

# Dead Man's Touch

Kit Ehrman

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Poisoned Pen Press  
6962 E. First Ave., Ste. 103  
Scottsdale, AZ 85251  
[www.poisonedpenpress.com](http://www.poisonedpenpress.com)  
[info@poisonedpenpress.com](mailto:info@poisonedpenpress.com)

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# Chapter 1

There is a gash in the earth where his casket will rest. The sharp dirt edges are draped with green matting. Softened. The stark finality of this place hidden from view. Above our heads, a hot breeze rustles the canvas as a stray beam of light glints off the rounded end of the casket's support. I focus my gaze on the metallic sheen, and even as my vision blurs, I convince myself that all I feel is regret.

Maybe if I'd had some kind of premonition he wouldn't live to see sixty, maybe then I would have made an effort to make it work...to be his son.

The priest concluded his eulogy with words I half listened to. Words extolling the virtues of a man he did not know. When he signaled for us to stand for the closing prayer, I glanced at Rachel and squeezed her hand. She looked more sorrowful, more distressed than I was capable of feeling, and a twinge of guilt nudged my conscience. Her sorrow was for me, I knew, yet she needn't have bothered.

Father had been a strict, controlling authoritarian and little else. And yet, I'd still been surprised when he'd kicked me out of his house for leaving college, and in the past two years, I hadn't gone back.

When the prayer was concluded, Mother stepped across the carpet and placed a dozen white roses on the casket. My brother, Robert, had his arm importantly around her waist, as

if she needed his support, but when she turned to leave, I saw she was in full command of her emotions. As usual, she was dressed to perfection. Her elegant black dress shouted money, and if the designer threads didn't get your attention, her four-carat diamond ring was likely to do the job. The woman could make a statement without opening her mouth.

She paused in front of me. "Stephen, you are coming back to the house, aren't you?"

I glanced at Robert and almost said no, but my sister moved into view behind him, and I changed my mind. Sherri clung to her husband's arm with her long slender fingers bunching the sleeve of his suit coat as she looked at me beseechingly. Her eyes were red-rimmed, and a faint sheen of moisture glistened above her upper lip.

I turned back to my mother and mumbled, "Yes, ma'am."

The corner of her mouth twitched, then she nodded, and the four of them joined the crowd heading toward the row of cars that shimmered in the hot June sunshine.

I put my arm around Rachel's waist. "Guess I changed plans on you, huh?"

"That's okay," Rachel said as she slid her hand along the small of my back, beneath the Armani jacket Mother had had delivered to the loft along with a silk shirt and tie. The getup felt alien after slogging around a horse farm in jeans and work boots. "To be honest, I was surprised when you told me you weren't going."

"Yeah, well...I guess I better. I'll take you home first, if you prefer."

She shook her head. "I'll go with you."

I squeezed her tighter, then we stepped from beneath the canopy into a flood of sunlight. I paused and squinted against the glare. A group of people I hadn't expected stood farther down the slope in the shade of an old oak. Marty and Mrs. Hill, my boss, and behind them, at what I took to be a symbolic distance, Detective Ralston.

“Stephen, my dear boy.” Mrs. Hill came forward and clasped my hand. “I’m so sorry, dear. What a shame.” She patted my arm. “Losing your father at such a young age. So tragic, dear. So tragic. Is there anything I can do for you? Any way I can help?”

“No, ma’am.” I cleared my throat. “I appreciate your coming.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, dear. You know that.” She released my arm. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do.”

“Thank you.”

She nodded, then made her slow way across the grass. She looked dignified in her generous black skirt and blouse, but to my mind, motherly described her best.

“Marty, thanks for coming,” I said.

“Shit, Steve.” He glanced over his shoulder. “She would of canned my ass if I didn’t come pay my respects.”

I smiled at him. “Thanks anyway.”

“Yeah, well. Just kidding. For you, I’d come.” He looked me up and down, then fingered my sleeve. “Man, you clean up good. Almost didn’t recognize you.” His grin faded. “You gonna move back home, now?”

I shook my head.

“Which reminds me,” Marty said, and I knew what he was going to say before he opened his mouth. “Got any idea when you’re coming back to work? It’s been what, eight weeks since you got out of the hospital?”

I glanced over his shoulder at Detective Ralston. “Nine weeks and a day,” I said, thinking about how my life had changed since I’d interrupted a horse theft back in January.

Marty snorted.

“I don’t know, Marty. Soon.”

“Christ. I hope so.” He reached over and awkwardly hugged me. “We miss ya, bud.” Marty grinned at Rachel. “Don’t we, Rache?”

“We sure do.”

“Rache? You’re calling her Rache, now?”

Marty shrugged, and I decided I had better get my butt in gear and get back to work. He filled me in on what was and wasn’t

happening at Foxdale, and when he said good-bye, I watched him stride down the hill with his familiar, carefree gait.

“Steve, sorry about your father.” Detective Ralston shook my hand, and as usual, he’d been quietly observing everyone with intense hazel eyes. “How’re you doing, otherwise?”

I shrugged. “Okay, I guess.”

I watched his attention zero in on the lack of conviction in my voice. He simply said, “Mind if I stop by one afternoon?”

“Sure.”

He shook my hand, and after he left, Rachel said, “It was nice of them to come, wasn’t it?”

“Hmm.”

“They’re worried about you.”

“They’ll get over it.”

She shook her head, then entwined her fingers in mine. “You need help, Steve, and if you can’t see that, you’re worse off than I thought.”

I cleared my throat. “Let’s not talk about that, now.”

She blew her bangs off her forehead and hugged me, then she rested her head against my chest. “I’m just worried about you.”

“I know. It’s just that I can’t deal with it right now.”

“You’ve got to, sooner than later, or you’ll never be happy.”

I put my arm around her shoulders. Beyond the rows of tombstones, the Baltimore skyline lay shrouded beneath a shimmering cloud of heat and exhaust.

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s get out of here.”

I kept the windows down until the pickup’s pathetic air-conditioner kicked out a few stray molecules of cool, and we drove to my parents’ house in silence.

“My God,” Rachel exclaimed as I turned into the hedge-lined drive. “It’s a mansion.”

“That, it is.” Three stories of cold, gray stone. Impersonal. The home of my childhood.

“I had no idea.”

“Yeah. Home-sweet-home.”

Rachel glanced uncertainly at my face, and even I could hear the bitterness in my voice. I idled the truck and listened as the muffler rumbled obscenely in the quiet, opulent neighborhood. The service hired to park the cars was still on duty, but I wanted a quick exit when the time came to leave. I dropped the Chevy into reverse, backed down the driveway, and parked alongside the gate house. I switched off the engine and rolled down my window.

When I didn't move, Rachel slid across the seat and rested her head on my shoulder. "You really need to go in, you know?"

"I don't belong here," I said as I leaned against the backrest, "and I haven't for a long time."

Rachel lifted her head. "Your parents...they make me so angry. You deserved more from them."

I grunted. "Maybe that's been my problem all along. Thinking I deserved more. Why should I have had it any better?"

"Because you're a good, decent person, that's why. You deserved parents who cared more about their kids than their social status."

"Most people would think I had it damned good, Rachel."

"Money isn't everything."

I kissed her forehead. "Let's get it over with."

I walked around the front bumper and opened her door.

Behind me, someone said, "What a gentleman," and I would have known my brother's sour voice anywhere.

I turned slowly around. Robert squinted at me through a haze of cigarette smoke with a sneer twisting his mouth.

"Nice to see you, too, Bobby."

He scowled, and the muscles in his face settled into a pattern they were well accustomed to, deepening the wrinkles around his eyes and bunching his eyebrows together over the bridge of his nose. He'd always hated being called Bobby. Not dignified enough, I supposed. And if I wasn't mistaken, he was already half-soused.

He looked from me to my truck with loathing. "What a piece of junk. Doing well for yourself, I see."

“What’s the matter, Robert? Mother doesn’t need your support anymore?”

“You stupid little shit.” He flicked his cigarette into the grass, glanced at Rachel, then turned abruptly and headed for the house.

I walked over and ground out the butt.

“Nice welcome,” Rachel said as she slid off the seat.

“Yep. Pure Robert. He’s always like that.” I rubbed my forehead. “Well, not always.”

I looked toward the house. “Robert idolized the old man. Ever since I can remember, he’s wanted to be like him. Dressed like him. Styled his hair the same way. Shit, I’m surprised he didn’t become a doctor.” I wrapped my arms around Rachel. “I’m glad you came, you know that?” I whispered as her hair brushed against my lips. “You give me strength.”

She leaned back and gazed into my face. “You’re the strongest person I know.”

I grunted.

“Trouble is, you don’t see it.”

“That’s because it isn’t there to see.”

She tilted her head to one side. “You don’t go through hell and back and come out of it in one piece, unless you’re strong.”

I brushed her bangs off her forehead. “If I’m not mistaken, you were just telling me I needed help.”

“You do, but that’s what guys just don’t get. Just because you need help doesn’t mean you’re weak. Everyone needs help now and then.”

I wished to hell I felt strong. All I felt was uncertainty and self-doubt, as if the fibers that made up who I was were disintegrating before my eyes, and there wasn’t a damn thing I could do about it.

Rachel looped her arm through mine, and we walked down the drive. When she paused inside the entrance, I glanced at her face. Her lips had formed into a silent “oh.” I followed her gaze to the wide double staircase that flanked both sides of the massive foyer. They curved upward and joined two stories above in

a long open hallway, drawing the eye upward to a magnificent chandelier of sparkling crystal.

The temptation of those broad mahogany banisters had gotten me into trouble more times than I cared to remember. When I was six, and no longer satisfied with simply sending an assortment of toys down the highly polished wood, I had slid down myself and broken my arm. Looking at them, now, I realized I'd been lucky I hadn't broken my neck.

"Something else, isn't it?" I said, and Rachel nodded.

It was spectacular, even to my jaded eyes. My mother's grandfather had commissioned Ephraim Francis Baldwin to design the mansion back in the early nineteen-hundreds, after he'd made a fortune importing and distributing spices to a global market, and neither one of them had been inclined to spare any expense. The marble tile I was standing on had come from Italy, and the intricately carved doors at my back were chiseled from teak that had been hand selected and shipped from the island of Java.

A heavy hand rested on my shoulder, and someone whispered in my ear. "Brings back memories, doesn't it?"

I grinned, and as I turned toward my mother's personal assistant, he clamped his massive arms around me in a bear hug that almost lifted me off my feet.

"My God, boy, it's good to see you." Parker released his hold and gripped my shoulders, instead. "You comin' home, now?"

"Uh, I don't know," I said.

He let go, and the crow's feet etched into his dark skin softened as his smile faded. "No, then."

I shrugged. "You know how it is."

He tousled my hair like he'd done a thousand times before, and a sad weariness filled his eyes. "Don't let 'em get to you, Steve," he said softly.

"I won't," I said as the front doors flew open, and two of my cousins and their girlfriends swept noisily into the foyer. They shook my hand and slapped my back and said all the proper things, then they drifted into the drawing room in search of something to eat.

I nodded to Parker, then I squeezed Rachel's hand, and as we stepped across the threshold, the dense carpet underfoot swallowed the sharp click of our footsteps.

Two long tables divided the length of the room. They were draped in fine linen and overloaded with delicacies only my mother's chef could conjure up. Waiters busied themselves offering drinks. I scanned the room but only recognized a couple of faces, which was no surprise as most of the crowd were from the hospital or the numerous benefits Mother committed. A new Monet hung above the fireplace mantel, offset by crystal vases brimming with calla lilies. As always, the overall impression was one of unselfconscious wealth.

I led Rachel over to an arrangement of high-backed chairs alongside one of the tall, narrow windows that lined the west-facing wall. Beyond the glass, early afternoon sunlight sparkled on a reflecting pool in a formal garden that had been off limits when I was growing up.

"Would you like something to drink?"

Rachel nodded absentmindedly. Guess the place wasn't what she'd expected from someone who spent his days mucking stalls.

I intercepted one of the tuxedoed waiters and snagged two tall iced teas complete with lemon wedges and mint sprigs.

"Oh, Steve."

I smiled softly and turned to find Sherri at my side.

She wrapped her arms tightly around my waist. "I've missed you so much." Her voice was muffled against my chest.

"I've missed you, too, Sher," I whispered. "How's California treating you?"

She straightened. "Good. Alex is wonderful, business is booming, the weather can't be beat. I love it."

"I'm glad."

Alex drifted over as Sherri disentangled herself. She narrowed her eyes and studied me. "You've lost weight."

"A little."

"I'm sorry I didn't make it out when you were in the hospital."

“Believe me,” I said, “you didn’t miss anything.”

She swallowed and shook her head. “I almost lose my baby brother because of some maniac, and Mother doesn’t even bother to call me. Five days, Steve. It took her five whole days after you were shot before she picked up the phone.” She frowned. “I don’t know what her problem is.”

“Mother’s problem is what it’s always been...Father.”

“Steve, that’s unfair.”

But true, I thought and decided I had better keep my opinions to myself. Sherri had always been Father’s little girl, even when she’d chosen to marry beneath her social position. And it wasn’t as if she’d scraped the bottom of the barrel when she fell for Alex Carter. Californian by birth and appearance, with windblown blond hair and a year-round tan, Alex was sole owner of a profitable landscape firm. It was his habit of working with his crews and getting just as dirty as they did that had really irked Father. Alex stood beside Sherri now, looking at her with such obvious love, I felt overwhelmingly happy for them and even managed to ignore a selfish twinge of brotherly jealousy.

“I can’t believe he’s gone,” Sherri mumbled.

“Me, either.”

Alex moved closer and embraced her. As she leaned into him, he nodded. “Steve,” he said, “my condolences.”

“Thanks, Alex.” I looked to where I’d left Rachel and almost dropped our drinks.

Robert had Rachel backed up against the wall. He towered over her with his broad hand braced on the gold-flecked wallpaper. She shook her head in response to something he’d said and glanced in my direction. I took a step toward them as Rachel ducked under his arm and threaded her way through the crowd. She smiled when she reached me. It didn’t quite work.

“Boy, I’m thirsty.” She removed a glass from my hand and took a sip.

“Stay here.” I sidestepped her, and she grabbed my arm.

“No, Steve. Don’t.” Rachel tightened her grip. “Please.”

I unclenched my teeth. “What did he say?”

“Nothing,” Rachel said as Sherri edged around her. “Nothing important.”

“Oh, hi. I’m Sherri, Steve’s sister.” She nudged me in the ribs.

Robert was staring across the room with such open hostility, I was only vaguely aware of Rachel introducing herself.

Sherri followed my gaze and sighed. “Oh, Robert. He’s a mess.”

“What else is new?”

“He shouldn’t be drinking,” Sherri said. “Not today.”

She turned back to Rachel, and I formally introduced them.

Sherri hugged her as if they were long-lost sisters. “Steve’s told me so much about you.” She glanced at me, and I caught a mischievous glint in her eyes. “I’m so happy the two of you are together.”

I grinned at my sister. With her living a continent away, we talked very little.

“Rachel, while you two are getting acquainted, mind if I go upstairs for a minute?”

“No. Go ahead.”

I climbed the stairs, and midway down the hall, I paused outside the second door on the left and slowly turned the knob.

Except for a stale odor of disuse, the room hadn’t changed. When I closed the door, my lacrosse stick rattled against the wood like old times. I unhooked my helmet and dropped it on the desk, then I lifted the stick off its hook. The feel of the smooth varnished wood in my hands, the weight, the balance, even the faint smell of the net were surprisingly familiar. Welcomed. Triggering memories of long afternoons and wide grass fields, of sweat and pain, of burning lungs and muscles cramped with fatigue. Of victories and disappointments. Friendships and rivalries.

I flicked my wrist, catching and throwing an imaginary ball, then I tossed the stick on my bed. I turned slowly around and surveyed the room, a room that was at once comforting, yet strange. Part of another life. A freeze frame of the past. My past.

I fingered the backpack that hung from the desk chair where I'd left it. A program from one of Sherri's concerts lay open on the blotter, and my high school graduation cap was still draped from one of the dozen or so lacrosse trophies on the shelf above the desk. I looked across the room at the poster of a fire-engine red Ferrari and another one over the bed of a hot lookin' babe in a string bikini. I grinned at that one.

Melissa, my former girlfriend, had always hated that poster. I kicked my old rugby ball across the floor, sat on the edge of the bed, and picked up the gold-framed photograph of Melissa and me, smiling into the camera a week before she dumped me, a week before I was thrust headlong toward independence. I'd learned more about myself in the past two years than in the twenty preceding it, not all of it welcomed.

I laid the picture face down, slid my hand under the mattress, and felt the cool smoothness of glass. I wrapped my fingers around the narrow-necked bottle and pulled it out. Cheap, smooth, American blended whiskey, eighty proof. I unscrewed the cap and inhaled the heady vapors. I lifted the bottle to my lips and paused.

Alcohol was the last thing I needed. I rested the bottle on my thigh.

Behind me, someone tapped tentatively, and the door creaked open.

"Hey." Rachel stepped into the room, and her smile faded when she saw the bottle in my hand. "What are you doing?"

I screwed on the cap. "Resisting the urge to have a drink."

She sat next to me. "That's not what it looked like." Her voice was low.

"I know, but that's what it was. I only deluded myself once, thinking this crap would solve my problems." And the combination of pain medication and a steady diet of alcohol had nearly landed me back in the hospital. The threat of going back had been enough to stop me cold. I stood and slid the bottle back where I'd found it.

Rachel shook her head. “What am I going to do with you, Stephen Matthew Cline?”

I bent over and placed my hands on either side of her hips, and she leaned back to keep from being knocked over. “I’m sure you’ll think of something, Rachel...Anne Miller.”

She overbalanced and flopped down on the bedspread. “Ouch.” She shifted the lacrosse stick out of the way and frowned at it. “And you forgot my middle name.”

“Did not.” I grinned down at her, and if truth were told, I’d only had a moderate chance at getting it right.

She giggled. “And we should both be—”

I put my lips on hers and felt her grin fade into a mildly responsive kiss. I moved from her lips to her throat and marveled at the familiarity of her scent. Her skin was smooth, like...

“You played lacrosse, I see.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Look at all those trophies.”

“Um-hum.” I bit her neck.

“You graduated high school with honors?” Rachel said as I slid my hand along her thigh.

“Um.”

“No wonder your father had a fit when you quit college.”

“A break.” I moved to kiss her, and she turned her head at the last second.

“What did you say?”

I slid onto my side and rested my head on my hand. Rachel grinned up at me mischievously, and I couldn’t help but smile at her. I smoothed her bangs off her forehead. “It was a break, Rachel. I was only taking a break. At least that’s what I thought at the time.”

Her grin faded, and I let my gaze travel down the length of her body, across her breasts, her flat stomach, her dress hiked halfway up her thigh, and with regret watched as she stood and walked over to the window.

I stood also. “What did Robert say?”

She turned around. The late afternoon sun streamed through the window behind her and shimmered off her black hair like a halo. I couldn't read her expression, but when she spoke, her voice was somber. "He's so," she waved her hand, searching for the right word, "bitter. What he said doesn't bear repeating."

"You're a pretty smart girl, aren't you?"

She crossed her arms under her breasts. "Uh-huh."

I glanced at my watch. "All I need to do is check in with my mother, then we can leave, unless you want to hang around longer. Get something to eat."

She shook her head. "No, I've seen enough of the high life for one day. I am glad I got to see your room, though." She frowned at the poster girl. "Except for her."

"Awh, Rachel. She means nothing to me."

"Uh-huh." She headed for the door, and I could see her grin. "Except on how many countless nights?"

"Rachel." I feigned astonishment as I closed the door behind us, and she totally ignored me.

Downstairs, Mother, Sherri, and Alex were seated by a garden window. Robert stood at attention beside Mother, looking more and more like an unwanted escort. One more duty completed, and we were on our way. I introduced Rachel, then formally expressed my condolences, and it seemed enough.

"Are you leaving, then?" she said coolly.

"Yes, Mother."

She nodded, said goodbye to Rachel, then headed off to join a group of Father's coworkers. I watched her for a moment, then turned back to Sherri, intending to ask if she'd have time to visit me before she headed back to California, when Robert clamped his hand on my shoulder and spun me around. His drink sloshed in its crystal tumbler.

"Nice little bit of play acting, Lover-boy."

I felt as if I'd been smacked in the face. The last person to call me that had done his level best to make sure I preceded Father to the grave, and he'd damn near pulled it off.

Robert poked my chest. “Did you hear me, Steve? I’m sick of you pretending you care about his dying. You’re—”

“Of course I care. He’s—”

“—nothing but a hypocrite.”

“—my father, too,” I said.

“That’s what you think.” Robert pointed his finger at my face.

“What do you mean, ‘that’s what you think?’” I said, but in true Robert fashion, he ignored the question and kept on going.

“You never cared about him, or listened to him. You’re a spoiled little brat, and you always have been. Hell, your running out early today proves it. Everything that went wrong in this family, went wrong because of you,” his voice cracked, “and I hate you for it.”

“Robert, what are you talking about?” Sherri said.

Robert spun around, and half of his drink splashed onto the carpet. He didn’t notice. “He ruined everything.”

“If you mean Steve not staying in school, then you’re—”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.” Robert turned back to me and focused his gaze on my face, although he had to work at it. “He stopped caring for all of us because of you. All their arguing and week-long fights and him sending us away every damn summer.” He waved his hand. “It’s all your fault. You’re a bastard, Steve, and that sordid little fact tore this family apart.”

## Chapter 2

“Wha—” Sherri began.

I licked my lips. “What are you talking about, Robert?”

“Like I said. You’re a bastard.”

I stared blankly at him.

“Not blood...illegitimate...a bastard.”

It felt as if the walls were closing in on me. I couldn’t move, couldn’t speak.

He smirked. “You’re the result of some putrid little fling, Steve.”

“Robert,” Sherri said, and she sounded out of breath. “You’re crazy. Mother would never do that.”

“Shows how much you know. Always off in some fantasy world, playing your precious violin.”

She looked uncertainly from Robert to me, then she squared her shoulders and looked into his face. “It can’t be true. And if it is, how come you’re the only one who knows about it?”

“Cause I’m older, that’s why. Remember during Easter break, when you were thirteen, and Steve,” Robert glanced at me, “he must’ve been nine or ten, and he ruptured his spleen when he flipped my four-wheeler? Well, the blood work came back all wrong, and Father knew right away that Steve wasn’t his son. I heard them arguing about it, and the following summer, they sent us away. They sent all of us away, Sherri. All because of him.” He pointed his finger shakily in my direction, then slowly dropped his hand. “He sent *me* away.”

I stood with my arms held stiffly at my sides, my hands clenched into fists, and I couldn't feel my feet on the carpet. "It's not true. You're lying."

"Oh, no I'm not." A glimmer of amusement flashed in his eyes. "You're the progeny of some two-bit racehorse trainer."

I twisted around and went after Mother.

Behind me, Robert choked, he was laughing so hard. He gulped, then yelled at my back, "Guess slingin' horse shit's in your blood, huh Steve?"

Mother had turned toward our raised voices with an irritated expression on her pretty face. As she watched me stride across the carpet, I imagined she instinctively realized that her proper little social gathering was about to come unhinged.

"Stephen, I'm warn—"

"Robert says I'm... that Father's... that he really isn't," I shook my head, "wasn't my father."

"Not here," she said sharply. "This isn't the time or—"

"Oh, yes it is. And you're not going to put me off."

Mother spun away from me just as Robert and the others joined us and unintentionally blocked her way. She hesitated, then asked the couple she'd been talking with to excuse us. They drifted off but remained discreetly within earshot. I didn't care.

Rachel slipped past them and stood by my side, and I was conscious of the strength she gave me.

"Well?" I swallowed. "A racehorse trainer. That's what he said."

"I will not discuss this here, Stephen."

So, it was true. As she turned to leave, I clutched her arm.

"Tell me." I relaxed my grip and let my hand drop to my side. "Please. I need to know."

"In the study," she said, then she left the room.

We followed her across the marbled hall and filed into the dimly lit study. With its floor-to-ceiling bookcases, heavy velvet drapes, and thick carpet, I had always found the room oppressively quiet. The air smelled faintly of dust and old books. Robert

clicked the door shut, leaned against the wood grain, and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Well?" I said.

"Yes, Stephen," she said flatly. "It's true."

"Mother!" Sherri raised a trembling hand to her lips.

Alex put his arm around her shoulders, and when I turned back to Mother, she looked me straight in the eye. She was poised and controlled, her back rigidly straight, and there was an air of defiance to the tilt of her chin.

"Did Father know?" I said, asking the one question that would explain so much.

"Eventually." Her voice was calm.

Robert edged between Sherri and Mother.

My heart was pounding in my chest so hard, it hurt. I exhaled slowly through my mouth and said to Mother, "Why didn't you tell me? If I'd known, I might have understood why he was such a cold-hearted bastard."

Robert hooted. "Now, that's a good choice of words, Steve." His mouth twisted in a malevolent grin. "You oughta be careful who you call a bastard. Don't you think?"

I slammed my fist solidly into his nose, and he yelped and went down on one knee. In my peripheral vision, I saw that Mother had clasped a hand over her mouth as blood ran between Robert's fingers and splattered on the thick Prussian rug, and I wondered which she found more distressing, her ruined carpet or Robert's busted nose.

"You're the real bastard, Robert." I shakily grabbed Rachel's hand, skirted around them, and headed for the door.

"Steve?" Sherri said to my back.

I didn't stop. Couldn't. More than anything, I had to get out of that house. We climbed into the Chevy, and when I backed onto the drive, I paused and looked at the house for what was quite possibly the last time.



I awoke sometime after midnight. The air was still and heavy with moisture and unbearably warm. Lacing my fingers behind

my head, I thought how, if a semi loaded with twenty-seven tons of sheet metal hadn't plowed into my father's car, he'd still be alive. I'd still be oblivious, secure and content in the knowledge of my identity, even if I didn't feel loved. Yet, I was sure I had been when I was quite young.

I closed my eyes, and a long-forgotten memory of a hot, sunny day, much like today had been, flooded my mind. We were in the park by the river. He was pitching to me, taking the time to explain position and technique, telling me to keep my eye on the ball. My father had been a muscular, powerfully built man, and even then, his black hair was sprinkled with gray. He carefully lined up his pitch and let go. The ball floated across the space between us, stark white against the green grass. Full of confidence, I had swung without hesitation, and as I lay there some thirteen years later, I could still feel the memory of that swing. I could still feel the impact as the bat connected solidly, the sound of it echoing in my mind. The ball had sailed high over his outstretched glove, and he had whooped and yelled to me that that was it.

I could still hear his voice.

A tear seeped from the corner of my eye and trickled into my hair. I rubbed my face and wiped the moisture from my skin. After I'd made that hit, he had scooped me up and spun me around, his bright blue eyes sparkling with pride as he told me what a great job I'd done.

I opened my eyes, and the image faded the way a dream does with the return of consciousness. I could no longer see his face, hear his voice, feel his touch. And I never would again. I swallowed and tasted salty tears at the back of my throat. Gone forever was the chance, the hope, that he'd be proud of me.

Willing myself not to cry, I stared at the high-peaked ceiling and watched as distant lightning flashed across the paneling. Outside, the night was eerily still. The mockingbird that had been talking incessantly all evening was silent, now, so were the tree frogs and crickets, all of nature holding its breath, waiting for the storm.

Beside me, Rachel stirred.

I hadn't bothered with a sheet, but Rachel always liked to be covered. She'd been restless tonight, and the sheet was twisted around her legs. Her dark hair was fanned across the pillow, and in the dim light, her skin looked pale. I watched as she opened her eyes and focused on my face. She kicked her legs free and rolled onto her side.

Rachel touched my cheek. "Have you been awake long?" Her voice was husky with sleep.

I cleared my throat. "Not long."

"Hmm." She leaned across my pillow and kissed the side of my face. Her lips were cool and dry on my skin. After a moment, she lifted her hand and traced her finger down my face and across my lips, then she kissed me lightly on the mouth.

I pulled her on top of me and wrapped my arms tightly around her.

Even though I now understood the reason for his coldness, I couldn't forgive him. Yet, as irrational as it was, I still longed for another chance.

I pressed my forehead against Rachel's shoulder and closed my eyes. My throat burned with the effort of not crying. She slipped her arm beneath my neck and stroked her fingers through my hair, and I felt unbelievably comforted. After a moment, I rested my head on the pillow. She propped herself on straightened arms, her knees sunk into the mattress alongside my hips, and looked down at me with an expression I couldn't read. Behind her, lightning illuminated the loft, and the first ominous rumble of thunder rattled the windowpanes.

One of my oversized Foxdale shirts hung loosely from her shoulders. I slid my hands up her thighs, across her silky panties, and along her smooth skin, feeling an impression of ribs. I cupped my hands over her breasts. She kissed me with lips and tongue and teeth, with passion and heat, and when the storm finally hit, bringing with it the smell of rain carried on a sudden wind, I hardly noticed.

By the time she slid off me and collapsed on the damp, crumpled sheets, the storm had rolled through the valley and was fading in the distance. I lay still, breathing hard, and listened to the rain pelted the tin roof while a cooling breeze drifted across our skin.

Rachel pulled the sheet up to her chin, then moved her arms up and down, billowing the sheet and letting it drop back down, doing it over and over again.

“What’n the hell are you doing?” I asked with a grin in my voice.

“Cooling off.”

“Hey.” I sat up. “I have an idea.”

“What?”

“Let’s go outside and stand in the rain.” I jumped to my feet, reached across the bed, and grabbed her hand. “That’ll cool us off.”

“What? Are you crazy? Somebody might see. Plus, it’ll be freezing.”

“No, it won’t.” I pulled her off the mattress. “And nobody’ll see. Not out on the deck. Not this time of night.”

“What about Greg and...?”

“They’re asleep.” I frog-marched her into the kitchen.

She giggled. “And how do you know that?”

“I just do.”

“Greg might be on a call or something,” she said over her shoulder.

“Well then, if he’s an incredibly lucky man, he’ll be coming home just about now and catch a glimpse of your gorgeous, naked body.”

“Steve.” She stood still while I flicked the dead bolt and opened the door. When I slid my arm around her waist and propelled her forward, she planted a hand on either side of the doorframe and braced her arms. “Steve, this is silly.”

“No, it’s not. It’ll be fun and different, and maybe a little crazy, but I’ve always wanted to stand in the rain without any clothes on.”

She giggled. "Go by yourself, then."

"Things like this should be shared." I slid my hand up her side and tickled her armpit. She shrieked and jumped through the doorway.

The rain was colder than I'd expected. We hugged ourselves and hopped from foot to foot, giggling like idiots. But in a few seconds, the rain didn't seem so cold. Rachel stood still then and felt the uniqueness of it. The rain and the breeze and the dark. She closed her eyes and tilted her head back. There was something stirringly primitive, almost forbidden, about standing in the rain and the wind, feeling it against your skin. When she opened her eyes and looked at my face, a subtle change moved in her eyes.

"I've never made love in the rain," she said.

"Me, neither." I stepped over to her and smoothed my hands along her shoulders, slick with sweat and rain. "And I think we ought to correct this deficit, don't you?"

"Hmm."



Sunday evening, after I drove Rachel home, I hesitantly picked up the phone and called Mother.

"What's his name?" I asked.

"What?"

"The racehorse trainer. What's his name?"

She sighed. "Why don't you leave it alone?"

"Because I can't. What's his name?" A pause, and I knew she wasn't going to answer. I also knew that appearances were more important to my mother than anything else, and God help the person who marred that picture. I said, "If you don't tell me," I said, "I'll be forced to ask around until I find out."

"You can't be serious."

"What's your girlfriend's name? The judge's wife? Miles, isn't it? Sharon Miles? I could start with her."

I listened to her disembodied voice, thick with anger, as she told me his name.

“Wait,” I said before she could hang up. “Does he know? Does he know I’m his son?”

“No, Stephen. He doesn’t have a clue.”

The following morning, as light seeped into the eastern horizon, I nosed the pickup off Greg’s farm and headed south on Interstate 95 on my way to Washington Park, home of Thoroughbred racing at its finest or so the commercial said. I wasn’t sure I was doing the right thing, wasn’t even sure I wanted to meet him. But I was certain of one fact. If I didn’t, I would always wonder.

I let the truck roll to a stop at the bottom of the off ramp, flicked on the dome light, and glanced at the map lying open on the seat beside me. I turned left and drove through the center of town. After a mile or so, I made another left. A ten-foot-high chain-link fence bordered the road, and beyond, barely visible in the early morning light, stood row after row of identical-looking barns. The backside.

When I reached the guard post, I breathed a sigh of relief. It was busy. Two cars and a pickup waited in line for the guard to wave them through. When the truck in front of me, older and rustier than my own, drove off, I pulled up to the guard’s window.

“The name’s Cline. I have an appointment with Mr. Kessler.”

The guard, an elderly black man with wiry arms and enlarged, arthritic knuckles, scanned his clipboard. “You’re not on my list.”

“He probably forgot to phone it in. Could you give him a call? Remind him?”

He eyed the growing line behind me, snatched up the phone, and punched in a number. After a second or two, he hung up. “It’s busy. Here.” He checked off a line on a thick, yellow pad and thrust the clipboard across the space between us. “Sign here, and I need to see your driver’s license.”

I scribbled my name, slipped my license under the clip, and handed it over.

"Which barn's he in?" I said when he held out my license. "I forget."

"Sixteen."

"Thanks." I let my foot off the brake and drove down the access road, thankful I'd been able to fake my way in.

Except for different color-coordinated stall guards and feed tubs hanging outside every stall, each building was a duplicate of its neighbor. I found barn sixteen and pulled into an empty space by the perimeter fence. As I walked down the alley between barns, I breathed in the heady, welcomed aromas and felt like I'd come home. I missed my job. Somehow, I'd have to find the courage to go back.

I asked a skinny, black kid where I could find Kessler, and he pointed me toward the far end of the shedrow. I hesitated in the wide doorway. A young woman led a big chestnut mare down the covered aisle that circled the long central row of back-to-back stalls. The horse's lippy ears flopped with each stride as they rounded the far corner.

I was dressed in a tee shirt, dirty jeans, and work boots, and no one gave me a second glance as I stood there, working up the courage to go inside. I wiped my hands down the front of my jeans, walked over to the office, and paused in the doorway. Kessler was standing behind a battered wooden desk with his back to the door. He was on the phone, and there was an edge to his voice that caught my attention.

"No," he said. "If it doesn't stop, soon, Everrod's going to find another trainer."

The office was far from neat. Sheaves of paperwork covered the desk, and stacks of binders were piled haphazardly on top of a row of filing cabinets.

"Shit, you don't think I did? I hired a firm out of Baltimore almost immediately. They were useless." He rolled his shoulders as if he were trying to work a kink out of his neck. "No. Are you kidding? Look, Charles, if I don't find out who's behind this, I'm going to lose—"

Whoever he was talking to cut him off. He rubbed a hand through his hair and listened without comment.

Framed photographs covered the walls. Horses stretched full out, muscles straining as they crossed the finish line. Horses standing in the winner's circle, their coats glistening with sweat. Conformation shots and bloodline charts. Horses gazing from their stalls with alert ears and intelligent eyes.

"Yeah, yeah," he said. "I know."

The huge desk, what I could see of it, was old and scratched, the varnish nearly worn off, and the chair behind it was missing a chunk of stuffing. No attempt at pretense in this room.

"All right. Don't forget." He switched off the cordless phone and stared at the wall in front of him.

When he turned around, I felt like I'd been socked in the gut. Except for an additional thirty pounds or so and an extra inch or two, I was looking into a mirror some thirty years into my future. The same sandy brown hair. The same dark eyes and straight eyebrows. The same nose. The same everything.

Kessler frowned as he set the phone on his desk, and I imagined he wasn't too thrilled that I'd overheard his end of the conversation.

"Can I help you?" His voice was mildly unfriendly.