

PROLOGUE IV

December 22, 2003

Eden Memorial Park. They didn't even have the decency to bury her in Beth Olam Cemetery. Eden Memorial. That stung a bit. She'd have to get over that one somehow. It was beautiful enough at Eden, that wasn't at issue. It couldn't have been further away from her life and their (she sighed) collective memory if they'd dumped her in the ocean. Her headstone would not be next to her stepfather's. Her grave was alone, under a gathering of queen palm trees. While palms were nice, she would have to get over that somehow.

Her sister's decision no doubt. Mother had space planned out for her own burial at Pierce Brothers Westwood Memorial Park. She *had* to be listed among the Hollywood elite of deceased. Samantha issued forth a controlled snort. Ceilly probably bought her space in 1947, a plot as close to eternal fame as possible. She'd never part with her plot for Samantha's death, not for all the fame in the world. Eden Memorial it was for Samantha. She'd have to get over that somehow.

Samantha breathed deep; the exhale was jagged. She was surprised at how many people showed up for her funeral. She was pleased by the numbers, a hundred if none. Still it was surprise she felt, they came for her. A surreal hostess was what Samantha felt like even though she couldn't go down there and thank each for their attendance.

They'll pay for her alleged demise, somehow, some way. Each had a hand in her fabricated death. Glances of contrition, stolen glimpses of quiet contempt or outright disdain were obvious, even from a distance.

Samantha watched with a macabre combination of horror and fascination, such as one would observe a tragic auto accident, cars mangled, vapor hissing from radiators. The memory of it zipped through her thoughts, this to that, that to this. A victim's bloodied, decapitated body stuck in the windshield, his head a foot away, a nightmare hood ornament. A car passed by the scene with a young girl in the back seat, a girl of eight years. The girl watched out of the window from the safety of the back seat, hands plastered on the glass. Samantha was that young girl, wide eyed and frozen, fixated, unable to tear herself from gazing. She remembered the feeling of seeing that dead person. This feeling in her gut, it was the same. No different on this day, she watched the milieu of her own funeral.

It was quite ironic to Samantha; those people down the hill by an open grave were the people she loved most. They were supposed to love her the most. Still, each contributed in some small fashion to her status as deceased, passed on, no longer among us, pushing up the daisies, growing cold not old. She repeated each epithet. *Worm bait, bone yard fodder.* Each had some part or at the very least, didn't help, couldn't or wouldn't. They let her go. All that was left now was for her to let them go. Samantha's breath came in spurts, went in waves. Despair, finality, foregone conclusions. Self fulfilling prophecies? She didn't know for sure, she could only look at them and knew an ache unlike any other previous. Well, almost. The death of Tommy, her firstborn, that compared. Samantha thought, she'd have to think about that one. Worse, certainly, to bury a child. But this? Toss-up.

Ex-husband, child, boss, lover, reporter, friend, parent; each carried a tear and a shoulder encumbered with the weight of penitence. At least, a good show of it anyway.

She stood behind a tree, disguised as just another elderly widow, crying over her dearly departed. Little did they know she mourned her own life.

Samantha watched the eulogy; she was too far to distinguish words with much clarity. She watched the epitaph. They cried. Sniffles and tissues, even a hanky or two. They threw dirt into the grave that was believed to be her final resting place.

She most definitely was *not* resting finally or peacefully. Alone here, alone there. Either way, she was most profoundly alone.

The thought amused her: alone. Alone they would place her into the ground; alone she stood by and witnessed the burial of a woman in her stead. Alone she would remove herself from her life.

Her former life, a life shed of necessity, of survival. Now her life was just something she had to get past in order to live. A resounding confusion but not one that she could allow herself to take lightly, disregard. She had to stay sharp. That her killers stood among the mourners proved their ruthlessness. To think her murderers were right there, down there, standing with the stricken look of the grieved!

The sight of Harvey Neills and Eugenie Prettig unsettled her into a rage that almost propelled her from the safety of her tree. Their presence was a mockery. She dug her nails into unforgiving bark, shook her head and leaned into the tree to quell the urge. Close enough to smell *tree*, banging her head on it held composure for her. It distracted if only for a moment. Nothing more.

It was simultaneously infuriating and reckless to be so close to the spectacle below. To scream foul would have them on her in moments, before she could utter the word conspiracy, and maybe endanger her children as well. Their complete victory over her had to remain for now, so she could live. As long as they thought her dead she was safe. To risk those odds was foolhardy. This was the only way to ensure safety for her children, whom she now watched cry, their shoulders heaving.

The eulogy, prayers, words of comfort. There was something so horrific about it all, the surrealism of one's own end. So mundane, an every-day event a funeral was, yet so consequential an occurrence, unparalleled in human existence. A death, a funeral. The ritual, the circumstance.

Those thoughts rushed through her head. She looked up. Puffy clouds left floating circles of shade in their wake along the green grass of Eden Memorial Cemetery in Mission Hills, California. The day was bright when those same clouds revealed lemon sunshine, dim when cloaked with dense cumuli. Stark contrast, blinding sunshine and dim remnants in the shade of cloud, a reminder, don't blink, you could be next.

She heard the Rabbi speak, Rabbi Lautger, the same man she'd asked so many questions of, had so many heated discussions with. Rabbi tried his best on many occasions to instill a sense of spirituality while Samantha maintained a distanced skepticism. She strained to hear him speak, moved closer.

When the clouds dispersed, she couldn't hear him but a gray cloak strolled close enough to play umbrella around them.

“We will seek to understand no more. We seek now only to accept that which has come to pass. We seek now to celebrate the life that was Samantha Mathiaas Goldinger, taken from us too soon, too young. We celebrate her life, her love, children, those whose lives she touched.”

She wondered what to call herself now that Samantha Goldinger was officially obsolete. The tableau before her proved that now, finally, she could take care of matters without concern for the safety of those that she loved. It was no longer Samantha Goldinger who watched Shauna, her daughter, cry. She was no longer the Doctor, the famous scientist, Doctor Samantha Goldinger, that watched Gregory Goldinger, her ex-husband, place his arm around Shauna, comfort her. The voyeur was a non person of questionable identity. She'd have to name herself, that's all there was to it. What would that name be?

Her body heaved, she sobbed, her world fallen apart. The clouds may as well have opened up and swallowed her like a predator with life sucking rage into the gray mass above. Each word of praise for the woman she had been forced her identity further into retreat. What name could respond in kind with representation of the simplest form of a tattered self: a name?

Shauna leaned into her father as Samantha's son, Jordan, stood on the other side of Gregory, almost as tall and surely more handsome. *As if that were possible*, Samantha thought. They were so physically beautiful, Jordan tall and lean, dark and exotic. Shauna looked more like Samantha; willowy and pale, thick mane of red curls the color of copper pennies, with Samantha's green eyes. Shauna's hair was less disciplined, less tethered

than Samantha's. Shauna let her waves sail free, brushed out and loose. They had the same freckles on their noses.

Samantha remembered the game they played when Shauna was a small child; match freckle for freckle on their faces.

Jordan, a cross between Gregory and Samantha had dark hair and light eyes, an olive complexion and freckles, just enough of them across the bridge of his nose to be an embarrassment to Jordan and a magnet to the girls.

Sam saw her family. Her chest collapsed in on itself, a wound striking breath, a deep wound, the breaking of her heart at the loss of what might have been.

Gregory was no longer hers and their children were almost grown, high school age, independent. It was better this way, she told herself over and over. It could be no other way. She couldn't let their lives be the price she paid. Only her own life could be traded for the arrogance that fueled her curiosity.

She cried with them and in her heart her arms reached across the distance and caressed her loved ones, held them close, erased the scene before them.

The casket lowered into the ground. The crank squeaked, a shrill metallic grate, tolling the final descent of her life as Samantha. It squealed crow-like as the coffin jerked, shifted into the hole. Those squeaks accompanied the cries of her mother.

Ceily wept theatrically. Sam knew it was heartfelt but it was the degree of how noticeable it was above all the sounds. All the better for the media to pick up on the once great screen legend whose daughter tragically died so suddenly under a haze of questionable circumstances. Sam visualized it, mentally shared her mother's moment of

glory when the lights would undoubtedly shine on her finally and once again, in shock at the loss of her youngest daughter. Such a loss. Ceilly would do her best grieving mother routine for the cameras and even though it would be a true and deep sentiment, the corners of her mouth would turn up slightly from the attention. Why, she might even force a brave smile for the cameras if only to show her adoring (rapidly aging and deteriorating) loyal fans that she was such a trooper in her time of grief. The turning up at the corners of Ceilly's mouth would be minute. Only Samantha, who knew every nuance of Ceilly's manipulations, would recognize the delight through the haze of grief once again proving that no reason was bad reason for press coverage. Especially at Ceilly's age. A woman in her seventies couldn't be too choosy with whom she spoke even if it was at her own dead daughter's expense.

Ah, yes, Samantha remembered well the travesty of Ceilly's life, Follywood as Ceilly called it. Sam shook her head and rolled her eyes. Melodrama at its best. Only thing missing was the piano, melodramatic Ragtime, *Bird in a Gilded Cage*, perhaps?

A cloud hovered, darkened a shade deeper than the pearlescent silver silk fabric of the *Chuppah* that sheltered the hole in the ground and those nearby. The cloud deepened the moment when the casket came to a distinct thud. The moment was frozen, every single thing stopped for one protracted slice. Then the crank gave it up with one last squeal, relatives cried, unceremonious clouds blanketed and heightened each sound, every word the Rabbi uttered echoed in the hills.

Sam's sister, April, flanked Ceilly. Samantha could look at her with dispassionate separation that cool disregard yielded. That did nothing to soften a jealous stab that April

should retain her life while Samantha could not. She wouldn't miss April. April wouldn't miss her. Consensual but subtle contempt made that particular farewell acceptable if not down right satisfying.

There was no great resemblance between them. April's hair was brown at birth and matched Ceilly's but was frosted blond since the late sixties. They had the same build, both five foot eight and slender as a young birch tree, lean and graceful. April's eyes were brown, Samantha's green. April stood tall but with a starched posture that made her appear stern at the same time that Samantha's height was draped around the tree on a nearby hillside, wrapped more like a sensual vine than rigid pole. Sam's frame didn't lurch with her height but took her stature for granted, as might a three-year-old chestnut Arabian mare. When Samantha moved, her muscles shifted, agile and lissome.

Samantha noticed that April had no elegance in appearance, no grace in movement. She winced, watched April look up into the clouds with an expression that could be mistaken for sorrow. It was not. She was in search of relief from boredom. *She wants to get back to her country club luncheon and her games of Mah Jongg. Either that or she's meeting her friends for lunch at Nordstrom's. Bitch to the end.*

No tears on April's cheeks or red swollen eyes for her, no sir. Control at all times. Still, April dabbed at the corner of her eye. Ceilly had taught her well. Sam still sucked in her breath at the callous repose her sibling displayed, inappropriately and always dressed wrong for the wrong events. Still, April dabbed at the corner of her eye. Ceilly had taught her well. Flower print silk dress? Pink shoes? For goodness sakes! Samantha shook her

head, hurt but not surprised. “Isn’t it always a disaster that brings out the best in her.

Good-bye, Sister mine. I won’t miss you either.”

Samantha knew what went wrong between them, always did. Samantha didn’t belong. It was that simple and that complex. Samantha was the youngest of four and the product of an affair Ceilly had with leading man Lawrence Chesterfield. Samantha grew up without a father, with a sister and two brothers that let superior lineage weigh on their side. Samantha never knew her biological father, never knew her family had reason to hate her. She only knew that she must have been a bad person.

It was only a week or two earlier that Samantha finally put it away, the feelings that some quirk of the gene pool worked against her best intentions with her family. It was only a few weeks earlier, a matter of days at this late date in her dearly departed life, when Samantha realized that her life had taken a turn for the worse. April would win in the end the battle that she’d tortured Samantha over for all of her life. Samantha threw her arms up and let them flop back to her sides. “Oh, well. Easy come, easy go. You win the jackpot. You get to live my life.”

Sam stood up tall, held onto the tree to steady her shaking legs. Her black wide brimmed hat and black lace netting covered her face but beneath, tears rolled and dripped unchecked. She was ready, inhaled the deep decision of finality.

“Goodbye Gregory. I would have loved you forever if you had let me. Goodbye my babies, I wish you a good life, one that you wish and hope for. Lyndsay, dear best friend, I will miss wondering what trouble you’re into next. Mother...oh, Mother.”

Inconsolable, Sam cried herself blind and paralyzed. She knew what she had to do. Now. Had to leave. Right now. Before it was too late, before she ran down there waving her arms like a lunatic, before she screamed that it was all a mistake, she was alive, see? Alive! She lived still and yet!

She did not do it. She held onto the tree and hoped it might suspend her impulses. They could kill not only her but those she loved as well.

Below, Gregory, Ceilly, April, Shauna, Jordan and Lyndsay bent over the mound left from the gaping hole in the ground and pulled a handful of dirt from it. When they tossed dirt into the hole, Sam could stand it no more.

She turned away, echoed cries of her children and her mother ringing through leaves and branches of her tree. She looked away. She moved one leg before the other and put steps into motion.

Gregory was genuinely stricken and for that, Sam was pleased. If Gregory had been his usual bland in-control self she would have known there was nothing inside. That wasn't the case. Had she binoculars she would have seen close up the ache in his eyes, his only Achilles heel to her. His expressions, his eyes could hide nothing from her. Never could through the good and the dark years of their marriage. For his grief and the fact that the bimbo girlfriend was nowhere in attendance Sam knew vindication, rare and sweet. It might have been only a momentary triumph, short lived and shallow, but victorious just the same. She meant something to him that was real, that was deep after all. Now she was a martyr. Who could compete with a dead hero? How ironic, she

thought, that the price of the respect due her (but never received nor felt by her) should be so exorbitant.

How contrasted, the dire and the sublime, all rolled around her death. Had she known it would have given such a feeling of being loved she'd have thrown a funeral for herself long ago. Catered et al, the whole shebang. Music, a live band, hearse down Main Street, the Philadelphia Mummers String Bands to accompany the death march. What a visual! New Orleans Zydeco, Louie-Louie parade, any kind will do. She wasn't particular at this point.

But as usual it was just her fantasy world catching up with her. Visualize all she pleased, the end was just as prosaic as any other Reform Jewish funeral. It was heartbreaking but not too much for anyone to stand. At least the Rabbi actually knew her. That was a plus. At least no one had to suffer an oratory from a man who knew nothing of her life while speaking of her in death as if he suffered tragically right along with the bereaved. She hated that and it was always without fail obvious to everyone in attendance including, Sam supposed, the dearly departed. In this case, the Reformed Jewish funeral was as trite as her wedding had been, as banal as her marriage, as expendable as her life.

All except for one part, the part where she was framed, fired, ostracized, hunted like an animal and threatened with death and the deaths of her family members. Blackmailed. Tricked and swindled. That part was real, more real than anyone standing around that hole in the ground knew or even imagined.

No fantasy life could have been more visual and she'd had plenty of fantasies. Too many. This one she would gladly have traded to have her boring life back. Just for

one more day, one closer look into the eyes of her children, one more moment to tell them she loved them, to stroke their wondrously young smooth cheeks.

How stupid! Wasn't her leaving them and dying on them proof that she loved them? Why, look at her and all those that came to mourn her. Liars! All of them, liars! Where were they just last week when she pleaded and begged them to listen, to believe her? Look, there was the reporter, Collin Jurssic, who did that story on her and that she'd called to meet and finally talk. That was just before the explosion.

Look, there's Lars, wearing his security uniform as though they were Navel dress whites. Where were they then? It was so easy to turn their backs on her then when she was alive and well. Do they blame themselves now or merely each other? Liars! Every one of them, liars. No one helped her, no one could. Not Gregory, not Collin. Certainly not April or Lyndsay.

She slumped against a headstone. Johnstone Peters, born 1905, died 1989. She slumped against Johnstone Peters and sobbed on the shoulder of his headstone. Would he have held her and patted her head, told her it was all right? Would he have reassured her that they did try, all of them, in the best way they knew, maybe the only way they knew? Cold stone replied with only silence.

Samantha wiped tears and a runny nose as those that mourned her passed behind her on the narrow road. Some looked at the old woman by the stone of Johnstone Peters and walked on with slumped shoulders of their own. Some shook their heads, all had heads bent, voices now hushed.

Long after, the last of them left. Long after, the puffy clouds turned to a granite haze, the afternoon got long in the tooth. Heat of late afternoon sunlight melted through her black coat and wide-brim hat. Samantha heaved her body with the effort it took the dead to rise and stood under moving clouds.

She felt old, older than her years, younger than her appearance, but old just the same. It was all drained out of her; all the hurt, the betrayals, the mattering whether she was a good wife or mother, a good friend or daughter. Samantha knew that all those things that Samantha Goldinger was, were only part of the picture that was Samantha Goldinger. That was why she had to die.

Samantha Goldinger, she reminded herself, was also a brilliant doctor, a gifted scientist, the person that discovered the secret to aging. The fountain of youth, the magic serum called Elixonal Twenty-One. Samantha Goldinger discovered how to turn back the clock on the human race. For that she paid with her life, was *paying* with her life. That she knew. That she could not change. Not then. Not ever.

She stood tall and forced her shoulders back, patted Johnstone Peters on the cold stone shoulder, a thanks for the shoulder to lean on. She walked away from her grave as the afternoon became evening and as the sun dipped into her hole in the ground.

Strangers shoveled soil on the casket of a dead body, of a woman she was not.