

PROLOGUE

Joy raised her hand to knock on the open library door when she heard Harrison say, "Trust me, Raven, there's a way to spare them."

"Oh, God, I hope so. Where *are* the children?" she asked nervously.

"They went for a ride," Harrison answered.

Tears threatened her mother's composure. "How are we going to tell them?"

Harrison took Raven into his arms and for a moment and held her very tight. He kissed her again, "Trust me."

I knew it! I knew it! They're in love! Joy could hardly contain herself. She pushed the door open wider to go in when she heard the words that stopped her dead in her tracks. "James, you can't fix the fact that they're brother and sister."

Joy's heart was splintering against her chest. She could hardly breathe. "No! No! No!" she cried.

From the top of the stairs, Dan heard Joy scream and then caught a glimpse of her running out the front door. "Joy," he yelled, but she didn't turn around.

Tears blurred her vision as she rushed from the house and down the front steps to the garage and the car. She grabbed for the door handle. As new tears washed away the old ones, Joy turned the key in the ignition and slammed the car into gear. Rocks from the driveway flew in all directions. She had no idea where she was going. She didn't care.

As Dan descended the stairs, he saw Harrison and Raven running towards the foyer and the front door. "Joy? Oh, my God," they said in unison, "she overheard us."

"Overheard what? Will somebody tell me what's going on" Neither of them answered. "What? Damn it, what's going on?"

Harrison made a mad dash for the front door. "No time. Come on, Son, we've got to stop her."

Dan was going to tear someone apart if he didn't get an answer. "What did you two do to cause Joy to run?" He looked first at Raven and then to his dad. "I'm waiting."

"She's in no condition to drive, Dan. We've got to catch up to her and the copter is the fastest way."

"Stop right where you are. Joy's a good driver and I want to know exactly what went on here."

"She overheard Raven and me talking and she thinks..."

"What the hell does she think?"

"That you're her brother."

"How did she get a stupid idea like that?" The muddied waters of his mind were beginning to clear and Dan didn't like what he was seeing or hearing. "You and Raven? I don't know what the hell is going on here, but one thing is for sure, I'm not Joy's brother, I would damn well know if I were."

His anger had reached the boiling point. "Give me the keys to the Rover," he demanded. "I'll find her and straighten out this mess."

* * *

Flashing lights got Dan's attention. A sheriff's car made a u-turn directly in front of him. Dan slammed on his brakes to keep from smashing into it. He lowered his window. "Have you seen a red car come by here?"

"That's why I was turning around. She missed the detour sign. That little miss is headed straight for trouble. The bridge is out about ten miles down the road. At the speed she's goin', she'll never get stopped."

"We've got to try," Dan said.

“We can try, sonny, we can try.” The sheriff said. “Park your car and ride with me. Maybe if she sees the lights, she’ll pull over.”

“It’s starting to rain again. We’ve got to stop her before she gets to the bridge,” Dan implored.

“She’s got the damn thing revved up. I clocked her at eighty-five on the interstate,” the sheriff told Dan. “If luck is with us, the old road will slow her down a bit - give us a chance to head her off before she hits the bridge.”

Daniel saw the red convertible. It was headed straight for the bridge. “Faster, faster!” Daniel yelled. “Cut in front of her. Do something, for God’s sake!”

Sheriff Graves increased his speed. It was too late. “Almighty God in heaven, she’s goin’ over.”

“NO! NO!” screamed Dan.

CHAPTER 1
Late-Spring 1999

Governor Harrison James opened the huge French doors that led to his garden. Flowers of all varieties covered every available space and the fragrance of lilacs hung in the air.

He stepped through the doorway onto the veranda, a drink in one hand and a letter from the bank in the other. Harrison leaned heavily against the balustrade and breathed in the scent.

It reminded him of the perfume Raven wore that night so very long ago, and for a moment, he let the fragrance engulf him as he envisioned her face and felt her in his arms, as clearly as if it were yesterday. "Damn it," he cursed and stuffed the paper into his pocket.

If only he could forget, but the memory of the black-haired girl was sealed in his heart, imprinted on his brain. The past played across his mind's eye like a movie, and Harrison remembered the first time he saw her.

* * * * *

His father had talked him into attending a fundraiser for the law school at West Virginia University. He'd stood by the fireplace at the far side of the banquet hall, looked into the fire's flames and wondered what his future would hold if he followed his father's dream for him.

The blaze started to flicker and the flames played tricks on his eyes. An image of the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen appeared in the glass fire screen. She stole his breath and still he stared, afraid if he moved, the angel in the fire would be gone.

Harrison closed his eyes and then opened them. He turned and when he did, he caught sight of her across the room. She didn't see

him at first, so he had time to study her, unhurriedly, feature by feature. When at last he reached her eyes her blue-green gaze, the color of the Caribbean and so clear you could see to their depths, stared back at him.

Before his brain could engage, his feet moved him to close the space between them, but as he hurried to cross the dance floor towards her, the throng of merrymakers separated them and obscured her from his view.

And, as quickly as she had appeared in his life, she had vanished.

* * * * *

Vanished. Harrison shook his head, trying to clear the memory. Why had he thought about her now? It had been over twenty years, for God's sake!

He banged his glass to the table and ran his hands through his hair. He pounded the banister with his fist. "Maybe she was an apparition, after all – an illusion," he said aloud. "A beautiful hallucination."

Harrison yanked his tie loose and unbuttoned his shirt collar. He plucked the glass from the rail, drained its contents and went back inside. He took off his jacket. When he did, he remembered the notice from the bank. He tore it open and read:

*Dear Governor James,
It has come to our attention that the rent on Mrs.
James's safe deposit box is past due. Failure to hear
from you within the next week will result in an
automatic charge to your account for an additional
year. If this procedure fails to meet with your approval,
please let us know immediately.*

Harrison slapped the letter against the palm of his left hand. "What could she possibly have kept in a private box? Well, I won't find out standing here," he muttered as he started toward the master suite.

No doubt that the keys were in the cherry secretary she claimed as her pride and joy. It was huge, old and ugly – a monstrosity that Harrison hated and had put off cleaning out.

He sat down at the desk that dominated one entire corner of the bedroom and pulled open the top right drawer.

Empty.

He opened the top left one.

Same thing.

He tried the middle drawer, but it was stuck. Something was caught in it. "What the hell?" he mumbled.

He jerked on the handle again and the drawer came apart in his hands. The contents fell to the floor.

Harrison saw a ring of keys and bent down to pick them up. When he did, he noticed sundry other items that had spilled onto the carpet. One, in particular, piqued his interest – a sealed envelope, addressed to him:

Harrison James
PERSONAL & CONFIDENTIAL
(To be opened in the event of my death)

He laid the keys on the desktop. "To be opened in the event of my death," he read aloud. Something told him the letter didn't hold good news.

Harrison wanted to be outside where he could breathe when he read it. He walked through the latticed arch leading to the garden and sat down on a stone bench. After a few minutes, he opened the

envelope and unfolded the lavender, monogrammed pages that held his wife's last words to him. It was dated a month before she died.

*Harrison,
I hadn't intended to ever tell you about your father's
scheme, but when I found out I was dying, I thought,
what the hell? Besides, it seemed the ultimate way to
make you suffer...*

"Make me suffer? What the hell, Marguerite?" Half of her words made no sense – affected either by medication or the delirium of her disease – and Harrison struggled to decipher her letter.

*...When I found out I was dying, I decided a letter would
make a great exit. You know my flair for the dramatic.
Besides, for once, I thought it would be nice to put old
Jonathan on the hot seat – where he belongs...*

"What does Father have to do with all of this?" Harrison wondered aloud. Sordid details in his wife's sprawling script soon told him.

*...Jonathan confiscated your letter, Harrison. It was his
idea, you see, to get rid of her, that girl. He said that it
would be a piece of cake – and it was. It was so easy.
Jonathan handed the desk clerk a twenty. He then
forged your handwriting on a note, exchanged it for
the one you had written and while the little vixen was
out I sneaked in and replaced your note with his...*

"The girl?" Harrison's eyes grew dark with sudden realization. "My letter to Raven?"

She had disappeared from his life as quickly as she had entered it and he had never known why. How could it have happened? He had asked himself that question a million times. Now, half a lifetime later, without an ounce of remorse, his dead wife tells him it had been easy. Marguerite rambled, but the meaning of her words was crystalline.

...In case you didn't know, Harrison, it wasn't the first time or the last, that Jonathan falsified your signature on papers and letters. But, this was the only time I helped him...

He could almost hear Marguerite's laughter as her hurtful and brazen words told him, loud and clear, how she assisted Jonathan James with his plan.

...It was fun. I felt like a sleuth in old "B" detective movie from the 1950's. I then took the girl's letter, studied it for a while and copied her hand. Yes, Harrison, those were my words that you found pinned to your pillow, not hers...

"God, Marguerite, what kind of cruel joke are you playing on me from the other side of the grave?" he asked. Her next words answered his question. It wasn't a joke, but it was, indeed, cruel.

...You see, Harrison, we had to get rid of her. Your father convinced me it was in your best interest, but it didn't take much convincing because I wanted desperately to be Mrs. James – Mrs. Harrison James. While Jonathan bought off everyone from A to Z – the dean, professors, so many more – he told me to have patience. "Go have some fun," he said. So I did. To

amuse myself while I waited for you, I had a fling with your best pal. By then, you were already in London, working and trying to forget her. I wanted to be there, too. Your father had promised he would make things work. I needed to be there – Andrew was pressuring me to be with him. Jonathan finally came to my rescue and sent me to England, and just in the nick of time, I must say...

The words blurred on the page and Harrison blinked in order to focus on their meaning. “Andrew? She had an affair with Andy Youngman?” Harrison crumbled the pages, and then straightened them again.

...“Make him forget the black-haired girl, Marguerite, and you’ll be a James. I guarantee it...”

“Make him forget the black-haired girl,” he repeated. A flash of wild grief tore through his gut as the clarity of Marguerite’s evil deeds leapt from the page.

...Andrew was a diversion. You were the prize - power and prestige. Jonathan wanted my father’s financial input for your political career. That was the big trade-off – you for my Daddy’s money. What a dowry! Funny how things work out, don’t you think...?

“No!” Harrison shouted. “I *don’t* think! There’s nothing comical about any of this!” Hurt and anger coursed through his body. His chest constricted and made it hard to breathe. Harrison inhaled and tried to regain the oxygen that had evaporated from his lungs, yet he read on.

...For a brief moment, I must admit, you satisfied my needs, Harrison. Andrew came back on the scene a couple of years into our marriage. Poor guy – I came on to him in your study. He put up a token refusal, much like you did in London. Remember London and the big seduction scene? It worked. You couldn't resist my technique and neither could he...

Harrison rose from the bench and walked the length of the garden. He tried to digest the fact his wife and his best friend had been lovers. Poor Andy, he thought. "You made fools of both us , didn't you, Marguerite?" he spat.

...My trysts with Andrew were spiced with excitement, secrets and a touch of mystery, until Jonathan found out. He said he would expose me, but he had no real proof about anything. This evidence is in my journals and I put them in a safe deposit box. Jonathan thought I burned them. I guess I should have, but I liked having my insurance in the bank. I felt as though I'd been set free when Jonathan had the stroke, but fate intervened, and I became ill, as well. Such irony! Why am I telling you all this now? I don't know. Call it my final curtain call. P. S. If there were an encore, it would be this – Jonathan knows where she is and he can't tell you now.

Marguerite

Harrison sat there for what seemed like hours. His mind and body were paralyzed with shock. The next stage he experienced was one of

disbelief. How could one come to grips with the lies and the deceit and especially, the cruelty?

His wife and his father had manipulated and maneuvered his life. What was worse, he had let them. "How could I have been so blind? How could I have let it happen?"

Finally, the shock, disbelief and hurt gave way to absolute rage. He dropped the lavender pages and with the heel of his shoe, crushed the letter into the ground. Harrison walked through the garden and got as far as the gate. With expletives thrown into the air, he stalked back to where the letter lay, covered with dirt. Harrison grabbed it and jammed it into his jacket pocket.

He got into his car and drove until he was completely spent.

In the wee hours of the morning, he found himself back in the city at the gravesite of his wife. He stood for a long time and looked at the grass-covered mound, finally kneeling beside the grave, as if by doing so she would be able to hear him better.

Frustration gave way to anger – Harrison shouted at her grave, "I guess I should have expected something like this from Father; cruelty was his specialty, no matter whose feelings were at stake. But you, Marguerite...? I knew you'd always been catered to and were used to having your own way. I even knew you were unfaithful. But, I didn't know you hated me."

* * *

ONE MONTH LATER

This busy day ended like the other seemingly endless days had since Harrison had discovered the secret found in his wife's desk drawer. He sat in the library of the Governor's mansion and stared into space, a brandy in one hand, Marguerite's letter in the other.

Raven could be anywhere – happily married with a half dozen kids – but she has a right to know the truth, he thought.

It had been over twenty years since Harrison had seen her, but in his mind's eye, it could well have been only twenty minutes...

Harrison hadn't wanted to leave her. He'd just stepped out of the shower when the phone rang - a client with a crisis. Harrison had to go to Philadelphia. She was sound asleep; so peaceful he hadn't the heart to wake her. He'd kissed her and she'd never stirred.

When he returned the next night there was no sign of her. A one-line note was the only reminder she had been there at all.

Thanks for a nice weekend, she had written. No address, no phone number, nothing else. He'd turned the room upside down, looking for clues, no matter how minute, that might lead him to her.

His search had been in vain.

"I couldn't have been so wrong," he'd muttered. "She loved me. I know she did."

Harrison had searched for her. Weeks turned into months and each inquiry turned up the same result as before – nothing.

In a day, she had disappeared; into thin air, but why?

Now, he knew why.

Determination took root inside him. He would find her.

Harrison walked the length of the library several times before it hit him – the missing link.

He hurried toward the master suite.

The ring with the safe deposit box key was the first thing he saw.

In his haste to read Marguerite's letter, he had tossed it onto the desk top and totally forgotten about the damn thing.

Insurance in the bank, were Marguerite's exact words.

That has to be the answer, Harrison prayed.

The governor looked at his watch. The bank was closed for the day. Harrison removed the single key from the fob, dropped it into his pants pocket and walked back downstairs to his study.

* * *

The heavy vault door swung open and Harrison followed the bank employee to the safe deposit boxes. He signed in and gave her his key. She inserted both his key and her corresponding key into a metal door numbered 406, opened it and left him.

Harrison lifted the box from its cubicle and placed it on a high table that stood in one of several privacy carrels. As he pulled up a stool to the table and sat down, he prayed he would find a clue to Raven's whereabouts.

Harrison took a deep breath and opened the lid.

Two diaries lay atop several other items – jewelry boxes, an assortment of letters, and a stack of cards. He opened the first leather-bound book and scanned a couple of paragraphs before he flipped through the remaining pages. Page after page of his wife's handwriting told in detail her innermost thoughts and secrets.

Thursday -

One man will never be enough for me. I thought when we were children that I loved him. It turned out to be the challenge of the chase I loved. If Harrison finds out about the others, he will undoubtedly want a divorce. I can't have that.

Harrison rubbed his temples. There were times when he had suspected his wife's infidelities and there were times when he had known for sure. By then he had Daniel to consider. Harrison didn't want to be separated from his son, so he put up with the indiscretions. Divorce hadn't been an option. He had been determined to make the marriage work, and somehow they stayed together for nearly twenty years.

Diary, he shouldn't take my boredom or my insatiable desire for sex personally. I'm invariably careful. So, you see, he doesn't have to worry about disease. I'm responsible and I'm very selective.

Don't take it personally? You were careful? Responsible? Selective? Well, I guess that explains it and makes everything just fine, he seethed to himself.

"God, Marguerite, what should I say? Thank you? That'll be a cold day..." His voiced echoed off the vault walls.

"I knew you were selfish and spoiled, but what you did to me, to us, is unforgivable." He dropped the jewelry back into the box, grabbed the journals and slammed the metal container back into its opening.

Harrison, never in two lifetimes, could have imagined the magnitude of what he had just read. Curse words rolled off his tongue in a silent stream as he stalked from the bank.

He reached his car in record time, jerked open the door and sank into the front seat. He skipped through the second book to the last few pages.

A weekend entry...

Today, Diary, Jonathan said I must be more discrete. He made it clear if I rocked the boat – ruined Harrison's chances at political success – what he would do to me. He threatened me! That bastard threatened me. "I'll tell Harrison about you," he said with an arrogant smirk, "unless you do what you're told."

One night in the sack with a campaign backer from Texas kept Jonathan off my back and my secret intact. I'm off the hook for the time being. I swear, Diary, he's

*only guessing about Daniel. I didn't even tell Andrew.
Jonathan will never get his hands on the proof. I'll put
you where he can't find you, Diary.*

"Only guessing about Daniel?" Harrison asked aloud. "What the hell...what about my son?" In disgusting detail, the last entry of his wife's diary told him.

*...Andrew died unexpectedly in a car crash last week. I
suspect Jonathan had something to do with it...*

"No!" Harrison shouted. "Not murder!" He felt the blood drain from his face, striking his veins like shards of ice as it coursed through his body.

"Enough," he said. But there was more...

*I've made my final decision – Harrison never need know
that Andrew Youngman was Daniel's biological father.*

Silent tears rolled down Harrison's face and the diary fell from his hands.

"The son I've loved all these years is not mine...?"

Like a broken record, Daniel isn't yours...isn't yours...isn't yours... replayed mercilessly over and over again through his brain, as the impact of Marguerite's words sucker-punched him in the stomach. "God, help me," he pleaded.

Harrison felt ill. Bile burned the back of his throat. Thankful that there was no one in the parking garage, he rushed to open the car door.

In his haste to get out of the car, the journal dropped from the car and landed on the concrete floor with a dull thud. Disgusted, Harrison

tossed it back inside. It caught the edge of the seat and fell to the carpeted floor mat.

He placed his elbows on the roof of the car and ran his fingers through his hair. He then took a deep breath and uttered an oath. "I can't tell Daniel this horror story," Harrison shouted. "It would only hurt him. Daniel is my son, no matter whose blood runs through his veins."

Harrison banged the top of the car with his fist.

"No! Never!" he shouted.

His wife's words thundered through Harrison's brain and caused his head to throb. With a thumb to his right temple and an index finger to the left one, he rubbed. The pressure helped. When he opened his eyes, he saw a folded sheet of blue stationery, with his name neatly printed on one side. "Must have fallen from the diary," he uttered.

Harrison sunk back down into the driver's seat, picked up the note and began to read. First surprise then anger registered on his face and when he realized the note was from Raven, the one he had never received, the one his wife had taken from his hotel suite, so many years ago.

James,

As I write this, I find it hard to believe I was so wrong about how you felt and about what we shared. I loved you totally and wholly, with all my heart. I could never have given myself to you otherwise. God, help me, I thought you felt the same. How could you leave, never looking back? How could I have been so wrong?

'Raven'

Harrison felt like he had just been hit with the second punch of a one-two combination. What he had just read was nothing like the

note Harrison found that morning so long ago. For months he had carried the note and what he thought were Raven's words – folded between the pictures in his wallet.

After he and Marguerite married, Harrison meant to dispose of it. Instead, he locked the letter in a fireproof metal box and placed it in his desk. He kept it to remind himself that she had gone and how wrong he had been about her.

He'd tried hard to forget her and had put every effort into making his marriage succeed. Try as he may, a part of his heart remained with the Raven-haired girl. Harrison didn't have to take the frayed piece of paper out of the box to know what was written, the words were seared in his brain.

James,

A family emergency came up! Had to go. Don't know when I'll see you again. Thanks for a great weekend.

'Raven'

Harrison pounded the steering wheel with his fists. "Listen to what she said, Marguerite, 'How could I have been so wrong? I loved you, James.' Darling," he said, willing Raven to hear him. "You weren't wrong – I did feel the same and still do. I suppose I'll go to my grave loving you."

As this realization came over Harrison, the memory of what he had written to her that night and what she never had a chance to read, ran through his mind as if on a Teleprompter:

Dearest One,

I knew the moment I saw you across the room that you were something very special. I had heard of love at first sight, but I never believed it really happened, until last night. With all my heart, I adore you. You gave me a

*precious gift, one I will cherish always and I promise
you'll never regret it. I love you, Raven, with all my
heart. I'll see you tonight – wait for me.
My love forever,*

James

* * *

Over the next few weeks and months, Harrison hired and fired several private investigators in his new-found resolve to find Raven and let her know what really happened on that fateful night many years prior.

The last two detectives assigned to the case sang the same song. Everything at the university is on computer now and all records more than twenty years old were destroyed ages ago. We have to be honest with you – without a last name, it's next to impossible. It'll take a miracle to find her.

Fresh out of miracles, Harrison decided to go see his father.