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OUT OF SYNC
BY
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CHAPTER 1 - BUTTERFLIES

August 1980

Why butterflies? Emily McKinley mused on her compulsion to paint them. It wouldn't be hard to find subliminal messages. Escaping from their cocoon prisons, free-flying in a foreign sky – butterflies symbolized epiphany. And their fragility intrigued her. Confident beings, though their wings could be split by any hazard they encountered. Elegant vulnerability. Grace in the face of danger. Or maybe she painted them for their beauty alone. Her reason didn't matter. She'd finished her work and would explore the implications later.

From her studio window overlooking Riverside Drive, Emily admired the ribbons of sunset over the Hudson River. The hue of the clouds – fuchsia – inspired her. In her next painting, she wanted to capture lovers as enchanted by the sunset as they were by each other. The thought made her smile. Terry would challenge her idea.

It's been done, he would say, and she would remind him that every image known to humanity had already been painted. Familiarity didn't mean a piece couldn't offer something new. Then Terry would agree. Emily would paint a sunset unlike any other because she painted with the eye of a god. She would respond in kind. Like predawn lovemaking, Terry's words slipped inside his readers and ravished them. He wrote with the mind of a god, she would say. This was their ritual. They fed one another. They loved.

After switching off the overhead fan and closing the studio door behind her, Emily paused. The nanny was putting the baby to bed, and quiet enveloped the apartment. She tiptoed to Terry's den, missing him – but hesitant to disturb him if he was writing. She tapped on the door, and he didn't answer.

She found him in the living room where a lamp cast the space in an amber glow. He stood at an open window. Curtains of silk rustled in a breeze from the river. The

fuchsia sky faded as dusk settled. She walked up behind him and slipped her arms around his waist.

"I finished it," she whispered. Terry's muscles tensed and then relaxed. She kissed his neck. "But I want you to see it in natural light. I'll show you in the morning."

Terry turned to her. "You must be tired. Get some rest." He paused and cleared his throat. "I think I'll take a walk."

"I'll come with you." When his eyes flared, she knew. It was not the sparkle of love. He tried to camouflage, but she recognized the expression he wore often. Hunger. Want.

"I won't be long. I just need..."

"You promised." She knew.

Terry took her hands and kissed them. His lips trembled on her skin. An unlikely move, but he tried to convince her, reassure her.

"I'll be fine. I'm just in a slump right now. Trust me."

"Last time you didn't come home until—"

"Not now. Please. I need to go."

"It's stealing you away from me, you know. Just be careful." She stepped back and turned from him. They would discuss it again tomorrow. Rationality would come easier in the morning.

In the kitchen, Emily poured a glass of chilled Chardonnay. A door slammed as she sipped it. She pictured Terry in the corridor, waiting for the mahogany door of the elevator to open. He would be staring at the floor, fidgeting. When the door opened, he would feel a moment of relief because the elevator car was empty, and nobody else would notice his need. She wondered what he thought about, if the events of the last year replayed in his mind as they did in hers. Maybe he didn't think at all—just answered the call and acted on his want.

Instead of relaxing her, the wine gave her the jitters. No, she couldn't blame the wine. Her stomach tightened as anxiety crept up her backbone and lodged in her skull. She set the glass on the counter too close to the edge. It hit the floor and shattered. The woody scent of Chardonnay sickened the air.

She couldn't do it—couldn't wait out another night of entertaining the whispering ghouls. When would he be back? Would he come home? What if he didn't? Would he beat fate one more time before his luck went bankrupt? She rushed out of the kitchen to the baby's room. Caitlin was sitting in her crib squealing. After kissing her daughter, she asked Maria to stay for a while longer. No problem, Maria said.

Taking no time to change out of her paint-stained shirt, she reached the lobby and feared Terry would be out of sight. She spotted him from the steps of their building – a solitary figure on an empty block walking north. The sense of his aloneness punched her.

Dusk turned dark as she followed him into Riverside Park at Ninety-Sixth Street. A squad car with siren blaring sped up Riverside Drive. The squeal silenced the night birds until a lone raven cawed, and then another. Beyond the park, a steady rush of cars on the Henry Hudson Parkway added a background of white noise.

The streetlamps provided dim light on the path but couldn't break the black of the high wall on her right. She sprinted to keep Terry in view. Silent, breathless, she stifled her fear. He walked with his hands stuffed in his pockets, a habit he'd acquired when his hands shook. He kept his head down, walking as one who knew his destination but did not want to see it as he approached.

Couldn't stop him if she tried, but she wanted to be there when the dope made him vulnerable. And by following him, she protected herself from another night of her mind running wanton as she waited in the bed where Terry belonged.

Past One-Hundredth Street – there were no markers, but she'd been walking several minutes – she looked beyond Terry and squinted. Movement. An indistinct shadow glided toward him. She sped up and saw the shadow break into figures. As the languid night turned cold, she shuddered.

A raven cawed, and garbled voices joined the noise of the highway. Terry stopped. He said something, but she didn't catch his words. An ugly laugh came from one of the shadow people. A snort followed, and another caw from the hidden raven watching them from a treetop.

Then the figure pounced. Terry stumbled backwards but managed to stay on his feet, freed his hands from his pockets, and raised them. She felt her strong man's weakness.

"Get outta there!" She ran to her husband as he pivoted. He stretched out his arms to stop her.

"Go home," he moaned. "I can't believe you followed me."

The figures, four of them, cackled as one.

"Who's this?" The largest broke from the group and slithered forward. "Another customer?" He had no face, just a hood with a head hidden inside it. Stocky in an oversized sweatshirt, he had the aura of a beast in the wilderness – a bear or a boar. His sandpaper voice scratched Emily's ears.

"If you ain't got money, you pay with pussy," he growled.

"Leave her alone," Terry said. "I've got money."

"You ain't my problem. She is," the monster said as his posse closed in. "I know why you're here. You're a junkie. But you..." He pointed a thick finger at her. "You're where you don't belong. Bad luck for you."

Emily stepped back and Terry reached into his pocket. The faceless one lunged at him and grabbed his wrist.

"Drop it!" he yelled. "You think you can hurt me?"

"My wallet," Terry said. "I'm trying to give you...the money—" His voice broke. The gang howled. They pressed in.

"Your fuckin' money can't buy her back, asshole. She's mine now."

Emily's knees wobbled. She felt lightheaded, dizzy...losing it...seeing only her gracious butterflies hovering above their heads. For all her fears, she'd never feared a scene such as this. The one who taunted them played a bad character from a cheap novel or B-rated movie. As she detached, her butterflies swarmed down on him like killer bees.

Terry charged at the beast, but the others sprang and devoured him. They tumbled into a seething heap on the trail.

When she screamed, power fueled by terror sent her spinning into them. She leapt on the heap as her fingernails turned to claws. One of them grabbed her by the hair and yanked her to her feet. He hurled a punch. In an explosion of color, she flew backwards. Her head hit the tar. She heard the thud, but felt nothing.

Ravens, black against a charcoal sky, swooped down from all directions toward the chaos.

"Help him," she whispered.

Her lips went numb. The ravens transformed into butterflies, more exquisite than any she'd ever seen or painted. They circled her and descended. Their wings fluttered upon her eyelashes, but when she tried to smile, her face had frozen.

The butterflies glowed in neon and hummed. The sound billowed like an orchestra tuning. Tap, tap—the conductor's wand alerted them. They poised their wings and sang in harmony the sweetest melody—a song of summer and sunsets, strawberries and stars. Emily absorbed the music, and the notes tickled her with lilac-scented boughs. A cloud drifted down to cover her, and under its tent, the butterflies lulled her to sleep.

CHAPTER 2 - ADONIS

Spring, 2010

Serendipity. Olivia Brooks didn't give much thought to such concepts, but when she reached Gallery E for the opening of the exhibition, a heady sensation told her Caitlin McKinley's entrance into her life had a meaning beyond the obvious.

Caitlin greeted Olivia like family. Her warmth set her apart from the other gallery representatives who appraised art at the Academy. The others intimidated the graduate students, and their typical responses dismissed even the best artists as amateurs. Few took interest in student work, let alone the artists. They visited the school with a social agenda. The Academy boasted an influential board and faculty, and gallery owners wanted them on their guest lists.

Olivia sensed nothing pompous about Caitlin when her painting, *Forgotten*, caught Caitlin's eye. They'd spent an hour talking in her studio, and an instant connection had turned them into friends.

Caitlin left her circle of guests and joined Olivia as servers in black waited with trays of hors d'oeuvres, and bartenders uncorked bottles of white and red. She handed Olivia the exhibition guide titled, *Portraits of Aloneness: Emerging Artists Explore the Solitary Figure*.

"This is your big night," she said. "I know you belong here."

"Aloneness," Olivia said, more to herself. "Funny my first exhibition has this theme."

"I think you'll appreciate the other work," Caitlin said. "But watch. I predict *Forgotten* will be the star of the show."

Seconds later, Olivia decided Caitlin was wrong when the obvious star of the opening made his entrance. In the hum of art talk and small talk, she heard a quiet, collective gasp. A middle-aged man, dressed impeccably in a tailored suit, made an entrance that changed the dynamics in the room. The reception turned into an event. Cameras she hadn't noticed before his arrival flashed.

The man's silver hair, curling at his collar, glistened under the lights. He smiled as a clique of women moved en masse toward him. The elegance of his form attracted the artist in her, but a deeper sensation, something indefinable, pummeled her.

"Who—"

"My dad," said Caitlin. "I want you to meet him. I told him about you."

Olivia watched him slip into conversation with his impromptu entourage. A girl, not part of the original circle, handed him a pen and her exhibition guide. He autographed it. Her body language said she was gushing.

"Is he an artist?" Olivia asked Caitlin.

Caitlin laughed. "That depends on who you ask. A New York Times critic recently disagreed with popular opinion and called him clichéd. But he's immune to them by now."

Olivia couldn't remember the last time she'd read the Times.

"Come on, let's get a drink. If I know my dad, he'll be at the bar any minute."

Their path to the bar was obstructed by guests, most of them in couples or groups. Caitlin welcomed each of them by name, introducing Olivia as an up-and-coming artist who could very well be the next hot commodity.

"I'm thrilled to be the first to show her work," she said to a woman named Guggenheim.

The woman ignored Olivia. "Your father looks happy tonight. I invited him—again—to a dinner party. He actually said he'd think about it."

"You did catch him in a good mood," said Caitlin.

By the time they reached the bar, Olivia needed the wine. In a place of fifty little black dresses, she felt awkward—didn't even own a black dress. When she glanced at her reflection in the front window, her defiant straw-colored hair upstaged her like a rambunctious child. She imagined that the cultured guests judged her as one who belonged in her studio rather than an upscale gallery opening, and she agreed.

"I'm a little nervous," she said. "I'm more comfortable working alone in my studio."

"I don't blame you. These events can be brutal, but you need to be noticed and this is the best way to do it. Besides, you've got the look of an artist," Caitlin said. "Believe me, these people secretly envy you. You've got something a salon or spa can't give them." Caitlin looked past her and her face lit. "Stop stealing my show, Daddy."

The beautiful man embraced his daughter. "I hope you have a decent red tonight, darling."

"Uncork the *Tignanello*," Caitlin told the bartender. She picked a long strand of hair off his lapel. "Blonde. I don't know what they see in you."

"I wish you'd tell them the truth."

"Which is?"

"I'm a boring recluse and I only come out to appease you. If I had my way, I'd be home with Nina tonight."

Olivia sipped her Chardonnay and watched their easy intimacy. Loneliness trickled from her core.

"Daddy, this is Olivia Brooks, the artist I told you about."

Caitlin's father faced her and held out his hand. "Olivia. Terry McKinley. I'm glad to meet you." He beamed comfort into her. "This is your party."

Olivia took his hand with a limp, uncertain grasp. She should have figured it out. Caitlin McKinley. The New York Times.

"The author," she said. "I didn't realize. I'm sorry."

"Didn't I mention he wrote?" Caitlin scowled with humor. "Maybe I was too embarrassed by that last review."

Terry laughed. "I liked the review. First critic to tell the truth. I have become a cliché."

Caitlin kissed his cheek. "Let me show you Olivia's painting before everybody else discovers it."

Olivia followed them across the room. Her heart thundered. She wondered how her painting would fare under the scrutiny it was about to receive. As they studied *Forgotten*, Terry sipped his wine. Olivia stood behind them, hoping her Adonis would speak to them as he spoke to her.

Caitlin stepped back. "I should mingle. Keep my dad occupied so the groupies don't bother him."

While Terry focused on the painting, Olivia eyed him. She couldn't read his reaction, whether he approved of her work. She'd read his early fiction in college and related to his characters who searched for meaning, or in rare instances found it only to lose it again.

At the time, his narrative felt too sentimental for her tastes, but she considered him a gifted author. He used poetic language and chose philosophical themes. She hadn't read his latest books, though. After she decided to pursue her studies in figurative art, she had no time for literature.

"Olivia," he said. "Come here." Her stomach tightened as she stood beside him. He fixated on *Forgotten*. "Your painting haunts me."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You've captured his loneliness. Painful, but sublime. You traveled beyond his body and revealed his soul. But Caitlin tells me you didn't use a model. Is that right?"

"I don't know who he is. That's why I titled it *Forgotten*."

"But you've seen him."

"Not that I remember." She stared at the painting. "I know it sounds..."

"I have another impression. Do you mind if I tell you?"

"Please. I'd appreciate your opinion." Her eyes drifted over the image of her Adonis. She agreed with Terry's description. Haunting – his face and body had haunted her for years.

"You're in love with him," Terry said.

"Excuse me?"

A waiter appeared with the bottle of *Tignanello* and refilled Terry's glass. Other guests stood watching them, but nobody intruded.

"You couldn't intuit him like this if you didn't love him. Or am I being clichéd again?" He chuckled.

"He's not real." She liked the man and his interest excited her.

"How can you be sure?" He caught her eyes and held them.

"I think you're teasing me. He's just the product of a lonely girl's idealism." She took a final gulp of her wine.

"I'll buy it. Name your price. Or would you rather we do business through Caitlin?"

His unexpected offer stunned her. She'd never considered the possibility of selling it. Adonis stared at her, waiting for her response, wondering if she'd let him go to a stranger.

"I need to think about it," she said. "But thank you. I'm shocked." The space around her – the people, the paintings, the buzz – turned surreal.

"So what do you think, Daddy?" Caitlin breezed up to Terry and took his arm. "Wasn't I brilliant to find Olivia tucked away in academia?"

"You're like your mother." He winked at his daughter. "You see the world through her eyes. Brava, darling."

"And did I tell you Olivia has over a hundred sketches of this figure? She's been developing him since she was fourteen. You can see how she matured through the drawings, but from the beginning she identified...his essence."

"Now you sound like me." He faced Olivia. "I'd like to see those drawings. Perhaps you'd join us for dinner this week and bring your portfolio."

"I'd love to. And I should have told you earlier, I've read your work. I'm a fan."

"Don't indulge him," Caitlin said. "He gets too much of that."

"Have you read *Gift of Remembrance*?" Terry asked.

"The only book I've read lately is my art history textbook. It's been a busy semester, but I only have two weeks left."

"You might enjoy it when you have time. I'll send you a copy tomorrow. Do you have Olivia's address?" he asked Caitlin, and she nodded. "Good. Remind me in the morning. I wouldn't be surprised if you discover we excavate common ground in our art. I look forward to speaking with you about it."

Someone tapped him on the shoulder and he turned. Guests gravitated to him and formed a group. He pointed to *Forgotten*.

"Her style reminds me of Emily," he said. "She's not afraid to take risks. Disciplined skills, but I detect a wild streak. Early genius, I think."

Heads bobbed. Bodies pressed closer. Olivia noticed some Academy people arriving. Grateful for an excuse, she slipped away to welcome them.

An hour later, on her third glass of wine, she stepped outside with another student. The nocturnal energy of Chelsea pulsed through the neighborhood. Olivia's cheeks burned. She felt alive.

"I think I have a crush on Terry McKinley." She stifled a giggle and felt foolish.

Victor lit a joint. "Join the crowd, honey. But I heard he's a little weird."

"In what way?"

He shrugged. "Crazy ideas. Psychic. Occult. Whatever."

"I think people mistake poetry for insanity. He's probably using metaphor."

"They say he never recovered after his wife got murdered."

The warm night turned briefly cold. "Really? I didn't know. She must have been Caitlin's mother. When did it happen?"

"Ages ago, I guess. They say he keeps trying to contact her. But he's a writer. It's in his nature to be wacko. To each his own." Victor looked into the gallery. "He is hot, though, for an old guy. But you've gotta be careful. You're probably searching for another father figure. Not that I blame you."

"He offered to buy my Adonis."

Victor snorted. "No wonder you like him. I'd worship at his feet if he even looked at my stuff."

Tired, overwhelmed, she went back inside. Guests were congratulating Caitlin on the exhibition. She heard someone mention an art critic had stopped by. Terry was gone. When she walked past Adonis, she felt his questions and knew those questions were her own.

“So, do we have a sale?” Caitlin asked.

“I didn’t expect that.”

“My dad knows good art. We have a private gallery in the back. I’d like to show you my mother’s work if you have time.”

Olivia followed Caitlin down a short corridor and past her office. When Caitlin put a key into a doorknob, the door was unlocked.

“So that’s where he went,” she said. “I should have known.”

Caitlin opened the door and white light streamed into the hallway. Inside the room, on exposed brick walls, hung a collection of paintings. Two leather chairs in the center of the space faced a vivid painting of butterflies – dozens of them – in flight in an azure sky. Its beauty stole Olivia’s breath.

Seated in one of the chairs, Terry motioned to them. Hesitating to breach their sacred space, Olivia waited.

Caitlin walked over to him and sat on the arm of the chair. She kissed her father’s cheek.

“I wanted Olivia to see mom’s work. Do you mind?”

“Come in,” Terry said. “Sit here.” He pointed to the chair next to him. “It’s the best place to view the butterflies. They flutter toward you from this spot.”

Olivia tiptoed in, took a seat, and stared at the painting. Terry was right. The butterflies sprang alive. They mesmerized her. The rest of the room receded as she felt the breeze of their fragile, transparent wings.

Terry broke the spell. “Magnificent, isn’t it?”

“I’ve never experienced a painting like this. Your wife was gifted.”

“She...would have been one of the great artists of our time.” His voice drifted away and melancholy colored the room.

Caitlin leaned against him, stroking his hair.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” whispered Olivia.

“You understand loss.” Terry said. “You know what it means.”

Empathy passed between them. “Did Caitlin tell you?”

Caitlin shook her head. “I didn’t say anything. I didn’t need to.”

“Your parents?” Terry asked.

“They died in the World Trade Center. They both worked for Cantor-Fitzgerald. I was fourteen.” She heard him sigh. “They were all I had.”

“Then we do understand each other,” he said. “I thought so. You’re a brave girl.”

Terry and Caitlin sat in silence as Olivia moved from painting to painting. A woman in a park. A nude holding a newborn. A man reading a book. A dog in midair, leaping. More butterflies. A nude male, his arms raised in prayer. A full moon glistening over dark water with a twinkling city on the shore. A city street dotted with umbrellas. Behind the art, she perceived a life. She felt a presence.

"Thank you," she said. "I'll never forget these images. Her work affects me."

Terry stood. "We should go. I told Nina she could wait up for me."

"My daughter," Caitlin said. "She won't go to bed until he tells her a story."

They left the room. The main gallery had emptied except for a bartender. Terry asked for a final glass of wine as Caitlin walked Olivia outside.

A breeze from the Hudson freshened the air, but it reminded her she was going home to the stuffy walk-up she shared with two other art students. Her spontaneous connection to this family felt right. Likely, her sense of belonging would dissipate by morning, and she wished she could hold on to it.

"How long ago did your mother die?" She bit her lip. "I'm sorry to ask."

"Thirty years ago in August. I was Nina's age, so I don't remember her. But I know her through my dad. I imagine I know her better than most people know a parent. Daddy has a way getting to the core of person."

"He never remarried?"

"No, and he never will. I worry about him. He can't let her go, and his...longing has led him to outrageous territory. He's gotten a bit of a reputation now, and strange things go on in our house. But he's a good man."

"Yes, I see that. Thank you. I'm glad I met him."

Caitlin returned to her earlier buoyancy. "And he wants your painting. He'll pay whatever you ask. Even I didn't expect a sale on your first night."

The lights of a taxi shone and Olivia raised her arm. It stopped at the curb. They said goodnight, and as the cab pulled away, Olivia saw Terry locking the gallery door behind the bartender. Even that common act was done with rare grace.

CHAPTER 3 – REMEMBRANCE

Terry awoke before sunrise. Despite the pain, he held the image that had surfaced in his sleep – a memory as freshly detailed as last night’s exhibition. Thirty years ago. They were barely adults back then. His early success fed his delusion of maturity, but Emily saw through it. Her idealism, while reflected in her art, carried none of the bullshit artists told themselves and others.

As he listened to the soundtrack behind the image, he heard her voice.

My beautiful man is still a little boy, she said. Not judgmental, but she stated the truth without apology. *One day you’ll wake up and realize the little boy is not equipped to make a man’s decisions.*

He’d kissed her that morning, believing as a child would believe that a kiss erased unpleasant truth. She softened at his touch and responded to him, but her truth could not be seduced. Her body, yes, but never her mind.

And here Emily lived, thirty years after her death, in images he cherished above reality.

He made coffee and brought it into his study. On his desk lay a handwritten draft – the book he swore he would never write and always knew he would. No one knew the story, not even Caitlin. There had been speculation at the time, of course. Rumors. Some came close, but nobody got it right. He’d guarded the secret forever and wondered why. Self-preservation, maybe. Shame, certainly, but the effort wearied him and he wanted to break free.

He walked to his bookshelf and grabbed a copy of his new book, *Gift of Remembrance*. Ranked number 13 in the Times last week – an unlucky number, but a fair showing two weeks after the launch. He wanted Olivia to get it before she left for her studio. Maybe she’d take it with her. Maybe not. Probably not. The girl made art. As it should, art occupied her wide spaces. She possessed the same determination he and Emily had at her age. He hoped she had a small corner available for fiction, and wondered why it mattered to him.

Too early to call the messenger, but he placed the book in a padded envelope. Caitlin would address it during breakfast. As he was about to seal it, he stopped, and so did time.

He took the first page of his draft and read it in a whisper. The words caught in his throat, but he kept going and finished the page. The effort exhausted him. There he

stood, his naked soul cringing in the cold of a stranger's eyes. The thought of his agent being his first reader sickened him, or even his longtime editor who predictably gushed over every new book. Gushed over dollar signs, but that was beside the point.

It would take a special reader to make his cold soul warm. Someone who – he didn't know how – would give him the courage to keep writing the story. Or someone who would convince him the book would be a mistake, that atonement could not be earned through confession. He would never place such a burden on his daughter. Bad enough Caitlin lived a motherless life.

He scribbled a note at the top of the page. *Working title: Out of Sync*. He hesitated. The act was foolish perhaps. He had no reason to believe Olivia would be his ideal reader, but as he penciled her name, it felt right.

Olivia,

Original – no copies. Return it or toss it in the trash. Your choice. TM

He folded the draft in half, took his book from the envelope and placed the draft inside the front cover. After he sealed the envelope, he felt a rush of relief. Irrational euphoria followed and Terry felt free as the first hints of dawn lightened the sky.

Most mornings Olivia awoke with images of Adonis playing in her head, but something was different this morning. Adonis was there, guarding his turf like a jealous lover, but Terry McKinley challenged him. Adonis, for all his mystique, remained trapped in the forgotten memories that had spawned him. Although he looked three-dimensional, he wasn't. Held by oil on canvas, Adonis struggled to rise. The man painted in flesh tones but without flesh could not vanquish the flesh-and-blood man who wanted to purchase him.

But why did Terry wish to own him? Before Olivia opened her eyes, she considered the possibilities. Their mutual loss connected them, and he perceived the shadows of her loss in her artwork. Or something simpler – Caitlin wanted him to buy it. Olivia's first sale to Terry McKinley would generate positive buzz. Or, there was the obvious though improbable answer. Terry simply liked the painting and wanted anything that reminded him, even remotely, of Emily's style.

A knock on her door startled her back to the morning.

"You've got a package," Celeste called. "Messenger service." Curiosity heightened her voice. "I didn't think you knew anybody who has money to waste on a messenger."

Olivia leapt out of bed and opened the door. "He didn't forget."

"Who?" Celeste stood in their corridor naked.

"I hope you didn't answer the door like that." Olivia grinned at her friend, wishing something of Celeste would rub off on her, inspire her dormant recklessness, or at least ignite a drive for freedom.

"I did, but he only saw my face. And my arm. I think." Celeste laughed and handed Olivia the envelope. "I'm modeling for Vic this morning. I was practicing." She waited.

"It's just a book."

"I'm not getting dressed until you tell me. And I'm getting cold. I think it's about to rain."

Olivia mimicked a frown. "There's not much to tell. Last night, Terry McKinley liked my painting. He wants to buy it, and he sent me his latest book. That's all."

"Don't fuck with me." Celeste gawked at her.

"It's true." Olivia fingered the package and her pulse raced.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Celeste squealed.

Olivia shrugged. "We haven't closed the deal yet. I didn't have a price. I'm not even sure I'm ready to sell."

"Ready? You've only done a million studies of the same pose." Celeste morphed into character and struck a pose—Adonis' pose in *Forgotten*.

A smile broke through and Olivia allowed Celeste's enthusiasm inside.

"Let the gallery decide the price. They'll get half, so they'll go for top dollar." Celeste grabbed her and hugged her hard. "This is your big break."

Without meaning to, Olivia stiffened—a reaction she tried to minimize. She hated being the untouchable girl. Never admitted to anyone how tragedy had morphed her. It crept into her at random moments and stood as a bastion against hope.

"So, what's he like?"

She didn't know how to respond. It would be easy to gush about Terry McKinley, and a part of her wished for liberation—to defy her restraint and declare him wonderful. Instead, she sighed as heat rose from her neck to her face.

"Never thought I'd see you blush," Celeste said happily. "He must be quite the man. God, he does write great cheesy stuff. Books to be read in bed."

"That's not how I remember his books."

"Then maybe you didn't read between the lines. Pure sappy romance."

"I guess I'm not the romantic type." Olivia's blush turned to embarrassment.

“Sell him your painting, sweetie. And if you’re lucky...well...” Celeste’s laughter filled the hall as she skipped away toward her room. “If you need any advice on men, let me know. I can give you a few pointers.”

Olivia closed the door and pushed back images that came out of nowhere to wreak havoc on her predictable isolation.

Still an hour before she would head to her studio at the Academy, she propped up her pillows and got into bed. She pulled out the book. *Gift of Remembrance*. Hardcover, with a book jacket of a ship in fog navigating through choppy water. The image made her heart skip. She opened to the end. 511 pages. With her schedule, she wouldn’t be able to read all of it before their dinner.

Maybe he’d forgotten the invitation, but she wanted to read as much as possible, just in case. Terry McKinley deserved a read. She brushed her fingers over the book cover, feeling familiarity with the unfamiliar picture. Her fingers slowly traced the letters of his name above the title.

She opened the front cover and found a folded sheet of paper.

Terry wished he didn’t have the morning appointment with Ian Sheldon. An increasingly rare urge to write prevailed, and he wanted to make the most of it. But the student from his graduate seminar, *Fiction’s Truth, Fiction’s Lie*, had groveled. It was all an act, of course, but worthy enough to grant him a meeting.

As a group, his students bored him. Individually, they offered more in return. Ian, in a peculiar way Terry didn’t stop to define, intrigued him. So the timing felt off, but he accepted it, since the whole point of his current draft was bad timing. He put the pages of *Out of Sync* into his top drawer and straightened his desk, thinking about page one and wondering if Olivia had noticed it yet.

Caitlin was taking the morning off from the gallery. Still basking in her most successful opening to date, she’d given the nanny some free time. She and Nina were attempting a domestic challenge – making cookies, he thought. Caitlin had her mother’s eye for art, and Emily’s ineptitude in the kitchen. Those cookies would be a chore to swallow, but for Nina’s sake, he would endure them.

His cell rang, and Caitlin told him Ian had arrived. Terry chided her kindly. Calling someone on the phone within the same house was symbolic of cultural degeneration. She laughed and promised to walk Ian to the study.

Ian Sheldon didn’t wait for her to announce him when Caitlin opened the study door. The boy had a reckless look about him – dark uncombed hair and muscles that

twitched even when he was standing still. His eyes burned into their subject, the kind of stare that made a weaker person intimidated and a stronger one defensive, but Terry felt neither.

“Thank you for seeing me, Professor,” he said with a staccato voice.

“Call me Terry. I’m not into formalities any more than you are,” Terry pointed to the leather sofa in front of the fireplace. “Sit down and tell me what’s on your mind.”

Ian beat him to the sofa and sat stiffly. “You’re not expecting casual conversation first. I appreciate that. I’ve held this in long enough.”

Terry pulled up an armchair and sat facing him. “You’re troubled? I thought you came to discuss your paper.”

“Can’t write my paper. Not since I saw your book.”

“Which one?” Terry asked, but he knew. Didn’t analyze how he knew – he’d written over a dozen books Ian might be familiar with. Without waiting for an answer, he got up and took a copy of *Gift of Remembrance* from his bookshelf.

“Yes, that one.”

Terry handed Ian the book and sat. He waited for Ian to open the cover, but the young man’s hot eyes stayed fixed on the book jacket.

“Did the book disturb you?”

“Not your book. I admit I haven’t read it yet. It’s the cover. That picture.” Ian’s breath turned shallow. Drops of sweat trickled down his neck.

What Terry thought would be an ordinary meeting piqued his interest. He perceived layers beneath the surface of the brusque student, and the thought of uncovering them excited him.

“Could you tell me where it is?” Ian placed his finger on the center of the ship.

“May I ask why you’re interested?” Terry leaned back and folded his hands. “I have some creative control over my book covers. I rather like this image. I believe it’s evocative.”

Ian snorted a laugh. “You can say that again. It hit me. I don’t know how else to describe it. I need to know as much about it as I can.”

Terry reached out and Ian handed him the book. “I found the original photograph myself when I was doing research for the book in Duluth, Minnesota. Looks like an ocean, but this is Lake Superior. *Gitche Gumee*, as Longfellow called it. The ship was a freighter, heading for Duluth to pick up iron ore from the mines in Northern Minnesota. According to the woman who sold me the photo, this ship never made it.

The great lake holds the secrets of over three-hundred shipwrecks.” Terry paused. Ian was shaking.

“Thank you,” Ian said after a period of agitated silence. “That makes sense. Not that any of this makes sense, but...”

“Are you familiar with the region? Quite beautiful, but I visited in the summer. I hear winters can be deadly.”

“Not really. I mean, I’ve never been there.”

Terry watched him. Close to eruption, the rising lava in Ian’s volcano sought release. No way of knowing if it would trickle out or explode. Although he felt concern for the boy, he was convinced Ian had come to the right place. He would find answers—not all of them, but he would find something. Unsure how to proceed, Terry waited.

“I had a dream,” Ian said. “But when I woke up, it didn’t go away. It’s been with me for weeks and it’s driving me crazy. I know you study...other things.” His eyes darted to Terry’s bookshelves. “I read your blogs. I didn’t think I should bother you, but when I saw the cover I had no choice.” He coughed.

Terry went to the bar, poured a glass of seltzer and handed it to Ian. “Tell me about the dream. You’ll be relieved to tell it. I can’t promise you resolution, but the pressure will lessen.” He didn’t tell Ian how the pressure now zipped inside him. The sensation felt kindred—not to be feared, but explored—and Terry welcomed it.

“The cold,” Ian stated. “It began with the cold. I didn’t know you could feel cold in a dream. And wet. Spraying all over me. Icy. It made me numb. I wondered how it could be so cold and not freeze.” He shivered. “Then I heard a roar—no, a moan, like something alive. It stopped. The wind came in and I heard it again. Not as loud, though. The sound never went away, but it faded into the background. It seemed to take forever, but finally my eyes worked. I saw where I was. I was on the deck of a ship.”

Terry edged his chair closer. “Tell me about the ship.”

Ian’s voice steadied. “Here’s the thing. It wasn’t a cruise ship. I’ve been on one. Nothing like that. It smelled like...I don’t know...like grease. Like a car repair shop.”

“Was anyone with you?”

“Not really. I had the impression there were others, but I couldn’t see them. A light from somewhere jiggled around. It was like watching an old film. The scene jerked and the timing was too fast. I was scared shitless. I knew we were going down. I ran around like crazy, but I couldn’t stop it. I was going to die. I didn’t see the water below me, but I felt it waiting with a wide open mouth.”

"You're a writer," Terry said. "Most people aren't able to describe a traumatic event."

"I'm living in it. I live in it every day."

"Would you call this a recurring dream, then?"

"No. It came to me once, but it stayed. It possesses me." Ian leaned back on the sofa. "I'm exhausted. I can't move on until I break free from it."

Terry handed the book back to Ian. "And you think this photograph is a clue?"

"I saw the picture and it stuck. It matched. In fact..."

Terry waited, feeling unsaid dialogue taking place between them.

"You fit in, too. I came to Columbia because of you. I didn't know why I had to study with you until I saw your book. And one of your blogs proved I was right."

Terry knew, but he asked. "Which blog?"

"Past-life regression. A year ago I would have laughed. Hell, I would have mocked you. I'm a skeptic. I mean, I was a skeptic until the dream took over my life." Ian finished his seltzer and placed the glass on the end table. "I must sound like a maniac."

"Not at all."

"Would you help me? You do it, don't you? The past-life regression thing."

Affection for the troubled student rose, and it felt good to care. "Come to dinner on Thursday night. I can't promise you anything, but let's see what happens."

CHAPTER 4 - CONFESSION

Feeling like an eavesdropper, Olivia unfolded the sheet of paper she'd found in the book. Handwritten— who wrote anything by hand anymore? Even class notes were taken on laptops. She'd never seen more elegant script, the kind of penmanship you'd expect from the Nineteenth Century or before. Each word seemed as carefully drawn as an artist's sketch.

But the words above the lines at the top of the page were different— rushed, almost scribbled. Written in pencil, not the blue pen used in the body.

Olivia,

Original - no copies. Return it or toss it in the trash. Your choice. TM

She had no idea why Terry sent it to her, let alone placed such trust in a girl he'd just met. But they excavated common ground, he'd said. Almost strangers, they shared the identity of loss, and this united them. As she'd felt when she met Caitlin, intimacy grew quickly in their environment.

Working title: Out of Sync.

The title spawned an image. She saw a landscape with earth and sky out of harmony, as though the painting had been cut into pieces and put back together carelessly. The edges of the horizon didn't match. Points of land jutted into the sky where they didn't belong. Trees were cut at the trunk, and their branches hovered like spaceships. A couple had been holding hands in what should have been the original painting, but their hands had been severed. The woman was trapped in the tree branches above and away from her lover. Untouchable. Out of sync.

Olivia read the first sentence, and then went back and started over. She wanted to hear Terry's cadence, so she read the page aloud.

Emily worked hypnotically, and when I stepped into her studio at ten, she didn't notice me. The intricate lines of a monarch's wings possessed her. It was early for me, but I knew she had risen before sunrise. I'd felt the loss of her when she left our bed. Her preference for predawn had been the subject of affectionate bickering on my part. I rarely went to sleep before the early hours of the approaching day and never understood the call she heard when the city rested from the clutter it would later face.

Hope awakened Emily each morning— hope rather than plan, and she baffled me. Optimism was an endearing but foreign aspect of my Lover, my polar opposite.

I held a mug of coffee as I watched her focus. Only a marked disturbance would rouse her, and I did not intend to break the spell. The coffee tasted as I preferred it, dark and a step from bitter.

Emily always took her coffee light, flavored with vanilla or cinnamon or some new spice. Attracted to scent and touch and sound as well as sight, her tastes translated to her art. In her paintings, one could feel the warmth of flesh or the cold of rain, the aroma of the setting, and the musical score underpinning all of it.

While I was commercially successful and considered bold in my use of language, my darling's artistry trumped me. I felt it unfair how accolades had avoided her, but Emily scoffed at the idea. Material success had nothing to do with art. Forever content to paint without ambition for remuneration or acclaim, she did her work for love alone.

Particles suspended in the morning light reminded me of the fairy dust sought by children. I had a passing wish to return to a place of fundamentals like wishing, believing, expecting, but the thought had nowhere to nest. A thumping in my temples sent it away.

Beneath the pulse, I heard the jealous beast. It tolerated no competition, not even the lure of my beautiful wife. I had dark respect for its power, since it had quelled any token resistance I'd made in the past. I was the lone rebel without a weapon, and it was the grand imperial guard. Better to surrender than face the consequences of mutiny.

Heroin. Dear God. Heroin owned me.

Olivia's voice broke on the final sentence. A tear fell and landed on the word *heroin*. Terry was a novelist, but the story was not fiction. He'd entrusted her with the opening of his memoir.

She was rereading the text when her phone rang. Caitlin spent a moment gloating over the exhibition, promising Olivia it was the first of many and predicting an early breakthrough in an almost-impossible market. Less than one-percent of artists made a living from their art, Caitlin said, but Olivia would defy the odds.

Caitlin's optimism didn't take root, and only when Caitlin asked her to dinner on Thursday did she react. Yes. Yes, she'd bring her portfolio. She looked forward to seeing him – them – again. And yes, she received his book. No mention of the draft, though. The page was Terry's secret.

Caitlin had always been intuitive, but Terry dismissed her instant dislike for Ian Sheldon. When she tried to dissuade him from having Ian over for dinner on the same

night as Olivia, Terry reminded her – a party of three was awkward at best. A foursome gave the evening some hope of enjoyment.

“You’re so pompous, Daddy. I hope Olivia won’t be uncomfortable. She’s pretty shy, you know.”

“She’s an artist,” he said. “It’ll do her good to learn how to navigate through social waters.”

“But you could have chosen a more appropriate guest.”

“I didn’t choose Ian,” He grinned at his daughter and prepared himself for the reaction he knew he’d get. “He chose me.”

Caitlin pouted as she’d done since she’d turned three. “You’re hopeless, you know.”

“Hopeless? Not at all. I’m looking forward to the evening. I have no idea how it’ll turn out, but that makes it interesting.” He took Caitlin’s hand. “Did you find out what she likes to eat? She’s so thin. I wonder if she’s vegetarian.”

“Vegan,” said Caitlin. “I guess we’ll do Indian. Chana Saag, maybe. But Ian’s so hyper. I bet the spices will bother him.” She grinned. “Maybe he’ll get heartburn and leave early.”

Ian was the first to arrive for dinner, and it didn’t set well with Terry’s plans. Caitlin had asked Olivia to come at 6:30 and he’d told Ian to come by 7:00. That would have given him a bit of time with her before dinner to get her reaction to the first page of his memoir. But at 6:40, Ian rang the bell.

Nevertheless, Terry greeted Ian warmly and offered him a drink. The boy needed it. He seemed even more fidgety than before, but this time Ian avoided eye contact. His attention darted to objects in the room and back again like a boomerang. Terry winked at Caitlin as she stood in the doorway and watched. Once again, she’d been right. Ian would be a difficult dinner guest.

“I’m reading the book,” Ian said. “I had to take off the book jacket, though. I couldn’t open it otherwise.” He snickered with nervous energy. “I wanted to ask you about the girl. I’m not the...” He sipped his wine and tapped on the glass with too-long fingernails. “I’m no romantic. In fact, at first I thought your work was too...I don’t know...emotional. You know, for a man.”

“You’re typecasting us now, Ian. I thought young people had abandoned those conventions long ago. We’re equals, men and women. Society has finally given men permission to express emotion.”

Ian shot Terry a puzzled look before his eyes darted again. "Is she really a work of fiction?"

"Lily?"

"Lily Star," Ian said, too loud. "Even her name..."

"Her name is real. I learned about Lily while I was doing research in Northern Minnesota. A rich setting for a story from the 1940's. The old traditions ruled the social structure back then, with the mining and shipping industry fueling Duluth's economy. Men were expected to be rough. Decisive. The women compliant and without opinion. Even today, I imagine the good people of the upper Midwest remain more conservative than the rest of us."

"But Lily is different. She has a defiant streak." Ian's eyes brightened. "I can't imagine someone so real being the product of a writer's imagination."

Terry didn't try to hide his amusement. "I'll take that as a compliment. But Lily's stunning defiance generates some extreme reactions. I'm not sure she is wise, considering what happens to her later." He cleared his throat. "Sorry. I shouldn't be giving away the story."

"But that's the point. She's honest. She doesn't play the game."

"True enough."

"I can't get her out of my mind. I picture her. Was she blonde?"

Terry chose his words cautiously, sensing another reaction in Ian that bordered on the extreme. "Lily is whatever you want her to be. I never go to great lengths to describe a character. I won't insult my readers like that."

Ian sighed. "So now, I have one more obsession to deal with."

Terry motioned Ian into the dining room. "Well, let's deal with them one at a time. Is the shipwreck still troubling you?"

Ian gulped the rest of his wine. "The only time I get any sleep is when I'm so drunk I pass out. Even then, those waves keep coming." He scowled. "Sometimes I think my heart's going to explode."

An unnatural move for him, but Terry placed his hand on Ian's shoulder. "Perhaps you'll find some answers after dinner."

"I hope so." Ian turned suddenly toward the door. "Do I know you? You look familiar."

Olivia and Caitlin stood at the doorway.

"I don't think we've met," Olivia said. She glanced from Ian to Terry and gleamed. "Sorry I'm late. I was painting and lost track of the time. I apologize. I should have changed."

Terry watched the gentle rise of her chest as she inhaled. Dressed in dark jeans and a canary-colored tank top dotted with tiny splatters of paint, she looked like she belonged in a SoHo window display. Her hair, golden chaotic curls, fell past her shoulders.

"You look lovely. What's the word? Shabby-chic."

Caitlin chuckled. "At least I've taught him a few new words. But I agree. They'd sell a top like that at Barney's for two-hundred or more."

"I wouldn't know," Olivia said, grinning. "GAP is about as high end as I get." Ian shuffled.

"Olivia, this is Ian. He's one of my grad students."

Ian stepped up to Olivia and held out his hand. She took it.

"Are you a writer?" she asked.

"I was. I mean, I haven't written lately. I guess that's why I'm here."

"You're here for dinner," Caitlin said. "Pleasure before business."

"Good advice," Terry said. "Olivia, sit next to me, if you don't mind."

Ian stepped up to the table as Olivia took her seat next to Terry. Caitlin walked to the chairs opposite them and motioned to Ian.

"Did you bring your portfolio?" Terry asked.

"It's in the hall. I'll warn you, though. Some of my sketches are pretty bad. They date back to..." She stopped.

"2001," Terry said.

"Yes. I began drawing that October. It gave me something to do. My guardian was a psychologist and she thought it would be good therapy. My drawings were so awful nobody expected I'd go into art."

Ian gazed steadily at Olivia and seemed to find reprieve from his jitters.

"Well, I look forward to seeing the awful stuff," Terry said. "And have you decided to part with your beloved Adonis?"

By the look on her face, Terry knew he'd asked the *Question*. Olivia, doing a poor job of camouflaging her ambivalence, shrugged.

"An artist needs to sell her work," said Caitlin. "That's what it's all about."

Last thing he wanted, but Terry felt a barrier between them. Olivia shifted nervously, and he imagined she wished to return to her studio and hide among the paintings that had become her only family.

Ian broke from his self-absorption and turned to Caitlin. "Maybe she's not ready." He looked at Olivia. "Don't let them talk you into anything you don't want to do. I know that feeling."

"Do you?" Terry heard the challenge in his own voice. His dinner guests didn't make a good mix. Ian annoyed him, and he wished he'd thought it through before inviting him.

"I hope you don't mind eating vegan for one night, Ian," Caitlin said.

"I'll try anything once," he said.

Willing away the distance between Olivia and him, Terry patted her shoulder. Her skin was moist to the touch.

"I don't mind waiting. Maybe I could commission a painting. That way, it would be mine from the beginning. I do understand separation anxiety. I've lived with it for thirty years."

She smiled. "Thank you. I'd love to do a painting for you."

CHAPTER 5 - REGRESSION

After dinner, Terry invited them into the study. Caitlin declined, excusing herself to relieve the nanny and put Nina to bed. Olivia tagged behind Terry and Ian. In the study, Ian rushed to the bookshelf and grabbed *Gift of Remembrance*. He tore off the book jacket, and let it drop to the floor.

"Have you read this?" He asked Olivia as Terry walked to the bar and mixed a whiskey sour.

"I intended to read it this week, but I got distracted." She glanced at Terry. "But I'm looking forward to it."

Content to watch their interaction from a distance, Terry stirred his drink. The book was shaking in Ian's hand as he flipped through the first few pages. Olivia stepped back. Ian's anxiety made her uncomfortable, Terry thought, and a part of him wanted to set her at ease, offer her a drink, and sit beside her. But, he stayed at the bar analyzing the odd dynamic in the room.

"Here – this is the part I was looking for." Ian pointed to the open page with savage eyes.

"Let me guess the passage," said Terry. "Is it a sign of weakness that I would give my life and heart for a girl – hardly more than a child – named Lily Star?"

"Yes." Ian's eyes darted from the page, to Olivia, and over to Terry. "That's it. How did you know?"

Terry leaned against the bar and recited the rest of the paragraph – a precious portion of his book. His editor had considered it an unnecessary risk in an otherwise tight manuscript, but Terry had prevailed and they kept it in.

"Weakness or not, I would do it. I believe the transaction has already occurred. In a time past, I purchased Lily with my blood, and now she is mine." Terry took a drink. "The prose is a bit sappy for contemporary tastes, but I like the analogy. At my age, I don't write for the pleasure of others as much as I write to satisfy myself."

"Read it to us." Ian held out the book.

"I'd love to hear it. If you want to," said Olivia.

Not his plan, but Ian's compulsion intrigued him. He left his drink and joined them. When Ian handed him the book and dropped into the armchair across from Olivia, Terry took a seat beside her on the sofa.

"I gave this reading at the bookstore in Lincoln Square last week. I was pleased with the audience reaction to this scene. Manhattan has more romantics than I thought,"

He knew the passage by heart, but he kept his eyes on the page as he read.

We walk hand in hand along the bay. Lily laughs when I touch her cheek. She says my hand is rough, not the hand of the poet she believes me to be. Mine are the hands of a laborer, I tell her. I only play the role of poet when I am with her. She conjures the poet and now he lives for her alone. He struggles to create words worthy of her.

As the moon stands guard over the bay, we lie in the tall grass up from the shore. Nobody will find us here. A night owl makes music, interrupted only by the distant horn of an iron-ore freighter on the lake.

"Do you ever wonder where the iron finally ends up? Will it become part of a grand building in New York?" Lily rests against me, and the scent of her skin arouses me.

"If that's where you want it," I say. "I'll send some ore to New York for you."

"Then someday we'll go there, and we'll know you had a part in building the city. I'll tell everybody you built New York City for me."

I laugh at her sweet delusions, but my mind cannot focus on cities or buildings or the ore on the ships. I fumble with the fragile buttons of her shirt. Her breasts rise and fall with her breath. She pushes my hand away and sits up.

"Did I do something wrong?" I ask, wilted by lovesickness. In Lily's presence, I am broken.

"Silly man," she says. Her laughter skips over the water. She loosens her shirt from her waistband and pulls it over her head. The moonlight lands on the mounds of her breasts. With her eyes shut, she places her shirt behind her head and lies back.

"Touch me," she whispers. "I won't wait anymore. Touch me like a man touches a woman. Touch me until I cry."

Darling child, beautiful girl. I obey you. Our surrender liberates us as it has done for generations. We love tonight as we loved in the past—as we will continue to love throughout all time.

Terry felt the heat of Olivia's eyes and the steel of Ian's concentration. Quiet, like a dense cloud, descended. His prose had revived Lily's presence within him. She was

skipping toward the shore, giggling like a child. Her joy washed over him. She twirled like a ballerina, as agile as one who had been trained in the art. In the breeze, her skirt billowed and he again memorized the perfect form of her legs. But as her movements brought her too close to the water, she froze. Fright replaced her happiness, and for a second her eyes lost their shine.

"I know her," Ian said, finally. "I know her like I know myself." His eyes bore into Olivia, and she squirmed.

"It's fiction," she said. "The story is fiction, isn't it, Terry?"

"I'm not sure it matters," Terry said. "Literature connects with people on many levels. Even for the author, characters have a way of coming alive in ways we can't predict. Who's to say they aren't real, at least on a subliminal level?"

"That's way too deep for me," Olivia said.

"This is no different than your art. Adonis is real to me, and yet you tell me he's a work of fiction. Should I disagree with the artist?"

"I'm ready," Ian said. "Ready to face my past. Can we do it now? Olivia, I hope you'll stay for this. I think you're a supportive person."

Terry and Olivia exchanged looks. The poor girl had no idea what was about to transpire. Perhaps he'd been wrong to include her. He hadn't questioned his motivation, hadn't thought it through. The truth was he wanted her here. Selfish on his part, and he wasn't sure the experience would be in Olivia's best interest. He eyed her—wishing her to stay, but resolved to let her go.

"Ian has asked me to facilitate his past-life regression. Are you familiar with the term?"

"Is that some kind of hypnosis?"

She spoke with marked control—too calm—and it worried him. Her eyes widened. Olivia was afraid.

"It can be a valuable experience in self-realization. Ian hopes it will help him with some unresolved issues," he said.

"Issues, nothing," Ian stated. He stood and paced in front of the bookshelf. "I hope it'll save my mind. I'm going crazy."

"If you'd rather not stay, Caitlin would love to introduce you to my granddaughter. We won't be long." He pulled his cell from his pocket. "I'll give her a call. You'd probably rather engage in some girl-talk. I don't blame you."

"No," Olivia said. "I'll stay."

Fear nudged Olivia, but she didn't want Terry to know. Irrational to fear a therapeutic experiment, and it shouldn't matter to her if past-life regression was a valid exercise or New-Age hocus-pocus.

When Terry pulled up another armchair and set it so he and Ian were facing one another, she slipped to the far end of the sofa, wishing to keep a respectful distance from the event she expected would be intense. She positioned herself to have an unobstructed view of Terry's face rather than Ian's. A hint of excitement rumbled within her—curiosity mingled with apprehension. Despite the bizarre situation, she wanted to sit and watch Terry. He moved with the grace of a dancer. The melodic timbre of his voice soothed her. He spoke as both a philosopher and a confidant.

She recalled what Caitlin had said after the reception. Terry's longing led him into outrageous territory, and strange things went on in their house. At the time, she never imagined she would witness his eccentricities firsthand.

"How do I get started? I wanna do this right," said Ian.

"We can't do anything until you relax. I want you to close your eyes and breathe deeply. Try to forget where you are, and why you're here. Focus on a single thought. It can be anything pleasant. But, whatever it is, give it your full concentration. Perhaps a single object. Something you care for."

From the looks of him, relaxation would be impossible. He squeezed his eyes shut.

"Clench your fists. Now release them. Let your jaw go slack. That's it. Imagine that with every breath you're teaching yourself to float...yes, just above the surface of the chair. Keep breathing as you feel yourself hovering there. You're safe. Serene. Good. Find your single focus and visualize it," said Terry.

Olivia breathed in time with Ian. She nestled deeper into the sofa and concentrated on Terry. His gray eyes sparkled as he watched his subject. When he again encouraged Ian to detach from everything save one single thought, she felt him doing the same. Certain that he had no awareness of her, she memorized the contours of his face.

"Deeper," Terry said. "You can tell me what you're seeing, if you'd like to."

"A balloon," whispered Ian. "I've blown it up, and it's the size of a basketball."

"Describe the color."

"Red. Like an apple. Except I can see through it."

"Is it tied with a string?"

"No. The balloon is free. Totally free. That's what I love about it. I tap it and it floats up. I need to keep it from hitting the ground. It's a game I played as a kid."

Terry grinned. "Yes. I know that game. Keep it in the air, Ian. See if you can make it change colors."

"Green now," he said. "I'll make it yellow next time I get a hit."

As the invisible balloon bounced between them, Terry leaned back in his chair. He surprised Olivia with a glance. Her eyelids felt heavy, and she sat up.

In time, the object accomplished its purpose. Ian's conscious energy had dissipated and he slouched in the chair.

"Now imagine the balloon floating through an open door. What color is it now?"

"Purple," said Ian.

"And you see the door, don't you? Is it large enough for you to go through?"

"It's a heavy door. Metal. Narrow. But I can get through."

"Then, go after it. Go through to find your balloon. There's nothing to fear. You can see lights on the other side. And your balloon is floating right inside the doorway. Tell me when you're there."

Time stopped. Olivia watched Terry as he waited for Ian's response. She wondered if he felt confident or uncertain. Ian sat suspended in another dimension, not moving forward but not retreating.

"I'm in," he said after a long blank space.

"And where are you?"

"I'm in a kitchen...no...it is, but not..."

"Step in further, and you'll see."

"A galley. The stew is simmering, but nobody's watching it."

Terry nodded. "Good. Tell me about it."

As Ian described in detail his imaginary environment, Olivia pictured it in her mind as a painting. A massive cook stove, with eight burners. Iron. A narrow table, rough wood, metal chairs. Green walls. The environment was stuffy, and yet stark. She didn't see the balloon and wondered if Ian had forgotten it.

"I don't belong here," Ian's voice rose an octave. "I want to be here, but..."

"Tell me," said Terry. "But first, tell me your name. Do you know it?"

"They call me Mac. I want to be called Mac."

"Is that your name? Shall I call you Mac?"

Ian paused. He was pondering. "I can hear her calling after me. She doesn't want me to go. She's making me feel guilty, but that's wrong. I want to go. She's wrong to try to keep me..." He clenched his fists. His neck tightened.

"She?"

"Lily," he stated. "Lily's upset. I hate when she does this."

Terry's face darkened. As though he suddenly remembered Olivia's presence, he shot her a quick look she couldn't interpret.

"Think about it. What's her real name?"

"I warned her to stay away, but she followed me onboard. She's going to make me look like fool. She needs to get out before we..." Ian's eyes popped open. "I can't listen to her crying. She knows what it does to me."

"Why is she doing this?" Terry asked.

Ian gazed into his imaginary galley. "She's afraid. She's always afraid."

"Of what?"

"Water. Lily's afraid of the lake. She says the lake will take me. The lake is our enemy."

Olivia's heart thumped. Her ears were ringing. Fear seeped into her and she slipped closer to Terry for safety.

"Describe the woman, Mac. What makes her different from others?" Terry asked.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Anything. What makes this woman special? Why are you so troubled by her concerns?"

"I've lived...for her eyes."

"You'll need to be more precise, Mac. I don't understand."

Ian leapt from his chair. "Those eyes! Nobody else has the color of Lily's eyes. They match the flowers in our yard. The lilacs."

Not quite hearing it, Olivia felt Terry sigh.

"Lily is suffocating me with her fear," Ian cried. "I've had enough of her haunting me." He stifled a sob. "I gotta find that damn balloon and get out here."

"It's right there," Terry whispered. "Look, it's at the door. It's slipping through the door now, and you should follow it out. When you do, you'll leave Mac in the galley. He'll be safe there. And Ian will be safe, too."

Trancelike, Ian returned to his chair. Then he placed his face in his hands and cried.

CHAPTER 6 – MOURNING

“I’ve never had an evening like this,” Olivia said after Ian left. She knew their next session would happen without her, and she wished him well. She acknowledged another connection that felt natural despite Ian’s disturbing mannerisms. This was strange territory for her, a world of interaction with people on a level she had previously avoided. Terry walked her out of the study and into the living room.

“I hope you don’t think I’m a crackpot.” A smile lit his face and Olivia found him beautiful. “I imagine the session was not what you expected.”

She sighed, determined to stay true to him. She wasn’t good at conversational niceties and if she were to practice them, Terry would never be the subject. The man had trusted her in his raw honesty and she honored him.

“I admit it was strange experience. I’ve never taken this stuff seriously. A friend of mine is into the Tarot, but I never let her give me a reading.”

Terry watched her curiously. She saw how he concentrated, how his whole attention stayed on her, so unlike people who talked but never really listened.

She bit her lip. “I need to think about this. You know – absorb it. Right now, I’m confused. I’m not sure what happened. This could have been Ian’s imagination. You were reading about Lily, and he brought her into the scene with him.”

“Maybe. My book may have distracted him,” Terry said, but his expression told her the obvious answer didn’t satisfy him. “Would you like a glass of wine before you leave? Caitlin would love to spend some time with you alone. I have an appointment and I better get going.”

Olivia glanced at the ornate cuckoo clock on the wall, admiring its artistry as she checked the time. Past ten. Late for an appointment. She felt a deflating sensation.

Caitlin walked in. “Nina’s finally asleep. But she told me I’m not as good at bedtime stories as you are.”

Terry chuckled. “That’s my girl. Always loyal to me. Would you get the flowers, darling? Then I’ll get out of the way so you and Olivia can talk.”

“I should get going, too. It’s late,” Olivia said.

“I hope my dad didn’t scare you off. I tried to talk him out of inviting Ian.”

“Not at all. I had a wonderful evening. Not what I expected, but this is good for me. I need to stretch myself. You know – experience things I know nothing about.” Like compassion, she mused. Like love. Terry was unlike anyone she’d ever met, and his

idiosyncrasies only made him more fascinating. She wished to know him. Her desire felt foreign and dangerous. As a solitary soul, she didn't know how to react to her want.

After Caitlin left, Terry stepped in close. "I owe you an explanation. I would have enjoyed spending the evening discussing your art, but Ian's situation is critical. He hasn't been sleeping. He's on the brink, and I didn't feel I could put him off. I don't want to fail him."

"I'm glad you included me. You had no obligation to invite me."

"Obligation? I would never consider you an obligation, Olivia. I'm delighted you came." His voice was low, and rich with sincerity.

Caitlin returned with a bouquet of fragrant red roses and white lilies. Terry took them and nodded to Olivia. "My driver will take you home."

"The subway isn't far. I'd rather walk." Seeing the bouquet, she struggled to quell an ugly feeling rising inside her. Terry had a date. Images of cultured, coifed women flashed – the kind of women who still wore fur coats in the winter and didn't care how politically insensitive they looked. Wore diamond jewelry when they went shopping at Saks. The type who'd swooped in and ambushed him at the exhibition. Perhaps Terry would never marry again, but he still had the needs of a man and an array of willing participants.

"Please don't. It's dark out," said Terry.

She was about to dismiss his statement when Caitlin shot her a look that told her to keep quiet. Terry waited, and for the first time, she felt his disapproval.

"I'll let the two of you settle it." Caitlin said. "I'll call you tomorrow." Caitlin pecked Olivia on the cheek and walked away.

"I have an idea," Terry said. "I wonder if you'd like to come with me. It won't take too long. But I'll still insist you take a ride home. This is a dangerous city, after all."

Had he invited her to tag along on his date? But he wouldn't do that. The images of the intimidating women faded, and she nodded.

In the hall, her portfolio lay against the wall and she went to retrieve it. Terry had forgotten to look at her drawings, but she didn't blame him. Past-life regression was a lot more fascinating than her scribblings.

"Would you mind leaving it?" Terry asked. "I'd like to spend some time alone with your work tomorrow morning."

"Sure." Easier to leave it with him than to sit stewing while he analyzed her drawings. She wondered if he picked up on her fear of revealing a part of her that begged for privacy.

"Where are we going?" she asked as they walked to the entry.

"Riverside Park," he said just above a whisper. "It's a special place, and I'd like you to see it."

They stepped outside. An idyllic spring night, but the air had cooled. Terry asked her if she needed a sweater — Caitlin had plenty — but she declined. They crossed Riverside Drive at One-Hundredth, passing a monument to lost firefighters. It was her first time in the neighborhood, and she admired its subtle grandeur and historical ambiance. Parkside, Terry turned north.

"It's not far. Just a few blocks."

"The page from your memoir is in my portfolio," she said. "I meant to tell you earlier, but the timing wasn't right. Thank you for letting me read it."

"Not in the trash, then?" He grinned.

"I can't describe how it moved me. I could paint my impression, but I'm not...words don't come so easily. I hope you'll keep going with it. I'm sure it's painful."

"A relief, though. I've been meaning to write about Emily for decades. A month ago, I finally faced it. I don't want to run out of time with unfinished business."

"I'd like to read more. I'm honored that you gave it to me." To the east, a crescent moon beamed above the buildings. Beyond the stone wall of Riverside Park, a raven cawed boldly.

"They're always here at night," Terry said. "We find ravens portentous, but they are beautiful birds. I wish Emily had...she would have painted them eventually, although she viewed them with a Poe-like quality. The painting would have been one of her darker works, I suspect." He stopped at the wall and stared over the park. "They were cawing that night, too. More of them, as if they were warning..."

Olivia stood behind him and sensed him traveling back, leaving her alone on the sidewalk as he rushed toward Emily — any memory of her. She felt out of place, an interloper in a private world they still shared, a world perched between life and death. The scent of the roses and lilies swirled around her in the breeze. Terry stood resolute, his hair sparkling under the streetlamp. In the fragrance of floral, she inhaled another scent — the scent of him.

"I think I love you," she whispered, too low for him to hear. Life hidden in her scarred heart trickled free.

"I'm sorry," He faced her. "I get carried away."

"I understand."

At One-Hundred and Fourth, they took the stone steps down into the park and walked along a tar path. The high wall isolated the park from the city. To their left, the lawn sloped with a dog run and promenade beyond it. A couple walking two dogs greeted them. Terry patted the dogs and wished the owners a good night. They followed the path to a lone bench. There, another bouquet lay on the wooden seat. The flowers were dried and curled, and their sad beauty fit the setting.

Terry seemed to forget about her again. He removed the old bouquet and walked to a wire trashcan up the walk. After disposing of it, he returned and placed the fresh flowers on the bench.

Olivia squinted to make out the words on the bronze plaque on the bench.

Emily McKinley 1958-1980 My Lover.

Her heart ached for him as he stood there communing with his beloved. She ached for herself, too. The man resurrecting her life would never love her.

"It happened here. Right where you're standing. This is where she died."

Anything she thought to say would have sounded trite. She looked down at the path—their sacred ground.

"She'd finished her butterflies, but she wanted me to see them in the natural light of morning. Emily was funny about light. She detected the shifting and changing of light most of us never notice. When she painted, she knew how light would affect her work. A piece would look different depending on the light source. But you know that, too, don't you?"

"I prefer painting in natural light," she said. "When I'm working with a model, it's the only way I can capture the true flesh tones. But when I paint from my imagination, I see...him...in all types of light. But my work doesn't compare to Emily's."

"She never got to see my reaction to the butterflies. She died that night. By dawn, I was in the hospital. I didn't see the painting for weeks. I think facing it for the first time was the most difficult act I've done in thirty years." His voice was low, heavy with love. "The page you read was how our last day began."

"I admire your strength to talk about it. I don't talk about September 11th."

"But you will. The day will come when you know you have to share it with someone."

"I don't think so," she said. "I'm not as strong as you are."

"Strong?" He sat on the bench beside the flowers. "I'm not strong, Olivia. I'm driven. There's a difference."

Awkward standing there, she was relieved when he placed the flowers on his lap and motioned to her to take the seat beside him. From the dim of the streetlamp a distance from them, she watched the waving shadows of branches on the path. She pictured a couple walking there thirty years ago. They were holding hands, talking about art and literature. Talking about their child. An idealistic image. Hers was not a scene that would end in murder.

"How did it happen?"

"It was my fault. She shouldn't have been here. She belonged at home, but she followed me. I'm not sure why." He stared north and pointed. "They came from over there."

"Who?"

"One of them was my dealer. He always came alone, but he came with his gang that night. I'll never know why. Nothing made sense. When I heard Emily's voice, I panicked, but I don't know what made them attack us. I remember somebody grabbing her hair and hitting her. I saw her fall backward. I don't remember anything after that."

"It wasn't your fault. I can tell how much you loved her."

Sadness, or guilt, covered his face. "I was an addict. I lost my passion for everything except heroine. My work, my daughter, my wife. I gave it my life, and it took Emily, too."

"Did they hurt you?"

"I should have died. To get rid of me, one of them injected me and I overdosed. They tried to make it look like I'd hit Emily because she caught me shooting up. I was supposed to die."

"No," she said. "You were supposed to live."

"Not without Emily." He rose from the bench and stared into the darkness.

The magnitude of his grief hit her. She stiffened and struggled to detach, just as she'd done at fourteen. Wouldn't cry. Couldn't.

"Lucky for me, the plan failed. The fingerprints on the syringe weren't mine, so the cops knew I was a victim, too. They didn't know about my..." Terry rubbed his eyes. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"The important thing is you survived. You have Caitlin and Nina, and you've written wonderful books. Your life matters."

"Well, the world is not about me. Caitlin needed me, and now we have Nina. That's why I'm still here." He placed the flowers beside her and held out his hand. She

took it. His hand trembled when she stood. Face to face, holding hands, they exchanged a smile, and Terry defined it.

“Shattered hearts. It takes another shattered soul to understand. I pray to God Caitlin and Nina never understand. And I’m sorry you know grief, but I’m grateful we met. When you’re ready to talk, I owe you one.”

Olivia doubted she would take him up on his offer. At that moment, holding his hand was enough. She felt real for the first time in nine endless years.