

## Chapter 2

The reporter, Collin Jurrsic, stood to the rear of the mourners, his hat low over his brow. He wore the sort of hat that Clark Kent wore, slanted and provocatively over one eye. He wore a hat because it was a chilly hot kind of day, chilly in the shade, hot in the sun. He didn't want his hair blowing all over his face. Bad enough his hair was thin, straight and not a reflection of his self-image, worse if it showed absences throughout by blowing this way and that. He wore a hat to keep it calm. The hat was gray and sported a band around it, two shades darker, charcoal gray; shiny and tight around the hat. The hat was wool and had once belonged to his father. It was vintage.

His expression was guarded by dark sunglasses. His notebook was tucked away, deep inside the breast pocket of his suit coat. It was unnecessary for this event, the funeral of Samantha Goldinger. No notes were needed to remember or remind him. His overcoat, a rare necessity on a chilly spring day, was not often worn and therefore didn't reveal much at all, either about him or the storms it had seen. It was breezy and they did call for rain by day's end. Hence the crisply creased overcoat and gray wool hat with the charcoal gray band around it. Then again maybe it was just the sort of armor needed for the event, he mused, a cloak of strength for the ensuing travesty.

After all, he'd been chasing this story for a few months now. Some way to end the story: the main character dead, murdered. Makes for bad coverage and a short run. No second installment. The end. Kaput. Finis.

He figured that there was no way she should have bought the big one, no reason at all. *Nice little housewife that happened to work in a lab. A doctor, a mom, for God's sakes.* She was someone's daughter and someone's wife at one time. She was a scientist.

She helped develop a treatment for sick kids that couldn't concentrate in school. Heck, he probably had the disorder himself, undiagnosed. One of the good guys, uh, gals, he reminded himself.

So why this? It wasn't only a blurb in the papers that brought him out to this tragedy, nor that he worked with her husband Gregory at the *Los Angeles Post*. It wasn't the whiff of a good story either. More like the whiff of a stinking up to high heaven rat. Big, fat and dead. A dead rat and he smelled it from a mile away. It was the tragedy that was one step ahead of his investigations, the tragedy that he was too late to prevent. Christ, Greg didn't even know that whole thing, not even half, didn't know that his own buddy was investigating his ex-wife. Nor did Greg know that through it all, the reporter lost a bit of his own heart to the wife of his friend, one piece at a time.

His gut was knotted, his middle hollow. He listened, watched from behind his sheltered alcove inside the hat and behind the glasses.

*His fault?* Perhaps. Maybe he wasn't quick enough, losing his touch. But, nah, that wasn't it. More gut instinct than evidence had gotten him this far. The answer was somewhere close, close enough to get the lady killed. It was frustrating to hear her death called an accident; he knew better. In fact it was maddening. Fuel line leak and a tossed cigarette from a passing car. No. Uh-huh. No good. Not buying it. He couldn't stop it. He couldn't save her. In the end when it was live or die, he couldn't get between her and the fire. He couldn't take the bullet for her. He couldn't jump high enough, move fast enough. He was involved. He froze. That's what was maddening.

The Rabbi called for acceptance. Her death, the man with the Yarmulke on his head said, transcended understanding. 'God gives and God takes away.'

Collin sometimes felt that at the moment when a person accepted the imminence of their own death God gave the knowledge and the understanding of finality. And then takes life away. Calls us home. That's acceptance. Was he afraid to die? Until two days ago he was more afraid of the method than the fact of it. Now he wasn't so much. She'd be at the other end and somehow that was reassuring. He cared more for her because of the journey she embarked on before his own. It was comforting.

Did Samantha Goldinger; wife, mother, doctor, healer, scientist, daughter accept and understand? Did she have the moment to call to her God? He didn't think so.

Damn, he hated funerals. They always tore him apart, even if just for a while. This one was worse. The mother cried. The kids were falling apart, the son too brave to break down, the daughter a mess. Even Greg was minus his usual bravado, his arrogance. He looked shaken by the Big Picture. It wasn't a pretty sight and Collin could tell that the dozen or so colleagues from their office liked seeing him brought down a notch or two. Even if it was at the expense of his family. It was in the elbow from one person to the other, the nod of acknowledgement that it could have happened to anyone but happened to Greg Goldinger.

Collin looked up into the distant hillside across the cemetery. A woman dressed in black on the hill above them leaned on a headstone. She looked familiar somehow. Familiar. Something about the build, the shape of her? But no, couldn't be. Why should she? She was old. Why did she look familiar?

The service ended. The Rabbi closed his book, sobs were abundant, heads hung, faces were wet. Over two hundred people disbursed after the thump of the casket, after

the dirt was tossed, the sound like skittering mice in the rafters as it hit the coffin in the hole.

The woman on the hill looked up and over to the crowd. *Familiar...*

He walked through the slowly separating crowd, slowly not like leaving a movie but like lingering between not wanting to leave her there alone and can't wait to get the hell out of there. Looking like no one is in a rush. People walked along the lane by the hill where the woman was but she had turned away. She didn't watch those walking.

Collin watched her as he wound his way through the throng, a thread that bound the moving group looser and looser, now some in front and others behind. None walked in front of the family. A parade, the heavy walk of those not yet understanding nor with the acceptance that would be expected through the streets of some small European country. Surely not near Los Angeles, California.

He approached the hillside and heard the twittering of birds, some nerve they had to sing at such a time. He caught sight of the birds, black with white in the tail feathers. They were in a branch as if Samantha was right there, singing to her friends, her family. The branch was above the woman in black, now to Collin's right, on the slope of the hill.

She was slumped down over a stone, the stone of Johnstone Peters, her beloved no doubt. Her arm covered her face and her coat tented most of her body but he could tell that she was tall and narrow by the shape of the ankle, the wrist. The ankle, so familiar, so . . . how could an ankle be familiar? Should he have been able to recognize her suffering from it? Her arm covered what little he could see of her face. The ankle . . . so *familiar*, like he should have been able to place her, to see her as she was elsewhere. But

where? The ankle, in some other kind of shoe maybe. A heel? A Sandal? Maybe it just reminded him of something? Somewhere?

He walked by her slowly, slow enough for her to look up and see him the way a dream goes, slowed down. And what would he have seen? Did he expect Samantha? He did, he did. He expected to see the face, the smooth planes that were her cheeks, her nose, her green eyes, her curls dark red and down past her shoulder. Crying green eyes. Freckles across the nose.

He looked at Johnstone Peters, looked at the other stones in nearby areas. They were adorned with pebbles, the customary way to show that the deceased was visited, pebbles on the stone.

Johnstone Peters had no visitors, no pebbles on or near the stone. He looked at the dates of the life of Mister Peters. Nineteen-nineteen to nineteen-eighty-nine. That woman was not old enough to be the Widow Peters. Seventy years old and another thirteen years since he died. Eighty-three? Was that regal a stature possibly eighty-three years old? That was a younger ankle, a less fragile wrist.

The reporter walked on with the crowd, behind and away but still with them. The woman buried her head on her arm, sat on the grass and leaned on her buddy, Johnstone Peters.

It meant something. He couldn't put it together but was certain just the same. It meant something as much as the fact that the death of Samantha Goldinger was no accident. He couldn't stop that either. He got himself emotionally involved and froze. *His fault . . . .*

He walked on to his car and got in. Engines started in front of him, behind him. Cars pulled out into the wide lane and followed the limousine to the exit. Collin sat in his car and wondered about the death of Samantha Goldinger and about the woman on the hill. When he turned the key, an image came to him of the last time he saw Samantha, when she turned the key of her own car. The explosion was big enough to rock his car which was halfway down and across the street.

Her outside rear mirror hit his windshield and bounced off. The crack was still there. It was only two days ago. Jews buried their dead swift. *Shloshim*. He'd heard the word. Recently deceased. Most recently. There was a stain on the windshield from the mirror, a small splattering of blood. A tiny shard of glass was stuck up in one of the spidery veins of the crack, glass from Samantha's car. He couldn't wash off the blood; the shard of glass would rip the hell out of his windshield wiper. Stuck.

Now he would go to the house and wash his hands from a bottle of water set outside the front door and then sit *Shiva* with the others. Sit and talk in whispers, laugh at small funny occurrences in the life of Samantha Goldinger. Then he would leave and the crack in his windshield would still be there. Until he got it fixed.

Collin didn't think he could get it fixed too soon. Not as soon as the Jews buried their dead, it would seem. He drove away, the last of the cars, the last of the mourners.

Except for the woman in black on the hillside who wept over the stone of Johnstone Peters, who died at the age of seventy and who still had a mourner.