

Chapter 1

May 23—California

Archibald Simms had a headache. His eyes hurt. His joints hurt. Even his toes hurt.

His skin was as dry as it was white, almost transparent. His diet of back-alley meth and tangerines just wasn't doing the job; it was great for taking off the pounds, but the surgeon general hadn't signed off on it yet. Three weeks ago, his speed queen got herself dusted. The only other garbage in town was in the county landfill, and nobody he knew had figured out how to shoot up coffee grounds or bald tires.

So he decided to ride the black horse. The horse didn't ride cheap.

His hard little stomach temporarily released its grip on the snarl of barbed wire inside, but that tormented digestive muscle was getting ready to cramp all over again. Heroin withdrawal was teaching Simms how to do the zombie twist. He was a quick study.

Simms had to struggle to deliver the prepartum .38 loads into the six dark little wombs of his snub-ugly Saturday night special. But he managed. The monkey on his back had a new pair of ice skates and was going for the gold.

“You've got to be here, Ted.”

“I don't 'got' to be anywhere, Evvie. I'll be there when I goddamn get there.”

“You said you'd pick up the cream on the way home, Honey. I need it for the salad. The Burns will be here in forty-five minutes.”

“Do a tap dance for the Burns. Get 'em drunk. Ed flies better shit-faced than sober, anyhow. Trust me.”

“Tell Harry we've got company tonight. Just this once?”

“Harry's got more to worry about than your half-assed dinner party.

DEA's getting its balls toasted in the budget hearings. We need a Waco that works, or there's going to be a lot of narcs selling pencils."

"Maybe this thing with the Burns will get your mind off—"

"Right! And maybe me picking up a fucking bottle of cream, or whatever the fuck it is, instead of finishing this report, will make it easier for the fucking bean counters in D.C. to decide who gets the ax next in this fucking office."

When he started talking again, his voice sounded tired, and she put down the impulse to fire back at his insensitivity.

"Tell the Burns to suck eggs till I get there."

"I'll get the cream. I hate to wake up the baby; she still seems a little bit feverish. I don't think she'll need to be on the medicine much longer. Maybe one more night."

"Wake her up. She'll live."

"Get here when you can, Honey. Love you."

But Honey had already hung up.

In the parking lot of the convenience store, Evvie lifted Cindy out of the safety seat. She didn't want to leave her in the car. Evvie never took chances with her little girl.

Simms was already dead and falling to the pavement when the third round fired by the store clerk clipped off the top of his left ear and penetrated Cindy's temple on the right side of her head. Twenty feet from the door, standing on the outside walk, Evvie had watched the store clerk crouch on one knee and fire a silver pistol point-blank at Simms. Simms' own handgun was only a dark shadow, ineffective, hanging down. Not fired even once.

It happened too quickly to justify the cancellation of a small life.

She'd been carrying Cindy on her right hip when it happened. No place to go. The bright lights. People ducking. Simms backing through the swinging doors with enough momentum to buck them open. Then the fear. The brilliant, sudden fear.

The physical impact of the bullet hitting Cindy was barely noticeable. A tap. A pat. A gentle shove. Not even that. The noise of the killing shot sounded to Evvie as though it had come from somewhere very far away.

It echoed. And echoed. And echoed.

During the one-sided shootout and immediately after, all eyes were

on Simms and the store clerk. Witnesses focused on the weapons, distracted by their own fear. Evvie glanced down at her dead child and then, hobbled by shock, looked up at nothing in particular. She shifted Cindy into position across her chest and held her close, like she did when she was nursing. She took three steps back, opened the car door, reached in, and got Cindy's blanket. She didn't get in the car. She wrapped the blanket around her daughter of eighteen months to shield the child's still face from prying eyes.

Evvie turned away from the glare of the lights. She began to walk.

She left the car because she knew that if she drove, she'd have to put Cindy on the seat. She couldn't hold her and drive at the same time. And she had to hold her. She tucked the blanket more tightly around her baby.

She walked through pale patches of streetlight. There was no moon. She turned a corner and waited for a crossing signal to flash, then went across a street and up a hill. She walked on new concrete, the sidewalk of a residential area. She passed a red tricycle with its front wheel turned toward a hedge. A skateboard. The white lines of a hop-scotch game on a driveway. Farther on, a small dog barked. She realized why she was heading west. The hospital. Two miles away between the freeway and the ocean.

Nurses. Doctors. Someone who could help.

The people there would tell her what to do.

She knew that Cindy was gone forever, but it was important to get to the hospital before someone saw, before she had to tell a stranger who was only curious, before she was asked to explain a thing she didn't understand.

After she had covered the first mile, Evvie changed. A corrosive sadness began to eat the protecting numbness. She didn't go into the hospital. She walked past it and continued the extra half-mile to the beach. The same beach where, on the morning of that same day, she and Cindy had drawn faces in the sand with a stick and made eyes for those faces with white stones.

An hour later, a lady named Lolly, walking with her dog, found Evvie sitting on the sand at the edge of the ocean.

Evvie let Lolly look at Cindy.

Whatever words were spoken were the right words ... because Evvie began to cry.

June 20—Connecticut

“Do you think she ever got that extra breast taken off?”

“Not in high school.”

“Three-tits Evvie whose daddy drove a Chevy? Top-heavy Evvie?”

“Amy Kravitz! That’s crude!”

“I would’ve had it cut off. The crap she had to put up with. Those rhymes. And the jokes we made. About buying bras, that kind of stuff. My folks said they would’ve got it cut off if it was me.”

“Your folks had bucks. Anyway, it was small. Doc Greenberg called it a vestigial breast. You never saw it? On the left. Below the normal one. Only a couple of inches big. Not something anyone would notice, not if you dressed right.”

“And stayed out of the gym shower. And didn’t date guys like Eddie.”

“I heard a rumor that she just lost a baby. A drive-by shooting or something.”

“Really? That’s horrible! Poor Evvie.”

“Well, if anybody could recover from that, old Happy Face Evvie could. She could’ve smiled her way through Auschwitz.”

“Yeah. So friggin’ upbeat. Even with that pervert father of hers and that weirdo mother. Remember that thirty dollars I swiped from the senior fund? My mom didn’t pay it back; Evvie did. She told me she had plenty of dough in the bank and it wasn’t doing any good just sitting there.”

“She did that? For you?”

“Yeah. That was Evvie. Bucky Finney worked at First Federal. He told me she never had more than forty bucks in that account.”

“Admit it, Amy. You never really liked her.”

“I was down in high school. Screwed up.”

“Prom queen? Three colleges in heat? Tony Dixon bare-ass drunk and threatening to jump off the breakwater ’cause you wouldn’t give him the time of day? Give me a break!”

“So I was a bitch. But I’ve got that thirty bucks right here. I was going to pay it back if she showed tonight.”

“A high-school tenth reunion’s a big thing. She should be here.”

“Remember how she used to fold her arms across her chest over that extra tit? I saw her mom slap her once for doing that.”

“About all she got out of this place was Best Disposition in the yearbook. At least she got that.”

“I thought I had that one wrapped up.”

“Amy! You piggy! You got First to Get Married and Best Looking.”

“Yeah. I guess disposition was a thing she could do something about.”

July 4—Connecticut

In May, the day after Cindy was killed, Evvie had called her mother and asked her to come to California from Connecticut for the service.

Her mother didn’t come.

The weeks of mourning passed. Ted fell deeper into the hole that opened up after Cindy’s death. He didn’t smile. Didn’t talk. Never did break down like people break down when a loved one dies. He seemed to absorb the fact of their loss with stone-cold resignation, a reaction she tried to rationalize but could not. Even before the loss of Cindy, Evvie found herself making excuses for Ted. Too many excuses. Now this. She was alone, like being alone was all there was.

God gave Cindy to them, then took her back. The gift had turned into an ulcerated memory.

Over the Fourth of July weekend, she traveled from San Diego back to Connecticut where her mother still lived in the old house a half-mile from the high school. As Evvie drove the town’s center street in her rented car, the New England of her youth flooded back. At one corner, she ran a stop sign that wasn’t there before. Still, she was struck by the sameness of the place. But her sense of proportion was out of phase with reality: The town was a smaller town; the distances between buildings and corners were shorter; she came to side roads and recollections too quickly; it was too compact, too closed in, smothering, trite.

For a reason she didn’t want to understand, she drove past the house three times before turning into the paved driveway. She parked the car on the grass beneath the tall elm tree. She pulled off onto the grass out of habit. She remembered the day her father ran his pickup over her bicycle on purpose to teach her a lesson about the need to keep the driveway clear. She was more careful after that.

Her mother opened the door and gave her a hug and asked if she'd like a cup of tea and said, "There's water on." Evvie said "Yes" and followed her mother to the kitchen through rooms that were exactly like they were ten years ago.

They drank tea.

Said things that meant nothing.

Talked briefly about life and how difficult it could be at times without being too specific, but that "God had a plan." Her mother's words.

Evvie wondered about that plan.

Later, alone because her mother had promised Mrs. Alnutt down the street that she'd bring over a recipe for cinnamon apple pie, Evvie went upstairs to her old room. Not much was different, just smaller. She looked out the window. The elm tree had filled out and blocked the view. She couldn't see the street anymore. She turned away from the window. She walked around the bed and stood in the narrow space between the bed and the wall, where small blue flowers printed in too-straight rows on white wallpaper seemed to muffle little sounds that should have been there. Evvie knelt in the narrow space, then lowered onto her belly and lay down on the worn carpet and rested her head on her arms like she did so many times long ago. That was how she always did her school work, lying on her stomach on the floor between the bed and the wall ... the wall where the floor-level grate covered the heating duct that angled down to the basement; the grate she listened through on Friday nights when the sounds of the men came up from below as they watched the X-rated movies her father put on at one dollar per customer to cover the cost. She often fell asleep there, her head on a library book, a history text, her mother's Bible.

Evvie and her mother ate dinner together in the big kitchen that evening. Not much was said, nothing solved. Shallow memories. Bits of lightweight gossip. What happened to? ... Do you ever? ... And more tea.

Nothing about her father.

Nothing about how he had blown off the top of his head the night the whiskey and time ran out.

Nothing about the young blind girl he raped.

Nothing about the indictment. No talk of the confusing terms used by the defense lawyer at the trial: genetic defect, dissociation disorder,

depersonalization. Words that Evvie remembered so clearly despite her young age. Words that she wondered at but which nobody would explain for her. Words that somehow seemed to hold answers, would let her understand.

The looks. The silence.

The shame.

After dinner, Evvie stood alone on the front walk and watched fireworks blossom above the high school. The holiday weekend was one of the reasons her airfare from San Diego to Hartford had been so expensive, that and the fact she had come to New England on an impulse. Airlines made you pay for impulse.

A little after the fireworks ended, a couple came toward Evvie on the walk.

“My God! Is that you, Evvie? Evvie Boxer?”

Evvie took a step backward, but there was no shadow to hide in. “Amy? Amy Kravitz?” said Evvie. “... Amy?”

“Where have you been?! We missed you at the reunion. We were talking about you just two weeks ago. I can’t believe it!” Arms around, cheeks almost touching, air hugs. Then at arm’s length. Amy’s arms.

“Evvie, you look great!” Eyes up and down. Amy still squealed instead of talked. “You haven’t gained an ounce!”

Evvie couldn’t say the same about Amy. The Prettiest Girl in the Class was a sow. “I’m just visiting Mom ... from San Diego. ... I live there.” Her words sounded stupid, alien, prepubescent. She was fast regressing into another time, another personality, another relationship.

But the regression brought back the old perkiness. She smiled at the guy. “Amy, you son of a gun! Where’d you get this hunk of meat? We knew you’d end up with the best-looking catch on the dock!” *Dock is right*, she thought, and stuck out her hand to the tall, fish-faced simpleton standing at civilian attention next to her schoolmate. *This man is wearing shoes for the first time in his life*. A conclusion more in wonder than humor.

“This is Dittsey Scullion. We’re tying the knot next week! Can you imagine? It’s his first time!”

Evvie shook her head slowly. *First time? First time ashore? Dittsey? Dittsey Scullion?* The tall sedative of a man took her hand and squeezed her fingers too hard and mumbled something aimed at the top of her head.

In the dim light Evvie thought the fellow's eyes were slightly crossed, but she couldn't be sure and she didn't want to stare.

Amy reached over and took Evvie's hand out of his and held it in her own. "Evvie," and she swung Evvie's hand from side to side like they were both five years old, "... can you come? Can you come to the wedding?"

"Gee, I'd love to! I wish I could. But I'm going back in the morning."

They made small talk. When they chatted about the senior prom, Amy started to reach for her wallet, but hesitated, glanced sideways at Dittsey, and stopped. And Amy hesitated a second time when she thought to ask Evvie about the loss of the child. But that moment also passed. Amy preferred to keep center stage.

Twelve hours later, Evvie was headed back to California.

The trip worked. The memories of Cindy had no connection with the New England memories, but California seemed the lesser horror. And her mother, alone with her recipes, was a mixture of doubt and self-willed ignorance far too fragile to disturb.

July 22—California

"The Agency's cutting back. Harry says I'm out."

"Harry can't do that! You carry that place!"

"It's got nothing to do with Harry. He'll be gone himself by December." Ted's voice rose, ranting sounds. "If those pus suckers in Congress think the FBI can do what we're doing ... Shit! Harry and me, we never got a chance to nail one of the big fish, never got a chance. ... Just fucking sidewalk servers and goddamn day trippers ... never one of the big boys. I'd of given my ass to have nailed a big boy. Just one fucking once."

Then he descended into that surly place Evvie couldn't reach.

She watched him for a long time. Then, to her surprise, she felt a spark, a tiny flash of hope. "Ted? Let's chuck it. Let's get away and start again."

He didn't look at her. He didn't reply.

"We have enough money to stop for a while. Let's fall in love again."

"You don't love me now?" Hard, aggressive words.

"I love you too much," she said. "I want you back."

A week later, he was out, along with six others. Collect a paycheck to the end of the month. Sayonara.

But something had changed and changed for the better. When she thought nothing else could go wrong, it didn't.

They were munching burgers in the parking lot of a fast-food joint as the sun was going down. "What you said? ..." He looked almost playful, the way he did when they first met. Over the previous few days she had sensed a shift in his mood that she attributed more to her own hope than to reality.

"What did I 'said'?" she asked.

"About doing something crazy."

"About chucking it? Looks like it's been chucked for us."

"That's right."

"You've decided to shoot me?" She reached across the console and stole a French fry. She made him bite off one end before she ate it.

"I'm serious, Evvie."

Her mind came alive. Not because of what he was saying, but because of the way he was saying it. For the first time since the accident, they were alone. No recrimination. No guilt. No small ghost. She waited.

"Still think you can sail?" he asked. "You used to be pretty damned good at it. Or have you forgotten those so-called sailing lessons you gave me?"

She watched the last fry disappear into his grin. She recalled the San Francisco days and the deal they'd made when they first met: If she'd teach him how to sail, he'd teach her some of the Agency hand-to-hand stuff, *Dim Mak, Jeet Kune Do*, kicks, chops, and choke holds. All the stuff a modern girl needed to survive an Oakland commute. The lessons were a transparent excuse to spend time together. Most of all, she liked learning about the things he called "sneaky Petes," improvised, clever gimmicks. Like how to make a time-delay fuse out of a matchbook by tucking a lit cigarette under the matches. Or how to disable an attacker with a pencil poked up under the jaw. Even the ugly, quiet efficiency of an ice pick or a screwdriver driven down through the center top of the skull. And one time, so easily that it surprised her, she put Ted down for five minutes with a sleeper hold. She thought he was faking it, but when he came to he was angry. He gave her a twenty-minute lecture about being more careful.

She put memories away. "Sail?" she asked. "What do you mean 'sail'?"

"I know it sounds off the wall, but Harry knows this guy who wants to get rid of a nice little twenty-eight-foot sailboat. He's not asking much."

Her heart cranked up.

“Well?” He was looking at her.

“Well what?” she answered.

“Give it a shot?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

She was quiet. She only breathed.

“Listen up, sailor girl. I found out this afternoon that I’ve got an open invite to work a security position on the East Coast. In Newport. Rhode Island. The Agency has a rehire program. It’s an open offer. Show up any time between now and the end of the century.” He let the words settle into her. Then he said, “We could bum around, cruise a bit, get rid of some of our money, then sail the boat up to Rhode Island. That’s if you like the thing and want to buy it.”

“Sail up to Newport?” she asked. “Where’s the boat? Virginia? Florida?”

“Nope,” he said. “Guess again.”

The boat could be in hell. She wouldn’t care. “I give up.”

“Panama.”

“Panama City? Florida?”

“Panama … the Canal Zone.”