

NORA ROBERTS

WORLDWIDE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER

NIGHTWORK

'The perfect take-me-away-from the-world read'

GUARDIAN

NIGHTWORK

—1
—0

ALSO BY NORA ROBERTS

*Hot Ice • Sacred Sins • Brazen Virtue • Sweet Revenge • Public Secrets •
Genuine Lies • Carnal Innocence • Divine Evil • Honest Illusions • Private
Scandals • Hidden Riches • True Betrayals • Montana Sky • Sanctuary •
Homeport • The Reef • River's End • Carolina Moon • The Villa • Midnight
Bayou • Three Fates • Birthright • Northern Lights • Blue Smoke • Angels
Fall • High Noon • Tribute • Black Hills • The Search • Chasing Fire • The
Witness • Whiskey Beach • The Collector • Tonight and Always • The Liar
• The Obsession • Come Sundown • Shelter in Place • Under Currents •
Hideaway • Legacy*

SERIES

Irish Born Trilogy

Born in Fire • Born in Ice • Born in Shame

Dream Trilogy

Daring to Dream • Holding the Dream • Finding the Dream

Chesapeake Bay Saga

Sea Swept • Rising Tides • Inner Harbor • Chesapeake Blue

Gallaghers of Ardmore Trilogy

Jewels of the Sun • Tears of the Moon • Heart of the Sea

Three Sisters Island Trilogy

Dance Upon the Air • Heaven and Earth • Face the Fire

Key Trilogy

Key of Light • Key of Knowledge • Key of Valor

In the Garden Trilogy

Blue Dahlia • Black Rose • Red Lily

Circle Trilogy

Morrigan's Cross • Dance of the Gods • Valley of Silence

Sign of Seven Trilogy

Blood Brothers • The Hollow • The Pagan Stone

Bride Quartet

Vision in White • Bed of Roses • Savor the Moment • Happy Ever After

The Inn Boonsboro Trilogy

The Next Always • The Last Boyfriend • The Perfect Hope

The Cousins O'Dwyer Trilogy

Dark Witch • Shadow Spell • Blood Magick

The Guardians Trilogy

Stars of Fortune • Bay of Sighs • Island of Glass

Chronicles of The One

Year One • Of Blood and Bone • The Rise of Magicks

The Dragon Heart Legacy

The Awakening • The Becoming

—1
—0

eBooks by Nora Roberts

Cordina's Royal Family

*Affaire Royale • Command Performance • The Playboy Prince •
Cordina's Crown Jewel*

The Donovan Legacy

Captivated • Entranced • Charmed • Enchanted

The O'Hurleys

The Last Honest Woman • Dance to the Piper • Skin Deep • Without a Trace

Night Tales

Night Shift • Night Shadow • Nightshade • Night Smoke • Night Shield

The MacGregors

*The Winning Hand • The Perfect Neighbor • All the Possibilities • One
Man's Art • Tempting Fate • Playing the Odds • The MacGregor Brides •
The MacGregor Grooms • Rebellion/In from the Cold • For Now, Forever*

The Calhouns

*Suzanna's Surrender • Megan's Mate • Courting Catherine •
A Man for Amanda • For the Love of Lilah*

Irish Legacy

Irish Rose • Irish Rebel • Irish Thoroughbred

Jack's Stories

Best Laid Plans • Loving Jack • Lawless

*Summer Love • Boundary Lines • Dual Image • First Impressions •
The Law Is a Lady • Local Hero • This Magic Moment • The Name of
the Game • Partners • Temptation • The Welcoming • Opposites
Attract • Time Was • Times Change • Gabriel's Angel • Holiday
Wishes • The Heart's Victory • The Right Path • Rules of the Game •
Search for Love • Blithe Images • From This Day • Song of the West
• Island of Flowers • Her Mother's Keeper • Untamed • Sullivan's
Woman • Less of a Stranger • Reflections • Dance of Dreams • Storm
Warning • Once More with Feeling • Endings and Beginnings • A
Matter of Choice*

NORA ROBERTS & J. D. ROBB

Remember When

J. D. ROBB

*Naked in Death • Glory in Death • Immortal in Death • Rapture in Death
• Ceremony in Death • Vengeance in Death • Holiday in Death • Conspiracy
in Death • Loyalty in Death • Witness in Death • Judgment in Death •
Betrayal in Death • Seduction in Death • Reunion in Death • Purity in
Death • Portrait in Death • Imitation in Death • Divided in Death •
Visions in Death • Survivor in Death • Origin in Death • Memory in Death
• Born in Death • Innocent in Death • Creation in Death • Strangers in
Death • Salvation in Death • Promises in Death • Kindred in Death •
Fantasy in Death • Indulgence in Death • Treachery in Death • New York
to Dallas • Celebrity in Death • Delusion in Death • Calculated in Death •
Thankless in Death • Concealed in Death • Festive in Death • Obsession in
Death • Devoted in Death • Brotherhood in Death • Apprentice in Death •
Echoes in Death • Secrets in Death • Dark in Death • Leverage in Death •
Connections in Death • Vendetta in Death • Golden in Death •
Shadows in Death • Faithless in Death • Forgotten in Death •
Abandoned in Death*

Anthologies

From the Heart • A Little Magic • A Little Fate

Moon Shadows

(with Jill Gregory, Ruth Ryan Langan, and Marianne Willman)

The Once Upon Series

(with Jill Gregory, Ruth Ryan Langan, and Marianne Willman)

*Once Upon a Castle • Once Upon a Star • Once Upon a Dream •
Once Upon a Rose • Once Upon a Kiss • Once Upon a Midnight*

Silent Night

(with Susan Plunkett, Dee Holmes, and Claire Cross)

Out of This World

(with Laurell K. Hamilton, Susan Krinard, and Maggie Shayne)

Bump in the Night

(with Mary Blayney, Ruth Ryan Langan, and Mary Kay McComas)

Dead of Night

(with Mary Blayney, Ruth Ryan Langan, and Mary Kay McComas)

Three in Death

Suite 606

(with Mary Blayney, Ruth Ryan Langan, and Mary Kay McComas)

In Death

The Lost

(with Patricia Gaffney, Ruth Ryan Langan, and Mary Blayney)

The Other Side

(with Mary Blayney, Patricia Gaffney, Ruth Ryan Langan,
and Mary Kay McComas)

Time of Death

The Unquiet

(with Mary Blayney, Patricia Gaffney, Ruth Ryan Langan,
and Mary Kay McComas)

Mirror, Mirror

(with Mary Blayney, Elaine Fox, Mary Kay McComas, and R. C. Ryan)

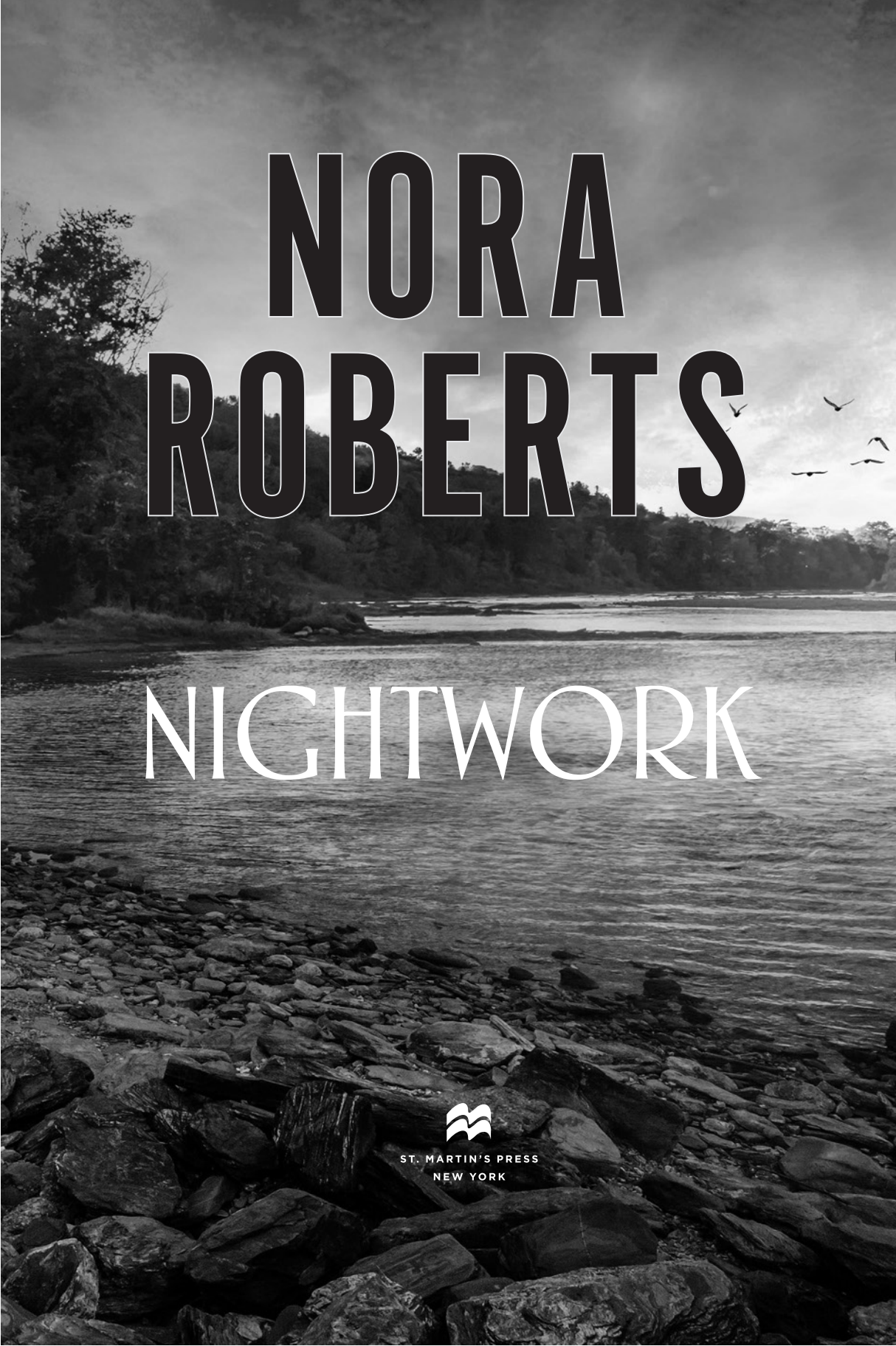
Down the Rabbit Hole

(with Mary Blayney, Elaine Fox, Mary Kay McComas, and R. C. Ryan)

Also Available ...

The Official Nora Roberts Companion

(edited by Denise Little and Laura Hayden)



NORA ROBERTS

NIGHTWORK



ST. MARTIN'S PRESS
NEW YORK

-1
-0

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

First published in the United States by St. Martin's Press,
an imprint of St. Martin's Publishing Group

NIGHTWORK. Copyright © 2022 by Nora Roberts. All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America. For information, address
St. Martin's Publishing Group, 120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271

www.stmartins.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data (TK)

ISBN 978-1-250-27819-7 (hardcover)
ISBN 978-1-250-27820-3 (ebook)

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use.
Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales
Department at 1-800-221-7945, extension 5442, or by email at
MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

First Edition: 2022

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Jason and Kat
My Theater Kids

—1
—0





PART ONE

THE BOY

A boy's will is the wind's will,
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Every one can master a grief but he that has it.

—William Shakespeare

—1
—0

-1—
0—

CHAPTER ONE

When he was nine, and his mother had her first deadly dance with cancer, he became a thief. At the time, he didn't see it as a choice, an adventure, a thrill—though he would consider his career all of those things in later years. Young Harry Booth equated stealing with surviving.

They had to eat and pay the mortgage and the doctors and buy the medicine even if his mother was too sick to work. She did her best, she always did her best, pushing herself even as her hair fell out in clumps and the weight melted off her already thin frame.

The little company she'd started with her sister, his crazy aunt Mags, couldn't keep up with the cost of cancer, the sheer magnitude of the dollar signs needed to deal with what invaded his mother's body. His mother was the backbone of Sparkle Sisters Cleaning Service, and even with him pitching in on weekends, they lost clients.

Lose clients, lose income. Lose income and you had to find money to pay the mortgage on the cozy two-bedroom house on Chicago's West Side.

Maybe it wasn't much of a house, but it was theirs—and the bank's. His mom hadn't missed a stupid payment until she got sick. But banks didn't much care about that once you started falling behind.

Everybody wanted their money, and they added more money onto it if you didn't pay up on time. If you had a credit card, you could buy stuff like medicine and shoes—his feet kept growing—but then all that made more bills and more late fees and interest and stuff until he heard his mother crying at night when she thought he slept.

—1
—0

He knew Mags helped. She worked really hard to keep clients, and she paid some of the bills or late fees with her own money. But it just wasn't enough.

At nine, he learned the word *foreclosure* meant you could be out on the street. And the word *repossessed* meant people could come take your car.

So at nine, he learned the hard way that playing by the rules as his mother had didn't mean much to the suits and ties and briefcases.

He knew how to pick pockets. His crazy aunt Mags had spent a couple of years on the carny circuit and learned a few tricks. She'd taught him as kind of a game.

He was good at it, damn good at it, and put that talent to use. The right and wrong his mom had so carefully taught him didn't mean much either when she was puking in the bathroom after her chemo, or tying a scarf around her bald head to drag herself off to clean somebody's fancy lakefront house.

He didn't blame the people in the fancy lakefront houses, or in the slick penthouses or shiny office buildings. They'd just had better luck than his mom.

He rode the trains, wandered the streets, picked his marks. He had a good eye for them. The careless tourists, the guy who'd had one too many belts at happy hour, the woman too busy texting to mind her purse.

He didn't look like a thief, the slim, young boy just shy of a growth spurt, with a mop of wavy brown hair, heavy-lidded deep blue eyes that could radiate innocence.

He could flash a charming smile or slow-walk a shy one. He might cover that mop of hair one day in a backward Cubs fielder's cap (his dork look) or tame the mop into what he thought of as the private school slick-down.

During the period his mother was too sick to know what was going on, the mortgage got paid—Mags didn't ask; he didn't tell—the lights stayed on. And he had enough to pore through the secondhand stores for what he thought of as wardrobe.

An old school blazer, dress pants, a faded Bears sweatshirt.

He sewed pouches and pockets inside a secondhand—maybe thirdhand—winter coat.

And he bought his first set of lock picks.

He kept his grades up. He had a bright, thirsty mind, studied, did his homework, and stayed out of trouble. He considered starting a business himself—charging for doing assignments for others. But Harry understood most kids were blabbermouths.

Instead he practiced with his lock picks, and used the computer in the library to research security and alarm systems.

Then she got better. Though still pale and thin, she got stronger. The doctors called it remission.

That became his favorite word.

For the next three years, life hit normal. He still picked pockets. He shoplifted—very carefully. Nothing too expensive, nothing identifiable. He'd worked out a nice arrangement with a pawnshop on the South Side.

They had a mountain of bills to carve through—and the money he made tutoring fellow students didn't carve enough.

Besides, he had a taste for it now.

His mother and Mags built up their business again, and for three years in the summers, Harry cleaned and scrubbed and cased houses and businesses.

A young man with an eye on the future.

Then when the mountain of debt had been whittled down to a hill, when the worry lifted from his mom's eyes, cancer came back for another dance.

Two days after his twelfth birthday, Harry broke into his first house. The terror he'd felt that he'd get caught, dragged off to prison, and the trauma of it would join hands with cancer and kill his mother evaporated the moment he stood inside the quiet dark.

In later years, when he looked back, he understood that that was the moment he found his purpose. Maybe it wasn't a good purpose, one acceptable in polite society, but it was his.

He stood, a tall boy now after that longed-for growth spurt, staring out the wide windows at the moonlight spearing across the lake. Everything smelled of roses and lemons and freedom.

—1
—0

Only he knew he stood here. He could touch anything he wanted, take what he wanted.

He understood the market for the electronics, for the silver, for the jewelry—though the good jewelry would be locked up. He hadn't yet figured out how to crack a safe. But he would, he promised himself that.

He didn't have time or the ability now to haul away all the shiny things.

He wanted to just stand there, just bask, but pushed himself to work.

Most people, he'd learned, don't think anything about gossiping in front of the help. Especially if that help is a twelve-year-old scrubbing the kitchen floor while you and your neighbor plan some charity event over coffee in the dining room.

So, keeping his head down, his ears open, and his hands busy, Harry learned about the client's neighbor's husband's stamp collection.

She laughed about it.

"It's become an obsession since he inherited his uncle's collection last year. Can you believe he just spent five thousand on one of those things?"

"On a stamp?"

"That doesn't count the temperature and humidity controls he's had put into his home office where he keeps them. He used to joke about his uncle's hobby, now he's all in. He's haunting auctions and online sites, added his own albums. Now it's an investment, and that's all fine. I mean, what do I care if he has a bunch of silly stamps in his desk? But he's looking up auctions and dealers in Rome so he can check them out when we go next month."

"Let him buy his stamps," the client advised. "You go buy shoes."

Harry filed it all away and decided the universe sent him a big, bright sign when the friend talked about hauling boxes for the event to her car.

He approached the dining room, all innocence. "Sorry, Ms. Kelper, I'm done in the kitchen. Um, did you need some help carrying something?"

“Actually—Alva, this is Harry. Harry, Ms. Finkle could use some help from a strong back.”

He flashed his grin, flexed a biceps. “I can give you a hand before I go up and help my aunt finish upstairs.”

So he walked with Ms. Finkle to the big, beautiful house next door with its big, beautiful views of the lake.

And got a firsthand look at the alarm system when they went inside. No dog, he noted, always a plus.

“Um, are you moving, Ms. Finkle?”

“What?” She shot him a glance as they crossed the wide foyer. “Oh, the boxes. No, we’re holding a charity event, a silent auction. I’m in charge of collecting the items.”

“That’s really nice of you.”

“We have to do what we can for the less fortunate.”

I hear that, Harry thought, noting the open floor plan, the turn to the left. And the double glass doors—closed—with a manly office space behind them.

He carried out boxes, stowed them in the back of a shiny white Mercedes SUV.

And though he wanted it—could’ve used it—he refused the offer of a five-dollar tip.

“It’s for charity,” he said. “But thanks.”

He went back to work, spent the rest of a sunny summer morning with his hands in hot, soapy water.

He and Mags took the train back to his house in silence because today was chemo day, and Mags spent the ride meditating and holding one of her magic stones to stir up healthy vibes. Or something.

Then with his mother in her candy-pink headscarf, they rode to the hospital for the best day and worst day.

Best because the nurse—Harry liked the nurse better than the doctor—said his mom was getting better. Worst because the treatment would make her sick.

He sat with her, reading out loud from what they called their C-Day book. She kept her eyes closed while the machine pumped the medicine into her, but he could make her smile, even laugh a little when he changed voices for different characters.

—1
—0

"You're the best, Harry."

She murmured it while Mags sat cross-legged on the floor at her feet. Imagining, she'd told them, bright white light blasting the cancer.

As always on the best/worst day, Mags made some sort of dinner she claimed had healing properties and smelled almost worse than it tasted.

She'd burn incense, hang crystals, and chant and talk about spirit guides or whatever.

But as crazy as she was, she always stayed the night on chemo day, sleeping on an air mattress on the floor beside her sister's bed.

And if she knew how often Harry snuck out of the house, she never spoke of it. If she wondered where he came up with an extra hundred dollars, she never asked.

Now he stood in the Finkles' lakefront house in the breathless quiet. He moved through it soundlessly, though there was no one to hear if he'd stomped his way to those double glass doors.

Inside the office he breathed in the air that smelled vaguely of smoke and cherries. Cigars, Harry decided as he spotted the humidor on the wide, ornate desk.

Curious, he lifted the lid, sniffed. He lifted out a cigar, mimed taking a few important puffs. For the hell of it—he was twelve, after all—he put it into his backpack.

Then he sat in the high-backed leather chair the color of port wine, swiveled back and forth, scowled as he imagined a rich man might when conducting a meeting.

"You're all fired!" He jabbed a finger in the air, snorted out a laugh.

Then got down to business.

He'd come prepared to deal with a locked drawer, but apparently Finkle considered his home too secure to bother.

Harry found the albums—four in all—and using his penlight, began to go through them.

He wouldn't take them all. It didn't seem fair, plus, it would take too long to move them. But in the past three weeks, he'd done a load of research on stamps.

Finkle had mounted his on black, acid-free paper, used the glassine sleeves to protect them. He had the tongs, but Harry wouldn't

risk those. Without practice and skill, he could tear or damage a stamp and lower the value.

Most sleeves had four stamps across and six down. He chose one from the first album and carefully transferred it to the binder he'd brought with him.

One from each album seemed right, so he replaced the first album, opened the second. He took his time with it, and since Finkle had a handy spreadsheet in each album listing the stamps and values, he didn't even have to work very hard.

He'd just chosen the sleeve from the final album when lights flashed on against the other side of the glass.

With his heart banging into his throat, he closed the desk drawer on the final album, grabbed the last sleeve, and took it with him on his slide under the desk.

Somebody was in the house. Somebody besides him.

Another thief. A grown-up. Three grown-ups. With guns.

They stormed into his mind, three men, dressed in black, packing heat. Maybe they didn't want the stamps. Maybe they didn't even know about them.

Sure they did, and they would come in. They'd find him and shoot him in the head and bury him in a shallow grave.

He tried to make himself smaller, imagined himself invisible. And thought of his mother getting sicker and sicker with worry.

He had to get out, get past them somehow, or find a better place to hide. He started to count to three. On three, he'd crawl out from under the desk.

The blast of music had him jolting so he rapped his head on the underside of the desk hard enough to see stars.

Inside his spinning head he said every forbidden word he knew. Twice.

The second round he directed at himself for stupidity.

Thieves didn't turn on the damn lights, and didn't blast out music.

Somebody was in the house, okay, but not a ring of thieves with guns who'd shoot him in the head.

Carefully—especially careful since his hands still trembled a little—he put the sleeve into the binder, closed it into his backpack.

—1
—0

He combat-crawled out from under the desk and, with an eye on the glass doors, away from the light. Along the journey he spotted a guy—older than he was but not old—in boxer shorts.

In the kitchen, pouring what looked like wine from a bottle into a couple of glasses. He'd nearly made it to the shadows when the girl danced into view.

In her underwear. In that lacy bra thing and that thong deal—like in the Victoria's Secret catalogue that his friend Will's mom got in the mail, and he and Will and some of the guys pored over whenever they could.

Bright red against her skin, and her butt was right there. Just right there. And her breasts were all up there over the top of the bra, sort of jiggling while she shook her shoulders and rocked her hips.

They'd see him if they looked toward the doors, but he couldn't move. He was twelve and male, and the instant woody locked him in place.

She had black hair, long, long black hair she lifted up, then let fall again as she grabbed the wineglass. Drinking, she danced toward the guy. He was dancing, too, but was nothing but a blur to Harry's eyes.

There was only the girl.

She reached a hand up her back, unsnapped the bra. When it fell, every ounce of blood in Harry's body throbbed to his groin.

He'd never seen an actual girl's actual breasts. And they were amazing.

They swayed and they bounced in uncanny time with the music.

He had his first stunning orgasm to Fall Out Boy's "Dance, Dance."

He feared his eyes rolled clear out of his head. He feared his heart stopped. Then he just wanted to lie there on the gleaming hardwood floor for the rest of his natural life.

But now the guy was all over the girl, and the girl was all over the guy. They were doing stuff, lots of stuff, and he was peeling off the thong thing.

And Jesus, she was all the way naked. He could hear her making sex noises over the music.

Then they were on the floor and they were doing it. It! Right there, with the girl on top.

He wanted to watch, more than just about anything. But the thief inside the boy knew now was the time to get the hell out. Get out while they were too busy doing it to notice.

He eased the door open, belly-crawled through it, then used his foot to nudge it closed behind him.

The girl was practically singing now: *Terry, oh God, Terry!*

Harry went from belly to crab walk, breathed deep, then ran for the door. He heard her scream of ecstasy as he slipped outside.

He used the hike to the train to relive every moment.

He fenced the stamps for twelve thousand dollars. He knew he'd have gotten more if he knew more. And if he wasn't a kid.

But twelve thousand equaled a fortune. And was too much to keep hidden in his room.

He had to go to his crazy aunt Mags.

He waited until they were alone. His mom insisted on helping, but she was only up to light cleaning work on one house a day, and on Thursdays, they had two.

He helped Mags strip the linens from the single guy's slick, party-time apartment. An all-day rain lashed at the windows as they worked. Mags used the client's stereo system to play some sort of New Agey crap.

She wore a T-shirt she'd tie-dyed in purple and green and the hair she'd recently colored a kind of deep maroon bundled under a green kerchief. She had dangling stones at her ears and a rose quartz crystal—for love and harmony—on a chain around her neck.

"I want to open a bank account."

He glanced over as she bundled sheets into the hamper. Her eyes were blue like his and his mom's, but a lighter shade, and dreamier.

"Why's that, pal?"

"Because."

"Uh-huh."

She unfolded the contour sheet, and together they snapped it, then started to fit it on the bed.

Harry knew she could leave it just like that. To the “Uh-huh” that stretched into forever.

“I’m almost thirteen, and I’ve saved up some money, so I want to have a bank account.”

“If all of that were true instead of part of it, you’d be talking to your mom and not me about it.”

“I don’t want to bother her.”

“Uh-huh.”

They repeated the process on the top sheet.

“I need an adult to go with me, probably sign stuff.”

“How much money?”

If she went with him, she’d find out anyway, so he looked her straight in the eye.

“Almost fifteen thousand.”

She stared hard back at him. The tiny blue stone on the side of her nose glinted.

“Are you going to tell me where you got that kind of money?”

“I’ve been tutoring and doing odd jobs, and cleaning houses. It’s not like I spend much of anything.”

She turned away to get the duvet, black as midnight, soft as a cloud. And said, “Uh-huh.”

“It’s my money, and it can pay off some of the bills, and some of the mortgage. We’re getting all that past-due crap again, and a guy came to the door—a collection agency guy. She said I had to go to my room, but I heard enough.”

She nodded as they floated the duvet onto the bed, then started casing the pillows.

“You’re a good son, Harry, and you’re not going to Dana with this because she wouldn’t go for it. Too many questions, but I’ve got a few before we come to an agreement.”

“Okay.”

“Did you kill or hurt anybody to get the money?”

“No.” Genuine shock radiated. “Man!”

She arranged pillows just so on the bed. “Are you dealing drugs—even pot, Harry?”

He happened to know Mags smoked pot when she could get it, but that wasn't the point. "No."

She gave him a long look with those dreamy eyes. "Are you selling yourself, honey? Sex?"

His jaw didn't actually hit the floor, but it felt like it. "Jesus! No. That's just—no."

"Good. Color me relieved. You're such a good-looking boy. Prime bait for some, so I worried a little there. You think I don't know you sneak out at night?" She carted over the shams.

"I was hoping you had a girl, or met up with some of your friends for fun." Studying him, she toyed with her crystal. "Whatever you're doing, you're doing it for your mom. I love her as much as you do."

"I know."

"I don't know why the universe put this shadow on her, and I'm not a fan of money bringing the light. But it does, for her, seeing as she worries too much about the bills."

Stepping back, Mags eyed the landscape of the bed before nodding approval.

"You don't want a regular bank account. You want a brokerage account. Money makes money, that's the sad state of it."

Mags had some weirdo ideas for sure, but Harry also knew she was nobody's fool. So he listened, he considered.

"A brokerage account?"

"Are you planning on . . . saving more?"

"Yeah. It's not just the bills. The last time the guy fixed the furnace he said it couldn't be fixed again, and we'd need a new one this winter for sure."

"Brokerage account. I dated somebody who does that kind of work. Too straightlaced for it to go anywhere, but he'll set us up."

She crossed to him, laid her hands on his cheeks. "You're a good son and a smart boy." She patted those cheeks. "Keep it up."

They heard about the Finkle Stamp Robbery when Ms. Kelper watered her deck plants. He felt Mags's cool sidelong gaze on him as she washed the glass deck doors and he polished the stainless steel appliances.

"I'm really sorry to hear that," Mags said. "Were they valuable?"

"Apparently, but what's worse is their son Terry was supposed to be taking summer courses in college, but blew that off and partied for a week while they were away. In their house. I had to tell Alva I saw the lights, heard the music, the cars. So it was probably one of his friends, or a friend of a friend—you know how those college parties go—who took them."

A sign, Harry thought as he made the Sub-Zero fridge gleam.

Like Mags would say, the universe shined a light.

And his mother got better.

When he was sixteen, Harry fell in love with a doe-eyed blonde named Nita. She supercharged his dreams and made him float down the hallways at school. He tutored her in Spanish—no charge—helped her with her algebra homework.

They went to movies, or for pizza, sometimes solo, sometimes with Will and his girl du jour. He asked her to prom; she said yes.

He cut back on his work—the cleaning and the lifting locks—to spend more time with her. After all, they'd gotten the new furnace, paid down the medical bills, stayed current on the rest.

He kept his hand in, of course, cleaning with his mother and Mags on Saturday afternoons. He averaged two B&Es a month, and added to his account.

They still had bills to pay, after all. And college was around the corner.

His mother liked Nita, loved having his friends hang out at the house watching DVDs or playing video games. His junior year of high school would always be one of his fondest memories.

For prom he pooled money with Will and sprang for a limo. He bought a pink rosebud wrist corsage and rented a tux.

When he stepped out of his bedroom, Dana pressed her hands to her face. "Oh, oh! Just look at you. Mags, it's Booth, Harry Booth. No martinis tonight, son of mine. Shaken or stirred."

"Scout's honor." He held up two fingers, then crossed them to make her laugh.

“Pictures!” She grabbed her phone, but Mags snatched it from her.

“You go stand with that handsome boy of yours. God, Dana, he looks just like you.”

“Love of my life,” Dana murmured as she tipped her head to his shoulder.

He wrapped both arms around her, pulled her closer. “Best mom in the history of moms.”

She turned, brushed a hand at his hair. “You got so tall. My baby’s all grown up, Mags, and on his way to the junior prom. Come on, we need one of you and Harry.”

Dana and Mags switched places. Mags rose to her toes as if to kiss Harry’s cheek. She whispered, “I slipped condoms into your right jacket pocket. Hell of a lot better safe than sorry.”

That night, after the magic of the prom, during the after-party at Will’s, Harry took Nita’s virginity, and she his, on the cool tile floor of the guest bath.

He began his last high school summer as happy as he’d ever been.

Before summer ended, cancer came back for one last dance.

CHAPTER TWO

Harry never doubted his aunt's love for her sister. The woman's past included the carny circuit, communes, and covens. She'd ridden her thumb around the country, worked—briefly—as a Vegas showgirl, a performance artist, a magician's assistant, and a waitress at a truck stop, where she met the man she referred to as her first ex-husband.

But Mags caged up her wanderlust for a decade to stick by her baby sister. She cleaned houses and apartments and office buildings, and even in the good times rarely spent more than a handful of days away and on her own devices.

In the bad times she was a rock—a colorful one, but solid. She never missed a doctor's appointment or chemo day. When Dana was too weak to manage for herself, Mags bathed her, dressed her—refusing to let Harry help.

"A son doesn't give his mom a bath," she decreed. "Not when she's got a sister."

But he understood how deep and wide that love ran when cancer took his mother's hair for the third time.

He and Dana made dinner together. She was having a good day, a pretty strong day. Maybe he worried about the dark circles that haunted her eyes, or how thin she felt—like skin over loose bones—when he hugged her, but her color was good, the eyes above those circles bright and happy.

He'd finished his homework, and Mags was coming over around

eight. He could go out without worrying, hang out with Will awhile. Then he had a house to case before he came home.

So a good day that took a turn into the weird and amazing when Mags strolled in two hours early.

The woman who loved dying her mass of waves crazy colors, who often braided beads and feathers through it, stood with her bald scalp covered with glitter.

The spoon in Dana's hand clattered to the floor.

"Oh God, Mags! What have you done?"

"It's a look, right?" Mags posed, one hand on her hip, the other behind her ear. "The glitter makes it, I think. I used rainbow glitter as a tribute to my gay and lesbian friends, enemies, and strangers, so it's double the pow."

"Your hair, your beautiful hair."

"I donated it—another pow." She pointed a finger as Dana began to cry. "Knock that off. What's for dinner?"

"Mags, Mags, you didn't have to—"

"I don't have to do a damn thing. Free spirit here, and I do what I want when I want to." She crossed to the kitchen as she spoke, sniffed at the skillet. "Smells good."

"It's—it's got chicken in it. You're a vegetarian—"

"Not today. Today I'm a bald carnivore, so there better be enough for me."

"There's enough." Because he feared he might cry, too, Harry moved the skillet off the heat before it burned, then wrapped an arm around each woman, hugged them in. "There's always going to be enough."

After dinner, when Mags dragged his mom into her particular form of Scrabble—bonus points for best made-up words—Harry studied himself in the bathroom mirror.

He liked his hair. Actually put off haircuts as long as he could get away with it because they always cut it shorter than he liked.

And he really liked the way Nita played with it.

But he understood what Mags had done was a gesture of love, support, and, hell, solidarity.

So he picked up his electric razor—he didn't trust himself with

lather and a blade on his face. He took a lot of deep breaths until he saw more determination than fear in the eyes looking back at him.

After he took the first long swipe—almost straight down the middle—and the thick waves fell, he had to bend over from the waist, clutch the vanity.

His legs buckled, his stomach twisted, and his breath just stopped.

“Holy shit.” He forced himself to look again and watched his own eyes bug out. “Holy shit. No going back. Get it over with.”

The second pass brought on the same reaction, but he held steadier for the next, and the next.

The razor wasn’t the best, and he figured he’d probably cut its life expectancy by half.

It left a stubble, but he figured it was the thought that counted.

He looked . . . really weird, he realized. Not like himself at all. It occurred to him he’d have to wear a ski cap for his nightwork, but he considered the possibilities of more radical appearance changes, and how they could add to his bag of tricks.

He cleaned up the mess, then studied himself again. And realized something else.

How his mother must feel when she looked in the mirror. She didn’t have a choice about losing her hair. The cancer and the treatments took that choice away from her.

When she looked in the mirror, she saw that loss, that lack of choice, and someone who didn’t look quite like her.

“Another reason Mags did it,” he murmured. “So she could feel and see and know what Mom does.”

He slipped into his bedroom, changed his shirt. Then tried on a pair of the glasses—clear lenses—he sometimes used to change his look. Switched to sunglasses.

Narrowed his eyes and imagined himself with a soul patch or a goatee. He might be able to make some facial hair bits with his own hair and some of the stuff they used in the theater department at school for plays.

Pleased with the possible side benefits, he stowed the bag of hair, grabbed a ball cap.

When he came out, the sisters were deep in the game.

"Oxmoana? Come on, Mags."

"The plaintive cry of a constipated ox, or that of a female ox in labor." Mags smiled, fluttered her eyes as Dana rolled hers. "Seven-letter bonus, on double word score, plus the bonus-bonus. I'm kicking your ass, Dane."

"Yeah, well, I can beat that. I can beat it. Hold on."

Harry stood back, watched his mother rearrange her letters, and felt the love for both of them just blow through him like a warm wind.

"I'll just add an ess to your word for a field of constipated oxen, and go up with q-r-a-z-i-e-s. Qrazies, a couple of bald women drinking cheap wine and making up words for Scrabble."

Dana picked up her glass. "Now who's kicking whose ass?"

"The night is young."

"I'm going to leave you qrazies and go hang with Will."

"You have fun, baby, and . . ." Dana trailed off as she turned.

She slapped both hands over her mouth as her eyes filled.

"Harry. Oh, Harry."

"What?" He looked down, smiled. "Whew. I thought I forgot to zip my fly."

"I can't believe you—you weren't even bald as a baby. He came out with a headful of hair. Remember, Mags?"

"Yeah, I remember. Want some glitter, pal? I got plenty."

"I'll pass, thanks."

"Oh God, look at us." Tears streamed as Dana began to laugh. "Would you just look at us." She gripped Mags's hand, reached for her son's. "I'm the luckiest woman in the world."

Nita cried, and not in a sweet, supportive way.

"How could you do that! You didn't even talk to me about it first."

"It's my hair. Or was."

She got that look in her eye, one that warned him they were going to have an actual fight.

"How would *you* feel if I cut off my hair, or dyed it blue like some weirdo?"

"It's your hair."

"Oh, easy for you to say, because you know I'd never do anything like that."

—1
—0

"I don't care about your hair. I care about you. And I did it for my mom."

She took a big, audible breath, the way she did when she considered herself really reasonable against his screw-ups. He'd learned over the past eight months he screwed up a lot on Nita's scale.

"I'm sorry about your mom, you know I am. It's awful what she's going through. I hate it, so much. And I understand you have to help her work, and be there for her so we can't spend a lot of time together, or go out as much as other couples do.

"But."

There was, Harry knew, always a *but* when she pulled out Reasonable Nita.

"But it's our senior year, and the homecoming game and dance is next week! Next week, Harry. Your hair's never going to grow back in a week. How are we supposed to go to our last homecoming with you looking like a freak?"

That snapped it. He hadn't known you could fall out of love in a single moment.

"My mother lost her hair. It's the third time she's been there. I guess that makes her three times a freak."

"You know I didn't mean it like that, and that's a stupid thing to say. Your mom—she's a victim. You did it on purpose, and didn't even ask me first."

He hadn't known when you fell out of love you felt so cold.

"My mom's nobody's victim. She's a fucking warrior. And I don't have to ask you, or anybody, about what I do for her. And this?" He pointed to his head. "This doesn't come back until hers does. Since that makes me a freak, and you don't want to be seen with one, we're done."

Shock widened her eyes an instant before they filled. "You're breaking up with me? You shave your head and you break up with me, right before homecoming? You can't do that."

"Shaving my head didn't have anything to do with you, and you made it clear you don't want to go with me the way things are."

"I already have my dress!"

"So wear it or don't. Not my problem."

"You can't just . . . we're having sex."

“Not anymore.”

He walked out on her, and felt both cold and free. He decided swinging by to see her on the way to Will’s opened his world.

Everything had been fine when his mother was in remission. But they’d started to get rocky when the cancer came back, when he hadn’t been able to take Nita out as often or give her as much attention as she wanted.

She’d been subtle about it, he thought now, just enough to make him feel guilty and torn.

Well, no more of that.

Maybe he’d miss having a girlfriend, and he sure as hell would miss the sex—when they’d managed it. But he had plenty to fill his time. School—and he still had hope of a scholarship to Northwestern—friends, work, his mom, his nightwork.

Hands in pockets, head down, mood sour, he trudged his way to Will’s. He knocked on the door of the cheerful white bungalow.

Will’s dad answered, stood in his Bears sweatshirt, angled his head.

He plucked Harry’s cap off, grinned.

He said, “Dude!” then scrubbed a hand over the stubble. “I can smooth that out for you if you want.”

“You can?”

Will’s dad ran a hand over his own smooth dome. “I got the skills.” Then he laid a hand on Harry’s shoulder, and his eyes went a little misty. “You’re a stand-up guy, Harry Booth. Get your skinny white ass in here.”

Crisp, colorful fall took a hard turn into the gray and white of winter. And winter punched down with brutal fists, blew its icy breath over the city as if determined to freeze it in place.

The new furnace did its best, but the aging hot water heater gasped its last on a February morning that dawned at minus eight.

Harry had enough socked away for a new one, though he had to lie to his mother about getting a deal on the unit and the labor. It wasn’t the first lie he’d told her that winter, and wouldn’t be the last.

He told himself she looked better, and once they got through the

—1
—0

winter, once she could get out, walk in the fresh air again, she'd bounce all the way back.

His acceptance letter from Northwestern and the scholarship perked her up. She could happily pore over the college brochures, haunt their website, and spend whole evenings making lists of what she thought he'd need in his dorm room.

But he'd done the math.

"I'm going to commute the first year. Live at home. Free rent and laundry services."

"I want you to have the whole experience. You're the first in our family to go to college. And such a good one. I want—"

"I'll have plenty of the experience—and not have to bunk with somebody I don't know. After I check it all out, make some friends or whatever, I can think about living on campus next year."

"But you'll miss all the activities, the parties."

"Now you want me to go to drunken college parties?"

She smiled a little. "Sort of. I want you to have a life."

"I've got a life."

"And spend too much of it on me. I know it costs more to live on campus, and the scholarship won't cover everything, but we can take out a student loan."

"Next year."

She sat back. "I've been looking into taking out a second mortgage."

"No."

Now she folded her arms over her thin chest. "Harrison Silas Booth. Who's in charge around here?"

"Well, Dana Lee Booth, you said you wanted me to have a life, and having one means making my own decisions. My decision is to live at home the first year."

"First term. The first term, Harry, that's a good compromise. You'll know your way around by then, you'll make friends."

"You sure are anxious to cut me loose."

She reached out, laid a hand over his. "I want my bird to fledge. I want to see you fly, Harry. You take the first term to find your way, then we'll figure out the rest."

"First term, but you ditch the idea of a second mortgage."

"I can agree to that. We'll look into student loans. You could get a job on campus. It's such a beautiful campus."

Because it made her happy, he let her rhapsodize.

But he had a job, and once she was settled for the night, he'd go to work.

A couple of young professionals spending the cold heart of February in their vacation home in Aruba had a very nice collection—his and hers—of designer watches.

Bulgari, Rolex, Chopin, Baume & Mercier, TAG Heuer. And, his information told him, a couple of Graff.

He doubted they took everything with them.

But if he bombed there, people who collected five-figure watches had lots and lots of other goodies to choose from.

He hoped for the watches—one from each; he wasn't a monster. If one of those included a Graff, he could turn them and cover medical, household, and college expenses for months.

He'd been inside the house the previous spring when the owners hired Sparkle Sisters to do a deep spring cleaning, so he knew the layout. He knew the security system, and could beat it.

And he knew the Jenkinsons had two safes—one in their home office, one in their master suite walk-in closet.

That one would hold the watches.

He'd made an investment and bought the same brand. He'd rented a small storage space, like a holding center for items waiting to be moved. And in it, for weeks, he'd practiced the art of safecracking.

They hadn't gone top-of-the-line, probably lucky for him, but Harry thought he had a knack for the art. With his new skill, some luck—and the coming six to ten inches of snow he took as a sign—he'd start college in the fall debt free. Or close.

He worried about leaving his mother, even for the two hours—three, tops—the job would take him. What if the storm knocked out the power? What if she got sick and called for him?

What if, what if?

But if he pulled this job off—and he damn well would pull it off—he could eke out the take slowly, paying things down, tell her he'd taken on some extra tutoring.

—1
—0

He'd think of something.

So he took the train, just a teenage boy bundled up to the eyeballs like everyone else on a gusty, snowy night in Chicago.

He got off a full stop before his destination, put the thick-framed glasses he'd worn on the ride in one of his inside pockets. Switched the football ski cap for the hockey one, and trudged a half mile through the bitter.

Anyone with any sense, or without thieving on their mind, was tucked into the warm at one in the morning. His only concern on the half-mile hike was the possibility of a patrol car stopping to see what the hell he was doing out.

Went to see his girl, you know. Heading down to the El to go home. No problem, officer.

But he didn't see any patrols, and when he reached his destination, kept walking with purpose.

You go furtive, he figured, people pay attention.

He didn't hesitate, but walked straight to the front door.

The locks posed no real challenge, as they'd gone for decor instead of serious security with the single cylinder and basic dead bolt in Venetian Bronze.

They fell for him inside a minute.

He slipped out of his boots, stepped in on his thick socks, stuffed the boots in a plastic bag, counting the seconds in his head.

Shut the door, lock it, and move straight to the alarm box.

They'd gone basic there, too. He opened it, clamped it off, then stood and let the silence surround him.

His favorite part, he could admit. Beyond the prep, the practice, the study came the moment when he could just stand in the silence and his pulse tripped with the thrill of it.

The stealing, the payoff? That was just the work.

But that moment, that silence, that was his.

So he took it, then he moved.

Straight up the stairs, double doors on the left, and to the closet on the right wall.

A lot of clothes—a hell of a lot of shoes. These two were crazy clothes hogs. But he could admire the man's suits—that fine, fine wool—and

the shirts with the monogram on the cuffs. The soft leather of designer shoes.

He admired, too, the woman's collection of sweaters. Cashmere, merino wool. He felt a tug of temptation, wanted to take one—just one—for his mother. So warm and soft.

But that would bring questions, and he didn't want to lie about a gift.

Instead he played his light over the safe. And smiled.

"Hi there. I've been working with your brother for a while now. Let's get acquainted."

He shook his head as he got out his stethoscope. "Basic combination lock. They should've done better."

His first step was to find the combination length. To make sure all the wheels disengaged, he turned the dial clockwise three times.

He put the bell of the stethoscope beside the dial and began to turn it counterclockwise. When he heard the first two clicks, he stopped, noted down the number on the dial.

He reset, repeated twice more to be sure.

"Good start."

Moving the dial counterclockwise, he stopped it opposite his first number. Started back—slow, careful—to where he'd parked the wheels, listening for clicks, noting down the number until he heard no more.

A four-number combination, he thought.

And now his math skills—who said you never used algebra in real life?—came into play.

He drew two line graphs, labeled them. X-axis for starting point, y-axis for the right contact point.

He reset the lock, then put it at zero.

He worked in silence—just those clicks—worked patiently, noting down each contact area, then graphing the points, x-value, y-value.

It took him thirty-three minutes of painstaking work, careful listening, exacting math to identify the four numbers.

8-9-14-2.

Now he needed the sequence. He started to try the numbers as written down, then stopped.

—1
—0

"It's a date. Jesus, it's Valentine's Day. Probably their first date or something. In '98. Could it be that easy?"

A four-digit combination could mean close to two thousand variables. No way he'd hit on the first.

But he tried it. 2-14-9-8.

And when he pulled the lever, the door opened smooth as silk.

"Oh shit! Just like that."

The thrill nearly rose to the level of that first, strange, outrageous orgasm at twelve.

He pulled out his stopwatch, hit the button.

"Thirty-five minutes, twelve seconds. Not bad, but I'll get better."

He drew out a glass-topped case—no lock—that would hold a dozen ladies' watches. It currently held seven. And one was the Graff.

He took it out, shined his penlight over it.

He'd never held anything that cost so much. And there was beauty here, he could see that. The way the diamonds fired under the light, and the sapphires mated with them gleamed.

He'd learn more about gems, he promised himself. They had, well, life in them. More fun than stamps or old coins.

He put the watch in the pouch he'd brought, put the case back, took out the next, and studied the men's collection. He settled on the Rolex—a classic for a reason—then replaced the case.

He drew out other cases—cuff links, earrings, bracelets, necklaces. Small collections, he supposed, but impressive.

And tempting.

Gotta get home, he reminded himself, and he still had to go by the storage place, stow the take.

But in the end, his fingers simply reached for a pair of square-cut diamond earrings. Small but classy, and probably not easily traceable.

He closed the safe, spun the dial. Checked the area to be sure he left nothing of himself behind.

He retraced his steps and was walking through the thickly falling snow in less than an hour since he'd stepped into the house.

And with, he figured, about two hundred thousand in his backpack.

He was going to push for twenty percent. He'd take ten, but he'd push. And maybe get fifteen.

And with thirty thousand, he'd knock back a shitload of the medical bills.

In spring, they'd have that fresh air—and the heating bills would vanish. Maybe, just maybe, he could talk his mother into taking a vacation in the summer. They'd sold their old car long ago, but they could rent one. He had his learner's permit. He'd taken the course in school, and Will's dad took him out in his car so he got practice. He could get his license, they'd rent a car, and they'd drive to the ocean.

She'd told him how much she wanted to see the ocean. Plus, sea air was supposed to be healing and all that.

They could get a motel near the beach for a few days. The drive to and from, that would be vacation, too. They hadn't had a vacation since . . .

Since cancer, he thought, then shoved it away.

He'd had a great night, no point in spoiling it. Time to look ahead to spring, to summer, to college in the fall.

But winter held on, and March went out as ferociously as it came in.

By the middle of April, he decided Chicago had become the ice planet Hoth.

Then slowly, spring began to crack winter's icy grip.

They threw open the windows, let the air in. Sure, they had to close them at night or freeze to death, but it was a start.

Harry felt hope bloom like the crocuses his mother had planted when he'd been a little boy.

He was even seeing a new girl. Alyson, science nerd, but totally cute. Nothing serious, he didn't want serious before he started college. But he had a prom date, and that mattered.

He walked home in the almost balmy air juggling his night's schedule in his head.

Homework—had to keep those grades up—a little more research on precious gems. Dinner—maybe he could talk Mom into ordering pizza.

And he had a potentially lucrative target he wanted to take a closer look at.

He walked in the house, mood high.

"Hey, Mom! I'm grabbing a snack. Figure I aced my chem test today. I got a crapload of homework, but I'm all over it."

He had a bag of Doritos in one hand, a can of Coke in the other when she came out of the bedroom.

"You used to want a folded-over PB and J after school."

"Times change. I need the carb and caffeine rush for the calculus and the paper I have to write for . . ."

It got through that high mood, the way she looked at him cut right through it.

"What's wrong?"

"Let's sit down, Harry."

"Mom."

"Please. Let's sit down. How about you bring me one of those Cokes?"

He made his mind blank; it was all he could do. He poured hers into a glass over ice because that's how she liked it. Then he sat at the kitchen table with her.

"I went in for a PET scan today."

"What? You didn't tell me you had one coming up. I go with you."

"You have school. Mags went. And I didn't tell you, baby, because the doctor wanted one. He wanted one because . . . Baby, the chemo's not working this time."

"No, they said it was. They said."

"It was, for a short time last fall, into the winter, but not anymore, Harry, and not for a while."

He'd known, hadn't he? Inside he'd known. The circles under her eyes, deeper, her energy sliding away like the flesh on her bones.

"They'll try a different treatment."

"Harry." She took both his hands. "It's spread. They've done all they can do."

The hands holding his felt like bony feathers. So light, so thin and sharp. "I don't believe that. You can't believe it either."

"I need you to be brave for me. It's not fair. I shouldn't have to ask

you to be brave. None of it's been fair. It stole your childhood, and I hate that. I hate it. I'm not saying I won't fight, I'm not saying that. But we're stopping the chemo."

"Mom, please—"

"It might buy me a couple months, months where I'm sick from it. But that's all. I want the time I have left with you where I can be your mom, at least for most of it."

She squeezed his hands hard. "Six months. Eight or nine, maybe, with more treatments. I'd go through it a hundred times, Harry, if it meant I could watch you grow into a man. Graduate from college, fall in love, start a family. But I can't. My heart wants that—you're my everything—but my body won't let me."

"You beat it before."

"Not this time. Help me make this six months good ones."

"You beat it before," he repeated.

When she put her arms around him, he was a child again. And the child pressed his face to his mother's breast and wept.