

### Chapter 3

Collin sat at his office desk, the only illumination a small banker's green lamp in the darkness of the midnight hour. Bathed in the six-foot circle of light, the rest of the world beyond his desk was a dark void. The large office of the L.A. Post was mute. Not a computer hummed save his own laptop, no cleaning person dusted past papers and clutter-laden desks.

He pondered the day's events-- the funeral, the house where people milled around, the stories, the speculation. On his desk were photographs, articles and files. The smiling face of Samantha Goldinger looked up at him from a glossy print taken for a PR piece the paper did on the lab where she was employed. The print was from several years back, maybe four or five.

Her smile was secure. No matter how long he stared at her he could not find any thought in her eyes for future peril. Her expression was innocent of the trouble she would later become embroiled in. It was a nice photo, the kind that could be used in a magazine spread or a dossier. She'd just been named to a national council on pediatric educational studies to determine the length and breadth of the effects of ADD and ADHT on kids in primary grades. Her youngest son had not yet died from Leukemia. She was still married to Greg. They'd just bought their dream house in Brentwood. She had barely used up half of her thirties. Forty was still a vague notion.

Collin looked at the photo, studied it against what he knew of her recently. Her troubled world fell apart in the last sixteen months. Collin suspected that the beginning of the decline went back much further than sixteen months. The articles hinted at it.

He shuffled the photo among the papers to find the articles.

Cows dead in the desert. Mass suicide of centenarians when there weren't supposed to be so many people alive of that age, let alone all in the same area of California at the same time. What did they do? Have a secret society and call each other up and say, hey let's all kill ourselves today? Strange occurrences that dated back to the Second World War and the occupation of Europe. The development of serums first to kill and then to heal mankind, to reverse the aging process. The fountain of youth that so far had a price tag of dozens of lives, maybe hundreds or thousands. A thousand deaths.

The pieces were only suggesting a portion of the whole. Samantha constituted only one more casualty in the battle. That bugged Collin, bugged him big-time. What was wrong were the pieces, the innuendo. They bothered Collin at that late hour but not in a way that he could define and that bugged him even more, most of all.

There was no sleeping. *My fault? She was somehow familiar.* He rubbed his hand through his light brown hair, held palm to forehead as he read the articles over and over again, read and searched for something he could not define. He was seasoned. He should know this stuff inside and out. You got smoke you got fire. You smell a rat you got an infestation problem. It followed. One followed the other. What did he have here? He had nothing but disjointed events that alone meant nothing. Spread across his desk he had paranoia and conspiracy, maybe worse. *A thousand deaths?*

Nosing around corruption and greed, twenty-three years on the job might have jaded him some but he still knew which side of the fence he straddled. His years of following the shift of power, environmental rapists that paid high government officials to procure holes in tax laws gave rise to alarms that blared on a dime. He should know this

stuff. Why wasn't he making heads or tails of this one? Where was the blockade, where was the screaming limousine in the middle of the night down a dark alleyway?

He scattered the articles under the photos again, revealed more recent pictures. They were taken when he followed up on the story of Samantha's firing from the lab a few months earlier. It was sudden, devastating for her. The photo was taken as Samantha diverted her route away from the media frenzy that followed. She looked back over her shoulder as Collin called to her from the crowd. A momentary reflex, her curly dark red hair flying behind her back, her arm holding a briefcase, her expression curious and yet fatigued. She was in motion, walking away, her tall body lean and still draped in her lab coat. Her nametag remained in place on the pocket; her purse hugged under her briefcase'd arm. Her other arm was in mid-rise to shield her face from flashes and microphones. Reporters surrounded her but not so close to miss the shot. It was a good shot of her, revealing her vulnerability, her innocence?

Accused of negligence and breach of ethics. That face?

He knew some of her personality from the divorce that Greg had spoken of, even though he'd never actually met Samantha, was never in an opportune situation for an actual introduction. She didn't know him at the time. It was obvious from the photograph; no recognition in her eyes. He was just another hound from The Post.

Not even Greg could stop the onslaught, couldn't usher her through the quagmire of media that hounded her night and day. Did she do it? Was it true? Did she let all of the facility test animals die of a virus that got out of her controlled station by the negligence that she and her team were accused of? Did she allow a (possibly) globally destructive virus loose in the facility by accident? And was it worse if it was by accident or on

purpose? And for what purpose? Could the population of Los Angeles and possibly the entire populace of the world have been subjected to an Ebola type epidemic by her carelessness or callousness? The ultimate Stephen King nightmare come true?

She denied it, of course. Framed, she claimed. He looked at the face, at the eyes. No answer there. No way to know. Only the circumstances surrounding the subsequent events have had any bearing on the appearance of guilt or innocence. Would the soul of a mother whose son died of Leukemia allow her to take unnecessary lives? Would the heart of a doctor, a respected pediatrician turned research scientist turn her back on the very cure she sought for the beast that claimed the life of her beloved son?

Now it was too late to ask. He might never know. Dead. Killed? Erased? Silenced? Or coincidence? Collin wasn't certain but had enough doubt to pique his inclination toward that smelly rat. He turned the photograph over and looked at the date written on the back. Three days after she was fired, just a few months before she was brutally killed in a horrific blast that touched more than just his windshield.

"It's not whom they buried but what. What was left?" He thought back to the service. Six men carried the casket up the aisle. He remembered them. Greg, Greg's brother, a few friends and a cousin.

"They strained under the weight." Collin ran his hand through his hair. "That's odd." He reread the press release. "Body thrown." He dealt papers until he found the coroner's report. No autopsy at first until the court order held precedent because of the nature of the death. Jewish law prevailed as far as the district attorney's office and no farther. "Not enough left of her to fill a child's coffin. *Strained under the weight?*

Collin's cellular beeped.

“Yeah? I’m at the office. No, not yet. I’ll be a while. Get some sleep, babe. I’ll see you in the morning.” He waited. “Yeah, me too.” He disconnected. He looked at the photograph of his girlfriend that stood off in the corner of his desk, collecting the kind of dust that floundering relationships were doomed to. At least that one. Collin knew it, too. Had Samantha lived, the relationship would have taken a nosedive but the turn of events made him procrastinate even breaking up of a dull affair with a dull blond stuck in a dull marriage that he now wanted nothing to do with.

Christi’s perky smile wasn’t enough to hold him with Samantha’s haunted expressions gliding in and out of his every thought lately. A woman on the run wouldn’t hold any more intrigue for him at the moment than one dead scientist that he couldn’t let go of.

“That’s it! Shit!” He pounded his palm on the desk. “It was her! It was Samantha on the hill.” His eyes opened wide as he replayed the tape in his head, the image of the woman; too tall, too sturdy to be over eighty years old, grieving for a man dead more than a decade. The ankle, *so familiar*, now he remembered. He loved how her foot tapped from the heel not the toe when she was nervous. That’s why he’d noticed at all. It was the moving foot, constantly tap-tap-tapping.

Before the inquiry board, right there on the evening news, they showed her answer question after question. She was poised, self-assured. But Collin was in the room, Collin saw her from behind the cameras and the crowds, just another hound from The Post, watching as her ankle drummed a steady *Wipe Out* on the carpet below the table. Her heel, her ankle, showed her humanity in the face of adversity. It was the ankle

bracelet that gave it away; a gold braid with an encircled initial scrolled ‘SMG’. It was the same ankle, the same bracelet he saw that morning.

“I’ll be God damned,” he whispered. He frantically waded through papers for the picture of her again, the one taken three days after her release from the lab. He looked more closely at the eyes, the expression, now not sure what to believe of her. “She’s alive.”

Collin Jurrsic smiled just a bit. “Alive. She’s alive, I just know it. I’ll be a monkey’s uncle if she’s not.” He stared at her. “Just what the hell are you capable of, Samantha Goldinger, Doctor Goldinger?”

Collin ran his right hand through his hair as he recalled the woman on the hill, the woman in black that watched the service and collapsed from supposed grief over the stone of Johnstone Peters. He took the framed picture of Christi and turned it face down on the desk, right on top of the photograph of Samantha.

Collin looked across the aisle to Greg’s desk, to the picture of his girlfriend. It was in a double frame next to a picture of his kids, *her* kids. He wondered if Samantha’s picture was under the bimbo’s. The bimbo that happened to share an office upstairs with the secretary to the senior editor. He’d bet it was. It wasn’t like Greg to take such detailed care with people’s lives. Not even their photos. Not even people Greg discarded like sandwich wrappers. Greg tended to do that frequently. Always in competition.

&&&&Collin had been a golden child, Greg a mentor until Collin’s work impressed the bosses and he came up in the office faster than was comfortable for Greg. No love lost, no enmity. Just watchful distrust. Keep your enemies close and your friends at arm’s length. That’s where they stood.

He wondered about the picture of Greg's girlfriend. He wondered about Greg. Obviously Greg couldn't take on the investigation with his own ex wife while he was involved in it with the bimbo, in it up to her pretty strawberry blond eyebrows.

Would Greg have given Collin information or even a tip in the right direction if it didn't suit Greg's own purposes? That was the question, wasn't it? He thought not. Never trust a man with all the classic signs of pecker disease; falling for a broad who has more ambition than the boss, more implants than real parts, more bleach in her hair than blood in her veins.

He pushed his chair back and leaned as far as possible, raised his legs onto his desk. There, he went over it all from the beginning, from the first he heard of Samantha Goldinger.