

One



*342 West Twentieth Street, New York
Saturday, August 2, 2003, 10:30 P.M.*

In the weeks since the accident, I've kept away from the constellation of friends who knew and loved my brother, Samuel. If our paths did happen to cross, they managed to say, "It's a miracle you survived, John," in tones suggesting the opposite.

I wore that one dark moment on the highway like a red-hot brand.

To avoid any more chance meetings, I arrived at Hal Vanderlin's party deliberately late, hoping the crowd had already melted away. I wouldn't have bothered coming at all but Hal had proved elusive lately, not returning my calls or emails. He still owed me a significant amount of money and this party was the one sure chance I had of finding him.

As a child I'd spent hours exploring the Vanderlins' townhouse, losing myself in the dim labyrinth of its halls, opening doors to silent rooms. Most retained furniture from a bygone era—chairs

upholstered in burgundy damask and framed with carved walnut, handmade lace on the arms and headrests. Wardrobes, bookcases, and desks gave off the aroma of camphor and old mahogany. A ghost house. That's how it seemed to me then.

Of all its chambers my favorite was one I called the vanishing room. A large, open rectangle on the top floor, to a boy it looked immense. Two huge mirrors hung on facing walls. If I stood dead center between them I could see myself telescope away to nothing. When I tired of those solitary games I'd run out through the kitchen to the back garden, a jungle of trees and overgrown shrubs. I'd sharpen sticks and tie lengths of string to make bows and arrows then lie in wait for a Cyclops to charge out from the bushes or a giant to swing down from a tree.

Even these innocent recollections seemed tainted now by Samuel's death.

By the time I walked into the party, only the serious hangers-on were left. Among them, Professor Colin Reed had zeroed in on a woman with white-blond hair and china-blue eyes who I assumed had just graduated and was therefore fair game. Tight pants and a clingy silk shirt showed off her firm, fit body.

Reed headed off, to get drinks I assumed. As I was looking around for Hal she caught my eye. I sent her a smile back.

"I'm Eris," she said when we were close enough to hear each other.

"John Madison." She moved a little nearer to me.

"Are you with the bride's or the groom's party?" I asked.

I noticed her eyes widen when she laughed. They were a mesmerizing blue, so intense I wondered whether she used those contacts that enhance eye color. "Yeah, it's funny," she said. "Sometimes these university parties do seem as deadly as your second cousin once removed's wedding."

"You're at NYU?"

“No, an MIT grad. You?”

“Columbia. But some time ago. Hal and I go way back. We’re childhood friends and lately, business associates.”

“Isn’t he a professor?”

“Yes. I’m an art dealer. He’s sold some art objects through me.”

“An art dealer. That’s exotic. You must be a millionaire then.” She chuckled to show this was just a tease.

“Millions of dollars pass through my hands. It hurts always watching them end up in someone else’s bank account. Should have gone into hedge funds.”

That produced another grin. “So you’re a friend of Hal’s?” she asked.

“My older brother and his father were friends. Samuel would always bring me here on his visits, and whenever Hal came home from boarding school or summer camp we’d spend time together. He didn’t have a lot of other friends here in the city. How do you know him then?”

She didn’t answer me and I saw her flick a glance across the room. Reed appeared in the doorway, his bushy fair hair that seemed to stand up vertically from his scalp, somewhat skewed, his reddened nose suggesting this was far from his first drink. He shot daggers at me from where he stood. A signal he was not amused by my monopolizing the object of his affection.

Normally I’d stand my ground, but I had to find Hal. “Sorry I can’t stay and talk.” I pulled out my business card and handed it to her. “I’ve got to see Hal. Give me a call if you’d like to get together for a coffee or something sometime.”

She gave the card a quick once-over and tucked it into her shoulder bag. “I don’t drink caffeine, but I love long walks on the beach and romantic dinners.”

It was my turn to laugh. “Looking forward to it,” I said. I left before Colin Reed came over to break the spell.

In the kitchen, before I went out the back to look for Hal, I put David Usher's "Black Black Heart" on, turned up the volume, and opened a window so the music would drift outside. Usher wrote the song about a woman, but I'd always thought how easily the title could apply to me.

I walked outside on the stone pathway. Soft light glowed from the windows and floated out onto the tangle of garden. The heat of the August night drew the scent from the aspens and spun it through the air.

I took in a deep breath and felt almost content.

I found Hal in the small stone pavilion, sitting in the same old wicker chair his father used to occupy. An oil lamp hung on the back wall, sending out the perfume of citrus. One of his sleeves was rolled up above the elbow, a cream-colored rubber strap binding his arm so tight it made his flesh pucker.

When Hal saw me he flicked off his lighter and set a spoon down on the table beside a ziplock bag containing a grayish powder. "John, your timing is always perfect."

I stepped through the arched entranceway and took a seat on the edge of the stone wall that formed one side of the pavilion. I checked to see whether anyone else had come outside then reached up to pull down one of the blinds. A moth fluttered out, its white wings as thin as tissue paper.

You'd think it was Hal who'd just survived an accident, not me. I was struck by how frail he looked. A pattern of purple bruises dotted his bare arm, entrance wounds for old injection sites. At thirty-three, only a year older than me, he looked closer to fifty.

He frowned. "You're still a free man."

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

"The papers hinted at criminal charges. They said you were way over the speed limit."

“The accident was more than six weeks ago and nothing’s happened. You know they always exaggerate. I’ve driven that route a million times. I could do it blind.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Well, it’s only your word for it now. Samuel can’t argue his side of the case.”

“Hal. You’re about to shoot up. Don’t lecture me about risk.”

He laughed. “There’s no danger unless you have the bad luck to get the pure stuff.”

His addiction was no secret to me. It had started out as a lark, but the odd occasion had become a daily event. Our commercial venture selling off his father’s collection did not have a long future. We’d ripped through most of the family wealth already.

He pointed toward the spoon. “Part of a complete set assembled by Mother. Commissioned by the Spanish royals, so she was told. Sixteenth century, House of Borbón y Grecia. A wedding gift to celebrate the union of Castile, Aragon, and Navarre.”

I picked up the spoon carefully, knowing Hal would freak if I spilled its precious cargo. I could see the crest on the handle: a shield in the lower half, the lion rampant and a castle in the upper two quadrants, a crown at the top. My experience as an art and antiquities dealer had taught me some hard lessons about spotting counterfeit material.

I set the spoon back on the table and sighed. “You know this set is a fake or you’d have sold it by now.”

“You’re right, of course. The one thing Mother purchased with no advice from us. She was so pleased with herself. Father knew right away it was a copy. ‘Badly done, too.’ I can still hear him saying that; it entertained him for an entire fortnight. As always I rose to her defense. I don’t have the heart to sell it.”

“Hal, I only came tonight because you’ve been avoiding me. You owe me almost two thousand for that loan I gave you. When am I going to see it?”

“I have a long list of creditors. You’re welcome to stand in line.”

My voice went a notch louder. “Funny. That’s not what you said when I gave you the money.”

Hal winced as though I’d touched a particularly sensitive nerve. “You’re so aggressive, Madison. So unlike your brother. Samuel taught me to appreciate the beauty of old objects, their stories. It’s been hard to sell off my father’s possessions, but with you, it’s all about the dollars. It’s always been like that between us. ‘Me first,’ that’s your motto.”

Our relationship had always blown hot and cold, but this time I had no patience for his bad temper and my irritation flared into anger. “I’m still trying to recover from the crash. I lost my only brother. Don’t dare use him against me.”

“And I’m about to lose my job. Colin Reed, who this minute is partaking of my hospitality, quaffing down my best liquor and leering at the females, gave me my walking papers late this afternoon. I found out about it too late to cancel the party. I knew they weren’t going to grant me tenure, but I never expected this. And he’s got the gall to show up here. So I’m seriously broke. Even you can’t suck blood from a stone.”

I mumbled a few words about that being unfortunate news.

He waved my remarks away. “You’ll get your money soon. I have something else, anyway, worth vastly more than a hunk of silver.”

“What?” I was a little surprised to hear he’d kept something back from me. “You’re not trying to sell it yourself, surely?”

He tightened the rubber strap on his arm again, ignoring me.

“Hal. Before you float off to never-never land, listen to me. You’ve been satisfied with the prices I’ve gotten for you before. If this thing you have is really valuable you could end up getting ripped off. Sell it through me and you can pay me back that way. For crying out loud, don’t be so stubborn.”

“You’ve made enough off me. This time it’s my turn.” Hal managed a smile and resumed his preparations, a ritual he seemed to enjoy almost as much as the high.

He picked up the syringe and pulled off the cap, dropping it onto the table. The needle looked no wider than a human hair. He drew the liquid into the syringe and cleared the air bubbles. Curling up his left fist, he jabbed the tip of the syringe into his skin, flagged it, and pushed down the plunger. A dribble of blood emerged at the puncture site.

He leaned his head back against the wicker chair as if he wanted to rest. I walked away in disgust, leaving him there, dreamy eyed and slack jawed. Had he found anything of real value? I doubted it. But why would he want to hide it from me?