

THE UNCLE HUNT
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The Uncle Hunt

The woman on the doorstep stood poised with her hand raised to knock, her blue eyes wide and her red lips parted in a surprise I shared, since I'd opened the door without knowing anyone was on the other side of it. Her auburn hair, cut short, stirred in the cool breeze of a misty Maine morning. It was the only thing about her that moved. I gave her a quick, up and down glance, taking in the neatly tailored blue suit, tan hose, and expensive leather pumps. She held a slim brown briefcase in her other hand. A saleswoman? I brought my gaze back to her face, readying myself for a fast refusal and retreat.

She looked at her raised hand as if surprised to find it still where she'd put it, and lowered it. Her gaze turned back to me.

"Elizabeth Donner?" she asked. Her accent was New England, her manners polished but not overly ingratiating. Perhaps not on the saleswoman, though

obviously not someone who knew the person she was asking for. I hesitated.

“May I ask what your business is?”

She looked at me a little more closely. Dressed in jeans, boots, and a gray tee shirt, and with my long brunette hair pulled back in a loose braid, I hardly looked impressive. I could see her drawing conclusions of her own.

“My great-aunt, Moira Dearborn, asked me to call.” Her manner had changed subtly. She apparently took me for the hired help. My mouth twitched in a mixture of amusement and irritation.

“About what?”

“My great-aunt was a friend of Miss Donner’s parents,” she said with a hint of impatience. “And the message is private.”

I thought about telling her that Aunt Liz wasn’t at home, or of leaving her outside in the mist while I trotted upstairs to see if my aunt knew a Moira Dearborn. In the end, though, I let her in, standing to one side while she stepped over the threshold onto the marble floor of the great hall.

“Your name?”

“Crystal Wynan. Miss Donner will know my last name.” Now that she was through the door, her voice held cool condescension.

“Wait here,” I said. “I’ll see if Aunt Liz can spare a moment to speak with you.”

She gave me a quick, startled glance out of the blue eyes. I left her reassessing the situation while I crossed the great hall and mounted the stairs at the

back of the room.

Aunt Liz, her slim body clad in jeans and a comfortably oversized Aran sweater, sat in a leather armchair in the library, wrapped in a blanket. A fire crackled on the hearth, warming the half-circle of chairs where she sat working on her new novel. In her lap was an open notebook computer. She acknowledged my entry with a brief upward flicker of her green eyes. Turning back to the computer, she finished entering the correction she was making in a staccato flurry of keystrokes and looked up again, one black eyebrow raised questioningly. Her nose was red, and her eyes were slightly puffy.

“There’s a Crystal Wynan downstairs,” I told her. “She says her great-aunt Moira Dearborn sent her to talk to you. Are you available?”

She leaned back in her chair, studying me with a thoughtful frown. “Did she say what about?” Her normally pleasant contralto was marred by the effects of sinus drainage and heavy coughing.

“She said it was private. I think she thought I was the hired help and was being too nosy.”

She let out a long breath, closing her eyes. “The timing’s inconvenient,” she said. “I wish she’d called first. All right, her family and ours have been friends for nearly a century. Tell her to come on up.” She leaned forward to set the computer on the oval rosewood coffee table in the center of the arc of chairs.

I turned and went back to look into the great hall, where Ms. Wynan still waited by the door. She

looked up at me questioningly.

“Come on up,” I said.

Aunt Liz let out a burst of air that sounded suspiciously like a laugh and degenerated into a coughing fit.

My aunt’s house, built by my grandparents, was a smaller scale replica of the ancestral home in Ireland. It was five stories tall, built stair-step fashion against the face of the cliff behind it. The great hall was two stories in height, with a grand staircase at the back that split to sweep upward into long galleries to the right and left. The library door was off the right-hand gallery. Ms. Wynan crossed the marble floor, her pumps making hard clicks against the polished stone. I waited while she clicked her way up the staircase, her hand resting on the smooth curve of the oak banister. She flicked me another glance as she reached the gallery. I read reproach in her gaze. She paused as she drew even with me.

“You might have told me,” she murmured.

“People should never make assumptions.”

She stepped past me without answering that, entering the library. I leaned my shoulder against the doorjamb, hanging around in case Aunt Liz needed me for anything.

“Miss Donner? Thank you for seeing me,” Ms. Wynan said, approaching my aunt. She made as if to shake hands with her, but Aunt Liz shook her head.

“Summer cold,” she explained. “I don’t want to give it to you.”

The younger woman nodded, dropping her hand. “I’m Crystal Wynan. My great-aunt says that we met once many years ago, but I was very young at the time. I don’t know if you will remember me.”

Aunt Liz narrowed her eyes thoughtfully, studying her for a few seconds. “You must be Gregory’s daughter, right?”

Ms. Wynan smiled, pleased. “Yes.”

My aunt poked a hand out of the blanket to point at a nearby chair. “Please, sit down.” She waited while Ms. Wynan folded herself neatly onto the chair next to Aunt Liz’s, crossing one leg discreetly over the other. “Now, what can I do for you?”

“Great-aunt Moira sent me to ask a favor of you,” she began, then hesitated, frowning gently. “No, maybe I shouldn’t say that. She doesn’t know I’ve come here. I don’t suppose you remember my Great-uncle William?”

Aunt Liz echoed the frown, narrowing her eyes slightly. Her tone was a little cooler. “I know of him, but I never met him. He died before I was born.”

“Well,” she said, “that’s just it. Apparently he’s not dead.”

Aunt Liz raised her head, cocking it slightly to one side. “I’d understood he’d died in the second World War.”

“That’s what we’d all believed, but apparently it isn’t so. It wouldn’t necessarily be a big deal, but his father, my great-grandfather, who’s quite

ancient, has had an accident and isn't expected to live much longer. Great-uncle William is the main beneficiary of his will. The lawyers are all in an uproar about it. They've known for ages that Great-grandfather's estate would go to his other son, my grandfather Baxter, and now, well..." She shrugged eloquently. "Great-grandfather never changed his will, naming Great-uncle William as his primary heir. We've always wondered why."

"What makes your family so certain William is alive?" my aunt asked.

"After Great-grandfather's accident, Great-aunt Moira began sorting through his papers, making certain everything was in order, and she found stacks of letters rubber-banded together in his safe. They were from William, and the first one was dated two months after he was supposed to have died overseas. The last one was quite recent, only about three weeks ago. Great-aunt Moira got quite a shock."

"I imagine she did." Aunt Liz coughed, and huddled deeper in the blanket. "It's strange that he would have kept the fact that he was alive from the rest of his family like that."

"Yes, that's part of the problem. My great-aunt can't be absolutely certain that the handwriting is actually her brother's. She wants to make sure that this isn't just a soldier friend of William's, someone who's passing himself off as my great-uncle in order to inherit Great-grandfather's fortune."

"I'm not certain what you want of me. Aren't

the lawyers taking care of all of that?”

“It would mean hiring a private detective, and, well, you know what Great-aunt Moira’s like. If there was a scandal, she would never be certain the detective would keep his knowledge to himself. And, you see, none of the letters have return addresses on them. But they’re all postmarked Bar Harbor, Maine, and nearly every one of them has a small drawing on the letter paper, scenes that she recognizes as being places here on Mount Desert Island.”

There was silence for a few seconds.

“You want me to look for him,” Aunt Liz said.

“If you would. As a very great favor.”

“Why me?”

She smiled, dropping her gaze. “I thought of you because I’ve always thought you were very clever. It can’t be easy to write the mystery stories you write. Plus there’s the fact that you’re an old family friend, and you’re not likely to gossip about what you find out. And I thought of you because you live here on the island.” Her gaze came back up. “Islanders tend to be a bit closed-mouthed with people who aren’t Islanders. I thought an investigator from outside wouldn’t have as much chance of finding this person as someone the locals recognized as one of their own.”

My aunt drew her black eyebrows down in a mild frown.

“Really, it would be such a relief to Great-aunt Moira if we could settle this quickly and quietly,”

Ms. Wynan prodded.

Aunt Liz sat back in her chair. After years of knowing her, I recognized the nearly invisible signs of irritation in her manner, but I was fairly sure our guest wouldn't. "I honestly can't give it my attention right now. I'm working against a deadline with my publishers, and I am way behind."

The other woman threw the door a quick glance, checking to see if I was still there.

"Perhaps your niece could do the legwork, then? She can get out and ask the questions, and report back to you about what she's found?"

I narrowed my eyes at her assumption that she could appropriate me for something my aunt obviously wasn't too keen on to begin with.

Aunt Liz studied me for a long moment. She sighed, turning her attention back to Ms. Wynan.

"I'll need to see the letters, of course. And I'll need a good picture of William, even if it is wildly out of date."

"Of course." Tension eased out of the younger woman's posture. "I've brought everything I thought you would need." She reached down to lift the briefcase onto her lap. I pushed away from the doorjamb and crossed the carpeted floor to see what she'd brought. She pulled four thick rubber-banded stacks of letters from the briefcase, holding them out to my aunt. "They're dated, so it won't be difficult to keep them in order."

She reached back inside and pulled out a thin leather-bound photo album. "These are the most

recent photos of William. You can remove them from the album if you need to, but please make sure they get put back. Great-aunt Moira would kill me if any of them got lost. I've also tucked some of his paperwork from the military in the very back, in case it might come in handy."

"Thank you," Aunt Liz said. "I'm sure this will be enough to get us started. Where can we reach you if we find anything out?"

"I'm staying in Bar Harbor." She turned back to find a business card and a pen inside her briefcase, missing the flicker of surprise on my aunt's face. She scribbled down a name and phone number on the back of one of her cards. "This is hotel I'm at, and the phone number."

"Crystal, I can't guarantee we'll be able to find him quickly, or that we'll even be able to find him at all," Aunt Liz cautioned.

"I know." She smiled. "I thought I'd hang around the island and see what I could do to help out with the investigation. I just really needed someone who knew how to look for clues to be the brains behind it."

Aunt Liz looked back at her noncommittally.

"Well," Ms. Wynan said, snapping the briefcase shut. "Why don't I go back to my hotel room and change into something a little more conducive to sleuthing?" She paused, throwing me another look. "That is, if you're available to begin today?"

I looked at Aunt Liz. "I thought I was here to

proofread your book and help with the revisions.”

A slight flicker of irritation quirked the corners of her mouth downward. “I know, but there’s not a lot you can do during the daytime, when I’m actually writing. Most of your work will be in the evenings. I don’t think it would hurt if you worked on the investigation during daylight hours.”

“All right.”

“Great!” Ms. Wynan said enthusiastically. She rose from her chair, started to extend her hand to Aunt Liz, then remembered the cold at the last second and drew it back. “I’ll run back to my hotel and change, and be back soon. Would you mind terribly if I brought something for us all for lunch? We could discuss strategy while we’re eating.”

“That would be fine.” Aunt Liz pulled the blanket tighter again. Her gaze strayed to the computer on the coffee table. I knew she wanted to get back to work.

“I’ll see you out,” I said.

Our guest followed me out onto the gallery.

“Is there anything in particular I should bring for lunch?” she asked.

I blew my breath out through my lips. “I’m not really sure what to tell you. Aunt Liz doesn’t need anything dairy right now—it’ll make her drainage worse. And I’m vegetarian.”

“I see. I’ll have to bring a variety of things.”

Her footsteps sped up. She caught up with me as we reached the stairs. We started down them together.

“Look, I know I got us off on the wrong foot.”

She looked at me sidelong. “I thought a house this size surely had staff, and—well, I apologize. You were right. I really shouldn’t have made assumptions.”

I glanced at her. She sounded sincere, and there was nothing in her face to suggest otherwise. I nodded.

“Can we start over?” she asked.

“I don’t see why not, Ms. Wynan.”

“Please, I insist you call me Crystal. ‘Ms. Wynan’ sounds too schoolmarmish.”

My mouth quirked. “Crystal it is, then.”

“I’ll need to know what to call you, since we’re going to be working together,” she prompted.

“Patty. Patty O’Donnell.”

“Do you live here with your aunt?” she asked as we reached the floor.

“No. I’m just here to help while she finishes writing her book. Normally her sister Kate does the proofreading, but she and Uncle Charles are spending two weeks on Tahiti, so I volunteered to help instead.”

“It must be exciting, getting to read one of your aunt’s novels before it’s published.”

“It’s certainly given me a whole different perspective on the writing business.”

She smiled, pausing while I opened the door for her.

“Where were you going when you opened the door a moment ago? When I was about to knock?”

“I was going to care for Aunt Liz’s horses.” I

smiled. “I don’t know which of us was more surprised, meeting each other unexpectedly like that.”

“Definitely me.” She thrust a hand out to shake mine. “You know, now that I’ve seen you both, you do look an awful lot like your aunt.”

I let go of her hand. She turned away, walking down the stairs.

“Back soon,” she called over her shoulder.

Crystal returned a little after noon, bearing a large basket from DeMarco’s, a specialty deli in Bar Harbor. I noted with approval that she’d changed into jeans, a white blouse, and comfortable brown walking shoes. While I brought plates, glasses, and utensils in from the kitchen, she pulled a tray of sliced meats, one of fresh vegetables, a loaf of bread, and a variety of condiments and dips from the basket, as well as several bottles of sparkling apple juice. We gathered around the end of the dining room table closest to the fireplace, serving ourselves from the trays and dividing up the stacks of letters so we could look at them while we ate.

“Have you read any of these yet?” Aunt Liz asked as she opened the top letter on her stack and spread it out on the table.

“All of them, actually,” Crystal said. “Great-uncle William wrote one a month for almost sixty years. It took days to wade through them all.”

“Do you remember if he mentioned names of

places or people, anything that might help us pinpoint somewhere he's been?"

"There were some first names—he got married after leaving the army, to a woman named Ivy. They had two children: Lynn, a boy, and Debra, a girl. The children grew up and started their own families. Lynn and his wife Tessa had a son named Wade, and Debra had a son named Thomas. There's no mention of a husband for her."

I opened one of the letters. The drawing on it was executed in black ink, and looked like a view of Bar Harbor from the top of Cadillac Mountain.

"Now, I know this isn't here anymore," Aunt Liz said, tapping a drawing of a large, fancy house on her letter. Crystal leaned close to look.

"No, that's gone. You recognize my family's cottage?"

I widened my eyes slightly, studying Crystal from a new perspective. Back during Bar Harbor's heyday as one of *the* places to be during the summer season, people such as Joseph Pulitzer, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., George Vanderbilt, and numerous other wealthy or well-to-do folks had owned or rented what were fancifully called 'cottages', summer residences that anywhere else would have been called mansions. In 1947, a fire that began in Bar Harbor's dump had grown into a conflagration that destroyed more than seventeen hundred acres of woodland and burned many of the multi-million dollar cottages to the ground. Only a fickle shift in the wind had kept this house where my father and

his siblings grew up out of the path of the blaze.

“Does your family still own the land?” my aunt asked. “Perhaps he’s built a new house and is living there.”

Crystal shook her head. “Great-grandfather sold it to a man named James Colter years and years ago. William had talked about wanting to buy the land from him, but he sold it to this Colter instead. That strikes me as a little cold, but William never seemed bitter about it.”

“Your great-grandfather must have been terribly disappointed and hurt that William chose not to come home,” Aunt Liz remarked.

I opened another letter, noting by the date that I’d gotten the stack with the most recent ones. This one’s drawing was of a field of wildflowers, rendered in colored pencil.

“Did he say in any of the letters what he did for work?” I asked.

Crystal wrinkled her brow. “Come to think of it, not exactly. He owns a company of some sort, maybe a carpentry business. I remember him saying that his son had a real feel for working with wood.”

“That gives us a bit more to work with.” Aunt Liz frowned, surveying the stacks of letters. “Do you mind if we get the letters out of order? If we can sort the pictures by subject matter, it might help us figure out where they were done.”

“I don’t think it will hurt, as long as we can get them back in the right order when we’re finished with them.”

By the time we'd eaten our fill, we had the letters sorted into general categories—drawings of seashores, of harbors, of houses and buildings, and of inland landscapes, many of which were unidentifiable as to location because they concentrated on small areas.

“Well, ladies,” Aunt Liz said, pushing back her chair and standing up, “if I don't get back to work, I'll end up with my publisher camping on my doorstep. Crystal, thank you for lunch. I'd forgotten how much I enjoy DeMarco's meats.”

Crystal smiled. “You're quite welcome. It was the least I could do, under the circumstances.”

My aunt smiled in return and patted her on the shoulder as she moved past. “Let me know what you turn up.”

Crystal watched her go, then turned back to give me an amused look.

“So where do we start?”

I pursed my lips, studying the stacked letters. “Let's find a good picture of William in that album. We can make copies of it in town, and take those to show people while we look for some of these places.” I reached out and picked up the stack of harbor drawings. “If we concentrate on the more recent ones, we may find someone who remembers seeing him draw them.”

By mid-afternoon, armed with harbor drawings and copies of the photograph, we were on our way.

Crystal insisted on driving. As I slid in on the tan leather seat of her silver Mercedes, I guessed I couldn't blame her for not wanting to be seen riding around in Aunt Liz's beat up old Jeep.

She slid in behind the wheel. "Mind if we ride with the windows down?" she asked, pulling her door shut. "I love the smell of the ocean."

"Fine with me."

She started the engine and guided the expensive car through roads crowded with tourist traffic. My gaze drifted over ice cream and snack shops, trinket shops, and a bar with a tee shirt shop underneath. The window of that one had a shirt with a silhouette of a moose head and the legend 'Hard Rack Café' printed on it. My cousin Eddie had several of those.

Crystal pulled a map of the island off the dashboard and passed it to me. "Where to?"

"Take Highway Three south. We'll check Seal Harbor first, then head into Northeast Harbor."

She stepped on the accelerator as we left town.

Highway 3 cut across Acadia National Park, for the most part avoiding the beautiful and rugged southeast coast of the island. We passed through a wooded valley between Champlain and Dorr Mountains, with the granite dome of Cadillac Mountain rising beyond Dorr.

"This is beautiful countryside." Crystal took in a deep breath, taking in the scent of pine, with undertones of damp earth. The wind riffled her short auburn hair. "Look at the way the sunlight brings out all the different shades of green in the trees. And

doesn't the top of that mountain look pink!"

I chuckled. "Have you ever been to the top of Cadillac Mountain?"

"No. I haven't actually been here before. My family stopped coming here after the fire burned down the cottage."

"You'll have to go up there while you're here. The view's spectacular. It's the first place on the Atlantic coast of the United States to see the sunrise every morning."

"Is it?" She threw it another glance. "Why does it look pink?"

"That's just the color of the granite."

"I see." She turned back to the road.

"So where do you live?" I asked idly.

"Massachusetts. I work for Great-aunt Moira as her personal assistant. It's thankless work, but I get room and board and what she pays me, so I can't complain too much."

"If she doesn't know you're here, how are you going to explain your absence?"

She shot me a glance. "Oh, that's right. I did say she didn't know I was here, didn't I? She's keeping vigil in Boston at Great-grandfather's bedside. She's not going to miss me." Another quick glance. "And you? Where do you live?"

"Ireland."

"You don't sound Irish."

I smiled. "My husband is, though. I'm originally from Arizona."

"Oh, really?"

We settled into light chitchat, which lasted us until we reached the broad crescent beach of Seal Harbor. I directed her into a parking lot on the right side of the highway. We sat in the car and flipped through the drawings, looking for one that could have been drawn here.

“This one,” she said, pulling it from the stack. “See? The perspective is a little different, but that’s that island there, right in the middle.”

I looked out over the gray water and spotted the tiny island in the mouth of the harbor. Beyond it were the small islands known collectively as the Cranberry Isles. I considered the date on the letter for a long moment.

“I doubt anyone who’s out on the beach today would remember seeing him draw this. But it does prove that he’s been here. Why don’t we check around the docks, show a few people the photograph? Maybe someone will recognize him.”

Seal Harbor was a washout. We got no response to the name William Wynan, nor to the photo of him. Considering the fact that the photo was sixty years out of date, I wasn’t too surprised. We repeated our inquiries in Northwest Harbor. I left everyone we talked to one of Aunt Liz’s business cards, which had her answering service number, just in case one of them remembered something later. If nothing else, they might tell William someone was looking for him and pass

along Aunt Liz's card.

And if William contacted us as a result, that would certainly speed things up.

Aunt Liz was coming out of the stables as we drove up to the house around six o'clock that evening.

"I fed the horses, so you won't have to worry about that tonight," she told me, joining us as we climbed out of the Mercedes. Her voice was scratchy and she looked like she felt miserable.

"I would have done that! You should have waited. I would have done that as soon as we got here."

She shrugged. "I wasn't getting anywhere with my writing, so I thought I'd get out for a moment and do something. How did your investigation go this afternoon?"

"Slowly. No one recognizes his name or picture so far. I gave them your business card in case they change their minds."

She nodded. "I had a friend of mine run some discreet checks. No one named William Wynan owns property, pays taxes, or votes on the island. He also doesn't have a driver's license issued by the state of Maine. I suppose it's possible he lives in a cabin in the woods on someone else's property, or that he's living on a boat and only comes into port for supplies. It's also possible that it's not even him at all, as you suggested earlier, Crystal. It's very hard to exist in this world without leaving a paper trail of some sort."

Crystal gasped, turning pale. “You didn’t get a private detective involved in this, did you? I told you Great-aunt Moira wouldn’t want that!”

Aunt Liz studied her for a few seconds.

“This is a friend of mine. He doesn’t know who William Wynan is, just that we’d like information about him. He won’t discuss what he finds out. And there are things he can find out that we can’t, records you have to be a licensed private investigator to get.”

“You should have asked me first.” Color swept back into her face, an ugly, blotchy red. “Maybe I made a mistake coming here.”

Uneasiness rippled through me. I met my aunt’s gaze. She breathed out slowly.

“You have some idea how to proceed with this now, if you choose to do so alone,” she said, looking back at Crystal. “We certainly aren’t going to stop you.”

“Maybe I’d better,” the younger woman agreed sharply.

Aunt Liz sighed again. “Patty, gather up the letters for her, and the photo album. She’ll be needing them.”

I nodded and turned to go inside, bristling. I hadn’t wanted to take on this investigation to begin with, but I resented being summarily dismissed like this. There was only silence behind me. Crystal was too angry to speak, and Aunt Liz was too ill to bother.

I found a large manila envelope in Aunt Liz’s

study and took it downstairs to the dining room to stuff the letters inside. The photo album was too large to fit in the envelope, so I stacked it on top and carried them to the door. When I stepped out onto the front stairs again, the two women were standing with their arms folded across their chests, deliberately not looking at each other. I wondered what I'd missed. Crystal unfolded her arms and snatched the envelope and photo album from my hands. Without a word, she turned on her heel, jerked open the driver's door on the Mercedes, and climbed inside, dropping the album and letters on the passenger seat. The sleek car's engine started with a roar. She flung it into first gear and stepped hard on the accelerator, the tires throwing gravel as she sped away.

"Well," my aunt said, ignoring the display of temper, "I suppose I should call Moira and explain what happened. I'm sure she'll understand why I did what I did."

"Crystal said that Moira's keeping vigil at her father's bedside. She may be difficult to contact."

The corners of her mouth twitched downward.

"Moira has household staff. One of them will know where to reach her."

I was sitting at Aunt Liz's desk, my hands full of corrected pages from her day's efforts on her manuscript, when the phone call came. I reached absently for the receiver and put it to my ear, my

mind half on the story's heroine as the killer hunted for her in the old warehouse.

"Hello?"

"Patty? Thank God! I'm in trouble, and I don't know who else to call."

I wrenched my mind away from the story, fumbling for a voice identification.

"Who is this? Crystal?"

"Yes! Who else would it be? I'm scared, Patty. Someone's following me!"

I set the papers on the desk, sitting up straighter. "What do you mean, someone's following you?"

Aunt Liz appeared in the doorway, listening to my half of the conversation with a concerned frown. She motioned toward the phone.

"There's a man following me around town. I can't seem to lose him!" Crystal blurted. Her voice was high with stress and fear.

"Listen, Crystal, I'm going to put this on the speakerphone." I switched it over, and her voice sprang from the speaker halfway through what she was saying.

"—he's been following me ever since I came out of the restaurant. I'm afraid to lead him back to my hotel."

"Have you called the police?" Aunt Liz asked.

"Yes! They say they can't do anything. Please, could someone come pick me up and bring me over there? I am so afraid!"

I glanced at Aunt Liz. She shook her head.

“Listen, Crystal, go back to your hotel and tell the management that someone is following you. See if they’ll switch you to another room, if you’re afraid he may already know which one you’re in. Lock your door, and don’t open it for anyone,” she said, keeping her voice calm.

“What if he comes to my room during the night?” Crystal’s voice carried an edge of panic. “What if he breaks in—”

“In a hotel, you’ll be surrounded by other people. If someone’s following you, he’ll run a huge risk of being seen by someone. Out here, there’s only Patty and me. You honestly will be safer there than here.”

She drew in a shuddery breath. “Please. I’m too afraid to stay here.”

“Crystal, listen to me. My house is isolated, and it has a lot of big windows a prowler could get in through. You would absolutely not be safe out here if someone wanted to break in. Stay in town, where there are a lot of other people. Describe the man to the manager of your hotel. He’ll have his staff look out for him. They have a much, much better chance of keeping you safe than we do.”

“Oh God.” Crystal’s voice was shaky. “All right, all right. I’ll try.”

“Call us in the morning to let us know you’re all right.”

“All right, all right. I’m sorry—”

She fumbled to hang up the phone. The line went dead. I hung up on our end. We looked at each

other silently for a long moment.

“Well,” Aunt Liz said at last, “either she’s panicking over some poor innocent man who just lacks the courage to come right up and ask her to dinner, or you two stirred something up this afternoon.”

Crystal called back just after half past nine the next morning and sheepishly reported an uneventful night.

“I am so embarrassed about last night,” she told us as we sat listening to her phone call in Aunt Liz’s office. “It was so unnerving being followed like that. I just panicked.”

“What was it that made you think someone was following you?” my aunt asked.

“I didn’t just ‘think’ he was following me,” she answered sharply. “He was following me, all right. He was a big man, over six feet, very muscular. Very intense brown eyes. He had grayish hair and a thick beard and mustache. I noticed he was staring at me at the restaurant, but I didn’t think anything of it until he kept popping up in the shops I stopped to look in. He almost cornered me in the last shop, and that’s when I panicked. I hid in the bathroom and called the police on my cell phone. They wouldn’t do anything, so I called you.”

“That must have been very frightening for you,” Aunt Liz replied sympathetically. “How about this morning? Have you been outside yet today?”

“I got out to get breakfast. I didn’t see him anywhere.”

“That doesn’t necessarily mean he’s not still around somewhere. I’d feel a lot less concerned about you if you gave up searching for William and left it to your great-grandfather’s lawyers to deal with. They’ll know of people who can get the information they need without getting into trouble over it.”

“No,” Crystal said slowly, “I can’t. This is something I have to do. I have this dream of presenting Great-uncle William to the rest of the family as a *fait accompli*, to prove that I’m good for more than just filing papers and making phone calls. I haven’t told anyone in the family that I’m doing this. I want it to be a surprise.”

Aunt Liz narrowed her eyes slightly. It was a little late to keep it secret, since she’d called Moira Dearborn’s house and left a message for her last night, but she didn’t mention that to Crystal.

“Is it worth risking your safety to do this?”

“I think so, yes. Listen, I’m very sorry that I blew up at you yesterday. I just really wanted to solve this without resorting to a private detective, and I overreacted. Please forgive me. Any help you can give me would be greatly appreciated. Has your private detective friend found out anything that would be useful to us?”

“He hasn’t called back again. I’ll let you know if he comes up with anything, though.”

“Listen,” she began tentatively, “do you think

Patty would be willing to make some careful inquiries in the next few harbors along the road? I'll spend the morning here asking around the docks in Bar Harbor, and if that man is still around, he'll be too busy watching me to know about her."

Aunt Liz looked at me. I thought about it and shrugged.

"I'll talk to her about it. But Crystal, we don't have any pictures of William to show around. She'll need something to work with."

Crystal let out a long breath. "Okay, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll leave some copies of the picture in an envelope at the front desk. Patty can pick them up there and go on, without the man who was following me knowing that we've connected in any way."

"All right," my aunt said. "I'm going to expect you to call me every night you're on the island, to let me know you're in your hotel room and safe."

She laughed. "Done. It's nice to know someone out there will know if I don't come home."

They said their goodbyes and hung up. Aunt Liz turned and sat on the edge of the desk, folding her arms across her chest. She studied me for a long moment.

"I know you've been taught self-defense, but I have to be honest and say that I'm not comfortable with this. I don't like the sound of someone sneaking around watching Crystal, and I don't like the idea you might end up with someone following you home, either."

“I know the island better than she does. I could lose a tail fairly easily,” I said. “And I doubt anyone would try attacking me in broad daylight on a public street.”

She nodded after a long moment. “All right. But take my cell phone. I want you to be able to call for help if you need it.”

I picked up the envelope with the pictures at Crystal’s hotel and cut across the island on Highway 233 on my way to Somesville, passing Eagle Lake and a portion of John D. Rockefeller’s extensive carriage roads en route. There was still a hint of mist on the landscape—some days in the summer it never seemed to burn off entirely. I could remember one summer spending nearly a week without being able to see further than a hundred yards ahead. I had the windows down as a matter of course. The wind stirred my bangs and sent vaguely chilly, damp air up my shirt sleeve.

I had to admit to being puzzled. Why would our investigation have stirred someone to the point of following Crystal around in a threatening manner? If William was trying not to be found, all he had to do was lie low. We’d found no one yet who admitted to knowing his name or face. Even if someone had recognized him and told him what we were doing, simply calling the answering service and leaving a message telling us that he didn’t want to be found and asking us to stop looking for him

would have accomplished much the same result.

As to the other possibility, that the writer of the letters wasn't actually William, one would think that he'd eventually have to come forward if he wanted to claim William's inheritance. What were the chances that the family would mistake a stranger for their oldest brother, even after sixty years of separation? Would this man know enough about William's childhood to fake it, a la *Brat Farrar*? Would he stand even the slightest chance of passing a genetic test if the family insisted on it? Maybe in the beginning an imposter might have thought he'd get away with it, but as the years passed and science made advancements, he must have realized he would be caught. Why continue writing the letters when he knew he would gain nothing by it? Nothing about it felt right, and I had to conclude that the writer was actually William.

Which brought me right back to the question of why someone would be threatening Crystal.

I reached up and adjusted the rearview mirror, taking a look at the road behind me. The long gray ribbon of asphalt was empty. No tails. Not that I was really expecting one.

The town of Somesville, named for the island's first settlers, the Somes family, was small and picturesque, and guarded its old-fashioned beauty jealously. It took very little time to check public places for anyone who might have knowledge of William Wynan. While I was absolutely certain some of the drawings on the letters had been done

here, no one could recall one specific person among the many who stopped to enjoy the area's charms.

I moved on, heading south along the 102 to Southwest Harbor.

Southwest Harbor, once the only place on the island where steamships would call to port, was a commercial fishing harbor—ranked one of the top ten in Maine—and was home to some world-renowned yacht builders. I parked the Jeep and walked to the marina, watching the boats bobbing in the harbor and wondering which had been made here. Definitely this was the scene on at least one of the letters.

After some consideration, I chose the nearest dock and walked out to where a man was stowing gear on a sleek, single-masted sailboat.

“Excuse me,” I called out. “I wonder if you could help me. I’m looking for an artist who does a lot of harbor drawings. I have a picture of him—it’s not recent, but maybe he’ll look familiar anyway.” I held the photo out to him. “His name’s William Wynan.”

“Don’t know any artist,” the man answered gruffly, without looking up.

“Perhaps not, but you might still recognize him if you saw him.” I wagged the picture hopefully.

He shot me an annoyed look but came to the side of the boat, snatching the photo from my fingers. He gave it a quick glance, started to shake his head, and paused, giving it a longer look.

“He’s a boat builder, not an artist. And

Wynan's not his name. Check over at JaCo Yachts.” He handed the picture back. I took it slowly, studying him with a slight frown.

“You're certain?”

“I bought my boat from him, didn't I?” He turned back to stowing his gear.

“Where would I find JaCo Yachts?”

He waved a hand toward the south shore of the harbor. “That way. It's not far.”

“Thanks.”

“Bob?” a female voice called out from the boat's tiny cabin. “Who was that?”

I turned and started back up the dock.

A boat builder. I threw the sailboat another look. Crystal had said William was a carpenter. Could it be that he'd worked for JaCo Yachts, perhaps under an assumed name?

I tucked the photo away in my purse and headed back for the Jeep.

Traffic wasn't light—while Southwest Harbor wasn't the big tourist destination that Bar Harbor was, it still got its share of tourists. I managed to slide the Jeep into a narrow opening in the flow without causing a wreck and headed south to where the highway split, taking the 102A for the short distance it took to reach the side roads leading to Shore Drive. I was making the assumption that since Hinckley Yacht Company was on this particular road, JaCo Yachts might be, too. It was, though not right next door to Hinckley. I pulled into the parking lot, found an empty slot, and parked.

Looking up at the building's façade, I realized I'd seen it before, in a drawing on one of the letters. I climbed out and looked behind me. There, spread out before me, was the harbor view that had been on the last letter William had sent.

A chill swept across my skin. Shutting the door, I walked to the entrance of the JaCo building and went inside.

A blonde young woman behind an elegant wood reception desk looked up as I entered.

"May I help you?"

"I hope so." I crossed the dark gray carpet to the desk. "I'm looking for some information."

"Our sales personnel are quite knowledgeable about our products," she said. "If you'd like to visit our showroom—"

"Not that type of information," I interrupted, smiling. "I'm looking for someone, and I've been told that I might find him here." I opened my purse and pulled out the photo again. "It's an old picture, but someone may still recognize him."

She extended a manicured hand and accepted the photo, gave it a quick look, and looked back at me. "If you'll wait here for a moment, I'll see if there's someone available who can help you. I haven't been here long enough to know everyone yet."

"Thank you."

She got up and walked through a doorway behind her desk. I turned to survey the reception room.

The walls were covered with framed photographs of boats. Sloops, schooners, lobster boats and cat boats, boats with motors and boats powered by the muscles behind the oars, fiberglass and wood. They made a little of everything. One large frame displayed six pages from a *WoodenBoat* magazine article. I paused to look at the lead page. “James Colter—The Driving Force Behind JaCo Yachts.” James Colter—JaCo. I dropped my gaze to the photo under the title and found an older version of William Wynan grinning at me.

The jolt of surprise went clear to the bottom of my feet. James Colter was the man who had bought the Wynan property on Mount Desert Island. Was this truly the same man I was looking for? I skimmed through the article, picking up names. Colter’s son Lynn and his daughter Debra were both mentioned as following in their father’s footsteps in the craft of wooden boat building and design. There were also two grandsons, Wade and Thomas, not yet out of school, who were eager to join the business. I gave the date on the article a quick glance and decided the grandsons were long out of school.

All of those were the names Crystal had given for William’s children and grandchildren.

“Ma’am,” the receptionist said from behind me. I turned quickly, startled. I hadn’t heard her return. “Mrs. Northrup will see you now.”

She led the way through the door, taking me deeper into the building. She stopped by the open

door to an office, waited while I stepped past her, and pulled it closed. Inside, a red-haired woman, probably in her fifties, sat behind another elegant wooden desk, the photo in her hand and an angry, set look on her face. She regarded me through narrowed blue eyes.

“Let me tell you one thing straight off,” she said. “If that whore Bettina Eastlake sent you to claim that you’re that mythical love child she says she had with my father, you can go right back and tell her it won’t work. There are blood tests that will prove you’re not my father’s child.”

I blinked at her. “Excuse me?”

She began again, her tone biting. “You can tell Bettina Eastlake—”

“I’m sorry, but I have no idea who Bettina Eastlake is. My parents were Robert and Sarah Donner.”

She sat back, still eyeing me narrowly. “Where did you get this picture?”

“His family gave it to me. They’re looking for him.”

“Why would we be looking for him?” she asked. “None of us gave you this.” She jerked open her desk drawer and started to slide the photo inside.

“He has a father, a brother, a sister, and at least one nephew and great-niece that I know about. They’re the ones who are looking for him.”

She paused, dropped the photo into the drawer, and slid it shut again. “My father has no living

family.”

“Is your father an artist?” I asked.

“Who are you?” she returned.

“My name is Patty O’Donnell. If you’ll give me a moment, I’ll try to explain why I’m here. I honestly didn’t come here to stir up trouble.”

She studied me for a long moment before nodding.

“The details I have are a little sketchy, so you’ll have to bear with me,” I said. “My aunt and I were contacted yesterday by a woman named Crystal Wynan, who came here to look for her great-uncle, William Wynan. She said that up until recently her family had believed that William was killed overseas during World War II. William’s father had an accident not too long ago, and in going through his paperwork to be sure everything was in order, it was discovered that William wasn’t dead at all, but had been secretly writing to his father for the past sixty years, one letter a month. All the letters had drawings in them, of scenes around the island, and all of them were mailed from Bar Harbor, with no return address. The last letter he sent had a drawing of the view from right outside this building.”

Her face changed. Something in what I was saying was ringing a bell.

I continued. “Now, I don’t know why he chose to hide from his family for sixty years like this, but if your father is William Wynan, I think he ought to be told that his father is dying. If he wrote him once a month for sixty years, he’d want to know that.”

“Do you have these letters?” she asked.

“No, but they are on the island. Crystal has them. I could have them here within an hour, if you’d like to see them.”

“No, no. That’s okay.” She blinked rapidly, her eyes suddenly glinting with tears. “I’m sorry. You must think I’m awful, yelling at you like that when you came in. It’s just that for so long I’ve been afraid he was writing those letters to the horrible Bettina.” She let out a nervous giggle. “They did date briefly, not long after Mother died. She’s been after him ever since to marry her, and can’t understand that he’s not just playing hard to get.”

“Listen, the only way to know for certain if your father is William Wynan is to ask him.” I pulled a note pad and a pen from my purse and scribbled down a message, along with my aunt’s name and number. “I’d like you to give him this message, if you would. I’d like him to get in touch with my aunt. If he is really William, and he wants to keep his whereabouts secret from his family, he can tell her that, and we’ll make sure his family doesn’t find out. I know Crystal is anxious to find him, but if he doesn’t want to be found, he certainly has that right.”

I tore the page off the pad and held it out to her. She accepted it, eyeing me curiously.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked.

“My aunt says that the Wynans have been friends of our family for nearly a century. She felt it was right to help them when they asked.”

She nodded, her gaze dropping to the note.
“Your aunt is Elizabeth Donner. My father’s already acquainted with her. She came here to research boat building for a book she was writing.”

My mouth fell open. “You know Aunt Liz?”

She smiled. “I’m sure he’ll call her, one way or the other. By the way, I’m Debra. Your aunt will know who I am.” She reached across the desk to shake my hand. “I’ll track Dad down and make sure he gets this. And then I think we’re all going to have a long family talk.”

I was feeling pretty buoyant as I left JaCo. Sliding in behind the Jeep’s steering wheel, I leaned down to fish the cell phone out from under the seat and dial Aunt Liz’s number. She picked up on the third ring.

“Hello?” Her voice sounded strained, as if she’d just had a coughing fit.

“Hi, it’s Patty,” I said. “I think I’ve found him.”

“Really? Where?”

“Southwest Harbor. He’s someone you know, actually. James Colter, of JaCo Yachts.”

There was silence for a few seconds.

“Patty, are you sure?”

“Reasonably. He wasn’t there, but I spoke with his daughter. She freaked out when she saw that photograph of him, and accused me of being sent by someone named Bettina Eastlake.”

She laughed. “So the horrible Bettina is still at

it, eh?”

“You know about her?”

“I’ve been told. Go on.”

“There’s an article from *WoodenBoat* on the wall of the front office about James Colter, with a good picture of him. I could swear it’s the same person as the photo Crystal gave me, only older. The article talks about his having two children, Lynn and Debra, and two grandchildren, Wade and Thomas. Those are the same names Crystal said were in the letters. And Debra told me that she knew her father had been secretly sending letters with drawings in them to someone, but that she’d been afraid he was sending them to Bettina.”

“So you haven’t actually spoken with him.”

“No. I asked Debra to have him call you. I figured you know enough about the family to be able to tell if he’s genuine or not. I didn’t mention the will—I thought you could do that once you were certain it was him. And, Aunt Liz, I told her to tell him that if he truly didn’t want his family knowing where he was, we would keep it secret.”

“Why did you tell her that?”

“If it is him and he doesn’t want to be found, he’s not going to call us unless he can be sure we’re not going to give him away.”

“All right. What are you going to tell Crystal, if she asks what you’ve found out?”

“Nothing, for now. We need to know where he stands before we make an announcement.”

“You’re in Southwest Harbor, did you say?”

she asked.

“Yes. In the JaCo parking lot, as a matter of fact.”

“Would you stop at *Port in a Storm* in Somesville on your way back? They called this morning to tell me a book I ordered is in.”

“Wish I’d known. I was in Somesville half an hour or so ago.”

She laughed again. “Sorry. You will pick it up for me?”

“Sure. I’ll be home in about an hour, then.”

We disconnected, and I set the phone on the passenger seat, next to my purse.

Port in a Storm might have been located in a small town on a small island off the Maine coast, but it consistently ranked as one of the best bookshops in the state. I wondered on the way back north what Aunt Liz had ordered, and when I walked into the shop and told them I’d come to pick up her book, I was surprised and pleased that it was the latest Sue Grafton novel. I knew Aunt Liz wouldn’t look at it until she’d finished her manuscript, which meant I’d have time during the days when she was writing to read it.

I was reading the jacket notes as I went out to the parking lot to climb in the Jeep, which was why I didn’t hear the noise until it was too late. I started to look back. Something slammed hard against the side of my head. Pain flared with arc-welder brilliance for a split second before the world went black.

I woke up when I did only because someone dropped me. The thud of hitting the ground jolted the air from my lungs. I gasped and jerked my eyes open, and collapsed in a fit of coughing as mildew-laden air filled my lungs. Someone nearby was breathing hard. A figure passed between me and the available light. Hinges squealed, and a door closed, plunging my surroundings into darkness. A stab of panic tightened my chest an instant before something clicked and the room flooded with electric light. The figure came back towards me. I stared upward, disoriented and confused, into the face of Crystal Wynan.

“You have no idea how difficult it was to drag you in here,” she told me. “You’re much heavier than you look.”

My vision made her look blurry and slightly doubled. I blinked and shook my head, which only made my head throb.

“Crystal, what’s—” I struggled to sit up, and discovered two things in rapid succession—first, that my wrists and ankles were bound, and second, that Crystal had no intention of letting me get up. She put a foot to my shoulder and shoved me back down hard.

“You know where he is, don’t you?”

“What?” I asked, startled. My arms were pinned beneath me, putting an uncomfortable stress on my shoulders and back.

“You found him in Southwest Harbor, didn’t you? Where?”

“Crystal, why are you doing this? I don’t understand—”

She took her foot off my shoulder and knelt down, planting a knee squarely in the middle of my chest. It was suddenly three times as hard to breathe. She knew she was hurting me, but didn’t seem to care.

“You accused me yesterday of making assumptions. Well, you made some big ones yourself, didn’t you? Oh, I wanted dear Uncle William found, but not for the reasons you think. Where is he, Patty? I don’t want to have to hurt you to find him, but I will.”

I stared up at her speechlessly. Under ordinary circumstances I was a pretty agile mental gymnast, but this one had knocked me straight off the beam and onto the mat. I thrashed around for something to say and let the first thing that came to mind pop out of my mouth.

“How do you know where I’ve been?”

“Because I’ve been following you.” She gave me a derisive smile. “I realized I’d made a mistake last night after I got back to my hotel. I never should have kicked you off the investigation like that. I watched you work yesterday. You’re very good. You should have been a detective. I tried to get Liz to let me back into the fold last night, but even the threat of a stalker wasn’t enough to get her to let me come back.”

“You made all that up about the man following you.”

“Of course. Why would anyone waste their time stalking me?”

I struggled to pull in enough breath to stay conscious and thinking. “You could have just asked, Crystal. I still don’t understand what you’re doing.”

“Don’t you?” She leaned a little harder against my chest, her face a mask of bitterness. “All my life, I’ve known that my grandfather would inherit Great-grandfather’s money. And do you know who will inherit once my grandfather’s dead? He has only one direct living descendant, and that’s me. All that money should be coming to me. Now suddenly William pops up from the dead. He’ll inherit everything, and when he’s gone, all that money will go to his children and grandchildren. I’ll be left out in the cold. I’m not about to let that happen.”

“I can’t breathe,” I squeaked.

She let up a little, but not much. “I’m going to stop him, Patty.”

“How? Everyone knows he’s alive, even if they don’t know where he is.”

“No one but me knows he’s alive. No one else has seen the letters. No one else will ever see them, once this is over.”

Ice settled in a solid chunk in my insides. The implications of her statement for both me and Aunt Liz were plain, since we’d both seen the letters. And if Crystal ever found out about Aunt Liz’s call to Moira Dearborn, or my conversation with Debra

Northrup—

“You see,” she said, “if he’s dead and buried, he’ll never be able to show up at Great-grandfather’s funeral and spoil everything. As I said, I watched you work yesterday. I figured you’d get the job done quicker if I wasn’t there to slow you down, so I sent you out on your own, knowing you’d be extra discreet if you thought someone might not like what you were doing.”

“I didn’t see you.”

“Of course not. You were watching for a big man with gray hair.” She smirked. “I got to Somesville ahead of you and followed you from there. It was the most logical place for you to head next.”

“If you know where I went, then why are you asking?”

“Because I lost you in traffic in Southwest Harbor. After you got back into the Jeep from talking to that man at the marina. Where did you go?”

“He wasn’t there,” I said.

She leaned harder on my chest.

“Try again.”

“I was just following a lead! He wasn’t there! It happens!”

“But you know where to find him.”

“No.”

“Then you know who does.”

“No!” I tried to twist out from under the pain and pressure. She backed off just enough to make

me quit squirming. She studied me through half-lidded eyes.

“You’re lying.” There was no doubt in her tone. “There’s no other reason why you would have left Southwest Harbor without talking to anyone else.” She shifted her weight back and rose to her feet. “I can’t afford to be out of touch with the world for very long. But I’m going to buy a few things, and when I come back tonight, you won’t find our conversation very pleasant.”

Ve haf vays of makink you talk. I fought down a shiver.

She turned and walked back to the door. While her back was turned, I took a quick look around. My vision was still blurred and slightly doubled, but there wasn’t much to see. Bare stone walls, low ceiling, a floor covered with years of forest litter. The place had been open to the elements for a long time.

Crystal glanced back at me and smiled as she took an electric lantern off a hook by the door.

“This is the old storm cellar,” she said. “I’ve spent the last week getting this place ready. The hinges and hasp are brand new. Even if you manage to squirm to the door, you won’t break them and escape.”

She walked up five steps, pushed the door open, and went out into the sunlight. The door shut on the fresh air and light, leaving me in darkness.

It seemed like an appropriate time to curse, so I did, but it was ultimately not very satisfying,

because Crystal wasn't there to hear what I said about her. I'd told Aunt Liz I could lose a tail if I picked one up. Even if I survived this, I didn't know if I would live it down.

If Crystal was expecting me to lie here trussed up and meekly waiting for her to return with her chosen instruments of torture, though, she was in for a disappointment.

I drew my legs through the circle of my bound arms, bringing my hands to the front. My head throbbed harder, and movement caused nausea. Working literally blind, I explored the knots on the cords binding my ankles with my fingertips. Something rustled in the dark. I froze, listening. There were short, quick bursts of movement, like a mouse rooting among the litter on the floor. I shivered and tried to work faster.

How much time did I have before she came back? It couldn't have been noon yet when she'd knocked me unconscious at the bookstore. I had no idea where she'd taken me or how long I'd been out, but I couldn't imagine it had been all that long. That meant it was likely early afternoon. If she wasn't coming back until after nightfall, I would have hours to work myself loose.

The rustling sound got closer. I stomped the ground a couple of times with my still-bound feet. There was a squeak and a flurry of movement, headed away. I set back to work on my bonds.

It seemed to take forever to untie all the knots. I'd had to work the ones on my wrists loose with my teeth, and by the time I'd finished, I never wanted to smell or taste wet rope again. I pushed myself up on hands and knees, then rose slowly to my feet. My head was still throbbing, but the nausea didn't seem as bad. I headed to where I thought the stairs were, reaching out ahead of me like I was 'it' in Blind Man's Bluff, and found them by whacking my left shin against them. I felt the treads one by one to fix in my mind where and how high they were, worked my way up them, and tested the door. The wood felt solid. Nothing rattled when I shook it. I sighed and turned to sit on the top step.

Crystal had said she'd spent the last week getting things ready here. It was an easy bet that she hadn't done this for me—she hadn't even known I existed until yesterday. Had she intended this as William's tomb? Or Aunt Liz's? I had no doubt she thought it could just as easily serve for three. She'd come here planning on two murders, the deaths of two people she'd never met or known. I couldn't imagine what it would have been like if Aunt Liz had disappeared, never to be seen or heard from again. Or what it would be like for William's children if he vanished. Or for my own family, if we were never found.

I shivered, and vowed to get out somehow. Too many lives depended on it.

There were soft, irregular tapping sounds on the door. I cocked my head, listening. After a few

seconds I realized it was raining. It was already chilly and damp in the storm cellar. Just one more thing to add to the joy of the occasion. After a while the top step started to get wet where the rain was leaking in. I shifted down one, and waited.

By the time I heard the sound of an approaching engine, the rain had stopped, and my rodent companion seemed to have made at least one complete lap of the storm cellar. I rose to my feet, stretching cold muscles. I had the advantage of surprise, but it wouldn't amount to much if I was too stiff to use it.

She was at the door faster than I'd expected, and I barely had time to brace myself before she had the lock undone. The instant the door began to move outward, I flung myself at it, knocking it flying. It slammed against Crystal, who stumbled backwards with a startled outcry. I laced my fingers together and swung hard with my doubled fist at her head. The impact knocked her to her hands and knees and sent the flashlight she held spinning away. The beam was dazzlingly bright against the white mist that had settled in behind the rain. The flashlight bounced on the soft turf and rolled to a stop, the beam gleaming off the barrel of the gun Crystal still clutched in her right hand. She let out a string of invectives, rolling to bring the gun to bear on me.

My gut tightened. I spun and ran, hoping the darkness and the mist and the fact that I was moving would work to my advantage. The first shot

whistled past my head. The second went wide. I crashed through a low bush and nearly wound up on my nose. Changing direction and speed, I moved off to the right, skirting the lit area that represented Crystal's presence.

She didn't fire a third time. The light shifted as she picked up the flashlight and turned it toward the bush that had tripped me.

"You're not going to get away from me," she warned, moving toward the bush. "It's cold, and you haven't eaten for hours. You don't know where you are. You could easily get lost and die up here. I'm more than able to wait you out."

I said nothing and worked on quietly edging around her. The bush rustled. The beam of the light arced my direction and then away.

"Come back, and I'll make sure you're warm and well fed. We can discuss things over a meal."

Who did she think she was fooling? Her, me, and various instruments of—

She hadn't been holding anything but the gun and the flashlight. A chill ran up my spine. Why would she have brought a gun if she thought I was tied up and helpless? Something had changed. I thought about her car, and wished I'd been able to tell through the door which direction it was parked.

I took another step. The ground went out from under me with an abruptness that tore a startled yelp from me. The wet earth was slick. I landed hard on my stomach and slid backwards down a steep incline. Rocks and brush dragged the front of my

shirt up and scratched my bare belly. I snatched at the trunk of a small tree and managed to arrest my slide. Rocks I'd dislodged tumbled away. There was silence for a few seconds, followed by a patter of stones striking rock far below me.

Not good. This was not good. I looked up at the top of the slope. The mist above me was lit up, the glow getting brighter as Crystal approached. She reached the edge and swept the slope with the beam, blinding me with it as she spotted me.

She chuckled. "I see you found the cliff. This will do just as well as what I'd planned. Better, in fact." She squatted down, getting comfortable. "There won't be a bullet in your body to have to explain."

"I won't tell you anything." I turned my head to get the light out of my eyes.

"You don't have to." Her voice changed, becoming bitter. "I got a phone call from Great-aunt Moira a little while ago. Seems your aunt called and left her a message last night. Now the whole family knows about Great-uncle William and the letters. There's no way I can carry out my original plan without getting caught. But I am left with a problem, and that's you. You know what I'd intended. There's no way I can let you live."

She raised the gun and took aim at my hands. The shot was loud, the sound hemmed in by the mist. I ducked my head. The bullet struck a rock just upslope of my tree, spraying me with rock chips. I flinched but held on. If she was going to make me

fall, she was going to have to shoot me. I wanted there to be some proof that I hadn't fallen by accident. She leaned out, trying to get a better shot at my hands, hoping to graze the skin.

Without warning, the rain-soaked cliff edge gave out beneath her. She screamed. The gun went off, the shot wild. I watched, horrified, as she slid head-first on a layer of muddy debris down the slope and off into space. She shrieked in terror the whole way down, cutting off in silence only when her body thudded against the rocks below.

Oh God, I thought, shaken. If I didn't get off this slope, I'd be joining her soon enough. I searched for handholds and footholds, my fingers growing chilled and numb as I struggled upward. Handhold by handhold, I inched my way back up the damp, rocky slope and over the top onto solid ground.

Cold, wet, and muddy, I lay still and caught my breath while lethargy crept in and weighed my tired body down. Could she have survived that fall? I couldn't see how. I didn't know how far down she'd gone, but it had sounded like quite a distance, and she'd seemed pretty certain the same fall would kill me. The mist settled around me, leaching the heat from my body. I finally forced myself to roll over and crawl through the brush, unwilling to stand in case I encountered another cliff edge. I looked for the foundations of what I knew must once have been the Wynans' summer cottage. If I could find those, I might be able to figure out where Crystal's

car was parked, or at the least, where the storm cellar was. I would still be cold there, but at least I'd be protected in case it began to rain again.

After about half an hour of searching, I encountered one of the Mercedes' fenders. I struggled to my feet, circled the car, and entered through the driver's door. The dome light showed the key still in the ignition, and Crystal's cell phone on the passenger seat. First things first. I started the engine and turned on the heater before picking up the cell phone and dialing Aunt Liz's number.

She answered on the first ring.

"Hello?" she asked breathlessly.

"Hi. It's me." I was shivering almost to the point of making my teeth chatter. My voice sounded odd. It took a few seconds for her to recognize it.

"Patty! Where are you?"

"I'm not sure. I think I'm at the old Wynan property, but I have no idea where that is. I wasn't conscious when I was brought here."

"What happened?" she demanded. "Was it Crystal's stalker? Are you in danger?"

"I'm okay for the moment. There was no stalker. Crystal made that up. You need to send a rescue squad out here." I took in a deep breath and let it out again slowly. "Crystal went over the edge of the cliff. I don't know if she's still alive, but I suspect she isn't. If she is, she may still have the gun. You'll have to warn them about that."

There was dead silence for about five seconds.

"All right," she said finally. "Are you calling on

my cell phone?”

“I’m on hers.”

“I have the number,” she said. “I’ll call you back in a few minutes.”

“So is James Colter William Wynan?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said, and hung up.

I set the phone on the dashboard and leaned back in the leather seat, closing my eyes as the first of the heated air washed across me.

The doctor told me what I’d already known—concussion, assorted scrapes and bruises. No drinking, driving, or operating heavy equipment. He released me to my aunt’s care. The two of us made a sorry pair as she drove me home, her with her cold, and me with my assorted scrapes and bruises. She’d heard the whole story from me when she’d called back after phoning the police, so aside from asking me how I was doing, she said very little. In the glow of the dashboard light, I could see she looked troubled, so I left her to her thoughts, knowing she’d talk about it when she was ready.

The sight and sound of a woman sliding off a cliff to her death should have kept me awake for weeks to come, but I barely stayed awake long enough to shower and change into clean clothes. When I awoke the next morning, too sore and enervated to get up, I did think about her. I’d known people who had died before, my own parents among them, but this was the first time I’d been on hand

for the event.

As frightened as I'd been sliding down that slope, I couldn't fully imagine what those last ten seconds had been like for her. The few seconds of freefall through the misty darkness must have been utterly terrifying. In spite of what she'd nearly done, I wouldn't have wished that on her. I was contemplating what the sudden, shattering impact would have been like when there was a tap on my door. It edged open. Aunt Liz looked in at me.

"You're awake," she said, pushing it further open. She studied me, anxious concern edging her manner. "Are you all right?"

"I'll be all right."

"When you're dressed, come downstairs to the library."

She backed out and shut the door. I thought for a moment about whether or not I wanted to get up, decided there was no real point in procrastinating, and got out of bed.

A low murmur of conversation reached me as I came down the stairs to the second floor. Aunt Liz wasn't alone in the library. I eased up to the door, hoping to look in without attracting attention.

She sat in her usual place at the end of the arc of chairs by the fireplace, her focus on the two people who were sharing the warmth of the fire with her. One was Debra Northrup, and the other, still recognizable as the man in the picture even at nearly eighty, was William Wynan, aka James Colter. His hair, which had once been ginger-colored and thick,

was gray and wispy now. He was a little heavier than he'd been in the earlier photograph, but probably not by much. He was sitting in the chair Crystal had occupied on her first visit two days ago, while Debra was on his other side. There were three cups of coffee on the table in front of them, and a plate of cookies, half empty. Apparently they'd been here for a while. Aunt Liz glanced toward the doorway and spotted me.

"There you are," she said, and got to her feet, prepared to hover over me like a mother bird until I was properly seated. I was hesitant to enter, unsure how I would be received after having been present at the death of a family member. William looked me over curiously, his blue eyes as sharp as the mind behind them.

"She has a look of Robert about her," he remarked in a deep, worn voice, smiling.

"You knew my father?" I asked, moving into the room.

"He used to come to the factory as a teenager to watch us build boats. I thought he might come to work for me, but he went west instead and married your mother." He rose to his feet and extended a hand to me. "I'm James Colter. I haven't been William Wynan in so long that it doesn't feel natural anymore."

"Patty O'Donnell," I returned, shaking his hand. He settled back into his chair.

"Liz told me what happened up there on the mountain. I'm sorry this happened to you. My

father's been concerned about Crystal for a long time. He said she had good business sense, but that she didn't care who she stepped on reaching her goal. He always believed it would get her in trouble some day."

I backed up to the chair next to Debra's and sat down. Aunt Liz resumed her own seat.

"Can I ask you something? What made you hide from your family for sixty years like you did?"

His mouth quirked. "I knew you would ask that. I hid from my family for the very simple reason that I didn't want to get married."

I raised my eyebrows. "Couldn't you have just said no?"

He laughed. "You never knew my mother. Strong-willed woman, always got what she wanted. My sister Moira is a lot like her. She wanted me to marry the daughter of family friends, a girl I'd known all my life and couldn't stand. I would have married her to please Mother and hated every second of it, but when I was drafted and went away to the war, it gave me time to grow up and think about what I really wanted to do. By the time I got out, I knew I would never marry that girl, and that Mother would make my life miserable for it, so I came here and changed my name, and started out fresh. My father didn't like it, but he understood about being under Mother's thumb. When everyone began to wonder where I was and when I was coming home, he faked the letter from the army claiming I'd been killed.

“After a while, I met and married Ivy, and by then there was no going back. We kept in touch—he used to come out once a year to visit until he got too old to travel. He met all his grandchildren and great-grandchildren, although they never knew who he was. I kinda wish now that I’d told them.” He paused, his smile becoming melancholy. “My father’s nearly a hundred years old now. I never thought he’d last this long.”

He gave his watch a quick glance. “And now, I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to leave. I have a plane coming to take me to Boston. I’d like to see Dad one last time before he goes.”

We all got to our feet. He shook hands with me again.

“Come see me at the factory some time,” he said. “I’ll show you the things your father liked to do when he was there.”

Debra smiled at me as they turned away. Aunt Liz walked them down to the door. I moved over to the chair next to Aunt Liz’s and sat down, reaching out to grab a cookie off the plate. It had been too long since I’d eaten last.

She was back a moment later, pausing in the doorway to look at me. I raised an eyebrow.

“You don’t look too bad, considering.” She hesitated before continuing. “They brought Crystal’s body up this morning. The coroner says that death was instantaneous. She had a fractured skull, massive internal injuries, and her spine was broken in two places. It’s not likely she would have

survived long even if the landing hadn't killed her.”

I nodded, filing that away for future contemplation.

She crossed the room to join me, resuming her seat. “Patty, I want to know how you’re feeling. And I don’t mean just physically. You watched someone die yesterday. And you were nearly killed yourself. That’s got to be bothering you.”

That, I thought, was probably what had been worrying her on the trip home last night.

“I’m okay,” I said. “What happened will stick with me for a long time, but I couldn’t have done anything to stop her from falling. It was over too fast, and I had all I could do just hanging on myself. And I can’t ignore the fact that she would have forced me over the edge if she could have. Frankly, I’m glad it was her and not me. I’m not going to feel guilty over something I couldn’t have changed even if I’d wanted to.”

She studied me for a long moment before nodding. “That sounds like a healthy attitude to me.” She reached over and patted me on the knee. “Breakfast will be waiting for you downstairs. And when you’re done there, you might want to give your husband a call. He’s pretty anxious to hear from you.”

She stood up, gathered the coffee cups, and crossed the floor to the gallery, headed for the kitchen. I hesitated for a moment before getting out of my seat and going the opposite direction, toward the office. If my experiences had taught me

anything, it was that life was uncertain. Breakfast could wait.

I picked up the phone and dialed home.

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