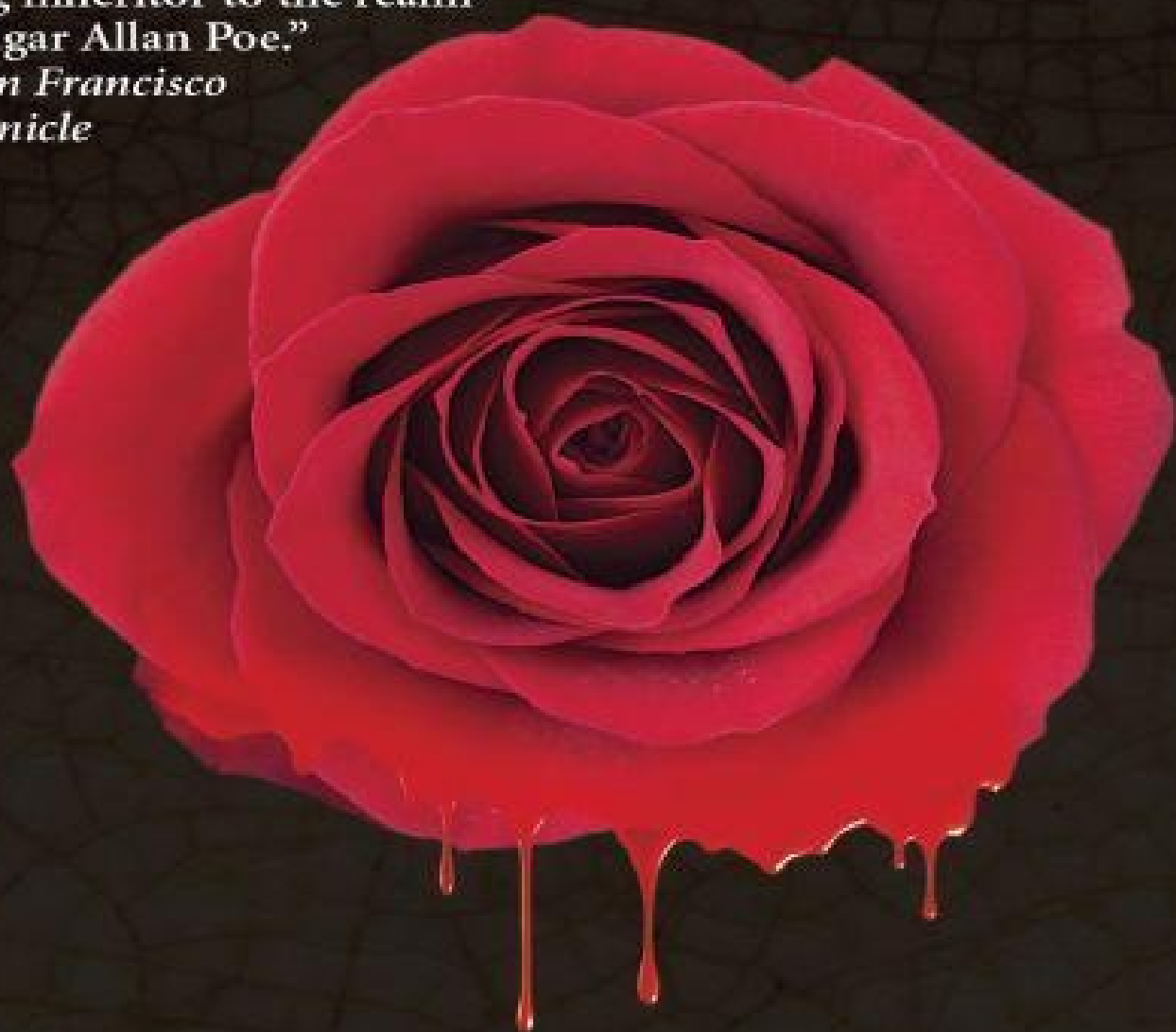


GRAHAM MASTERTON

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE 5TH WITCH*

“Graham Masterton is the
living inheritor to the realm
of Edgar Allan Poe.”

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Chronicle*



DEATH MASK

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CHAPTER ONE

The Miracle of the Rose

The miracle happened early on Tuesday afternoon. It was the tiniest of miracles, and it appeared to be a happy one. But it was only the first of many more miracles—miracles that grew darker and more frightening by the day—like statues that turn their heads around and baths that fill up with blood and dead people seen walking through the streets.

CHAPTER TWO

Three Warnings

It was the second week in May. Molly was painting a scarlet rose with a yellow ladybug crawling up its stem. Sissy came into her studio and stood watching her for a few minutes. Molly was sitting next to the open window, so that a warm breeze blew in from the yard and the sunshine fell across the gardening book that she was using for reference.

An oval mirror stood on the opposite side of her desk, and Molly's painting was reflected in it, and Molly was her hand, busily washing in the petals with a fine sable brush. She wore silver rings on every finger, including her thumb, and her fingernails were polished in metallic blue.

She was also wearing a spectacular antique necklace, more like a charm bracelet than a necklace, hung with bells and mascots and stars set with semiprecious stones. It flashed and sparkled and jingled as she painted.

"How about some more wine?" asked Sissy.

"Just half a glass. I always zizz off if I drink too much."

Sissy came back with a frosty glass of Zinfandel and set it down on the windowsill. "That's beautiful," she said, nodding at the rose.

Molly tinkled her brush in a jelly jar full of cloudy water. " 'Mr. Lincoln,' they call it. It has a wonderful smell. I just wish I had a green thumb, and I could grow some in the yard. But everything I try to grow dies of some kind of horrible blight, or gets eaten by caterpillars."

"Being a gardener, you know—it's like being a nurse," Sissy told her. "Your plants are your patients. They need constant fussing over if you want to keep them happy. Me, I always sing to my flowers."

"You *sing* to them?"

"Why not? My climbing roses love 'Stairway to Heaven.' Trouble is, I'm always gasping for breath by the time I get to the last verse."

"You shouldn't smoke so much."

Mr. Boots, Sissy's black Labrador, came trotting into the study with his pink tongue lolling out the side of his mouth.

"Hey, Mister, I suppose you're pining for a walk," said Sissy, ruffling his ears. "Well, it's too hot right now, but let's go sit outside in the shade."

Molly said, "I'll come join you, soon as I've finished this. My deadline's next Friday. *Fairy Fifi in Flowerland*, this one's called. You should read the text. Or rather you shouldn't, unless you have a strong desire to barf. 'Fairy Fifi skipped and danced, all around the roses. She had bellses on her fingerses ... and bellses on her toeses.' "

"Saints preserve us."

From the day that Trevor had first brought Molly home to meet her, she and Sissy had become the most comfortable of friends. There might have been thirty years between them, but they were both spectacularly untidy, and they both dressed like Gypsies, and they both liked wine and fortune-telling and jingly-jangly 1960s hippie music. "Hey, Mr Tambourine Man!" they would sing in chorus, arm in arm.

Such was the warmth that had developed between them that they could sit for hours together saying nothing at all, but occasionally smiling at each other, as if they shared a secret that they would never disclose to anybody else, not even Trevor.

Ever since he was in grade school Trevor had complained to Sissy that she looked and behaved

like a fortune-teller from a traveling carnival, with her wild gray hair and her dangling earrings and her black flowery-printed dresses. But Molly was a free spirit, too, and Sissy believed that Trevor adored her all the more because she was just as unconventional as his mother.

Molly reminded Sissy of a young Mia Farrow, from *Rosemary's Baby* days, with hair like little brown flames and a heart-shaped face and enormous brown eyes, and a coltish, apple-breasted, skinnily legged figure that always made Sissy think to herself that *she* used to look like that once—but that was when the Platters had just released “Only You” and her father used to collect her from high school in his new powder blue Edsel.

Sissy went outside, into the small backyard, with its redbrick paving and its terra-cotta plant pots. The sky was hazy but cloudless, and the humidity was well over 80 percent. She sat in the shadow of the vine trellis at the far end of the yard in front of a small green cast-iron table, and took out her Marlboro cigarettes and her DeVane cards. Mr. Boots flopped down at her feet and panted.

Through the open window, she could see Molly's reflection in the oval mirror, and she waved with her cigarette hand. Smoke drifted up through the vines.

Sissy began to lay out the DeVane cards. They were huge, much larger than tarot cards, worn at the edges, but still brightly colored. They had been printed in France in the eighteenth century, and even though they were called the “Cards of Love,” they were also crowded with mysterious signs and veiled innuendoes, and omens of impending bad luck.

The DeVane cards might well predict that a young girl was going to meet a tall, handsome stranger and plan to get married before the end of the year, but they might also predict that her wedding car would overturn on the way to the church and that she would be seriously disfigured by third-degree burns.

This afternoon, Sissy wanted to ask the cards if it was time for her to return to Connecticut. After all, she had been staying in Cincinnati for almost seven weeks now, and she was beginning to suspect that Trevor was growing more than a little irked by her being here so long.

She laid out the cards in the traditional cross-of-Lorraine pattern. Then she laid the Predict card, which represented herself, across the center. Her card was *la Sibylle des salons*, the Parlour Fortune-Teller, depicted as an old woman in a red cloak and gold-rimmed spectacles. Sissy had been able to tell fortunes since she was eleven years old, and she could interpret everything from tea leaves to crystal balls. She had never asked herself *how* she could do it. To her, seeing how tomorrow morning was going to pan out seemed as natural as remembering what had happened yesterday afternoon.

The first card came up was *les Amis de la table*, which showed four people sitting at a dinner table laden with roasted pheasants and joints of beef and whole salmon decorated with piped mayonnaise and slices of cucumber. Every place at the table was set with seven pieces of cutlery, and this was a clear indication that she would be welcome for at least another week.

The pretty young woman at the head of the table was holding up a pomegranate and laughing, and the young man sitting next to her was laughing, too. Pomegranates were a symbol of purity and love because they were the only fruit incorruptible by worms, but they were also a symbol of blood because of the color of their juice.

Although the young woman and the young man appeared to be so carefree, there was an older woman sitting close beside them, and the older woman's expression was deeply troubled. She had her left hand pressed to her bosom, and she was frowning at the fourth dinner guest as if he frightened her. However, it was impossible to see his face, because he was wearing a gray hooded cloak, like a monk's habit, which concealed everything except the tip of his nose.

On the table in front of him there was a shiny metal dish cover, and his face was reflected in that, but the reflection was so distorted that Sissy was unable to make out what he looked like.

So here were four companions eating their evening meal—but one of them was a mystery guest and his presence was clearly disturbing one of the others. There was another strange element in the picture, too: a red rose was hanging upside down from the candelabrum just above the center of the table.

Sissy turned up the next card. *La Blanchisseuse*, the Laundress. It showed a young woman in a mobcap lifting a white dress or a nightshirt out of a wooden tub. The young woman's eyes were closed. Either she was very tired, or she was daydreaming, or else she didn't want to look at the horror of what she was doing, because the wooden tub was filled to the brim with blood, and the nightshirt was soaked in blood, too.

A small side window in the laundry was open, very high up, and a man was looking in. Presumably he was standing on a ladder. He had staring eyes and a ruddy face, almost as red as the blood in the wooden tub. All around the window frame, red roses were growing.

Sissy stared at the card for a long time. Mr. Boots realized that she was unsettled, because he lifted his head and made that mewling sound in the back of his throat.

"What do you make of this, Mr. Boots?" Sissy asked him, showing him the card. "It looks to me like somebody's going to get badly hurt, and somebody else is going to try to wash away the evidence."

Mr. Boots barked, just once. Sissy slowly put down the laundry card and picked up the next one. This was even stranger, *le Sculpteur*—showing a young sculptor in his studio. The sculptor was slim with long hair, and strangely androgynous, so that he could have been a girl in boy's clothing.

He was chiseling the naked figure of a man out of a block of white marble. The figure was holding up both hands, as if it were surrendering or appealing for understanding, and both of its hands were bright red, as if they had been dipped in blood.

All around the studio ceiling, there were stone carvings of roses.

"Somebody is going to get badly hurt, and then somebody is going to wash away the evidence. But it looks to me as if a third person is going to create an image that shows who really did it. Now—who do we know who can do *that*, Mr. Boots?"

Sissy picked up the cards and was about to take them inside to show Molly, when she saw something bright and red and blurry out of the corner of her eye. She turned, and there it was, in one of the terra-cotta pots. A tall scarlet rose, its petals almost tulip shaped, with a yellow ladybug crawling up its stem.

She approached it very slowly, took off her spectacles, and peered at it. She hadn't seen it on her way out. In fact, she was absolutely sure that she had never seen it before, ever.

She sniffed it, but it had no fragrance at all.

"Molly!" she called, too softly the first time for Molly to hear her. Then, "*Molly!*"

"I'm in the kitchen," Molly called back. "I'm just getting myself some clean paint water."

"Forget the darn paint water. Come out here."

Molly appeared on the back porch. "What is it? I really have to finish this illustration."

"I thought you couldn't grow roses," said Sissy.

"I can't. I told you. I'm the Angel of Death when it comes to gardening. Even my fat hen curls up and dies."

"So what's this?"

Molly came barefoot into the yard. She stared at the rose in disbelief. Then she laughed and said, "Oh, you're nuts! You stuck it in there yourself, just to fool me!"

Sissy shook her head. "Look at it, Molly. It's the exact same rose you've just been drawing. Right down to the yellow ladybug."

Molly took hold of the rose by the stem and gently tugged it.

“You’re right,” she said, and her wide eyes widened even more. “It’s rooted. And it *is* exactly the same. *Exactly*. Look—this is *insane!*—it even has brush marks on the petals.”

“It’s not possible,” said Sissy. “But it must be possible. I can see it.”

“We should show somebody else,” Molly suggested. “Maybe there was something in the salad.”

“Something in the salad like what?”

“I don’t know. Jimsonweed or something. Maybe we’re, like, hallucinating.”

“How could Jimsonweed have gotten into your salad? I watched you make it. It was nothing but rocket and scallions and sliced beets and hard-cooked eggs.”

“But how can this rose possibly be real? I didn’t grow it, I *painted* it!”

“Maybe it’s a miracle,” said Sissy.

“You don’t really believe that, do you?”

“If it’s not a miracle, what else could it be? Maybe it’s a sign from God.”

“Why would God send us a sign like this? I mean, even if he did, what’s he trying to tell us? We don’t have to grow roses from cuttings? All we have to do is paint them?”

Sissy said, “Maybe it’s more than a miracle. Maybe it’s a warning.” She held up the DeVar cards. “I was just reading my immediate future. Look at this—four people sitting at a table, but one of them looks as if he’s some kind of threat to the other three. Then there’s this—a washerwoman rinsing blood out of somebody’s clothing. And this—a sculptor carving the likeness of a living man, but the man has blood on his hands.”

“I don’t understand. What does it mean?”

“I think it’s something that’s going to happen to us ... or something that we’re going to find ourselves involved in. Somebody’s going to get hurt, maybe killed even.”

“Not one of us?”

“I surely hope not. But this sculptor—I think he might represent you. Whoever’s responsible for this wounding or this killing, the police are going to ask *you* to sketch his likeness.”

Molly shook her head. “Come on, Sissy—I haven’t been asked to do any police sketches for *months*. February, I think, was the last one, when that teacher got raped at Summit Country Day School. The CIS prefer computers these days.”

“It’s here in the cards, Molly. The cards don’t have any reason to lie to me.”

“Well, maybe you should read my tea leaves, too, just to make sure. The cards may not be lying, but they could have made a mistake, couldn’t they?”

“Molly—there are *roses* in all of these cards, and *they* mean something, too, although I don’t know what. And what do we have here, blooming right in front of us?”

Molly looked confused and unhappy. “Look,” she said. “I don’t know what to think of this. I’d best get back inside and finish my painting. Why don’t you try the cards again? Could be they’ll tell you something totally different this time. Something less, you know, *brrrrr!*”

Sissy shrugged. “Okay, I can have a go. But I promise you, they’ll come out the same, or the same message told with different cards. They always do, like the night follows the day.”

Molly reached out toward the Mr. Lincoln rose, and for a moment Sissy thought that she was going to pick it, but then she hesitated and drew her hand back, as if picking it would somehow make it more real.

“Might as well leave it,” she said. “Probably the only rose I’ll ever manage to grow.”

She gave Sissy a quick, unconvincing smile and went back into the house. Sissy turned back toward the vine trellis.

“Come on, Mister, let’s see if we can make the future look a little more rosy. Or a little *less* rosy, I should say.”

She had just hitched up her dress to sit down when Molly appeared at the back door again.

“Sissy?” Her voice was as colorless as cold water.

“What is it, Molly?”

“Come see for yourself.”

Sissy followed her into her study. On her desk lay the gardening book, still open at the photograph of the Mr. Lincoln rose. The oval mirror was still there, too, and so was Molly’s box of watercolors. But the sheet of cartridge paper on which she had been painting was completely blank.

Sissy turned toward the window. Outside, in the bright unfocused sunshine, the scarlet rose nodded and nodded, and the yellow ladybug continued to crawl slowly up its stem.

She turned back to Molly. “Paint something else,” she told her. “Another rose. A bird, maybe. Anything.”

CHAPTER THREE

The Red Elevator

Jimmy jabbed the elevator button yet again, and said, “What the hell are they doing up there? My slider’s going cold.”

“Some doofus has probably jammed the doors open,” said Newton. “They’re always doing that when they’re moving their furniture from floor to floor. Tough shit if anybody else wants to get back to their office.”

Jimmy pressed his finger on the button and kept it there, but the elevator’s indicator remained stuck at fifteen. Six or seven other office workers had gathered around the elevator now, carrying boxes of lunches and Styrofoam cups of coffee, as well as a delivery boy from Skyline with a persistent snicker and a large bag that smelled strongly of cinnamon chili.

“This is goddamned intolerable,” grumbled a shirtsleeved accountant who was trying to balance three La Rosa’s pizzas and three cups of soup on top of his briefcase. “Any volunteers to run upstairs and check out what’s wrong?”

Jimmy pressed his hand against his chest and wheezed. “Sorry, dude. It’s my asthma. Fifteen floors, that’d kill me. Newton, how about you, man? I’ll hold your cheeseburger for you.”

Three more office workers arrived, all of them carrying take-out lunches.

“Goddamned elevator’s jammed again,” explained the shirtsleeved accountant, as if it weren’t obvious.

There were three elevators in the Giley Building in downtown Cincinnati, but most of the time only one of them was working, and even when it did, its doors shuddered so violently whenever they were closing that Jimmy was always worried that they would refuse to open again, and he would be trapped inside.

The Giley Building had been built in less than eleven months, during the Depression, by hundreds of hands eager for the work. It had been scheduled for demolition more than three years ago, but local conservationists had fought to preserve its brown-brick Italianate facade, as well as its gloomy brown marble lobby, with murals of Cincinnati’s history, like the arrival of the first riverboat, and the building of the first suspension bridge over the Ohio River, and the opening of the Procter & Gamble soap factory.

Today, the building was less than two-thirds occupied, and many of the floors were deserted, with echoing corridors and tipped-over chairs and notice boards that were still covered with yellowing sales charts.

Newton said, “Oh, *man*,” but handed Jimmy his White Castle burger box all the same. He crossed over to the staircase, and he had already opened the door when there was a *bing!* and the elevator indicator light went from fifteen to fourteen, and then to twelve.

“Hallelujah,” said the shirtsleeved accountant, and the rest of the office workers gave a cynical cheer.

Newton came back and reclaimed his cheeseburger. “I’m going to change my job, man. I’m going to work in a building with elevators that actually go up and down, and the fricking air-conditioning actually conditions the fricking air, and half of the offices ain’t populated by ghosts.”

Newton thought that he had heard people walking around the empty floors late in the evening and echoing voices, and telephones ringing that nobody answered.

“You’re crazy, dude,” Jimmy told him. “You know there’s no such thing as ghosts.”

“Oh, yeah? And where do you think that dead people go when they die?”

“They don’t go nowhere. When you die it’s like someone switches the lights off, that’s all, and doesn’t never switch them back on again. And even if dead people *did* go somewhere, they sure as hell wouldn’t go to the office.”

“I know I darn well wouldn’t,” put in the shirtsleeved accountant. “When I die, I’m going Vegas.”

The elevator’s indicator continued to *bing!* its way from twelve to eleven and ten and nine, and eventually it reached the lobby. The office workers crowded around it, waiting for the doors to shudder open.

At last, they did—*chug-chug-chug*—and everybody took a step forward. But as they did so, a figure inside the elevator toppled to the floor, and they immediately took a step back.

“Jesus,” said Jimmy.

“Oh my good God,” said a woman right behind him.

A young woman was crouched facedown in the middle of the elevator floor, where she had just fallen, and underneath her a middle-aged man was lying on his side with his back to them. The young woman was dressed in a cream-colored pantsuit, and the middle-aged man was wearing a pale blue sport coat, but both of them were covered in blood. The elevator was plastered in blood, too, all the way up to the ceiling. There were sprays and runs and dozens of bloody handprints all over the mirrors.

Most horrific of all, a large kitchen knife was still sticking out of the young woman’s right shoulder.

Without any hesitation, the shirtsleeved accountant tossed his cups of soup and his pizzas and his briefcase onto the lobby floor.

“Call nine-one-one!” he shouted. He stepped into the elevator and placed two fingertips against the young woman’s neck. “She’s still alive! Help me!”

Jimmy pushed his box lunch into Newton’s hands and stepped into the elevator, too. The floor was so slippery with blood that he skidded and almost lost his balance.

“What do you want me to do, dude?” he asked the shirtsleeved accountant.

“Let’s lift her out of here—gently. Lay her on her side on the floor. Has anybody called nine-one-one? We need coats, blankets—something to keep her warm. And we need to find out where she’s been stabbed—keep some pressure on any arterial wounds.”

Jimmy said, “Shouldn’t we take out the knife?”

“No, leave it there. The paramedics can do that. A lot of stab victims die like that, taking the knife out.”

Between them, he and Jimmy dragged the young woman out of the elevator and laid her on the floor. A matronly secretary knelt down beside her and unbuttoned her coat and her blouse, trying to locate her wounds.

The shirtsleeved accountant went back into the elevator and checked the pulse of the middle-aged man.

“How about him?” asked Jimmy, but the shirtsleeved accountant looked up and shook his head.

“Looks like he was stabbed straight in the heart. Couple of times in the lungs, too.”

“Unbelievable,” said Newton. “Fucking unbelievable.”

The matronly secretary said, “This young lady’s been lucky, I think. I can only find cuts on her hands and her arms. She must have been fighting for her life.”

Jimmy hunkered down beside her. The young woman’s hazel-colored eyes were open, although she appeared to be staring at nothing at all. She was midtwentiesish, with light brown hair that was cut in a long bob, but which was now stuck together with drying blood. There were bloody fingerprints all over her forehead and her right cheek.

“Are you okay?” Jimmy asked her. The young woman didn’t answer, but she was still breathing and he could see her lips move slightly.

“You’re going to be fine,” Jimmy told her. “I promise you, you’re going to be fine.”

They heard sirens outside as paramedics and police arrived, and the lobby was filled by the kaleidoscopic reflections of red and blue lights.

Jimmy stood up. The shirtsleeved accountant came up to him and laid a hand on his shoulder. “You did good, son. Thanks.”

“Hey, I didn’t do nothing. You a first-aider?”

“Ex-marine. Served in Iraq. You get plenty of practice out there, I can tell you, patching up people with various kinds of holes in them.”

“Shit!” said Newton. “Whoever did this, he’s still in the building, right? He didn’t come down the stairs, did he? So there’s no way he could have gotten out.”

“Not unless he jumped from the fifteenth floor,” said the shirtsleeved accountant grimly.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Garden of the Inexplicable

It was evening by the time Detective Kunzel rang the doorbell, and most of the garden was shadow. But Sissy and Molly were still sitting under the vine trellis, drinking wine and looking at the terra-cotta pots with a mixture of awe and disbelief—but with delight, too, because what had happened was so magical.

During the afternoon, Molly had painted five more roses, of varying colors, from buttery yellow to darkest crimson. She had also painted a purple hollyhock and a sunflower and a ragged white Shasta daisy. And here they were, nodding in the breeze, as real as if she had grown them from cuttings and seeds.

“How do you think it happens?” asked Molly. “Do you think it’s some kind of *mirage*? You know, like an optical illusion, except that you can touch it, too?”

Sissy blew out smoke. “If you ask me, sweetheart, it’s more important to find out *why* it happens rather than *how*. Nothing like this ever happens for no reason. Never did in *my* lengthy experience anyhow.”

They had witnessed the miracle as it happened, right in front of their eyes. After Molly had painted a rose, they had stood back and seen it gradually fade from her sketchbook, as if the paper had been bleached by the sunlight. At the same time, they had looked out of the window and seen the same rose materialize in one of the pots—only the ghost of a rose to begin with, but then more and more solid, until it was real enough to be picked, and its thorns actually pricked their fingers and drew blood.

They had watched it happen with every flower, and a Japanese beetle, too. Molly had been reluctant to paint a bird, though, in case it wasn’t anatomically correct and couldn’t fly.

Sissy had dealt out the DeVane cards yet again, and asked them to explain the miracle in more detail. This time, however, the cards were unusually obscure, and difficult to interpret. When they behaved like this, Sissy always complained that they were *muttering*.

The last card was *le Sourd-muet*, the Deaf-Mute. It showed a young woman wearing nothing but a garland of pink roses around her hips. She had one finger raised to her lips, and one hand cupped her right ear, as if she were straining to hear. She was standing close to a dark lake on which three mute swans were swimming. On the far side of the lake, there was a grove of trees in which a naked man was hiding. His skin was very white, as if he were made of marble, but both of his hands were scarlet.

“What on God’s earth does *this* mean?” Molly had asked her.

“I don’t know. Maybe it means that we shouldn’t ask too many questions. Not for a while anyhow. Swans are a symbol of patience, but they’re a symbol of tragic death, too. And look. There’s that figure again—like that statue in the sculptor’s studio. And *more* roses. This is all very odd.”

“I thought the cards were supposed to *explain* things, not make them even more confusing than they are already.”

“Not always,” said Sissy. “Now and then they simply tell you that they can’t tell you anything. That usually means that you have six or seven possible futures waiting for you, and the cards can’t decide which one of those futures is actually going to happen.”

“But I thought my life was all mapped out, every second, right from the moment I was born? You know, like karma.”

“Oh, *no*, not at all! You always have choices! But there are certain critical moments in your life

when your entire future can be altered by a single random event—like whether you overslept and missed that bus, or whether it was raining and your shopping bag broke and some really attractive stranger helped you to pick up your shopping. Look at the way you met Trevor at the Chidlaw Gallery. He was only going there to give them a quote on their insurance.”

Molly nodded, and smiled. “The first time I talked to him, I thought, ‘What a good-looking guy—but what a stuffed shirt.’ But then he looked at my painting and said, ‘That’s amazing ... that really comes alive.’ And he didn’t even know it was mine.”

“Exactly,” said Sissy. “At moments like that, the cards seem to be waiting for one more piece of the jigsaw to fall into place before they’re ready to tell you what’s going to happen to you next.”

She finished her glass of wine and said, “The DeVane cards are not just for fortune-telling though. They’re like a key to all of the inexplicable things that happen in life. Why are we born? Why are we here for? That red-haired woman I saw in Fountain Square last week—why was she crying? Why did Frank die so young and leave me widowed for so long?”

“How come I can paint roses and they appear for real in my garden?”

Sissy picked up her glass but it was empty. “Ha! I wish I could tell you. But maybe you could paint us another bottle of Zinfandel.”

The doorbell rang. “You’re not expecting anybody, are you?” asked Sissy.

“It’s probably Sheila, bringing my cake ring back. I don’t know why she doesn’t keep it. I’m worse than you when it comes to baking.”

“My dear—*nobody* is worse than me when it comes to baking. Whenever I used to bake, I got answering smoke signals from the Comanche.”

Molly went inside. Sissy took out another cigarette, but Mr. Boots tilted his head on one side in disapproval, so she tucked it back into the pack.

“You don’t have the spirit of Frank hiding inside of you, do you?” she asked him. She leaned forward so that her nose was only an inch away from his and said, “If you’re in there, Frank, I promise to cut down. I’ll even try the nicotine gum.”

Molly came back out into the yard, accompanied by two men. One of them was broad shouldered and bulky, with brush-cut salt-and-pepper hair and eyes as deep set as currants in Pillsbury’s dough. He wore a tan-colored suit that was far too tight for him under the arms and a green shirt that looked as if it was buttoned up wrong, and his belly bulged over his belt.

Behind him came a thin, snappy-looking individual with deliberately mussed-up hair and the face of a handsome rodent. He wore a black designer shirt and he had a pair of D&G sunglasses hooked into his breast pocket.

Molly led the two men down to the arbor. “Sissy ... this is Detective Mike Kunzel and this is Detective—What did you say your name was?”

“Bellman, Freddie Bellman.”

“You caught me talking to my late husband,” said Sissy. “You must think I’m going doolally.”

Detective Kunzel looked down at Mr. Boots and said, “Not at all, ma’am. I used to have the worst-tempered Labrador bitch you ever met, and I was one hundred percent sure that she was possessed by the spirit of my late mother-in-law, may she rest in peace.”

Molly said, “How have you been, Mike? How’s Betty? Still singing for the Footlighters?”

“Betty’s great, thanks for asking. They just gave her the part of Milly in *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. I’ve had ‘Goin’ Courtin’ stuck on my brain for weeks.”

“Jesus—you and me both,” said Detective Bellman, but then gave a quick, sly grin to show that he meant no offense.

“So what can I do for you, Mike?” asked Molly. “How about some refreshment? Limeade? Cranberry juice? Ale-8-One?”

“If I wasn’t on duty, Crayola, I could do righteous justice to an ice-cold Hud. But I’m good thanks. I came to ask you if you could come over to the University Hospital and do your forensic art stuff.”

Molly looked across at Sissy, and the expression on her face said, *My God, your sculptor can predict this only hours ago*. But she turned back to Detective Kunzel and said, “Thought you were all computerized these days.”

“Well, pretty much. But Lieutenant Booker thought you were the right person for this particular job, on account of your interview technique. We have a young woman in the trauma center who was attacked in the Giley Building round about lunchtime today. Some knife-wielding crazy trapped her in an elevator and stabbed her three times in the back. She survived, but there was another guy in the elevator with her who wasn’t so lucky.

“She’s very shocked, very distressed, but the elevators in the Giley Building don’t have CCTV and obviously we need a composite of the perpetrator as quick as we can get it. That’s why Lieutenant Booker wanted somebody with real sensitivity when it comes to asking questions, and there isn’t anybody with more real sensitivity than you.”

“Nice of you to say so. I’d be glad to do it. Do you want me to go over there right now?”

“Give you a ride, if you like. I can give you all the grisly details on the way.”

Sissy said, “Did anybody else see the killer?”

“No, ma’am. The young woman who was stabbed was the only eyewitness. We searched the building top to bottom, all twenty-three floors, and we’re still not sure how the perpetrator managed to escape. But over seven hundred seventy-five people still work there, and so it couldn’t have been too difficult for him to mingle with the crowds.”

“Or *her*,” Sissy corrected him.

“Well, sure. But this is not the type of attack that I would normally associate with a female perpetrator.”

“Not unless the young woman and the dead man were having an affair, and she was a jealous wife.”

“You sure have some imagination, ma’am,” said Detective Kunzel. “But right now I think we’d better stick to the empirical facts.”

“Sometimes the facts can be very deceptive,” Sissy countered him. “It’s *insight*, that’s what you need.”

“My mother-in-law tells fortunes,” Molly explained. “She’s very good... . She can practically tell you what you’re going to choose for dessert tomorrow.”

Detective Kunzel tried to look impressed. “Wow. We could use a talent like that. Maybe I can call on you, ma’am, if this case reaches any kind of an impasse. Or if I need to find out a surefire winner for the Kentucky Derby.”

“You’re being sarcastic, Detective. But don’t worry, I’m used to it. My late husband was a detective in the Connecticut State Police, and he was a skeptic, too, when it came to fortune-telling. But I would be more than happy to help if you want me to. So long as you say please.”

“Please?”

Sissy was quite aware that “Please?” was the distinctively Cincinnati way of saying “Pardon?” “Excuse me?” but she pretended that she didn’t.

“There,” she said. “You’ve managed to choke it out already.”

At that moment, Trevor came out into the yard holding Victoria by the hand. Sissy’s first and only granddaughter was nine years old now, very skinny, with huge brown eyes like her mother and long, dark hair that was braided into plaits. She wore a pink sleeveless top, and white shorts, and sparkly pink sneakers.

Trevor was so much like his late father, with a wave of black hair and clear blue eyes, although ~~his face was rounder and not so sharply chiseled as Frank's had been, and he hadn't inherited Frank's~~ quick and infectious grin. He had shown no inclination to join the police force like his father, either. He was much more introspective and cautious, and he believed in calculating risks, rather than taking them. He was wearing a blue checkered Timberland shirt and sharply pressed khakis.

"Hey, Mike!" he said. "What are you doing here, feller?"

Detective Kunzel clapped him on the shoulder. "Hi, Trevor. Sorry about this, but we've come to borrow your talented young wife for an hour or two."

"What is it? Missing person?"

"Homicide. We had a stabbing this afternoon, down at the Giley Building. One dead, or serious."

"I heard about it while I was going to bring Victoria home from her party. Jeez."

Sissy said, "Why don't I take Victoria inside and give her a drink? How was your dance class, Victoria?"

"I was *terrible*. I kept do-si-do-ing round the wrong way."

Sissy took her hand and led her into the kitchen. "I used to dance like that, too. Always do-si-do-ing round the wrong way. In fact I think I've spent my whole life do-si-do-ing round the wrong way."

Victoria sat down at the large pine table, and Sissy poured her a glass of strawberry milk. "You want cookies?"

"I'm not really allowed, not before supper."

"Well, your mom has to do some work for the police this evening, so I think what I'll do is, I'll take us all *out* for supper, and when you go out for supper you're allowed cookies to keep your strength up while you're waiting for your order to arrive. How would you like to go to the Blue Aster Chili and have one of those great big chicken sandwiches with all the cheese on it?"

Victoria's eyes widened. "Can we *really*?"

"Sure we can. It's about time we ate something unhealthy around here."

Sissy was about to go to her room to fetch her wrap when Victoria said, "Grandma—you just dropped one of your cards."

She looked down. One of the DeVane cards had slipped out of the pack—but somehow it had fallen edgewise, and it was standing upright in the crack between two of the wide pine planks that made up the tabletop.

"Well, that's pretty neat, isn't it? I'll bet I couldn't do that again, not in a million years!"

She hesitated for a moment, but then she plucked the card out of the crack and peered at it through her spectacles.

Une Jeune fille tombante, a Young Girl, Falling. It showed a girl in a yellow dress falling down a well. Her arms were upraised as if somebody had just released their hold on her, and her expression was one of absolute terror. Up above her, a man in a strange lopsided beret was grinning down at her as she fell and throwing roses after her, as if her falling were some kind of dramatic performance.

Below her, half submerged in the darkest depths of the well, a black creature was looking up at her expectantly, its teeth bared and its claws ready to snatch at her dress.

Sissy frowned at the card for a while, and then she tucked it firmly back into the middle of the deck. *You're just a card. Don't try to get smart with me.*

"Grandma?" asked Victoria.

"What is it, sweetheart?"

"What's the matter, Grandma? That wasn't a horrible card, was it?"

"No, of course not. It was a very *nice* card, as a matter of fact. It was a little girl, jumping in some water. Hey—maybe it means that Mommy and Daddy will take you on vacation."

But Sissy suspected that the card was yet another warning, especially since it had been brought to her attention in such an extraordinary way. How could a card fall edgewise like that and stick in the table? It was a warning that something bloody and violent was very close at hand, and that it was going to arrive amongst them sooner rather than later. The girl, falling down the well. The black creature, waiting to tear her to pieces.

“Daddy promised he would take us to Disney World,” said Victoria, with a mouthful of Toll House cookie.

“That would be wonderful, wouldn’t it?” smiled Sissy. She rested her hand on top of Victoria’s head. *Une Jeune fille tombante.*

The world at the bottom of the well was another world altogether, in which creatures could breathe, but humans would drown. The cards were telling her that whatever was coming, it was coming from someplace different and strange—a place of reflections, and shadows, where everything was back to front, and voices argued very late at night, in empty rooms.

Molly came in from the yard, followed by Trevor and Detectives Kunzel and Bellman.

“I’ll see you later, Sissy,” she said. She picked up a green crochet shrug from the back of one of the kitchen chairs and pulled it on. “I don’t know how long I’m going to be—maybe two to three hours, depending. You’ll take care of these two for me, won’t you?”

“Oh, yes,” Sissy assured her. “I’ll take care of them good. I’ll feed them and I’ll read them a story and I’ll make sure that they wash their teeth before I tuck them into bed.”

“Ha!” laughed Detective Kunzel.

“*Momma,*” Trevor protested. “For Christ’s sake, already.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Red Mask

They had moved Jane Becker into a private room next to the trauma-surgery unit. As Molly made her way along the corridor, one of the fluorescent lights was flickering, which made her feel as if she were walking through one of those Japanese horror movies, like *Ring*.

A uniformed cop was sitting on a chair outside her door, reading *Cosmopolitan*. “All they had,” he explained, as Molly gave him a smile.

“I’ll bring you a *Penthouse*, next time I come,” she told him.

The room was painted a neutral magnolia, with a large framed poster of “Blue Grass Country” hanging on the wall. The venetian blinds had been closed, but Molly could see the glittering lights of Bethesda Avenue through the slats.

A young woman with curly chestnut hair was propped up in bed. Although she was very pale, she had one of those faces that Molly called “sweetly pretty.” Her pert little nose had a sprinkling of freckles across it, like cinnamon. Her eyes were mint green and her lips were bow shaped and very pink. But her left cheek was swollen with an angry red bruise, and she had butterfly stitches on her left eyebrow. Both of her hands were swathed in white muslin bandages, and Molly could see the bones underneath her pink flowery hospital gown, thick padded dressings had been applied to her shoulder blades.

As Molly came in, a large black nurse was checking her saline drip.

“You the artist lady?” asked the nurse.

“That’s me.”

“Here,” said the nurse, and maneuvered an armchair to the side of the young woman’s bed. “But make sure you don’t go tiring her out none. Her blood pressure’s way too low, which means she’s still in shock.”

“I’ll be fine, honest,” the young woman assured her in a high, off-key whisper.

“Oh, yeah? In my experience it’s the ones who insist they’re going to be fine is the ones who keel over the quickest.”

Molly propped her leather-bound sketchbook against the side of her chair and hung her satchel of pencils and pastels over the back of it.

“Molly—Molly Sawyer,” she smiled. “I can’t shake your hand, but hi.”

“Hi,” said the young woman. “Jane Becker. Very nearly the late Jane Becker.”

“Are you sure you’re ready for this?” Molly asked her. “The police want a likeness as soon as possible, but I can always come back tomorrow morning.”

Jane Becker emphatically shook her curls. “He killed that poor man, right in front of me, for no reason at all. Stabbed him and stabbed him and stabbed him, and then he started to stab me. I mean—*why*? I didn’t even know him, and I don’t think that man knew him either.”

“Well, the police can’t think of any reason why he should have attacked *either* of you,” said Molly. “The man who got killed was a Realtor. George Woods, that was his name. He worked for Ohio Relocations on the nineteenth floor. Forty-one years old, with a wife and two little girls aged seven and five.”

“I’m so sorry.” Jane Becker’s eyes were crowded with tears. “Somehow it makes so much worse, doesn’t it, knowing what his name was? He wasn’t just a dead man, he was George Woods.”

“Yes,” said Molly. She tugged a Kleenex out of the box on the nightstand and handed it to her. “But doesn’t that give us all the more incentive to find the guy who murdered him? Think of George”

Woods's family. Think of his girls. He's never going to see them grow up, and they won't even remember him. Let's try to give them some justice, shall we?"

Jane Becker nodded. "I'll help you. I promise. I can picture that man so clearly. Like he's *there*. She reached out with one of her bandaged hands as if he were standing right beside Molly and she could actually touch him.

Molly sat down, with her sketchbook on her knees.

"Before you start trying to describe the man who attacked you, Jane, I'd really like to know a little about *you*."

Jane Becker blinked at her. "Me? I'm just a legal secretary who got into an elevator and got stabbed by some psycho."

"I know. But I want to see that man through *your* eyes. Different people see things in completely different ways, especially when they're highly stressed. If you go to court, for instance, and you listen to five eyewitnesses, you wouldn't believe that they were all describing the same crime. The perpetrators were Hispanic. The perpetrators were black. The perpetrators were white guys wearing black hoodies. They drove a blue Buick or a gray Oldsmobile or a silver Accord. They had guns, they had knives, they had baseball bats. They ran off east, they drove off west."

"Okay. I understand. But I don't know what I can tell you."

"You can start with how old you are."

"Twenty-five last April. Aries, although I never behave like an Aries. Like, I'm not exactly the assertive type."

"You're single?"

A second's pause. "Yes, I'm single."

"Do you live by yourself?"

"For a while I did—almost eighteen months. But last October I moved back home with my mom and my dad. Oh, and my annoying younger brother Kevin."

"And home is where?"

"Lakeside Park. I've lived there all my life. I went to Villa Madonna Academy and then to Thomas More."

Molly thought: quiet, conservative neighborhood, not too expensive, with mostly traditional homes. "What made you move back?" she asked.

"I had an apartment on Elm Street, in the city. I loved it, but it was way too expensive."

"Okay ... You like music?"

"Oh, sure. Imogen Heap, she's my favorite. 'Have You Got It In You?' And Tori Amos."

"And reading?"

"Danielle Steel. I love Danielle Steel. And *The Lovely Bones*. That was the last book I read."

"How's your social life? Are you dating at all?"

"I go out with guys sometimes. But mostly in a gang from the office, you know? There's nobody special, not at the moment."

"Did you *ever* have anybody special?"

Jane Becker suddenly coughed, and coughed again, and reached over for a glass of water. When she had recovered, she said, "I don't understand the question. I mean, what does that have to do with my being attacked?"

"Jane—it's only background. It helps me to visualize the man who stabbed you in the same way that you do. You perceived him with your emotions, with who you are, as well as your eyes."

"Can't I just describe him to you?"

"I'm sorry," said Molly. "I didn't mean to upset you. Sure—let's get down to business and see if we can't bring this guy to life."

She folded back the first page of her sketchbook and picked out a soft sepia crayon. “What struck you about him the most? I mean—if you had to describe him to me in three words, what would you say?”

“His face. He had such a bright-red face. It was so red, it was practically scarlet. It was like I was badly sunburned, or maybe he’d been drinking. And he had eyes like slits, and a mouth like a slit, too. It was almost like he was wearing a red mask.”

“Do you think he *could* have been wearing a mask?”

“Oh, no. That was his real face. But it was just so *red*.”

“Did you smell alcohol on his breath?”

“No. But he did have a smell... . It was kind of sour, and burned. Like burned hair.”

“Okay ... he had a red face and eyes like slits. Could you take a guess at his ethnic origin? Did he look Oriental, maybe? Or Native American?” Molly’s pencil was already at work, and the man’s disembodied eyes were peering up at her from the page, as if they were emerging from another dimension.

“I don’t know what he was. He looked *dangerous*, that’s all. You ever see men like that? They’re all full of tension, like those pit bull terriers, you know?”

“Okay ... how tall would you say he was?”

“At least six feet. Six feet two. Maybe a little over.”

“And how was he built?”

“Heavy, with very broad shoulders. And a thick neck. And the way he stood. Even *that* was threatening. Kind of leaning toward me, as if he was itching to be let off the leash.”

“How would you describe the shape of his face? Oval, round, or squarish?”

“Squarish. Definitely squarish. And his forehead was kind of slabby.”

“How about his nose?”

Jane Becker closed her eyes. Molly waited for her with her crayon poised over her sketchbook, saying nothing. She knew that Jane Becker could see her attacker’s face as clearly as if he were standing right in front of her, and she didn’t want to interrupt that moment of intense visualization. She wished only that she could share it.

“Jane?” she coaxed her. “His nose? Was it a long nose or a snubby nose? Getting the nose right—that’s real important. If you think of the way that cartoonists draw people—they always exaggerate their noses.”

Jane Becker opened her eyes again. “I don’t want to make a mistake, that’s all. I was so freaked out when he was stabbing that poor man. But what if they arrest somebody and it wasn’t him?”

“Jane, seriously, that’s down to me. I’m the forensic artist, it’s my responsibility to get it right.”

Jane Becker hesitated for a moment longer, and then she said, “Okay, then, his nose was pointed with kind of a bump in it. And he had very high cheekbones. And a big chin, with a cleft in it. Remember that. A really deep cleft.”

Molly’s pencil made the softest of chuffing noises as she shaded and filled and structured, and the perpetrator gradually began to materialize in front of her, as if he were coming toward her through a hazy white fog.

“What was his hair like?” she asked.

“Reddish ... reddish, but turning gray. And cut very short. Bristly.”

Molly took out her box of pastel colors and went on sketching and shading for a few moments more. A red face, with touches of green and blue to give it depth and emphasis.

“You didn’t see what color his eyes were?”

“Like I say, they were slits. All I can think of is black.”

Molly lifted up her sketchbook up and turned it around so that Jane Becker could see what she

had drawn.

Jane Becker covered her mouth with one bandaged hand. “Oh my God,” she whispered. “Oh my God, that’s so much like him.”

“You’re sure?”

Jane Becker peered at the sketch more intently. “Maybe the cheekbones not so sharp. His cheeks were kind of fuller, not so hollow. And his eyebrows were thicker. I remember his eyebrows, because they were bristly and red like his hair.”

Molly lightened the shadows under the cheekbones and made the face smoother and rounder. She quickly scribbled in some denser eyebrows, too.

“That’s it,” said Jane Becker. “That’s the man who stabbed me. I can’t believe how you did that.”

“I listened to you, that’s all,” Molly told her. “You told me what he looked like, and here he is. But *you* told me—Jane Becker, legal secretary who lives with her parents in Lakeside Park, and that was very important.”

She didn’t say that she had made the suspect much less aggressive in his appearance than Jane Becker had described him. In spite of her prettiness, she suspected that Jane Becker had some problems relating to men. Probably not serious problems—no more than a lack of confidence, or a recent relationship that had suddenly turned sour. But witnesses’ personal prejudices could dramatically distort their description of a perpetrator’s appearance. Black suspects were frequently described by white witnesses as being much more dark skinned and much more physically intimidating than they actually proved to be when they were arrested. Looking “dangerous” didn’t affect the length of a suspect’s nose, or the positioning of his ears, or the color of his hair.

Molly had also made the suspect look flushed, rather than scarlet. A witness’s perception of color was always intensified by fear, because it widened the pupils.

She closed her sketchbook and packed away her pencils and her crayons. “Thanks, Jane. You’ve been very brave and very helpful.”

“What happens now?” Jane Becker asked her.

“Right now I’m going over to police headquarters to put some finishing touches to the composite, ready for the media. It should be on the TV news later tonight, and in the papers by tomorrow morning.”

“Do you think you’ll catch him? I couldn’t bear to think this could happen to anybody else.”

Molly opened her sketchbook again and looked at the face of Jane Becker’s attacker. “If the sketch is as accurate as you say it is—then yes, I’m pretty sure we’ll catch him.”

“Can I ask you one more thing?”

“Sure, of course you can.”

“Where did you find that *fantastic* necklace? I haven’t been able to take my eyes off it.”

Molly lifted it up. “It’s amazing, isn’t it? I got it at the Peddlers Flea Market on Kellogg. I don’t suppose it’s worth anything much, but I fell in love with it as soon as I saw it. It has everything, doesn’t it? Suns, moons, even little animals.”

On the way out of Jane Becker’s room, she showed the sketch to the policeman sitting outside. “This is the guy ... just in case he tries to get in here and finish the job.”

“Dead ringer for my Uncle Herman,” said the cop. “Be glad to pull him in for you, on suspicion.”

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