

Trust No One

By Jayne Ann Krentz

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Grace retreats to her hometown to regroup and tries to put everything she’s learned about positive thinking into practice—a process that is seriously challenged on the world’s worst blind date.

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As Witherspoon’s financial empire continues to crumble around them, taking a deadly toll, Julius will help Grace step into her past to uncover a devious plan to destroy not only Grace, but everyone around her…

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Editorial Review

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About the Author
Jayne Ann Krentz is the author of more than fifty *New York Times* bestsellers. She has written contemporary romantic suspense novels under that name, as well as futuristic and historical romance novels under the pseudonyms Jayne Castle and Amanda Quick, respectively. There are more than 35 million copies of her books in print.

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One

The note pinned to the front of the dead man’s silk pajamas was a one-sentence email printed out from a computer: Make Today a Great Day the Witherspoon Way.

Grace Elland leaned over the blood-soaked sheets and forced herself to touch the cold skin of Sprague Witherspoon’s throat. His blue eyes, once so brilliant and compelling, were open. He stared sightlessly at the bedroom ceiling. A robust, square-jawed man with a mane of silver hair, he had always seemed larger-than-life. But death had shrunk him. All of the charm and electrifying charisma that had captivated the Witherspoon Way seminar audiences across the country had been drained away.

She was certain that he had been gone for several hours but she thought she detected a faint, accusing question in his unseeing eyes. Shattering memories splintered through her. At the age of sixteen she had seen the same question in the eyes of a dead woman. Why didn’t you get here in time to save me?

She looked away from the dead eyes—and saw the unopened bottle of vodka on the nightstand.

For a terrible moment past and present merged there in the bedroom. She heard the echo of heavy footsteps on old floorboards. Panic threatened to choke her. This could not be happening, not again. It's the old dream, she thought. You're in the middle of a nightmare but you're awake. Breathe. Focus, damn it, and breathe.

Breathe.

The mantra broke the panic-induced trance. The echoing footsteps faded into the past. Ice-cold adrenaline splashed through her veins, bringing with it an intense clarity. This was not a dream. She was in a room with a dead man and, although she was almost certain that the footsteps had been summoned up from her nightmare, there was still the very real possibility that the killer was still around.

She grabbed the nearest available weapon—the vodka bottle—and moved to the doorway. There she paused to listen intently. The big house felt empty. Perhaps the footsteps had been an auditory illusion generated by the panicky memories. Or not. Either way, the smart thing to do was get out of the mansion and call 911.

She moved into the hallway, trying to make as little noise as possible. A fog of shadows darkened the big house. There were elegant potted plants everywhere—vibrant green bamboo, palms and ferns. Sprague had firmly believed that the abundant foliage not only improved indoor air quality, but enhanced the positive energy in the atmosphere.

The curtains that covered the windows had been closed for the night. No one had been alive to draw them back that morning. Not that it would have done much good. The Seattle winter dawn had arrived with a low, overcast sky and now rain was tapping at the windows. On days like this, most people turned on a few lights.

No one rushed out of a doorway to confront her. Gripping the neck of the vodka bottle very tightly, she went down the broad staircase. When she reached the bottom, she flew across the grand living room.

She knew her way around the first floor of the house because Sprague Witherspoon had entertained lavishly and often. He always invited Grace and the other members of the Witherspoon Way staff to his catered affairs.

The vast great room had been furnished and decorated with those events in mind. The chairs, cushioned benches and tables were arranged in what designers called conversational groupings. There was a lot of expensive art on the walls.

Sprague Witherspoon had lived the lifestyle he had tried to teach in his seminars, and the motivational business had been good to him. With Sprague it had been all about positive thinking and an optimistic attitude.

But now someone had murdered him.

She whipped through the front door and out into the beautifully manicured gardens. She did not stop to pull up the hood of her jacket. By the time she reached her little compact waiting in the sweeping circular driveway her hair and face were soaked.

She got behind the wheel, locked all of the doors, put the vodka bottle on the floor and gunned the engine. She drove through the high steel gates that guarded the Queen Anne mansion and out onto the quiet residential street.

Once outside the grounds she brought the car to a halt and reached into her cross-body bag for her phone. It

proved amazingly difficult to enter 911 because her hands were shaking so hard. When she finally got through to the operator she had to close her eyes in order to concentrate on getting the facts straight.

Breathe.

“Sprague Witherspoon is dead.” She watched the big gates while she rattled off the address. “At least, I think he’s dead. I couldn’t find a pulse. It looks like he’s been shot. There is . . . a lot of blood.”

More memories flashed through her head. A man with a face rendered into a bloody mask. Blood raining down on her. Blood everywhere.

“Is there anyone else in the house, ma’am?” The male operator’s voice was sharp and urgent. “Are you in danger?”

“I don’t think so. I’m outside now. A few minutes ago I went in to check on Mr. Witherspoon because he didn’t show up at the office this morning. The gates were open and the front door was unlocked. The alarm was off. I didn’t think anything about it because I assumed he was out in the gardens. When I couldn’t find him outside, I went into the house. I called out to him. When he didn’t respond I worried that he had fallen or become ill. He lives alone, you see, and—”

Shut up, Grace. You’re rambling. You must stay focused. You can have a panic attack later.

“Stay outside,” the operator said. “I’ve got responders on the way.”

“Yes, all right.”

Grace ended the connection and listened to the sirens in the distance.

It wasn’t until the first vehicle bearing the logo of the Seattle Police Department came to a stop in front of her car that she remembered a fact that everyone who watched television crime dramas knew well. When it came to suspects, cops always looked hard at the person who found the body.

She had a feeling that the investigators would look even more closely at a suspect who had a history of stumbling over dead bodies.

Breathe.

She looked down at the bottle sitting on the floor of her car. Dread iced her blood.

Don’t panic. A lot of people drink vodka.

But the only things she had ever seen Sprague drink were green tea and expensive white wine.

She found a tissue in her bag and used it to pick up the bottle. Not that it mattered much now. Her fingerprints were all over it.

Two

Isuppose the three of us can only be thankful that we’ve all got reasonably good alibis,” Millicent Chartwell said. She sank languidly against the back of the booth and regarded her martini with a forlorn expression. “I didn’t like the way that cute detective was watching me today when I gave my statement.”

“He wasn’t exactly smiling at me,” Grace said. She took a sip of her white wine. “In fact, if I weren’t the optimistic type, I’d say he was looking for an excuse to arrest me for Sprague’s murder.”

Kristy Forsyth put down her wineglass. Tears glittered in her eyes. “I can’t believe Mr. Witherspoon is gone. I keep thinking there must have been a horrible case of mistaken identity and that he’ll come striding through the door of the office tomorrow morning the way he always does, with some fresh-baked scones or doughnuts for us.”

“There was no mistake,” Grace said. “I saw him. And Nyla Witherspoon identified her father’s body. I was still at the house talking to the police when she arrived on the scene. She was seriously distraught. In tears. Shaky. Honestly, I thought she was going to faint.”

It was just after five o’clock. The three of them were exhausted and, Grace knew, still dazed. A close encounter with murder had an unnerving effect on most people. She and her office colleagues had not only lost a great boss, they had just lost their jobs. They were all of the opinion that working for the Witherspoon Way had been the best thing that had ever happened to them, career-wise. Their lives had been turned upside down by Sprague’s murder.

After giving their statements, Millicent had suggested going for a drink. There was unanimous agreement. They were now seated in a booth in their favorite after-work spot, a cozy tavern and café near the Pike Place Market.

The day was ending the way it had begun, with rain and gloom. The winter solstice had passed a few weeks earlier. The days were becoming perceptibly longer—Seattleites were keen observers of the nuances in the ever-changing patterns of sunlight—but the early evening twilight made it seem as if it was still December on the calendar.

Millicent sipped her martini and narrowed her eyes. “If I were the police, the first suspect on my list would be Nyla Witherspoon.”

As Sprague’s bookkeeper and financial manager, Millicent had a tendency to go straight to the bottom line, regardless of the subject. She was a vivacious, curvy redhead with a taste for martinis and the occasional bar hookup.

Millicent had been working for Sprague for nearly a year before Grace had joined the Witherspoon Way team. On the surface, she seemed to have it all—film star–level glamour and a computer for a brain. She had used both to make her way in the world. What Millicent did not have was a family. Her past was murky. She did not like to discuss it. But she had once said that she left home at the age of sixteen and had no intention of ever returning. She was a survivor. In spite of the odds against her, she had landed adroitly on her stiletto heels.

Kristy blinked away a few more tears. “Nyla does have the most to gain from Sprague’s death, doesn’t she? But she’s his daughter, for heaven’s sake. We all know that she had issues with him. It was a troubled relationship. Still, murdering her father?”

Kristy was the most recent member of the Witherspoon team. Born and raised in a small town in Idaho, she had moved to Seattle in search of adventure and—as she had explained to Grace and Millicent—more options in husbands. With her light brown hair, warm eyes and pretty features, she was attractive in a sweet, wholesome way that went down well with the Witherspoon clients.

Unlike Millicent, Kristy was close to her family. Although she had confided to her coworkers that she did

not want to marry a farmer, it was clear that she had a deep and abiding affection for the bucolic world she had left behind. She was forever regaling the office staff with humorous stories about growing up on a farm.

Grace and Millicent had privately speculated that Sprague had felt sorry for Kristy, who had found herself struggling in the big city. Perhaps giving her a job had been, in part, an act of kindness back at the beginning. But somewhat to everyone's amazement, Kristy had quickly displayed an invaluable flair for travel logistics and an ability to charm clients. As the demand for Witherspoon Way seminars had grown, so had the work involved in coordinating Sprague's busy schedule. Business had been so brisk lately that Sprague had been on the verge of hiring an assistant for Kristy.

"It wouldn't be the first time an heir has hurried things along," Millicent pointed out. "Besides, we know that Nyla was furious with Sprague. They argued constantly. Things between them only got worse when Mr. Perfect came along. Sprague didn't approve of him and that just made Nyla angrier. I think she was ready to do just about anything to get her hands on her inheritance. She hated Sprague for putting her on an allowance."

"Well, she is an adult, not a child," Grace pointed out.

"If you ask me, she decided she didn't want to wait any longer for the money," Millicent said. She swallowed some more of her martini, lowered the glass and fixed Grace and Kristy with a grim expression. "I think there's something else we should keep in mind."

Kristy frowned. "What?"

Millicent plucked the little plastic spear out of the martini and munched the olive. "It's true that Nyla had issues with her father but she wasn't very fond of the three of us, either. We had better watch our backs."

Kristy's eyes widened. "Jeez, you're serious, aren't you?"

"Oh, yeah," Millicent said.

Grace picked up her glass and took a sip. The wine was starting to soften the edgy sensation that had been riding her hard all day but she knew from experience that the effects would not last. She told herself to think positive but she had a bad feeling that the old dream would return that night.

She studied Millicent. "Do you really think Nyla is a threat?"

Millicent shrugged. "I'm just saying it would be a good idea to be careful for a while. I'm telling you, Nyla Witherspoon is unstable. She and Sprague had what can only be called a fraught relationship but the capper was the new fiancé."

"Burke Marrick," Kristy said. She made a face. "AKA Mr. Perfect."

"You know what?" Millicent said. "Burke Marrick was Sprague's worst nightmare. Sprague was always worried that some good-looking, fast-talking con man would come along and sweep Nyla off her feet. Why do you think Sprague insisted on paying her bills and keeping her on an allowance? He was trying to protect her."

Kristy sniffed. "Small countries could live on Nyla's allowance."

"The actual amount is beside the point." Millicent aimed the olive spear at Kristy. "If there's one thing I know, it's money, and I know how people react to it. Trust me, no one ever thinks they have enough. Nyla

couldn't stand the thought that the bulk of her inheritance was tied up in a special trust that she could not access until her father's death. And I've got a hunch Mr. Perfect was pushing her hard to get ahold of the money."

A grim silence settled on the table. Grace reflected on the fact that they had all had their run-ins with Sprague's temperamental daughter. Nyla had seemed jealous of the three of them. Now she would have her inheritance to go with her charming fiancé. From a certain perspective, life was suddenly looking quite rosy for Nyla. And for Mr. Perfect.

Grace cleared her throat. "You do realize what you're saying, Millicent. If you're right, that means that Burke Marrick is also a suspect."

Kristy put her glass down very quickly. "What if Nyla and Burke planned Sprague's murder together?"

Millicent shrugged. "Wouldn't surprise me."

"I think we had better hold off on the conspiracy theories," Grace said. "If you're going to make a list of suspects, you'll need a really big sheet of paper."

Kristy and Millicent looked at her.

"What do you mean?" Kristy asked. "Sprague was so nice. So generous."

Understanding gleamed in Millicent's eyes. "You're right, Grace. After Nyla and Marrick, the next name on the list just has to be Larson Rayner."

"We all know there was not a lot of positive energy lost between Larson and Sprague," Grace said. "Nothing like a falling-out between business partners to create motive."

"That's true," Kristy said. "Remember how Larson stormed into the office last month and accused Sprague of stealing his clients?"

"Professional envy and a strong dose of jealousy, not to mention a decline in revenues." Millicent smiled. Her green eyes gleamed. "Great motives for murder." She looked at Grace. "I wonder if Larson realizes that you're the reason why Sprague's business took off a year and a half ago."

Grace felt herself turning pink. "That is a gross exaggeration. I had a few ideas and Sprague let me run with them, that's all."

"Bullshit," Millicent said cheerfully. "Before you came along, Sprague Witherspoon was just another motivational speaker in a very crowded field. You're the one who launched the business into the big time."

"Millicent is right," Kristy said. "If poor Sprague hadn't been murdered last night, he would have become the number one self-help guru in the country within a few months, thanks to you."

"The Witherspoon Way was doing well before you came along," Millicent said. "But the really big money didn't start rolling in until after the cookbook was published. The affirmation-of-the-day blog caught fire after that. During the past few months, Kristy couldn't confirm speaking engagements and seminars fast enough. Isn't that right, Kristy?"

"Yes." Kristy smiled reminiscently. "Sprague was on the road every week. I don't know how he did it. But he never complained when I booked back-to-back seminars."

“He loved it,” Grace said. “He thrived on the travel and the crowds. He had so much charisma and such an incredible ability to communicate with an audience.”

Kristy nodded sagely. “But it was the cookbook and the affirmation blog that put the Witherspoon Way over the top. You’re the one who came up with both projects.”

“The cookbook and blog would never have worked if they hadn’t been done under the Witherspoon name,” Grace said. “All I did was dream up some marketing ideas that suited Sprague’s approach to positive thinking.”

“It’s called branding,” Millicent said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if you get a call from Larson Rayner soon making you an offer you can’t refuse.”

Kristy brightened. “Maybe he’ll offer all three of us positions in his firm. We are, or rather, we were Sprague’s team. Larson must realize that we’ve got exactly the qualifications he needs to take him to the top.”

“True,” Grace said. “But you might want to rethink that career path if it turns out that Larson Rayner is a suspect in Sprague’s murder. Could be tough to book future seminars for him.”

Kristy winced. “There is that little problem.”

“As for that list of suspects we were talking about,” Grace said, “it doesn’t end with Nyla, Burke and Larson Rayner. You’ll have to add those odd and disgruntled seminar attendees—the folks who emailed Sprague to complain because their lives did not undergo a dramatic change after they started practicing the Witherspoon Way.”

“Well, shit,” Millicent said. “You’re right, Grace. That would make for a very long list.”

Kristy sighed. “It may be sort of tacky under the circumstances but I can’t help noticing that if Larson Rayner is on the suspect list, our pool of potential employers is going to be extremely small. I don’t imagine there are a lot of folks out there looking for people who possess the skills required to manage the office of a motivational speaker.”

“On the other hand,” Millicent said, going very thoughtful, “if Rayner is cleared as a suspect, he’s going to need us. I wonder if he knows that?”

Grace picked up her wine. “Time for some serious positive thinking, as Sprague would say.”

“We need a Witherspoon affirmation for successful job hunting,” Kristy announced. She gave Grace a misty smile. “You’re the affirmation writer in the crowd. Got one for us?”

Millicent laughed. “Well, Grace? What would be a good Witherspoon Way saying for those of us who find ourselves suddenly unemployed?”

Grace ran one fingertip around the rim of her wineglass and gave the problem some thought.

“If Sprague were here he would remind us that no one finds an interesting future by staying indoors and waiting for a sunny day,” she said. “To discover your future you must go outdoors and take a walk in the rain.”

“That sounds about right,” Kristy said. Her warm eyes turned somber and serious. “Don’t know about the

rest of you, but working for the Witherspoon Way really did change my life." She raised her wineglass. "Here's to Sprague Witherspoon."

"To Sprague," Millicent said.

"To Sprague," Grace said.

Millicent downed the last of her martini and signaled the waiter for another round.

"I probably shouldn't say this," she said, "given how much money I made working for the Witherspoon Way and absolutely no offense intended toward you, Grace, but I have to tell you that I really detest those dumbass Witherspoon Way affirmations."

Three

The dream was lying in wait for her . . .

. . . The wind shrieking through the old, abandoned asylum caught the door at the top of the stairs and slammed it shut.

The darkness of the basement closed in around her. It was suddenly hard to breathe. She knew she could not allow her own fear to show. She had to stay strong for the boy. He was unnaturally calm, the way people are in dreams. He clung to her hand and looked up at her.

She knew that he was waiting to see if she would save him. That was what adults were supposed to do—save little kids. She wanted to tell him that she wasn't a real grown-up. She was only sixteen years old.

"He's coming back," the boy said. "He hurt that lady and he's going to hurt us, too."

She aimed the cell phone flashlight at the long bundle on the floor. Her first thought was that someone had left an unrolled sleeping bag in the basement. But it wasn't a sleeping bag. The eyes of the dead woman stared up at her through the thick layers of plastic.

Heavy footsteps thudded on the wooden floor overhead. Hurriedly she switched off the flashlight.

"Hide," she said to the boy in the language of dreams.

The door at the top of the steps opened. The entrance to the basement was once again illuminated with an empty gray light. Soon the monster would appear.

"It's too late," the boy said. "He's here now."

There was a small prescription medication container on the floor near the dead woman. Next to it was a liquor bottle. She could not see the brand on the bottle but she could make out the word vodka.

The only way out was through the door at the top of the stairs . . .

The ping of the email alert brought her out of the nightmare on a rush of adrenaline that tightened her throat and iced her blood. For a few seconds her heart pounded to the dark rhythm of the killer's footsteps. She hovered in the murky terrain between the dream state and the waking state.

Breathe.

It had been a while since the dream had haunted her nights but she had long ago made the breathing exercises a daily routine. It was one of three rituals that she practiced regularly. All were related to the nightmare of the past.

She sat up quickly on the edge of the bed and focused on her breath. But the edgy, fight-or-flight sensation threatened to overwhelm her. She could not sit quietly so she got up, went out into the living room and started to pace. Sometimes it took a few minutes to calm her nerves.

The gentle glow of night-lights illuminated every room in the small apartment. In addition, the drapes were open to allow the city lights to pour in through her fifteenth-floor window. She did not turn on any of the regular lamps and ceiling fixtures because she did not want to further stimulate her already overstimulated senses.

Breathe.

The images of the dream flashed and flared, clawing at her awareness in an attempt to drag her down into the dark, seething pit of raw panic. Her skin prickled. Her pulse pounded.

As she paced, she made the promise that she always made to herself during a bad attack. If she did not get things under control she would take a dose of the anti-anxiety medication the doctor had prescribed. In the past few years that vow, combined with the breathing exercises, was usually sufficient to get through even the worst episodes.

Just give the breathing exercises a chance to work. The meds are in the drawer. Don’t worry, you can have one if you really need it. You knew tonight would probably be a bad night.

Breathe.

She needed to go through the door. She had to get outside.

She unlocked the slider. Cold damp air swirled into the room. She stepped out onto the balcony. The rain had stopped. The jeweled cityscape of Seattle sparkled around her. The Space Needle glowed reassuringly, a giant torch against the darkness.

She focused on the exercises.

The thud-thud-thud of the killer’s footsteps faded back into memory.

Gradually her pulse steadied and her breathing returned to normal.

When she was sure she was back in control she returned to the living room. She closed and locked the slider.

“Crap,” she said aloud to the silent room.

And everyone wondered why she had never married, why she never let any man spend the night. Panic attacks were like earthquakes. It wasn’t a matter of if there would be another one. It was only a question of when it would strike. She had discovered the hard way that it might be weeks, months or even years between attacks. Or it could be tomorrow night. How did a woman explain that to a potential lover?

Maybe, if her social life ever progressed beyond the short-term-relationship pattern she had developed, she might find a man she could entrust with her secrets. But somehow that had not yet happened.

She had overcome the shivery jitters but she knew she would not be able to go back to sleep, at least not for some time. On the other hand, there was no job waiting for her in the morning, she reminded herself. She was free to sleep late. Now that was a truly depressing thought because she always got up early, even after a bad night. She was doomed to be a morning person.

She went to stand at the window. Although there were a number of condo towers, apartments and office buildings scattered around her, she could see a wide slice of the Queen Anne neighborhood. The hillside was dotted with the lights of the exclusive residences that had been built there to take advantage of the views. Tonight one of the big houses was dark and empty. Sprague Witherspoon's body was probably in cold storage in the medical examiner's office, waiting to be autopsied. The hunt for his killer had begun.

She thought about the vodka bottle that she had found at the scene. Another wave of anxiety whispered through her nerves. It had to be a coincidence. There was no other explanation.

She suddenly remembered the ping that had shattered the nightmare. She went back into the bedroom and picked up the phone. When she saw the sender's name she almost plunged straight into another full-blown panic attack. For a few beats she simply stared at the screen in stunned disbelief. This could not be happening.

Sprague Witherspoon had sent her an email from beyond the grave. The message was a macabre twist on one of the Witherspoon Way affirmations:

Each day brings us another opportunity to change the future.

Congratulations, your future will soon be very different.

Four

Well, that was the most awkward evening I've spent in some time," Grace said. "And I include the night of my high school prom, during which I discovered that my date was deeply depressed because the girl he had wanted to be with had turned him down."

"You want awkward?" Julius Arkwright asked. "Try the annual business dinner and charity auction I'm scheduled to attend later this week."

Grace gave that some consideration. "I don't think that qualifies as awkward. A business dinner and charity auction sound boring, not awkward."

"Yeah, boring, too," Julius agreed. "I will have to make casual conversation with a bunch of people who are as dull as I am. But the really awkward part comes later, when I deliver the most boring after-dinner speech ever written. The charity auction isn't so bad. I'll be stuck buying a piece of art that I don't want but that isn't exactly awkward. That's just costly."

He didn't seem to care about the financial cost of the event, she noticed. Interesting.

She had been introduced to Julius for the first time that evening. She barely knew him but she was already certain that he ranked as the least boring man she had ever met. That was, however, beside the point, she told herself. They were talking awkward, not boring, and she doubted that any business dinner could have been as unnerving as the blind date that she and Julius had just endured.

And the date was not over—not until she got back to the lake house. To get there she had to clamber into the

front seat of Julius's gleaming black SUV. She hated SUVs. They were not designed for women who were frequently obliged to shop in the petite department.

She tucked her trench coat around herself and tried to discreetly raise the hem of her pencil-slim skirt so that she could position her left high-heeled sandal on the floorboard of the vehicle. Reaching up, she grasped the handhold inside the cab and prepared to haul her bodyweight up into the passenger seat.

There was no hope of negotiating the business gracefully. Even if she had been wearing jeans and athletic shoes she would have had a problem. Dressed in a snug-fitting little black dress and heels the best she could hope for was to make it up and into the seat on the first try with as little bounce as possible.

She tightened her grip on the handhold and pushed off with her right foot.

"Watch your head," Julius said.

Before she realized what he intended she felt his hands close around her waist. He lifted her as easily as if she were a sack of groceries and plopped her on the passenger seat.

She tried to control her trajectory and landing but she bounced, anyway. Her coat fell open, exposing a lot of inner thigh. By the time she got things under control Julius was closing the door.

Crap.

The awkward night was not showing any signs of improving. There was probably an affirmation for a blind date gone bad but what she really wanted was a therapeutic glass of wine.

She watched Julius round the front of the SUV. For a moment his hard profile and broad shoulders were silhouetted against the porch lights of the Nakamura house. In spite of all the warnings she had been giving herself that evening, an unfamiliar and decidedly dangerous sense of anticipation sparkled through her. For the duration of the short drive home she was going to be alone with Julius. That was probably not a good idea.

He opened the door and climbed behind the wheel. She watched him angle himself into the seat with the easy grace of a large hunting cat settling into high grass to wait for prey.

Well, of course he had made the process look easy. It wasn't as if someone had literally tossed him up into the seat.

He closed the door. An ominous but rather exciting sense of intimacy seethed in the dark interior of the SUV. At least it seemed ominous and exciting to her. Julius appeared blissfully unaware of the edgy vibe. He was no doubt eager to dump her on her doorstep.

She focused her attention on their hosts for the evening. Irene and Devlin Nakamura waved cheerfully from the front porch of their home.

Irene was a tall, attractive blonde who could trace her heritage back to some of the many Norwegians who had settled in the Pacific Northwest at the end of the nineteenth century. She was the kind of woman who could handle being the wife of a man who worked in law enforcement. She was also a very sharp businesswoman with a fast-rising local company that specialized in high-end cookware.

Devlin Nakamura bore the unmistakable stamp of a man others looked to in a crisis. Which was a good thing in a police officer, Grace told herself—unless he was looking at you. He radiated determination and a stern

will and he had cop eyes. It was easy to imagine him kicking down a door, or reading you your rights. If you were a criminal, he was not the investigator you wanted on your trail. Grace shivered. She had not been surprised to discover that Devlin and Julius Arkwright had once served together in the Marines.

“I’m sure Irene and Devlin meant well,” she said.

Julius fired up the SUV’s big engine. “Do you always say things like that after someone has ambushed you with a blind date?”

“Don’t be so melodramatic. It wasn’t that bad. Just . . . awkward.”

Grace was certain that Irene’s motives had been well-intentioned. She and Irene had grown up together. They had been close friends since kindergarten.

Devlin’s motives, however, were questionable. He was relatively new in Irene’s life. The pair had met shortly after Devlin moved to Cloud Lake a year ago to become the town’s new chief of police. Grace had been Irene’s maid of honor at the wedding.

Grace liked Devlin and she sensed that he was a committed husband. But tonight she’d had the uneasy impression that he was watching her with the same cold speculation that she had seen in the eyes of the Seattle homicide detective who had questioned her after Sprague’s murder ten days earlier.

“Okay,” Julius said. “We’ll go with awkward as a description of the date. For now.”

The amusement that etched his dark, deep, deceptively easygoing voice sent another chill across her nerve endings. She glanced at him. In the otherworldly glow of the car’s interior lights his face was unreadable but his eyes were a little tight at the outer corners, as if he was preparing to pull the trigger of a rifle.

Not that she knew much about guns or the type of person who used them, she thought. The only man of her acquaintance who actually carried one was Devlin. But given his job, she supposed that he had some business doing so.

She had to admit that she was probably at least partially responsible for the atmosphere of impending doom that had hung over the small dinner party that evening. The problem was that she was not doing a really great job of thinking positive these days.

Stumbling onto a murder scene was bound to have some unpleasant repercussions. Still, it had been ten days since she discovered Witherspoon’s body and the darkness was not lifting. It hovered at the edge of her consciousness during the day. At night it swept in like the tide. In spite of a lot of meditation and positive self-talk and the three rituals, the bad energy seemed to be getting worse, affecting her thoughts and her dreams. Both were growing darker and more unsettling.

And the disturbing emails from a dead man were still arriving every evening.

Julius eased the SUV out of the driveway and onto Lake Circle Road with the cool, competent control that seemed to be at the very core of his character. The man would make a really good friend or a very bad enemy, she thought. She doubted that he was the positive-thinking type—more likely a tactical strategist.

She refused to contemplate what kind of lover he would be.

Whatever you do, don’t go there, she thought.

She had been too tense—too aware—of Julius all evening to consider the reasons why he disturbed her senses. The best she could come up with was the old warning about icebergs—the most dangerous part was hidden under the surface. Her feminine intuition told her that Julius Arkwright had a lot going on under the surface. So what? The same could be said of everyone. There was no reason to dwell on Julius's concealed issues. She had her own issues these days.

The only hard facts that she knew about Julius were the bits and pieces that had come out in the course of conversation that evening. He was a venture capitalist—a very successful venture capitalist, according to Irene. Other investors routinely entrusted gazillions of dollars to Julius to invest on their behalf.

Not that she had anything against making money, Grace thought. As it happened, figuring out how to generate some future income was right at the top of her To-Do list at the moment. Nothing like losing a job to make a person appreciate the value of steady employment. She should know—she'd lost count of the number of jobs she'd had since leaving college to find herself.

The position at the Witherspoon Way headquarters had lasted longer than any of her previous careers—a full eighteen months. She knew her mother and sister had begun to hope that her ever-precarious job situation had finally stabilized. She'd had a few expectations that might be the case, as well.

Julius drove at a surprisingly low rate of speed along the narrow, two-lane road that circled the jagged edge of Cloud Lake. The surface of the deep water was a dark mirror that reflected the cold silver light of the moon.

The silence in the front seat became oppressive. Grace searched for a way to end it.

"Thank you for driving me back to my place," she said. She struggled to assume a polite tone but she knew she sounded a little gruff.

"No problem," Julius said. "It's on my way."

That much was true. The lakefront cottage that Julius had recently purchased was less than half a mile beyond the house in which Grace had been raised. Nevertheless, she hadn't anticipated the ride home with him. She had fully intended to drive herself to the Nakamuras' that evening but Devlin had offered to pick her up. She had assumed that he would be the one to take her home. But when Julius had pointed out that he would be going right past the Elland house and said it would be no trouble to give Grace a lift, there had been no gracious way to refuse—not with Irene and Devlin both nodding encouragingly.

Dinner would not have been nearly so uncomfortable, Grace thought, if it hadn't been so obvious that Irene had been trying her hand at matchmaking.

Oddly enough, now that she found herself alone with Julius, she could almost see the humor of the situation. Almost. She settled deeper into the seat.

"Did you know ahead of time that Irene and Devlin were setting us up?" she asked.

"I was told there would be another guest." Julius's mouth edged upward at the corner. "Like you said, they meant well."

"Now that it's over, I suppose it's sort of funny."

"Think so?"

“I’m used to people trying to set me up with blind dates,” Grace said. “My mother and my sister have made something of a hobby out of doing that in the past couple of years. Now Irene appears to be giving it a whirl. Between you and me, they’re all getting desperate.”

“But you’re not interested?”

“Oh, I’m usually interested,” Grace said.

“Just not tonight, is that it? Got a problem with the fact that I’m divorced?”

His tone was a little too neutral. So much for making light conversation. This was getting more awkward by the moment.

She tried to sidestep.

“Nothing personal, really,” she said. “It’s just that I’ve got a few other priorities at the moment. I’m trying to come up with a new career path and that requires my full attention.”

Julius did not appear interested in her job issues.

“Any idea why things haven’t worked out with any of your other dates?” he asked.

She was starting to get the deer-in-the-headlights feeling.

“It’s just that nothing has ever clicked,” she said, very cautious now. “My fault, according to Irene and my family.”

“Why is it your fault?”

“They tell me that I have a bad habit of trying to fix people. If I’m successful, I send them on their way and I move on, too.”

“And if you can’t fix them?”

She tapped one finger on the console that separated the seats. “Same outcome. I send them on their way and I move on.”

“So, you’re a serial heartbreaker?”

She did laugh then. “Good grief, no. I’m pretty sure I’ve never broken any man’s heart. Men tend to think of me as a friend. They tell me their troubles. We talk about their problems. I offer suggestions. And then they go off and date the next cute blonde they meet in a bar or the good-looking coworker at the office.”

Julius gave her a short, sharp look. “Has your heart ever been broken?”

“Not since college. And in hindsight, it’s a good thing he did break my heart because the relationship was a disaster for both of us. Lots of storm and drama but no substance.”

Julius was quiet for a moment. “Looking back, I don’t think there was any storm and drama in my marriage.”

“Not even at the very end?”

“We were both relieved that it was all over, as I recall.”

That was hard to believe, Grace thought, but the last thing she wanted to do was dig into the subject of his failed marriage. She was not going to try to fix Julius Arkwright.

“Mmm,” she said instead.

“Don’t worry, I won’t spend the rest of the drive to your place unloading on you. You don’t want to hear about my divorce and I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Whew.” Grace pretended to wipe her brow. “Good to know.”

Julius laughed.

Some of the tension went out of the atmosphere. She relaxed a little more and searched for a neutral topic.

“How long will you be staying here in Cloud Lake?” she asked.

“I plan to use the house year-round. I have a condo in Seattle but most of my work is done online. With some exceptions, I can work here as well as I can at my office. Cloud Lake is only an hour from the city. I’ll commute a couple of times a week to make sure things stay on track.”

She reminded herself that Julius was a very successful venture capitalist. He probably bought lakeside cottages and city condos the way she bought new shoes and dresses. Not that you would know that to look at him, she thought. In recent years the Pacific Northwest had proven fertile ground for start-ups and the savvy investors, like Julius, who funded the businesses that hit big. There was a lot of new money walking around the region these days and very little of it gave off a flashy, rich vibe. Most of it blended in very well with the crowd that shopped for deals at Costco and bought mountain bikes and all-weather gear at REI.

Grace was quite certain that Julius’s money was not the old kind. He had the edge of a self-made man—the kind of man who was accustomed to fighting for what he wanted.

“The house you bought used to be owned by your neighbor, Harley Montoya,” she said. “I was surprised to hear that he had sold it. He’s owned that property and the house he lives in for nearly a decade.”

“Harley says it’s time to downsize. What about you? Planning to stick around Cloud Lake?”

“For a while. Now that I’m unemployed I need to watch every penny. Mom kept the lake house after she and Kirk retired but they only use it during the summer. They suggested that I save rent money by living here until I figure out my new career path.”

“Where do they live now?” Julius asked.

“They moved to Scottsdale a couple of years ago. Mom sold her gift shop here in Cloud Lake and Kirk turned over his insurance business to his sons. At the moment Mom and Kirk are on a world cruise.”

“Irene said you have a sister?”

“Alison, yes. She’s a lawyer in Portland.”

“So you intend to stay here in Cloud Lake only until you get your act together?”

“That’s the plan,” Grace said.

"What's your strategy?"

She blinked. "I thought I just explained my plan."

Julius shot her an amused glance. "I'm talking about your strategy for finding a new career path."

"Oh, that." She flushed. "I'm still working on it."

She didn't owe him any explanations, she reminded herself.

"You must have some thoughts on the subject," he said.

"Actually, no, I don't," she said, going for a frosty, back-off tone. "My life has been somewhat complicated lately."

"I know. Must have been tough finding the body of your boss the way you did."

She hesitated, not sure she wanted to go down that particular conversational path.

"I try not to think about it," she said coolly.

"The Witherspoon Way will collapse without Witherspoon at the helm."

She crossed her arms and gazed fixedly at the pavement through the windshield.

"Trust me, all of us who worked for Sprague Witherspoon are aware of that," she said.

"You need a job. Sounds like your problem is pretty straightforward."

"Is that right? And just when, exactly, was the last time you found yourself out of work?"

To her surprise he pondered that briefly.

"It's been a while," he admitted.

She gave him a steely smile. "In other words, you really have no idea whatsoever about the current job market, let alone how complicated my particular situation might be."

"How did you find the job with Witherspoon?"

The question caught her off guard. "I sort of stumbled into it. That's usually how I find a new job."

"You stumbled into working for a motivational speaker?"

"Well, yes. A year and a half ago I was looking for a new direction. I decided to attend a Witherspoon Way seminar hoping to get some ideas. After Sprague Witherspoon talked to the audience I waited around to speak to him."

"About what?" Julius sounded genuinely curious.

"While Sprague was giving his seminar on positive thinking, I came up with some ideas about how he could take his concepts in different directions." She unfolded her arms and spread her hands. "To my surprise, he listened to me. The next thing I knew, he was offering me a job. Once I was on board he let me have free

rein. Working for the Witherspoon Way was the best job I've ever had."

"Just how many jobs have you had?"

"A lot." She sighed. "It's embarrassing, to tell you the truth. And it makes for a sketchy résumé. Some job-hopping is okay but beyond a certain point it makes you look—"

"Flighty. Unreliable. Undependable."

She winced. "All of the above. My sister knew that she wanted to be a lawyer by the time she was a senior in high school. But here I am, still searching for a career path that will last longer than eighteen months."

"You've got a problem," Julius said. "You need a business plan."

She stared at him. "A business plan for landing a job?"

"As far as I can tell, everything in life works better if you have a good, well-thought-out plan."

It was all she could do not to laugh. He sounded so serious.

"Are you talking about a five-year plan?" she asked lightly. "Because I don't think Mom will give me free rent for five years."

"Not a five-year plan—not for finding a career. More like a three-months-at-the-outside strategy. If you're serious about this you need to set goals and meet them."

"I've never been much of a long-term planner," she said.

"No kidding. I would not have guessed that."

She gave him a cold smile. "Sprague Witherspoon said that one of my assets was that I think outside the box."

"There's thinking outside the box and then there's failing to be able to find the box in the first place. You can't appreciate the new model until you understand the old one and why it isn't working anymore."

Irritation sparkled through her. "Gosh, maybe you should go into the self-help business. That sounds a lot like one of the Witherspoon Way affirmations."

"What's an affirmation?"

"It's a shortcut to positive thinking. A good affirmation helps focus the mind in a productive, optimistic way."

"Give me an example," Julius said.

"Well, say you had a bad day at work—"

"Let's go with something more concrete. Say you found yourself at a dinner party with friends who set you up with a boring blind date. What kind of affirmation would you use to help you think positive about the situation?"

She went very still. "Probably better not to get too concrete."

“I’m a businessman. I deal in concrete facts.”

“Fine,” she shot back. “You want an affirmation for this date? How about, Things are always darkest before the dawn? Will that work for you?”

“I don’t think that’s a Witherspoon Way affirmation. Pretty sure it’s been around for a while.”

“Got a better one?”

“I don’t do affirmations. I’ve got a couple of rules that I never break but neither of them fits our current situation.”

“Here’s my place,” she said quickly.

But he was already slowing for the turn into the tree-lined driveway that led to the small, neat house at the edge of the lake. He brought the SUV to a halt in front of the wraparound porch and shut down the engine.

The lights were still on in Agnes Gilroy’s house next door. The drapes were pulled but Grace was certain that Agnes was peering through the curtains. Agnes possessed a deep and abiding interest in the doings of her neighbors. She was bound to have heard the unfamiliar rumble of the car in the driveway.

“Thanks for the ride home,” Grace said. She unbuckled her safety belt and reached for the door handle. “Nice meeting you. I’m sure we’ll run into each other in town. Don’t bother getting out of the car. I can manage just fine on my own.”

She could tell that he was not paying attention to her less-than-sparkling chatter. He sat, unmoving, his strong, competent hands resting on the wheel, and contemplated the house as if he had never seen one.

“I had a career plan by the time I was eleven years old,” he said.

“Yep, I’m not surprised.” She got the car door open, grabbed the edges of the trench coat and prepared to jump down to the ground. “I had you pegged as one of those.”

“One of those what?”

“One of those folks who always knows where he’s going.” She gripped the handhold and plunged off the seat. For an instant she hovered precariously in midair. Relief shot through her when she landed on both feet. She turned and looked back at him. “Must be nice.”

He popped open his own door, uncoiled from behind the wheel and circled the front of the vehicle. He got to her before she reached the porch steps.

“It helps to know what you want,” he said. “It clarifies choices and streamlines the decision matrix.”

The cool, calculating way he watched her sent a little chill down her spine. Or was it a thrill? The possibility made her catch her breath.Wrong time and probably the wrong man. Send him on his way.

“What was your career plan at eleven?” she said, instead.

“I wanted to get rich.”

She paused to search his face in the porch light. “Why?”

“Because I figured out that money gives a man power.”

“Over others?”

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