

**STYX &
STONE**

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STYX & STONE

An
ELLIE STONE
MYSTERY



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To Lakshmi

CHAPTER ONE

SUNDAY, JANUARY 24, 1960

About halfway between New Holland and Schenectady, a narrow road cuts through a fault in the wooded hills above the Mohawk: Wolf Hollow Gorge. Local lore has it that Iroquois Indians, poised on the lip of the ravine, ambushed a party of Algonquin invaders early one morning in 1669. The attackers poured down the walls of the dark glen in waves, whooping like demons, and slaughtered the Algonquins trapped below.

One mild Sunday evening in January, I found myself in Wolf Hollow, a willing prisoner in the backseat of a black Chrysler 300. I'm what people call a modern girl. The kind who works for a living in a man's world. I can hold my drink and I'm a good sport. I'm the kind who has her own place and sometimes invites a gentleman in for a nightcap. The finer the gentleman, the faster he slides from his end of the sofa to mine, the more roughly he gropes me. But his lips are soft, his tie is loose, and his arms have me pinned anyway.

Steve Herbert, barracuda lawyer with a square jaw and sharp, white teeth, had been pursuing me—the object of his baser desires—with devoted attention for some time. In the absence of a more suitable escort, I had recently been spending the odd evening with Steve, who was divorced, morally bankrupt, but good-looking and a fun time. I was too old for sock hops and earnest teenage boys, and my romantic options were otherwise few. Over his warm, heavy breathing, I became aware of an approaching noise outside the car.

I lifted my head to investigate, but Steve wrapped his big hands around my hips and pulled me back down on the seat. He planted the

sting of gin on my lips, and his prehensile tongue drew me inside his mouth in an oral tug of war.

Then a light flashed in the window, and someone began tapping on the glass. I shrieked and elbowed Steve in the eye as he scrambled to right himself in the seat. The pint of Gilbey's fell to the floor and emptied at my feet. My heart thumping in my chest, I squinted into the light at the large shape outside the fogged-up window, shielding my eyes with one hand while I wiped the glass with the other.

"What the hell?" bellowed Steve as he caught sight of the figure outside the car.

Once the window was clear and I could see the dullard's grin, I knew we were in no danger.

"It's all right, Steve," I panted. "It's just Stan Pulaski."

"Who's he?"

"Deputy sheriff."

"Damn! The gin!"

"Don't worry," I said as I adjusted my brassiere and smoothed my hair—long, curly, and quite unruly in situations such as this. "He's not a real cop. It's Stan Pulaski."

I rolled down the window, and Stan stuck his melon head inside.

"Ellie? What are you doing in there?" He craned his neck to view Steve better. He pursed his lips then announced that the car smelled like a distillery.

"What can we do for you, officer?" asked Steve, barely concealing his annoyance.

"The sheriff wants us to shut down this lovers' lane, sir." Then he turned to me. "Where have you been, Ellie? Sheriff Olney's been looking all over the county for you."

Steve wasn't happy when I left him in the lurch for Stan Pulaski and his cruiser. Twenty minutes later, Stan roared into the parking lot of the Montgomery County Administration Building and pulled to a gentle stop before the door to let me out.

"You should steer clear of fellows like that, Ellie," he said. Stan was a little sweet on me. "There's no future there."

"I'm a big girl now, Stan," I said.

He nodded, then his eyes rather glazed over slowly. "Your hair sure is pretty," he said.

"Stan, tongue in mouth, please."

"Sorry," he said, taking up an official tone again. "Frank's waiting for you. You'd better hurry."

"Will you drop me home later? I lost my chauffeur."

He smiled. "Sure, Ellie. Anytime."

The outer office was empty except for Deputy Pat Halvey, who, bent at the waist, had thrust his head out the window and was looking at something across Route 40.

My voice surprised him and he jumped, whacking his crew-cut skull against the sash. The window, in turn, fell like a guillotine on his shoulders and pinned him to the sill.

"Darn it, Ellie," he said, rubbing his neck once I'd freed him. "Make some noise when you come into a room, will you?"

"Stan says Frank's looking for me."

"In there," he grumbled, throwing a thumb over his shoulder toward the sheriff's office.

Frank Olney sat wedged between the arms of the swivel chair behind his desk, flipping through some papers. The chubby forefinger of his right hand was stuffed into the ringed handle of a mug of coffee, which he held aloft as if he had forgotten to drink once he had raised it. He struggled to his feet, managing to lift himself from his chair without resorting to the use of a derrick, and waved me inside with his left hand.

"Sit down, Eleonora," he said, motioning to the aluminum chair in front of his desk.

I hate that name. It was a cruel joke of some kind, intended to make me seem interesting, but it sounds like something pulled out of a dusty, old carpetbag instead. My father said I was named for Eleonora Duse, the great Italian stage actress, and Eleonora of Toledo, wife of Cosimo I de' Medici. I remember standing before a Bronzino painting in the Uffizi when I was ten, my father proudly pointing out my namesake.

Eleonora was a beautiful, elegant lady with a fat little boy at her knee: her son Giovanni. Not far away, the same little boy, beaming from another Bronzino canvas, clutched a small, half-strangled bird in his chubby hand. I prefer to go by Ellie.

“Charlie Reese’s been looking for you for two days,” said the sheriff, retaking his seat. “Where do you disappear to?”

“I’ve been off since Thursday night,” I protested. “And I’m always around.”

He frowned. Frank was a prude who didn’t quite approve. “Anyways, Charlie called me yesterday,” he said, setting the coffee on the desk. “He needed to find you right away and thought maybe I could put out a goddamn APB on you.” He pushed his coffee to one side, rearranged a paper, then fixed his eyes on mine. “I’ve got some bad news for you. Your old man called the paper Friday morning from New York to tell you your brother’s grave was vandalized.”

A rotten thing for someone to do, for sure, but hardly deserving a statewide manhunt. “I see.”

“And they painted some swastikas on the stone.”

Worse. No Jew, no matter how assimilated, no matter how secular, can escape the morbid awareness that, born at another time in another place, he could have been one of six million. It’s a feeling of impotence in the face of a hatred you can do nothing to change. And while I had grown a thick skin about being Jewish in a Christian society, swastikas still stung me with waspish fury.

“Do they know who did it?” I asked.

The life drained from Frank’s eyes, betraying the weight of another obligation to fulfill.

“What’s this really about, Frank?”

The sheriff rocked nervously in his chair. “Charlie Reese says you got a wire from New York yesterday. Someone named Bernard Sanger. You know him?”

I shook my head.

Frank winced a bit, as if I were putting him out. “He said your father’s in the hospital.”

My father was an aggressive, dynamic man, impatient of the perceived failings of those around him. His frustration had always raised his hackles and his blood pressure, too. Had he finally blown his stack over some student's ignorance of the differences between a Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet? When I professed my indifference to those very distinctions one evening at dinner years before, he dismissed my argument with a wave of his hand.

"I know you relish the role of mock primitive, Ellie," he bristled. "But you're not as ignorant as you wish to make people believe."

My mother scolded us for baiting each other.

"What was it, a stroke?" I asked the sheriff, who shook his head. "Did Charlie give you any details?"

Frank drew a deep breath, swiveled in his chair a bit, then explained in his typically delicate fashion that someone had broken into my father's apartment and clubbed him on the head.

"The cleaning lady found him unconscious yesterday morning. This Sanger fellow says he's at Saint Vincent's Hospital." He paused. "Critical condition."

I stared dumbly at the sheriff for several seconds, struggling to reconcile his words with a reality I could accept. Finally Frank spoke.

"Can I get you some water, Ellie?"



My head was a muddle when I left the sheriff's office a few minutes later. How was I supposed to feel about my father? We weren't close, we certainly didn't speak often, and then only to make perfunctory inquiries into the other's health. We'd exchange lukewarm platitudes about the weather, the Giants, or the Yankees—yes, I follow sports, part of my one-of-the-boys charm—but there was a mountain of distrust and disquiet between us. He never asked me about my work, of which he had never approved, and he could barely disguise the churning resentment he bore me for the disappointment I had caused him on so many occasions. Newspaper scribbling did not conform to

his idea of a noble and useful endeavor. The world needed journalists, to be sure, but Abraham Stone's surviving progeny—local reporter and hack photographer for a small upstate daily—had fallen short of the promise of the Stones who had rolled before.

When I landed in New Holland about six months after Mom had passed away, I welcomed the distraction it provided. I had tried to stick it out in New York, living at home with my grieving father after the terrible year of 1957, but it wasn't the moment to repair our relationship. He was adrift, and the only thing he knew for sure was that I displeased him. Finally, a college professor of mine steered me toward her old friend Charlie Reese and a job at the *New Holland Republic*. What harm was there in chancing it, she asked. For my part, I was happy to have found a job that didn't involve shorthand and fetching coffee. New Holland may not have been everything I had hoped for, but a girl can't be picky when it comes to careers. I considered myself lucky, but my father was ashamed of my choice. Our family's is a legacy of erudition and the arts, and I was not holding up my end. Although to his mind, my choice of career was the least of my offenses.

The chill in our relationship mellowed somewhat once I left home. Absence makes the heart grow fonder for some, but with us it was more out of sight, out of mind. Though our differences troubled me from time to time, the wound had calloused over and had become an ordinary bother, like arthritis or tennis elbow. Under the present circumstances, however, it merited my immediate attention; my father might expire at any moment, alone in a hospital bed two hundred miles away.

I called my editor, Charlie Reese, and told him my plans. He understood, said not to worry about work, and wished me well.

Before setting out for New York, I stopped at Fiorello's, the soda shop opposite my apartment on Lincoln Avenue. Over a coffee, I discussed the situation with the proprietor, Ron Fiorello, known to the locals as Fadge. He was a big man—six foot two and over three hundred pounds—a few years older than I was (twenty-three), and the closest thing I had to a friend in New Holland. We spent long hours sitting at

the counter in his shop, talking late into the night. I enjoyed his wit and salty humor. He liked having a girl around.

I remembered the first time I realized we would get on. Having recently moved to New Holland, I had been frequenting the shop for a few weeks, enjoying the occasional cup of coffee over a newspaper, which I liked to read in a booth near the back. On that day, I arrived just before lunch, and Fadge greeted me at the door, a magazine tucked under his arm.

"Hi," he said. He looked distressed. "You're Ellie, right?"

"Yes," I said.

"Watch the store for a few minutes. I'll be right back."

He rushed to the back room and disappeared into the toilet, where he remained for nearly forty-five minutes. When he finally emerged, looking relieved and not the least bit embarrassed, he thanked me and asked me how I'd fared.

"Not a soul came in, so I read the dirty books," I said, motioning to the magazine rack against the wall.

"Didn't I see your picture in one of them?" he asked, so sweetly that I fell in love with him on the spot.

"That's terrible news about your dad, Ellie," he said, staring at me with his bulging brown eyes—he suffered from a thyroid condition. "Maybe it'll turn out all right, but just in case, don't let him leave you feeling guilty; that lasts forever."



Normally, I take the train to New York. You have to be sure to reserve a seat on the right-hand side of the car, though, or you'll have nothing to see but trees and embankments rushing by for four hours. That gives me motion sickness. On the right side of the car, you can stare lazily at the Hudson, broad and majestic, and admire the Catskills and Palisades, the flinty rocks and green hills, and wonder if you've just passed the tree where Rip Van Winkle slept for all those years. But there was no train to anywhere at this hour, so I got onto the Thruway at New Holland around ten o'clock, hoping my '51

Plymouth Belvedere would get me to New York. Charlie Reese had pulled some strings to get me the company car in early December. I suspected it was a lemon—old-fashioned and round and, yes, a shade of yellow—they had no other use for, but I was grateful to have it anyway. It meant I could cover high school basketball games without having to take taxis or beg rides on the team bus. The teenage boys always stared slack-jawed at my legs.

Four hours later, I was bouncing down the Henry Hudson Parkway, under the George Washington Bridge and past the piers, arriving at Saint Vincent's Hospital in the West Village around two thirty.

I had phoned the hospital before leaving New Holland to arrange a quick visit, since I would be arriving long after visiting hours had ended. They agreed to accommodate me. A short nurse with a pleasant smile identified herself as Mrs. Buehler. She showed me to my father's bed in the Intensive Care Unit. I never would have found him otherwise; the long, snaking tubes of a breathing apparatus obscured his bandaged head. His skin, normally a robust tan, was a waxen gray. Liver spots I had never noticed before spread over his forehead, cheeks, and hands. He looked like a corpse. I stood over the bed for a few minutes, unsure of what to do. Then the nurse spoke.

"Why don't you go home and get some sleep, Miss Stone?" she said. "He's stable, and you can speak to the doctor in the morning."

Feeling vaguely guilty for abandoning the vigil, I left the hospital and drove over to University Place and Tenth Street, where I parked my Plymouth. I grabbed my bag, walked across Tenth and down Fifth Avenue, and paused at the door of my father's apartment building. The neighborhood hadn't changed. I peered through the cold darkness at the most familiar landmark of my youth: Washington Arch. A grayish shadow in the night, it loomed an eerie portal. An icy breeze ruffled the collar of my coat, and I ducked inside 26 Fifth Avenue.

"Miss Eleonora?" called a voice from a chair across the lobby.

Rodney. He used to watch out for me like a mother hen, tie my shoes, and adjust my book strap when it was loose. And I used to tell him stories of my day as we rode the elevator to the fifteenth floor. He

was a kind man who liked little children, perhaps because they treated him like a whole person, not a cripple with black skin. I crossed the polished marble floor, dropped my bag, and extended a gloved hand to the aging elevator operator. He pushed himself off the chair and stood lopsided but sturdy on his right leg, bent since birth. His tired face smiled sadly as he clasped my hand.

"I'm just sick about what happened to Professor Stone," he said, shaking his head. "Can't figure how someone got in here. I was on duty that night, and not a soul came through that door I didn't know."

"What time did my father come home that night?"

Rodney's face twisted in thought. "I remember seeing him come in, and I wasn't sleeping." This last observation seemed to be germane in fixing the approximate time. "Let's see, I came on at six, got off at two . . ."

"Never mind, Rodney," I said. "I'll talk to you again tomorrow. Try to remember when he came home."

"I know who'll remember," he said. "That young man who works with Professor Stone."

"Who's that? Someone named Sanger, perhaps?"

"I don't know his name, but he comes around here all the time. He'll know; he was with him."

"Could he be the one?" I asked, but Rodney shook his head.

"No, miss. They went upstairs together, then the young man buzzed the elevator about twenty minutes later. While I was bringing him down to the lobby, he said he forgot something upstairs. I called Professor Stone on the intercom right then and there from the elevator, and he answered. So, I handed the receiver to the young man, and they settled it between themselves."

"Do you know what he forgot?" I asked.

"No, miss. He must have mentioned it, but I wasn't really paying attention."

"So you didn't take him back upstairs to get it?"

Rodney shook his head again. "No, Professor Stone told him he'd give it to him on Monday."

“Did you tell the police about that guy?” I asked.
“About thirty times before they was through with me.”



Rodney whisked me up to the fifteenth floor and left me alone in the long, still corridor. The walls hummed peacefully, almost inaudibly, as all these prewar New York residences do. Lugging my bag to the last apartment on the southeast corner, 1505, I fished two brass keys from my pocket and turned the lock, then the dead bolt. Inside, the apartment was dark. The smell of the house had changed; the last whiffs of my mother’s perfumes had faded, and more masculine scents had settled in. The place was spanking clean, but the odor of old books and oriental rugs defies feather dusters and pine wax.

I flicked on the light, dropped my case next to the bench in the foyer, and stepped through the archway into the parlor. Everything looked different; it had been two years since I’d left. Flowers spewed from pots in every corner, on every end table. I recognized them as my mother’s favorites, but couldn’t remember what they were called. She had tried to teach me about flowers, but I was more interested in the boys who played baseball. Not a tomboy, but a fan. I suppose I still am. The wallpaper had been changed, and some new pieces of furniture anchored the grand old Kashmiri rug that my mother adored. Silk on silk, nine hundred knots per square inch—woven by children with very small hands, no doubt. One of the old paintings was missing: a Wyeth watercolor of a hillside, framed by a barn window. My mother had received it as a gift from the artist in the late forties. In its place was a portrait of my late mother beside a vase of orange tulips, painted by someone named Romich—most probably an artist she represented. Not my taste. On the mantelpiece in the parlor sat a simple gray vase. My mother’s ashes were inside. I wondered how my father had managed the redecoration project, since the room didn’t strike me as consistent with his dark and austere style.

My father had been found unconscious in his study on Saturday

morning, struck on the back of the head by a heavy object, unknown at present. The police had scoured the room that very afternoon, but had taken nothing away. The fingerprint experts had left a dusty trail over most of the study, since, judging by the scattered books and papers, the intruder had touched nearly everything in his search for valuables.

Despite the late hour, I wanted to have a look at what had happened. I circled around my father's desk, swiveling his green leather chair with a distracted hand as I examined the room I had so rarely visited as a girl. The three windows behind the desk were dark, locked tight with the louvered shades drawn. The desk drawers had been pulled out, some dumped on the floor. I stepped over the mess and opened the shades to look outside. The airshaft: twenty feet of nothing, then a brick wall. No access and very little light. I had never understood how my father could work in that cave, but he liked the dark, insulated peace of the room.

I glanced at the ponderous book on his desk: a magnificent, 1861 Gustave Doré *Divine Comedy*. No surprise there; Dante was my father's life's work. He had more than fifty different versions in various languages. The papers strewn about on the floor had not been moved by the police. I knelt down and picked through a few of them. Students' dissertations, notes for lectures, decades of professional correspondence . . . The contents of an academician's desk. His personal documents were scattered on the floor between a filing cabinet and the wet bar. I cracked an ice cube, dropped it into a tumbler, and poured Scotch over it. As one of the boys, I had learned how to drink whiskey, and hold it well. I had to hold my drink or be ready to defend my virtue.

The hi-fi, hidden inside a cherry wood cabinet, was untouched. A record sat on the turntable: Gounod's *Faust*. The encyclopedic collection of classical music records (78s and LPs) lining five long shelves of the chest above, had been ransacked. I say "classical" with a twinge of guilt, since my father insisted on pointing out the misnomer whenever he heard it. Classical, he declared, was a period of music dating roughly from the mid-1700s to about 1830. Mozart and Beethoven were classical composers, he maintained. Brahms and Tchaikovsky were Romantics.

One March evening fifteen years earlier, as we sped north up Sixth Avenue in a taxi, heading to the Ninety-Second Street Y to hear Lotte Lenya sing Weill, my brother Elijah referred to *The Three Penny Opera* as classical music.

“Kurt Weill is in no way classical music,” corrected Dad. “You can say he wrote operas, music for the stage, or modern music. But you cannot say he wrote classical music any more than you can say he wrote West Texas Swing.”

“But everyone calls it classical,” Elijah said in his defense. “At a certain point, you’ve got to accept common usage. You don’t speak Middle English, do you?”

“I don’t need to accept incorrect usage,” said Dad, and Elijah just shook his head and watched the streets whiz by.

“Daddy,” I asked once I realized the argument was over. “Is Paul Whiteman classical music?”

He laughed. Elijah roared, and my mother patted my head.

“Not exactly, dear.”

Back in my father’s study, I surveyed the mess again. Most of the disks lay on the floor, including several that had been maliciously shattered and trampled. Among the items missing, I noted three small silver picture frames, a gold pen set that had belonged to my grandfather, and the strong box my father had kept in his desk. I swept a few pages of one of my father’s manuscripts off the divan and plopped down to have a smoke while I nursed my drink. After shaking out the match, I realized the crystal ashtray, which had always sat on the low table before the couch, was gone, along with the silver Aladdin’s lamp cigarette lighter. I placed the cool match on the table, and took my cigarette and Scotch into the parlor.



MONDAY, JANUARY 25, 1960

A brilliant January sun splashed through the south and east windows, warming my stiff bones: I had fallen asleep in one of the armchairs in the parlor. After a couple of false starts, I managed to brew myself a potent cup of sludge in my father's little Italian coffee machine.

Down the hall, past my father's study, three bedrooms squared off the northwest end of the apartment. My parents' room, an elegant, polished art-deco suite with bath and dressing room, was on the left. Elijah's room was directly opposite, and mine was between it and a second bathroom at the end of the hall. My bedroom smelled hollow and looked cold. The furniture was still there, shrouded by dust covers, just as I had left it two years before. If it hadn't been my own bedroom, I would have thought the child who had slept there was dead. But that was Elijah's room. I didn't even look inside.

I showered in my father's bathroom, put on my face, and dressed. Passing the study door on my way back to the kitchen, I heard a noise and froze in my tracks. I should have run for the front door, but, strangely, I couldn't help but look. My eyes came to rest on a woman, a Negro of about thirty. Dressed in a faded cotton wrap-around dress, tan hose, and black shoes, she glared at me, maybe from curiosity, maybe from suspicion. Then I noticed the man. He was across the room, toying with a paperweight on my father's desk, as if he was bored. I looked him over: solid, average height, light-brown skin, and clear-blue eyes. He gave me the creeps.

"What you doing here?" the woman demanded, her tones unmistakably Caribbean.

"I live here," I said tentatively, wondering why I wasn't running for the door. "I mean, my father lives here."

"Professor Stone's girl?" she asked. "Eleonora?"

I nodded. "Excuse my curiosity," I said, "but who are you?"

She laughed. "Oh, you're Professor Stone's girl all right!" (My father and I are said to have the same eyes.) I waited for an explanation. "My name is Nelda, your daddy's cleaning woman. It was me that

found him,” and suddenly her smile faded. “Terrible what happened to Professor Stone. Terrible.”

“Who’s he?” I asked, motioning to the man at the desk.

“That’s Nelson, my brother. I’m afraid to come here alone after what happened.”

Nelson was still standing there, paperweight in hand, grinning smugly at me.

“Tell me what happened,” I said, turning to Nelda.

“I come in about this time Saturday,” she began. “I opened the door and called to Professor Stone, ’cause I don’t want to surprise him. Most days, he answers hello, but Saturday nothing. I called again, then I went to look. He was flat on the floor in the study, bleeding from the head! I thought he was dead. I screamed bloody loud. Then I called the police.”

“Didn’t you call an ambulance?” I asked.

Nelda’s eyes darkened. “No, the police done that. What you mean by that, Miss Eleonora?”

I waved a hand and walked into the study and crossed the room. I approached my father’s desk, and Nelson moved away, around the other side, and wandered to the door where he leaned against the jamb as if to block the exit. Nelda took up a position in front of me.

“Did you notice anything missing when you found him?” I asked.

“A couple of things. Silver things, gold, you know. I didn’t look much, ’cause the police was in charge.”

I thought a moment. “Are you the only person besides my father who has keys to this apartment?”

“I think so,” she said. “Excepting you. Why’re you asking such questions? Can’t you see that a burglar come in here and bashed Professor Stone on the head? That’s what the police said.”

“I’m just wondering how the burglar got in,” I said.

“Well, don’t go suspecting me, Miss Eleonora. The professor is good to me, and I am always good to him.”

Nelda told me she and Nelson had come to clean up the mess in the study, but I asked her to leave things alone for the time being. She cast a wary eye my way.

“We have not come to steal anything, Miss Eleonora,” she said.

“No, I didn’t think so. But I want to have a closer look at this mess before you put things back in order.”

Nelda shook her head. “You going to be staying here, Miss Eleonora?” she asked.

“For a few days, anyway.”

“Well, if you don’t mind the mess, I won’t clean it. Come on, Nelson,” she called, and the man with the unsettling eyes followed her out.



“Your father’s condition is critical,” said Dr. Mortonson, calling my attention to a set of x-rays on a light box in his office. “He’s suffered a depressed fracture of the skull behind the right ear. The resulting bleeding has created what we call an extradural hematoma. If you look closely at this shadowy area beneath the surface of the skull,” he circled the area in question with his forefinger, “you’ll see blood trapped between the meninges and the bone.”

“What does that mean in practical terms?” I asked.

“The cerebellum was subjected to an increase in pressure, which, in turn, can cause brain damage, coma, or death.”

“Can you relieve the pressure?”

“Of course.” He yanked one of the x-rays from the light box and snapped another in its place. “These,” he pointed to a pair of small, black circles on the film, “are the two holes we drilled to let the blood out. We discovered a clot and removed that, but there’s still swelling from the general trauma. We’re trying to reduce that by other means. If he regains consciousness, we’ll be able to assess how much, if any, damage occurred.”

“Which faculties are controlled by the cerebellum?” I asked.

“Motor functions, muscles, coordination. He may walk out of here like before, or maybe not at all.”

“Paralysis?”

“Or death.”



The man waiting for me in the visitors' lounge was a slightly built redhead in his late twenties, maybe thirty. Wearing a rumpled gray shirt, black tie, and brown jacket, he introduced himself as Detective-Sergeant Jimmo McKeever of the NYPD. I thought he looked more like a jockey than a cop.

"I'm sorry about your father," he said softly.

I asked him about the investigation.

"It looks like robbery. An intruder gained entry into the apartment, apparently through the front door, and surprised your father in his study."

"Are you sure my father was taken by surprise?"

McKeever started, as if I had ambushed him. "I believe so, Miss Stone. You see, the blow was struck from the back, which is consistent with, well, surprise."

His timidity was curious. I wondered if he was in the habit of speaking to girls. "Then you don't think my father might have known his attacker?"

The policeman wiped his lips with a handkerchief and laughed nervously. His eyes avoided mine. "Ah, I don't think so, but it's a possibility. What makes you think he knew the intruder?"

I shrugged. "Did you speak to Rodney the doorman?"

"Oh, yes," he said, gulping down some saliva. "Mr. Wilson was quite eager to cooperate. He told me about a young man who accompanied your father home that evening."

"You don't know who that man is, do you?"

He shrank into his jacket and shook his head. "No, miss, but he may be a colleague of your father's. I'm going to check on that."

"What else can you tell me about what might have happened?" I asked, amused by this funny little man, despite the circumstances that had brought us together.

"Well, we think we know what was taken. I have a list here," and he patted his pockets until he'd located the scrap of paper in question. "The cleaning lady helped us with this."

McKeever read off the list, mostly items I had noticed myself, plus a few knickknacks from the parlor. Nothing irreplaceable.

"Billfold?" I asked.

"Still in his pants' pocket. Nothing missing there."

"What about the bedroom? My father kept some of my mother's jewels in there. Mostly heirlooms, and quite expensive. He liked having them around."

"By all appearances, the intruder did not enter the bedroom."

I tapped a finger absently on my lip, thinking.

"What is it, Miss Stone?" asked McKeever.

"It's just strange," I said. "Why didn't the burglar search the bedroom? Most women keep their jewelry on a dresser or in a box. Jewels are lightweight, easy to conceal, and easy to unload."

"But your father lives alone. Your mother is . . ." McKeever stopped short, maybe out of reluctance to use the brutal word with me, or maybe he had just gotten my point.

"Yes, my mother is dead," I said. "But the burglar wouldn't have known that, unless he knew my father."

McKeever fidgeted, uncomfortable with any new scenario that didn't include a pat conclusion. "You say her jewels were expensive?"

"No Star of India," I said. "But they're the goods."

"Perhaps the intruder was scared off," he said. "Maybe he fled after hitting your father. To be honest, Miss Stone, the idea that this could have been the work of an acquaintance of your father's hadn't crossed my mind."

"I'm sure you're right," I said. "It's just those little details that bother me: How did the assailant get in, and why didn't he look for the real trove? And the billfold. Why overlook that?"

McKeever nodded, unconvinced. "You'd be surprised how many break-ins present similar inconsistencies. Take last week, for example. I investigated a burglary where only a bicycle and a jar of small change were taken. The thief ignored a drawer crammed with silver, some antique vases of some value, and an expensive hi-fi."

"What did you deduce from that?" I asked.

“That the burglar was probably a kid. He stole only the things he could carry and could use. My guess is that he rode off on the bicycle with the jar of change under his arm.”

“Sounds like a logical conclusion,” I said, and McKeever seemed relieved. “But how did your bicycle-thief burglar get inside in the first place?”

The detective’s face flushed, and I could see I’d unnerved him again. “Well, through a window off the fire escape. We found it wide open.”

I nodded. “But there was no open window at my father’s place,” I said. “And no forced entry.”



By noon, I was on the Saw Mill River Parkway, rolling toward Irvington and the cemetery where my brother was buried. Elijah had skidded on the slick pavement of Route 9A after a June rain two and a half years earlier, and his motorcycle careened over the shoulder and plunged down a steep hill. He was dead on the scene, a quiet woodland in Westchester County. My parents decided that he should be laid to rest where he died, so he was buried in Irvington.

The caretaker was embarrassed by the desecration. He apologized a little too insistently, explaining that the vandals, probably local juvenile delinquents, had broken into the cemetery late at night and made no noise.

“It’s such a big cemetery,” he said, as we walked over the cold ground toward Elijah’s grave. “I couldn’t have heard them if they’d thrown a party.”

“It’s all right, Mr. Dibb,” I said, touching the gaunt man’s elbow. “I understand these things happen all the time.”

“Oh, no, miss,” he said, looking straight ahead and not at me. “We haven’t had a desecration here since ’52, and that was an act of personal vengeance.”

“You mean no one has kicked over a headstone since then? It happens all the time where I live. Mostly troubled teenagers.”

Mr. Dibb's concave chest swelled, his gray, stubbly chin thrust upward in self-satisfaction. "I keep an eye on things." Then, perhaps remembering the reason for my visit, his pride flagged, and his chest deflated. "Of course you can't be everywhere at once. Especially in a big place like this."

My brother's grave was indeed far from the caretaker's house. Secluded in a low-lying glen behind a hill, it was often sodden from settling rain and decaying leaves. Yet it was a beautiful place, somber to be sure, but serene and bucolic. A huge, black oak stood nearby, its trunk and branches twisted, as if by grief for the dead at its feet. Elijah's granite marker had been pushed over, cracked in half by a heavy blow, and smeared with three black swastikas in acrylic paint. I pulled my Leica from my oversized purse and shot a few frames to examine later on; I couldn't stand to look at the grave one more minute, and not because some idiot had scrawled a couple of swastikas on the stone. As Dibb walked me back to my Plymouth, I turned my head until the tears had dried from my cheeks. He wasn't looking at me anyway.



At 110th Street, a swath of flinty green slices through Harlem. Running north for thirteen blocks, Morningside Park cordons off Columbia University to the west from the flats of Harlem to the east. Columbia, or more precisely Barnard, was my alma mater, daytime home for four years of studies and many hours besides of visiting my father at the office: Hamilton Hall, where the Italian Department conjugated its verbs and deconstructed its texts. My father kept his office on the sixth floor, overlooking Hamilton's statue and the John Jay Building to the south. I studied history at Barnard and spent countless hours at Fayerweather Hall, but with my father's lukewarm support, I was submatriculated into the School of Journalism my junior and senior years. That put me in the Journalism Building most days, just opposite Hamilton Hall on the other side of South Field. I often met him at his office for lunch or to ride the subway home together in the evening.

The last time I had visited Morningside Heights was on a June day two and a half years earlier—just a week before Elijah died—when I took my degree. Now I was returning under less auspicious circumstances to ask my father’s colleagues a few questions about a young man who had been seen with him the night of the attack.

The pall over the office was darker than I had expected, even for a Monday. When I introduced myself to the secretary, a handsome woman in her late thirties named Joan Little—according to the engraved Bakelite strip on her desk—I noticed her red eyes and raw nose.

“You’re Professor Stone’s daughter?” she asked, dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief. “What do the doctors say about your father?”

I explained the vague prognosis, that the doctors weren’t sure if he would pull through, or how much brain damage might remain. Joan Little listened with a pained expression, embarrassing me with her *poor dear* gaze.

“It’s been an awful few days,” she said. “I saw your father on Friday. He was so upset about your brother’s . . .” she balked at the word *grave*. “The horrible thing those vandals did.”

“How did he react?”

Miss Little shook her head and swallowed some watery build-up in her throat. “He didn’t say a word, but his temples were throbbing. He usually gets that way when he’s furious, but Friday it was different; he was seething. That was raw sorrow, inconsolable loss, and fiery wrath. He was spitting mad.” She buried her face in the handkerchief. Once she had composed herself, she continued: “Then Dr. Chalmers called Saturday afternoon to tell me about the assault on your father. Then Ruggero Ercolano.” Again the tears in the handkerchief, this time a gusher.

I knew Victor Chalmers, the department chairman and a needle-nosed iceman, but Ercolano was new.

“Who’s this Ercolano?” I asked. “And how did he know about my father?”

Miss Little looked up from her handkerchief and sniffled. “No, I didn’t mean Dr. Ercolano called me about your father. I meant he’s dead.”