominant? But Roy’s sister Anita had blue eyes. And so did Roy’s mother.

“No,” Walker said from under the blankets. “Too early.”

“C’mon sleepyhead. You don’t want your toast to get cold. Wash up fast and you can wear your favorite red shirt today, ok?”

Walker liked school. He’d been in various pre-school programs since he was two and logged enough hours in daycare to have an outlook and an immune system well suited for kindergarten. When she pulled up to the curb in his school’s circular driveway, there was no whining or reluctance to say goodbye. Jane would jump out of the car and take Walker out of his carseat, and before she could even get the car door shut he would say “Bye Mom,” give her a little wave and disappear into the line of children heading in the front door past the principal and the teachers who had pulled curbside duty that morning. This morning was no different when they pulled up behind the other SUVs. Except that Ansel may have lost his job or even his license as a paramedic. Except that Roy Adams wants a paternity test. Jane looked at the trees lining the schoolyard as she watched Walker head into school. Most of the leaves were down already. Hadn’t the school year just started?

Jane drove downtown to work at her law firm, Hantler Vintberg, a mid-sized full-service firm that recently opened several branch offices thanks to the natural gas boom. Jane’s practice was concentrated on wills, estates and general corporate work. Even though work for “frackers” and “crackers” in the natural gas fields was pouring cash into the coffers of Hantler Vinterberg faster than their clients could blast whatever they were blasting into the shale beds, Jane wasn’t working in the firm’s burgeoning “Environmental Development and Energy Resource Service Group.” Well, not directly anyway. She went to law school so she could help people, and build up small businesses. Not to spend her days in record rooms doing endless mineral rights title searches. No sir. Not Jane. But Jane wouldn’t turn down the former dirt farmers who sold those mineral rights and were now millionaires. Sure, if they needed herp, to do a little estate planning for those newly acquired millions, she was happy to help.   
 By the time Jane reached the parking garage to her firm’s building, she already felt exhausted, even though her day was just starting. She couldn’t decide whether to worry more about Ansel’s problem at work or Roy’s phone call. Probably Roy. Even if Ansel lost his job, her income could cover the bills. And Roy’s call was about Walker, so that was more serious. But any problem that had to do with Ansel affected Walker too, because Ansel was his father. Right?

Jane sped into the parking garage, taking the corners a little too fast. As she approached her space she had to slam on the brakes to keep from hitting Jake the night guard. He was standing in her space. Jane pushed the button to lower the driver’s side window of her new Sierratti. “Can you get out of the way? I’m in a hurry this morning.” What was he doing there anyway? His shift was over at 7 a.m. and it was past 8.

“You see that oil slick, right there, in your space? I’ve been waiting here over an hour just to warn you.”

“This is a new car. It’s not my oil slick.”

“Nobody parks here but you. I know that for sure because I check. At night. Well maybe not every night, but most.”   
 “Get out of my parking space. Now.”  
 “Maybe your husband doesn’t know much about cars, but I do. I know cars. Just come on out here and look close. You’ve got to get that checked. You got a leak, well a drip anyway. No way you’d have a spot here on the ground like this, in your space, unless you have a leak, or a drip.”

“I’ll get the car checked out, ok? Can you step aside, please?”

Jake stepped out of Jane’s parking space and she pulled in.   
 “You want me to just take a look under there for you?” He bent down to look at the underside of Jane’s car.

Jane paused before answering, letting Jake get down on the floor of the parking garage. She watched him crawl partway under her car and then bolted for the entrance to the main building. “No thanks, I’ll get it checked at the dealership, no need for you to look at it now.” She saw Jake trying to get out from under the car in time to follow her to the elevators but she was through the doors connecting the parking garage to the main building and into an elevator before he could catch up. Jane pressed the button for nine on autopilot. She had clients scheduled back to back all day and then she needed to get groceries on her way home. The day was jam packed with no time to stand around listening to Jake, making up problems with her car just to talk to her. What a creep. Oh no, what was that smudge on her skirt? From Walker’s shoes or did she brush the edge of her car? She made a mental note to wear darker clothes.

Jane plodded down the hallway to her office. When she saw the phone on her desk she wondered if she should call Roy. Was it best to just ignore him and hope he gave up on pushing for a paternity test for Walker? Or should she call and try to convince him to back off. Or call and threaten him maybe? With what? Ansel was right, sort of, dammit. Jane told Roy back when she was pregnant that she would do the test if Roy wanted. But that was six years ago. She meant she would agree to a paternity test right after Walker was born, if Roy wanted to be a part of Walker’s life then, from the start. She didn’t mean she’d still allow the test if Roy stayed out of their lives completely for five years, how ridiculous, until Walker was a little boy whose whole world was built around Jane as his mom and her husband Ansel as his one and only dad.   
 She leaned back in her leather chair behind her massive mahogany desk and closed her eyes. Probably best to take the bull by the horns. She dug in her purse for a piece of paper with the cell number Roy left on his phone message. When she dated Roy six years ago he was often up early, headed to a construction site. If she tried his cell now she might catch him in his truck. She dug out her wallet, keys, phone, hand sanitizer, cough drops, tissues, sunglasses, vitamins, granola bars, two juice boxes, rape whistle, pepper spray, umbrella, business card holder, antibiotic ointment, bandages, children’s aspirin, vitamin C drops, and then remembered she’d put the paper in her briefcase. She reached over and started rummaging through her briefcase when her assistant Helene leaned in the doorway.   
 “I’m sorry to interrupt, but Cynthia Mondrian has been here since 8 for her 9 o’clock appointment. I put her in Conference Room Q with a pot of coffee. And Oliver Bowden has called twice this morning. He says it’s urgent.”

Cynthia Mondrian was here to discuss a will. She was divorced and had grown children. That sounded simple enough, but Jane knew that Cynthia’s mother’s estate had been quite large. Cynthia’s mother died a number of years ago, unexpectedly and quickly, within weeks of her diagnosis of pancreatic cancer. Jane prepared the will, meeting with Cynthia’s mother at a nursing home, in the few days left before her death.   
 Because Cynthia was fairly well fixed in her own right, with money from shrewd real estate investments and her divorce, Jane recommended that Cynthia file a partial disclaimer, passing some of Cynthia’s mother’s sizeable estate directly to Cynthia’s daughters, skipping over Cynthia. Unfortunately, one of the daughters, Jane thought her name was maybe Linda or Lorna or something like that, she’d have to check the file, had been shooting up and snorting up her inheritance pretty much ever since she got the first check from her grandmother’s estate. So any meeting with Cynthia was likely to be long and complicated. That meant Oliver would have to wait at least until lunchtime, or this afternoon, to hear from Jane. Not good. As much as Jane hated to keep Cynthia waiting longer while she called Oliver back, it was still only 8:45, after all, a full fifteen minutes before Cynthia’s actual appointment time. So did the forty-five minutes she’d already waited really count? Was it Jane’s fault her clients were often early, especially the elderly? And Cynthia was only in her early fifties. Jane remembered how she used to come in early to accommodate clients who always came in early, no matter how early in the morning their appointment time was. But that was back when Jane was single and childless. Now, with Walker to get to school, clients who came in early would just have to wait, that’s all. And Oliver said it was urgent.

“Ok. Thanks Helene. Tell Cynthia I’m here and I’ll be in to see her in just a few minutes. I’d better see what Oliver wants. Oh wait, do you have Cynthia Mondrian’s file?”  
 “Already on your desk.” Helene pointed to the file neatly centered on the top of Jane’s desk.   
 “Of course. Thanks. Just make Cynthia comfortable and I’ll be in as soon as I check in with Oliver.”

Oliver Bowden was the CEO of one of Hantler Vintberg’s biggest clients, Integrated Products. Jane handled the family estate planning for Oliver’s parents. Actually, Jane’s mentor, Jack Dempsey put together documents for Oliver’s parents, all those years ago, that would have given Oliver control of Integrated after their deaths, but then Jack Dempsey died. And then Oliver’s father Max died. And then Oliver’s mother Adelaide got upset with Oliver and when Adelaide wanted to give control of Integrated to Oliver’s sister Nora, Jane hadn’t talked her out of it, as Jack undoubtedly would have. So now that Adelaide was gone, even though Oliver was still CEO, he answered to his sister Nora, who held controlling interest in the limited liability company that now owned Integrated. Complicated, but the use of the limited liability company saved millions in estate taxes when Adelaide died. And the plan carried out Adelaide’s wish that Nora’s controlling interest act as a check, putting the brakes on Oliver’s operational control of Integrated, even though Oliver was CEO and managing member of the limited liability company. With her controlling interest, Nora could fire Oliver at any time, and Oliver knew it.

Jane scooped the items strewn across her desk back into her purse and stuffed it into her bottom desk drawer. She dialed the number for Gautier, Oliver’s longtime assistant.  
 “Integrated Products. Oliver Bowden’s office.” Gautier’s smooth voice was just the right mix of competence and privilege to match Oliver’s personality. Jane couldn’t imagine anyone more suited to the Danish modern reception desk in front of Oliver’s corner office at Integrated.

“Gautier, it’s Jane Sidley Kaminski, returning Oliver’s call. He said it was urgent.”

“Hold please.”

“My sister wants a seat on the Integrated Board. Dammit Jane, what does Nora know about running a business? She’s already talking about going green and same-sex partner benefits. How about if we call it going broke instead of going green, because that’s where we’ll be if we do all the things she says she wants.”

Hello to you too Oliver. “I just need to mention that in addition to representing Integrated, and you in your capacity as CEO, I also represent your sister and our firm represents Integrated Products. While we have conflict waivers on file—“

“Never mind all that crap. I know all that. Just help me keep my crazy latte drinking flower child sister off my goddamn Board of Directors. She wants to sit on the Compensation Committee. The Compensation Committee. Do you know what that means? Next she’ll be saying we can’t get our club dues paid unless they spray the greens with pixie dust instead of weed killer.”

“I can’t get in the middle of a dispute between you and your sister. And she does hold controlling interest in the family limited liability company. If she wants to elect herself to the Board, she can.”  
 “Tell me something I don’t know. Help me out here Jane. C’mon. You can see my problem here. You know how Nora is.”   
 “Look, I can’t take sides here, but it seems to me some negotiation is in order. Would it hurt to look into some green initiatives that might even save some money for the Company? And there are some big, well-established blue chip companies out there offering same-sex partner benefits. They think it’s a good idea, and the Supreme Court is going to be looking at all that soon. Integrated might want to get ahead of the curve on that.”

“So you’re saying I’m screwed.”

“No, I’m saying that until the day comes when your sister sells you controlling interest in the Bowden Family LLC, and I don’t see that happening any time soon, you’re going to have to work with her. That’s what your mother wanted, and it could turn out to be a good thing, for you and for Integrated.”

“If Jack were still alive, we’d have worked this out over a round of golf. Have my sister packed off to Europe or on some cruise ship by the time we got to the 9th hole. Whole world’s going to pieces.”

“I’m sorry, but I have a client waiting,” Jane said. “If you want to meet to go over things, I can, but keep in mind I have a duty to disclose our discussion to Nora. And I can only do what you both agree on. I can’t take sides here. You’d need other counsel to take action adverse to Nora, same as she’d need other counsel to do anything adverse to you.” Jane knew her managing partner, Ted, would have a stroke if he knew she was suggesting that Oliver and Nora hire other lawyers. Integrated was one of Hantler Vintberg’s biggest clients, and keeping members of the Bowden family in the fold kept the work flowing from Integrated. She hoped Ted and Oliver didn’t run into each other in the clubhouse or the steam room anytime soon.

“Maybe a meeting with all three of us would be a good idea. Before you run off, there’s something else. There’s another reason I want to make sure our ducks are in a row. We had some feelers from a suitor.”  
 “You had feelers from a– you mean someone is interested in buying Integrated?” Wow. Nobody did manufacturing in the good ol’ USA anymore, did they? And on such a small scale as Integrated? With its aging equipment and workforce? Someone wanted to buy Integrated? Really? Who on earth would want to do that? Somebody who needs a slow bleed of losses in the years ahead to balance their books or lower their taxes? “Have you received a letter of intent?”  
 “No, just some feelers. An accountant at my club, not my accountant, but one of the better ones, said somebody foreign was calling around. Asking questions about Integrated. He thought maybe an investment broker or something, trying to flip the company, but who knows? But I thought if a possible sale is on the horizon, I’d like to have my comp, I mean our house, in order, you know?”  
 A sale of Integrated? To a foreign company? I guess you never know what someone might want to buy. “Ok, I guess we really do need to talk. But I have to run just now. How about a meeting tomorrow or later this week?”  
 “I’ll have Gautier set something up. The suitor is some Russian outfit, into oil and gas and some manufacturing and mining. The CEO is some big deal oligarch or something. Name of Rasnitkov.”

Chapter Two  
 Jane flipped through the Mondrian file – Lucy, yes, Lucy Mondrian, that was the daughter with the drug problem. Jane tucked the file under her arm, grabbed a pen and a legal pad and headed for Conference Room Q.

“Cynthia,” Jane said, holding out her hand, “glad you could come in this morning. Sorry to keep you waiting. How are you?”

“Good, good, I’m fine, I guess. You?”  
 “Good thanks. The estate formally closed last week. Here’s a certified copy of the official order.” Jane handed the copy to Cynthia. “So that’s everything on your mother’s estate. Closed at the county level and the final return has been accepted by the IRS.”  
 “A chapter closes.” Cynthia looked closely at the copy of the Court Order and sighed. “I guess it really is time to get my own house in order. I was thinking, now that mother’s estate is finally closed, I should get moving on my own affairs. Especially with Lucy acting so crazy.”

“Well, there are a number of options.”

“Cutting her out of my will, that’s the option I’m thinking about. I tell you, it’s ridiculous. She’s in England last I heard, living with who knows who and doing God knows what in Cambridge. Sometimes I wonder if she even knows who she’s living with. She only calls me now if she needs me to transfer more of her money, and half the time when she calls she sounds high as a kite. And she tells me it’s my fault. That I never supported her emotionally. What does that mean anyway?”  
 “I’m so sorry.” Jane shook her head and took a sip of coffee from a Hantler Vintberg mug. She set it on the coasters the high priced consultants recommended in the firm’s latest branding effort. The arrangement of the “H” and the “V” on the coasters was an exclusive design recommended to make the firm look more cutting edge. Did clients ever even look at the coasters? If they did, was there some part of their subconscious that thought the lettering said ‘top flight, up to the minute law firm’? The expensive consultants said so. Often. But Jane thought clients just plopped down their coffee mugs and covered the coasters without a glance. At least Cynthia was toying with her coaster. But she wasn’t looking at it. She was staring into space while pushing it in little circles on the conference table. Hadn’t even looked down at the thing even once, just twirling it with one finger. How much did those consultants cost? No wonder junior equity partner distributions were down by ten grand each for the last quarter.

“Because I sold real estate and put her in after school care, that’s why she’s broke and doing drugs? What about her father? Flying around the world doing corporate deals. If he was home at all, he was guzzling scotch. Why is it all my fault?”

“Cutting her out of the will is one option, but there’s also the possibility of leaving her share of your assets in a trust fund for her benefit. One of your other children, or a trust department of a bank, could be named as trustee. We could even put restrictions on it so that if she’s ever disabled, the funds would still be available to provide for her without being so available that they count as assets that interfere with government benefits, for example. Might take more of the burden off your other children to have a trust fund specifically set aside and preserved for,” Jane looked down at the papers in front of her just to be sure, “Lucy, rather than just putting more money in your other children’s pockets and leaving them to work out what to do, if anything, for their sister.”

Tears began to well up in Cynthia’s eyes. “That’s what you see, isn’t it? As the long, bleak future for my other children. Dealing with Lucy ruining her health with drugs and going on some kind of government program. They’ll hate me as much as Lucy does for leaving them to struggle with their drug addled sister. And everything I’ve worked for, all my efforts, it all just makes a bigger mess. Just more money for Lucy to manipulate out of my other children once I’m gone, and then poison herself. Oh God. How does this happen?”  
 Jane reached for the conference room phone. “Helene, could you grab a box of tissues from the closet in my office and bring it to Conference Room Q?” Jane usually brought a box with her to client meetings, but the call to Oliver distracted her.

“No, no,” Jane said, turning back to Cynthia, “I wasn’t making a prediction. I don’t have a crystal ball. Lucy could turn things around tomorrow and who knows what could be next for her? It’s just that what we’re doing here is trying to plan ahead based on the information we have now. Lucy got a large sum, outright, no strings attached from your mother’s estate. It didn’t seem to help her. In fact, it made matters worse, if we’re honest about it. So a trust fund is something else to consider, in your own planning for your children. It’s just an option. A planning tool. Not a prediction of what’s ahead, but a plan for what might be ahead, given what we know now.”

Helene knocked and then opened the Conference room door. “Here are the tissues.” She paused. “I hate to interrupt, but I have Ansel on hold. He said he’s fine, but he’s been in some sort of traffic accident, a minor one, no one hurt. He said he can’t find his insurance card and also wondered if you might have your auto club card. If you like, I could get them from your wallet in your purse and give him the information.”

“Cynthia, I’m sorry,” Jane said, handing the box of tissues to her. “I’ll be right back.” Jane followed Helene out of the conference room into the hallway.

“A traffic accident?” Jane picked up a phone from a desk in a nearby empty cubicle. Helene reached over and hit buttons on the keypad to connect Jane to the call from Ansel.

“Ansel? Are you ok?”

“Oh yeah, I’m ok. Just clipped one of those stone mailboxes on a right turn somehow. No injuries, I’m fine. I need to give the homeowner my insurance information and the card isn’t here in the glove box. And I’m going to need a tow so do you have the number for that auto club you said you belonged to? Does it cover if I’m driving?”

“You hit a mailbox?”

“Yeah, took the turn a little close I guess.”

“But you’re ok?”

“Yeah, I’m ok, but it set off the airbag and I think we’ll need a new headlight and some body work on my car. It’s such a p.o.s. I hope it’s not totaled.”

“Totaled? You think you totaled your car?”

“Janey honey, the cost of fixing a scratch could be more than what this thing’s worth, that’s all I mean.”

“Ansel,” Jane turned her back to Helene and leaned into the cubicle, “have you been drinking?”

“The guy whose mailbox I hit is standing right here. I really need to give him the insurance numbers. If you don’t have them, can you get me the phone number for the insurance people and I’ll call from my cell? And I really need to get a tow.”

“Ok, but we need to talk later. And I’m glad you’re ok. That’s all that matters. That you’re ok. I’m going to put Helene back on the phone and she’ll get you everything. I love you.”

”Ok. I love you too.”

Jane handed the phone to Helene. “Can you help him out? The card for the auto club is in my wallet, and it does cover Ansel in any car he drives. I think the easiest way to get the insurance information is to call my agent, Kim Manning. She’s with Northern Guaranty.”

Jane picked up Walker from day care even though she hadn’t been able to reach Ansel on his cell phone to find out what happened with his car. She didn’t know whether or not he managed to get a rental through the insurance and still planned to pick up Walker. She’d left three messages, but he hadn’t called her back.

There was no rental car in the driveway. He would be home by now, right? Maybe the tow truck driver dropped Ansel off at home. It would be just like Ansel not to realize their insurance would pay for a rental car. Or to know but not bother with it. As Jane and Walker were getting out of Jane’s Sierratti, her cell rang.

“Hey, honey,” Ansel was hard to hear over a lot of background noise. Jane guessed he was calling froym the Thin Dime. “I wanted to let you know I still need you to pick up Walker. I still don’t have a car. Donny gave me a ride to the Dime. We’re doing great rehearsal-wise, but I think I’m going to miss dinner. Ok?”

“When do you think you’ll be home? And how are you getting home? If you need me to come get you it’ll have to be before Walker’s bedtime.”

“I can hardly hear you. Hey, hold it down a minute. You just can’t believe how good this new stuff is I’ve been writing. Do you have a second? Maybe you can hear it over the phone. Hold on.”

“I’m out here in the driveway with Walker.”

“Great, put it on speaker. Hey there big guy, listen up.”

Even through the phone, it was good music. Really good. Smooth and sweet. Music that filled the ears and the heart, with lyrics that captured the easy, familiar love that Jane always felt for Ansel, even with all the confusion these days. Usually Donny played lead guitar and handled the vocals for the band, but for Ansel’s recent songs, Ansel played drums and sang. Hearing the sweet words, sung in his own voice, all the mixed-up emotions Jane felt about the late hours, the empty beer cans, Ansel’s problems at work, the wrecked car—the music turned it all around. Explained everything and reached someplace deep inside and clear and so good. Better than anything.

“Wow, Dad.” Walker was leaning toward Jane’s phone. “Wow, that’s really cool.”

Jane couldn’t say it, but she had to agree. Wow.

“Could you come down here and hear this one live, for real, Jane? I wrote it for you. You should really hear it, not just on a cell phone.”

“Mom, let’s go. We can get fries from Monty in the kitchen.”

It’s a school night. Good parents don’t sneak five year olds in through the back door of a cheesy bar on a school night. Fries are not dinner. Walker needs a bath. Ansel and I need to talk about his drinking. About his drinking and driving, his losing his job, his blasé attitude toward my ex-fiancé asking for a paternity test. I need to get to bed at a reasonable hour since I still have a job to go to tomorrow.   
 “Please, Mom?”  
 “Honey, Lady Jane, come down here. I know you want to. Bring Walker. C’mon.”  
 She really did want to hear that song again. So amazing how it cleared the air, even if it didn’t. “Ok, but just one time through the song. Walker needs to get in the tub and get to bed, so we can’t stay long. See you in a few.”  
 “Great. Love you.”

“Up you go.” Jane boosted Walker back into his car seat in the back of the Sierratti.

Jane pulled up and parked in a spot in the alley behind the Thin Dime. The days were getting shorter fast. Dusk faded to complete darkness on the drive from her house. There was a red cover over the light by the back entrance to the Dime and the light in the alley was eerie and chilly. Jane pounded on the door. She could hear the band rehearsing. She pulled out her cell and called Ansel’s cell. It went to voicemail. She hung up and looked around the alley. Something rustled behind a dumpster. Get back in the car and go home or see if the bouncer at the front door would risk the wrath of the manager if she took Walker in the front? Where is Walker?

“Hey! Dad! Open up the back door!” Walker climbed onto some cinder blocks and was waving and shouting at the bars of a greasy back window.

Jane pulled Walker off the cinder blocks and the back door opened. Ansel leaned out of the doorway and pulled them into a hug. “Hey there.” He gave Jane a kiss and took Walker from her. He was warm in the chill night air. Tall and welcoming, as always. Her Ansel. But there was the ever-present stale beer on his breath. Ok, he worked in a band in a bar, but when was the last time Jane had been pulled into his embrace and hadn’t smelled booze?

Ansel grinned at the two of them. He lifted Walker with one arm and kept the other around Jane. “Why don’t you see what Monty’s got on the grill?” He steered them toward the kitchen. “We’re just working through some of Donny’s new songs and then I can get everybody to run through the one I played for you on the phone.” He looked down at Jane and pulled her a little closer. I really want you to hear that one again, Janey Jane. He kissed her hair. “I’ll just be a few minutes.” Ansel put Walker down and let go of Jane. He turned back to his drum set on the stage. Walker took off toward the kitchen. Jane looked at Ansel’s retreating back, then headed to the kitchen to find Walker.

“Walker, how is ya? Step right up.” Monty, owner, fry cook, bookkeeper and occasional bouncer at the Thin Dime, pulled up a stray bar stool near the tall desk where he was sorting through receipts and put Walker on it. The stool was a little high for the desk, but Walker liked being so tall.   
 “Working hard?” Walker said.

“You know the answer.”  
 Walker grinned. “I know, I know! You’re hardly working. Right Uncle Monty?”  
 Monty laughed. His black hair showed more and more gray these days. “Hardly working. Hardly working at all. You got that right.” Monty got up, opened the door to the fridge, pulled out two hamburger patties and turned on the grill. “Jane, you’re too good for any of us lifers here at the Dime. Don’t I tell you that all the time? When are you going to listen?” He tested the grill pan with water and wiped his hands on the white cook’s apron that stretched across his ample middle. There was a pause in the music coming in from the stage. Donny came into the kitchen, waved at Jane and Walker and disappeared back toward the stage with a six pack from the fridge. Monty watched Jane’s eyes follow Donny and the beer as he left the kitchen.

“Shortcut to the muse. Funny how that works.”

“Does it? Does it work?” Jane pulled up a stray, mismatched chair next to Walker. Now he really liked being as taller than his Mom, and he swung his feet, hitting the side of the desk. Jane didn’t notice as she looked at Monty.

“For a while.” Monty, still at the grill, looked back over his shoulder at Jane. “That’s what I’ve seen. For a while. For some that while is a whole lifetime. For others it’s a short fast ride from the groove to the gutter. Don’t know which in most cases. Not ‘til the end of the line. And the thing is,” he shook his head and flipped the burgers, “nobody gets to choose, even if they think they do.”

“Even you?”  
 “Never touch the stuff. But I’m not up there.” Monty waived his spatula toward the doors leading to the stage. “I’m just a mere mortal back here with the grease and the bills.” He put cheese slices on the burgers. Once the cheese melted, he slid them onto buns on plates with chips.

“No fries?”

“Walker, say thank you. And stop kicking the desk. Sorry Monty.”

Walker stopped kicking, but fidgeted on the stool. “Thank you.”

“All good. Burgers are on me.”  
 “No, no, Monty, no need.” Jane reached for her purse.  
 Monty walked over to where Jane sat and put his hand on her shoulder. “I’m just trying to soften you up so you’ll hand me a credit card for Ansel’s bar tab. My accountant’s not happy with me taking it out of his check anymore.” He reached for a ledger book that was open on the desk and pointed to the line for Ansel. The running total came to $637.23. “It’s for five weeks. He gets a discount, but even so, it does add up, and that’s a lot to carry on the books, for one person. I’ve been letting it go, but I got bills to pay. You understand.”

Jane got a mental picture of all the empty beer cans she’d picked up around the house in the past few weeks. Plus $637.23 in booze here. Maybe he was buying for others in the band and not just himself? That’s what I’m hopng for? That guys in the band are sponging off Ansel? That would be good news? Because otherwise I’m scared to death at how much he’s drinking if all of it is going down his throat? My best case scenario is that I’m working my tail off to buy drinks for Donny, Jim and what’s his name on bass out there? Jane pulled a credit card from her wallet and handed it to Monty. He went out front to slide it through the card reader on the bar.

“You ok, Mom?”  
 “Oh yeah honey. Mommy’s fine. Eat your cheeseburger.” More to keep up appearances for Walker, than because she wanted to, Jane took a bite of hers. $637.23 was a lot for a burger, but it was good.   
 Jane pulled Walker’s homework folder out of his backpack when they finished eating. Walker’s homework included a worksheet where he had to match objects to words. The folder also had a sheet of construction paper with a sticky note on it that said draw something using only the primary colors red, blue and yellow. No green, orange or purple. Jane was also supposed to run through Walker’s vocabulary flash cards. They were just finishing up, and Jane was thinking they really should go home, when Ansel appeared in the doorway, waving for them to come to the wings of the stage.

“C’mon, I got Donny to agree to do my new song. About you Jane. You’re going to love hearing it live. It’s up next. You can listen from the wings. I gotta get back on stage. Love you.” And he was gone.  
 Walker was getting sleepy so Jane picked him up and put held him on her hip, leaning his head on her shoulder as she headed to the wings of the stage. No bath tonight. Walker would be sound asleep by the time she got him home. He would likely end up sleeping in the clothes he was wearing. At least his homework was done. But she was going to have to insist from now on. No visits to hear Daddy’s music on school nights. Period. I mean Walker is pretty much asleep so why drag him here when he won’t hear or remember anything anyway? And besides, this wasn’t a good environment and it’s just too late for a five year old to be out at night.   
 But then she heard Ansel’s song. A pounding drum line, in four, made it so danceable, she could hardly keep still. But it was no piece of party fluff. It was called “Back Seat Driver” and the verses were about how love is like trying to drive a car from the back seat with passion up front holding the wheel and going way too fast. The chorus was as catchy as a commercial jingle, but still conveyed the exhilaration and near panic of true love. The speed of longing and fear of loss. The fear of going too fast and the fear of slowing down. Hearing the song over the tiny cell phone speaker was nothing like hearing it, feeling it, living it, right here, right now, at the Dime.   
 When the last note faded, Jane realized Walker was sound asleep on her shoulder, but she was wide awake, riveted. Oh my God, when he played those drums and sang, so amazing. So alive. And it was her that he loved. People just don’t know. They can’t know how good he is. The people in the bar were applauding, but they couldn’t know. Only she knew.  
 Walker stirred a little on her shoulder. She blew a kiss to Ansel. He was on stage beaming at the applause. There were shouts of approval coming from the tables in the front of the bar. Jane doubted he could even see her in the wings because of the bright lights on the stage, but in any case, he was looking out at his audience, and didn’t turn her way.   
 Monty took Walker from her shoulder as she walked through the kitchen toward the back door. Walker was so sound asleep that shifting from Jane’s shoulder to Monty’s didn’t rouse him at all. “Let me walk you to your car. There’s been some suits in the alley.”  
 “Suits?”  
 “Like IRS or FBI or something, except they don’t come in the front door. I feel better with the drunks and gangs. I figure these suits are sniffing around for snitches or drug deals. You’d think they’d at least try to look like they’re undercover, you know? Maybe trade the suits for some dumpster casual?”  
 “Drug deals? Is that a problem at the Dime?” Jane felt queasy. Now she couldn’t wait to get Walker home.   
 “No more than you’d expect with musicians, honey. You know how they are. We just talked about the muse. And you heard them tonight, so good. Some of them need a little something to deal with that kind of raw feeling. But nothing big enough for these suits I’ve been seeing. And nothing for you to worry about. Ansel’s ok, darling. Don’t you worry.”  
 “I worry Monty. I think you do too.”  
 “C’mon, let’s get Walker in his car seat.”  
 Jane glanced around the alley. Was there a man in a suit disappearing behind the boxes and crates in the alley? She buckled the belt on Walker’s car seat without waking him and closed the car door gently. As she turned to thank Monty, a hand closed over her mouth. She grabbed at the strong arms gripping her, trying to break loose, unable to scream.