

**MIND OVER MURDER BY EVELYN DAVID
FIRST 5 CHAPTERS**

Chapter 1

"I don't think you were this paranoid before we got married. I would have noticed and believe me it would have been a deciding factor in my decision to hook up with you."

"I'm not paranoid. I'm just cautious and you know as well as I that all is not what it seems. We don't need GPS. A paper map works just fine. Besides, I don't want to be tracked by satellites. You've seen those drones on the news? How do you think they find their targets?"

"Who would bother to track us? Besides, we're going in circles. Why don't you pull over and ask for directions. That should be safe enough."

"Just check the map again, please...dear. And we are not going in circles!"

"I don't need to check the map again...sweetheart. And you are driving in circles. We've passed that French restaurant three times." I loved him but my husband wasn't the most observant man in the world.

"Are you sure? Might be a chain. If you could learn to read a map...."

Neither was he the most patient. "I told you to take the Milton exit, Jake. You completely ignored me."

"You told me too late. I would have had to take out a semi and a 10-year old Ford to get in the right lane in time to make that exit."

"You should have let me drive. I'm a better driver." I really wasn't but it irritated him no end when I made that claim.

"Read my mind."

"Is that an invitation?" I smiled at him. "You know how much you hate it when—"

"Damn it, Valentine, we're going to be late. Where's the next exit that will get us to the church?"

Okay. It was time to let him off the hook. He wasn't going to be disappointed since neither of us really liked going to weddings. They remind us too much of our own.

"It doesn't matter. The groom is on a plane to Mexico City. No one is going to notice we're not there."

"Peter is dumping Allison at the altar? Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I had a dream. Peter was sitting on a plane, reading today's paper, and the seat next to him was empty." I shook my head. "Aunt Delia is going to have a fit. She and Uncle Calvin spent a mint on Allison's dress. I told her not to, but like you, she never listens to me."

He glanced over at me, eyes narrowed. "So you knew about this for some time?"

"Maybe." I wasn't admitting anything. He gets annoyed with me telling him how things are going to turn out so I generally try to keep my premonitions to myself unless I thought the information was absolutely vital. Sometimes what I thought was vital and his definition of vital varied. This might have been one of those times.

"No maybe about it. You didn't think of mentioning it to me? Maybe before I put on this monkey suit?"

"No. Besides, I thought as long as we were both dressed up we could go somewhere nice for dinner." I gave him my best beseeching look. "I made reservations at Josephine's."

"That French restaurant we keep driving by?"

"See how well that worked out?"

The doorbell chimed drawing my attention away from the computer screen and the bid I was about to place for Jake on a 1939 New York World's Fair medallion pin. Jake and his nemesis Newton548 were in a bidding war for the item. Five minutes were left in the on-line auction and Jake was losing.

I looked up at the couple entering the shop. The woman was in her early forties, short blonde hair, no-nonsense manner. The guy was slightly younger or maybe his attitude was younger. His hair was brushing his shoulders and his beard was in the awkward stage. They picked their way through the stacked wooden crates that Jake hadn't gotten around to unpacking; the spoils of our recent trip to the antique mecca of New Hope, Pennsylvania. The man turned sideways in order to slide between the boxes. His suit jacket flipped open as it snagged on a crate and I caught a glimpse of his shoulder holster. Cops or rather detectives. Wonderful. Newton548 was going to chalk up another win. Jake would just have to deal with it.

"Can I help you?"

"Are you Valerie Zalmanzig?" the man asked.

I shook my head. "Nope." Everyone always tried to twist my first name into something they recognized, something more common. And while Zalmanzig was the name I was born with, when I married Jake almost five years ago, I acquired a white elephant of a house, a disapproving mother-in-law, and since there is always a bright side to most things—a surname with no z's.

"If you're not Zalmanzig, who are you?" The female detective's eyes flashed.

It didn't take any special abilities to see that she didn't believe me. Probably had a photograph of me in a file on her desk. I could see her ticking off the details: thirty-two year old Caucasian female; five-foot-five inches tall; long red hair; and hostile, brown eyes (a by-product of my dealings with law enforcement). After my last dance with the local police department, I'd told the Chief in no uncertain terms that I wouldn't be available for consultations in the future. Obviously, the Chief had conveniently forgotten.

I sighed. In the shower this morning Jake had warned me that he had a bad feeling about today. I thought he was just annoyed that he had to use my lavender scented bath gel.

The male cop shifted and almost knocked a 1950s floor lamp into an opened crate of Japanese porcelain. He caught the lamp but I didn't see him do it. Instead I saw a shattered teacup lying in a pool of red on a polished wooden floor.

Not my cup. Not my floor.

"Your name, please."

The female cop's words drew me back. Someone was dead.

I blinked once, then cleared my throat. "Who wants to know?"

They both pulled out gold shields and waved them in front of me. I snagged the woman's before she stuck it back in her blazer pocket. Glancing from the shield to the ID card, I read her name aloud, "Detective Diane Ellison."

Detective Ellison nodded. "And my partner is—"

"Mike Hardesty," I mumbled, his name popping into my mind before she could say the words.

Whoops.

I glanced up.

They smiled.

Damn. Me and my big mouth.

I handed the badge back. I shouldn't have touched it.

"It's been five years. I'm retired," I repeated, ripping open a package of Oreo cookies and dumping them onto a platter. I handed the platter to Detective Hardesty and turned to check on the coffee that was dripping into the glass carafe. As I watched, the brown drips turned to red. Blood.

I blinked. Blood was dripping off a woman's hand onto a broken teacup.

"Chief Peterson mentioned that you might be reluctant to help us," Hardesty mumbled, between bites of cookie. "She said to tell you she's willing to let bygones be bygones. She says everyone is entitled to one mistake."

The detective's voice was getting farther and farther away. I could see the blood trailing down the woman's bare arm to her hand.

"It's a mistake. You've made a mistake." The words echoed in my mind. The voice wasn't the detective's. It was an older man's and he wasn't talking to me. He was talking to someone holding a knife.

Detective Ellison touched my sleeve. "Miss Zalmanzig?"

The knife flashed and blood spurted onto a bedroom wall—an obscene design on the white paint.

The killer opened a window and stared angrily out into the snowy night.

"Miss Zalmanzig?"

The blue-striped wallpaper was gone. It was the same wall as five years ago but the wallpaper was gone, replaced by white paint. And fresh blood.

I focused on the Detective. "It's Mrs. Cohen. The Chief arrested the wrong man five years ago. I told her. She didn't believe me."

I couldn't wait for the carafe to fill. Time was running out. I grabbed it and coffee splattered onto the warming plate, the hot liquid flowing onto the white tiled countertop. I watched the liquid change again from brown to red. More people had died because I'd failed before.

Ellison took the carafe from me and jammed it back in the machine. Hardesty grabbed a cloth from the counter and mopped at the mess.

"She knows," Hardesty said, his voice soft as he soaked up the coffee into one of Jake's mother's best dish towels. "The Chief knows the mistake wasn't yours. Fletcher is still on death row but we've got another couple murdered."

Mostly just to keep myself grounded, and already knowing the answer, I asked a question. "In the old Chang house?"

"Yeah, but the couple living there now...." Ellison sighed. "Sorry, the couple that was killed last night was named Berman."

Hardesty tossed the wet towel into the sink.

I was going to catch hell over the coffee stains. Jake's mother was very particular about her things—and her son. She wasn't going to like this. Not one little bit. "Both stabbed? Both killed in the master bedroom?"

The female detective nodded. "It's just like last time."

I picked up the towel from the sink and began rinsing it out. I needed to act before the stain set. I needed to find the killer before someone else died. This time I couldn't stop until I found the truth.

Chapter 2

"Do you want a salad?" I didn't wait for his answer, just pulled out a head of lettuce from the crisper drawer along with a sack of carrots.

Jake finished turning the rib-eye steaks that were cooking under the oven broiler before responding—and when he did speak it wasn't about food. "I thought we agreed when we got married that you wouldn't get involved in any more murder investigations."

I used a large knife to chop the ends off three carrots that were past their prime. The knife striking the vegetables made a satisfying thump on the wooden cutting board. "I didn't go looking for this; the police came to me, remember?"

"It's not too late to say *no* to them. They can't force you to get involved."

"I'm already involved. I've been involved since that first couple was murdered in their bed five years ago. I couldn't pinpoint the killer then, but I knew it wasn't the guy the cops arrested. Alex Fletcher was a lot of things, including a murderer, but he didn't kill the Changs. No one would believe me then. They might now."

Jake appeared at my side and put his hand over mine, stilling the knife. "Are you sure it's not a copycat killer? That cable thriller about the Chang murders was re-aired about a week ago."

"I'm sure." I paused, then added, "The police are sure. The Chief wouldn't have reached out and admitted her mistake if she wasn't sure."

"From what you've told me, she hasn't exactly admitted she made a mistake." Jake raised his eyebrows. "Two days ago you were sure that Peter and Allison weren't getting married. Turns out Peter was on a plane all right, but so was Allison. The little detail about an elopement didn't show up in your dream. So maybe you're wrong about this too. You don't always know, Valentine. This could be a different murderer—just a coincidence that a second couple was killed in the same house."

I frowned. I didn't like his habit of rubbing my face in my mistakes. It wasn't one of his most attractive traits. But before I could come up with an appropriately pithy reply he continued.

"And the police? The Chief is sure? She was also sure that Fletcher was guilty. I followed the case. Hell, the whole town did. The police found his fingerprints in the bedroom. When they

finally tracked him down in Dallas, he still had some of the things he stole from the Changs in his car. The guy was stone cold guilty."

"Guilty of lots of things—but not of killing the Changs. Fletcher admitted to robbing the couple the day before the murders. He'd repaired the chimney on their house and when they weren't looking had taken more than just a check in payment. But he's always denied killing them." I stared into his eyes, willing him to understand. "It's past time that I finished this. Will you help me?"

"No." He sighed and released my hand. "But I won't stand in your way. I know you're going to do what you want to do anyway, regardless of what I want."

"Jake?" I wasn't sure if he was angry or just afraid for me; afraid of the toll I would pay for traveling in a murderer's wake. We'd met during the Fletcher trial. He'd seen what the fallout had been for me. He'd been my safe haven when the police chief had thrown me to the media wolves.

I'd lost a lot getting involved in the Chang Murders. My career, my reputation, and most of my friends. I had a Master's Degree in psychology. I'd been the star of the biggest jury consulting firm in New York. Attorneys were anxious to hire me because of my "amazing insight" into jury makeup, trial strategy, even the innocence or guilt of their clients. Local police departments quietly hired me as a consultant for difficult cases. Of course, I'd never mentioned to anyone my other "talents," my visions of past and future. But when a national rag sheet plastered my face on the cover and called me a fake who traded on the tragedies of others, the firm quickly cut all ties with me. I couldn't get hired to tell fortunes in a carnival once the tabloids, local, national, as well as television shows were done with me. I don't know what I would have done without Jake. Meeting him and falling in love saved me.

"Honey, I need to do this."

"Right!" Jake walked back over to the oven. "Did I mention that I talked to my mother today? She sends her regards."

He was bringing up his mother? Now? I glanced over at his stiff back. He wasn't afraid for me. He was angry. He was definitely angry. I chopped the carrots up in record time. Fine. I could deal with that. Two could play the game. "Did I mention that Newton548 outbid you on that medallion you wanted?"

I bunched up my pillow and stuck it back under my head. Staring upward, I tried to isolate the exact moment when the day had first gone wrong. Ever since I was a kid, I'd been convinced that bad days were the result of one mistake, one misstep that derailed the whole day, and that if I could only identify it, future bad days could be avoided. This theory, although not without major flaws, had served me well enough that I continued to use it. Assuming that stubbing my big toe on the bathroom door at 3 AM didn't count, it had to have been the 7 AM conversation with my Aunt Sarah. As usual she and Momma were squabbling over something that had happened when they were both teenagers. It was a strange week when one or the other of them didn't call me from Oklahoma just to complain about the other. But this time instead of agreeing to talk to Momma and smooth the waters, I'd told Aunt Sarah in no uncertain terms that I wasn't going to be the go-between for them any more—that she and Momma could call Aunt Delia instead. At least Aunt Delia had been a witness to their childhood! Of course the problem was Aunt Delia would remember the incident differently than either of them and wouldn't hesitate a second to tell them that they were both wrong. That kind of information wasn't anything Momma or Aunt Sarah wanted to hear. Of course Aunt Sarah wasn't pleased with my response either or at least that's what I took the "you always were an ungrateful little twit" comment to mean. So my dealings with my aunt might have set the tone for the day—that or Jake's ill humor about the lavender shower gel.

I could hear him brushing his teeth. Jake always brushed them extra-long when he was angry with me. He was taking his sweet time coming to bed. I didn't think he was mad enough to sleep in the guest room but it had always been hard for me to judge his feelings correctly. His emotions tended to change like quicksilver and I was always a step behind in deciphering them. I'm really not as good at reading his mind as he thinks I am.

Over dinner he'd made clear his very rational reasons for why another murder investigation was a really bad idea. He brought up the nightmares and the migraines and the half dozen psychosomatic illnesses that I'd endured while grappling with the psychic messages. He didn't want to watch me go through it again. Hell, I didn't want to go through it again. And I didn't want to think about how it might affect our marriage. We had enough problems without adding a murder investigation to the mix.

The wind outside picked up and the old house shuddered. The sprawling four-storied house had been in the Cohen family for over a hundred years, expanding as each generation had built

on an extra room or two. Jake had mentioned more than once that he'd probably add on something, just to keep with tradition. He'd hinted several times about a second nursery in the wing that housed the antique shop. Talking about a second nursery when we didn't have any occupants for the first nursery seemed too much like tempting fate to me. I usually changed the subject when he brought it up.

The bathroom light went out leaving only the full moon to illuminate the bedroom. My eyes were slow to adjust. I couldn't see the cracks in the ceiling but I knew they were there, just above my head. Among the other problems, the house's foundation was crumbling. It seemed to me that the cracks were getting wider and deeper every day. Jake and I needed to fix them before it was too late.

My husband slipped into bed beside me and stuck his Popsicle feet against the back of my bare calves.

I grinned and turned towards him. He might be angry, but he wasn't too angry.

Despite everything I loved Jake Cohen and I know he loved me. What were a few cracks compared to that?

The yellow crime scene tape danced in the wind and the snow began to fall. Another storm was about to blow in from the west. Seamont had already had its fair share of snow for the season. The historic town had grown up during the early 1900s as a summer vacation spot for the city dwellers. The ocean breezes made for a temperate summer but harsh winters. Most of the houses were built with large verandas and windows to catch the sea views. They were impossible to heat in the winter. When the village was first built, the population of Seamont dropped by half by the end of October, not to increase until again until early May. Now Seamont was a trendy commuter town to the Big Apple, just 40 minutes from Grand Central via Metro-North.

Jake's family had been one of the few to live in Seamont year-round. Even after we'd invested a fortune in thermal windows and insulation, parts of the house were virtually unlivable in the winter. Of course some drafts and cold spots weren't due to the weather.

"Come inside with me please." I knew I was pushing my luck. Jake had offered to drive me to the Chang house—it would always be the Chang house in my mind—but he hadn't changed his stance about not getting involved in the investigation.

He picked up a newspaper from the car seat and inclined his head towards the house where the two detectives were waiting for me. "You'll have plenty of company. I'll sit out here and check out the classifieds. See if there are any estate sales coming up. I assume we're still going to Boston next weekend?"

"Absolutely. I'm not going to shirk my half of the work at the shop."

"That's not what I'm worried about." He crooked a finger at me and I leaned in for a quick goodbye kiss.

"I know. I'm sorry." I opened the car door and got out, taking care not to slip on the icy sidewalk. I was sorry. Sorry that our lives weren't as simple as Jake would prefer. Sorry his mother didn't like me. And sorrier than I could say that I hadn't found the Changs' killer before he had killed again.

Detective Ellison was the skeptic. She stood out of the way but watched every move I made. I think she was afraid I was going to steal the Bermans' silver. Maybe not steal exactly, but she didn't trust me. Detective Hardesty was the true believer. He hovered near my elbow, his notebook out, waiting for me to start spouting clues. I think I disappointed both of them. Most of the Bermans' furnishings weren't old enough to be interesting or new enough to be worth much. There were some pieces that I felt belonged to someone else? The Changs? I wasn't able to get a clear reading. And to Detective Hardesty's dismay, I didn't hear any disembodied voices shouting the killer's name and social security number the minute he ushered me in the door.

I had visited the Chang house in December, five years before, at the behest of Chief Liza Peterson. Newly appointed, Peterson was intent on finding the person who had broken into Lee and Vera Chang's home one snowy night and stabbed them each more than a dozen times. She'd heard of me from a police chief in New Jersey whom I'd helped in a kidnapping case. Liza Peterson might have had the best of intentions, but when the news got out that she had a psychic working the case, she hadn't been able to stand up to the ridicule. One morning after a particularly scathing news story, she'd left a message on my answering machine that my services were no longer needed. Back then I wasn't strong enough to get through to her and the wrong man went to prison. I hadn't been back to the house since. But the killer had.

The staircase was the same as before. Polished oak banister. Dark green carpet on the stairs. Rage permeating the air, thicker near the top.

I paused on the sixth step. The killer had paused there too. Both times. Why? I couldn't see past the second floor landing. The step didn't squeak any alarm.

"Are you getting something?" Detective Hardesty bumped into me, then clumsily moved back down a step.

Besides a headache? I looked behind me and caught Detective Ellison's eye. She understood my problem.

"Mike, give her some space. You're blocking the vibes from reaching her."

"Wow." Detective Hardesty looked around as though the vibes in question might be visible; something he might need to brush off his shoulders.

I smiled in relief as he backed two more steps farther down the stairs. "Thanks." I noticed that now the six-foot detective's head was level with mine.

A thought really did strike me—well metaphorically at least. I went up two steps and stopped. I could see the master bedroom door.

"The killer is tall. At least six foot, likely taller. And probably male."

"Wow." Detective Hardesty stared at me and then backed away another step. I guess he was hoping more distance would yield more data.

I couldn't see a downside to leaving him with that belief.

"Mrs. Cohen? Are you all right?"

My knees ached. I opened my eyes and realized I was kneeling on the wooden floor of the bedroom. I was in the same spot where the killer had stood looking down at his slain victims.

They were just another obstacle between him and what he wanted. He hated them. He resented the time he'd had to waste on them. Both emotions, anger and frustration, filled the room, stronger even than the cold terror that clung to the four-poster bed.

I wished again that Jake had come in with me. I was going to need his strength. I was going to need his help.

Chapter 3

"Do you mind if my mother joins us for lunch?" Jake asked at the very moment I realized the car had stopped moving.

I opened my eyes and saw our garage door through the front windshield. I was surprised that I'd managed to fall asleep during the short trip; the Chang house was only a couple of miles away from ours.

"Fine, but you know she won't eat a bite of anything I fix."

"Funny." He sighed. "I'd really like the two of you to get along better."

"She doesn't like me."

"I think you can work around that if you try." He grinned. "I don't think she really dislikes you, she just doesn't think you're good enough for her highly intelligent, incredibly handsome, extra special, only son."

I glared at him.

He laughed. "Promise to be nice and I'll go with you this afternoon to the police station.

I gave him a weak smile, then opened the car door and got out. I was going to hold him to that bargain. I had a headache straight from hell and a visit from Ruth Cohen wasn't going to help matters.

Plus I had plumbers coming in a half hour.

"I'm moving into my own place soon."

Richard Baez was telling me a story he'd told many times before, with the same ending. He was still living with his parents. We were standing in the utility room of the house, which was behind the shop. I'd noticed a stain on the floor a week earlier, but had been hoping it would go away. It hadn't. It was spreading.

The twenty-something assistant plumber was gesturing with a socket wrench in one hand and a Phillips screwdriver in the other. "I've got it all planned. Big couch, 50-inch TV, fridge full of beer. You'll have to come over and help me decorate." He gave me a look that made my stomach turn.

It was a good thing his father, Javier Baez, was a crackerjack plumber. Richard was tall, greasy black hair, and always smelled like weed. He'd been working with his father for at least 10 years and still hadn't gotten his license. Javier didn't let him handle any jobs alone. Hell, Richard wasn't even that good at handing his father the tools he needed. At the moment Javier was outside getting something from his truck, a job Richard should have been able to handle, but apparently wasn't.

The dinger on the oven timer had been ringing for at least five minutes, I couldn't put it off any longer, even though I hated leaving Richard unsupervised in the shop. "Look, I've got to check on something in the oven. Call me if anyone comes into the store."

Richard gave me a smug smile. "No problem. I'll cover the shop for you. I'll check out those comic books you've got in that box on the counter. I saw an old Superman on top."

"Don't touch them. They're expensive first-editions."

"Oh, come on. They're just comic books." Richard sounded like a whiny nine-year-old.

The smell of a burning chicken casserole made me hustle up the steps. "I mean it. Don't touch anything."

I was about five minutes too late. The breaded topping of the casserole was scorched. I was trying to figure out if any of it was salvageable when I heard Richard calling me.

It wasn't a customer.

"The oil tank is leaking." The elder Baez slid out from under the cast iron behemoth oil tank that took up half the furnace room. He wiped his oil-stained hands on his jeans. I felt like Javier, and the ever-present Richard, had been practically living with us since Jake and I had been married. Something was always leaking or broken.

I sighed. This old house was a money pit.

"Can it be patched?"

Richard didn't even try to contain his laughter.

I glared at him, which was nothing compared to the look he got from his father. The young man didn't look the slightest bit embarrassed, but he did shut up.

Javier was in his early 60s, heavy-set and gray-haired, I'd never seen him smile. He was very serious about plumbing and just about everything else in life. His brow seemed permanently furrowed. I guess since Richard was his only child, a few wrinkles were inevitable.

"No ma'am. If it were a line or a fitting, then maybe. But it's the tank. You got to replace it."

I looked around the small room behind the shop that housed the ancient furnace, oil tank, and the water heater which Javier had assured me was also on its last legs. It suddenly occurred to me that the shop had been built long after the furnace had been installed.

"How do you get the old tank out of here and a new one in?"

Richard interrupted. "Only way out is through the shop. We'll take the door to this room off the hinges and see if that gives us enough room. If not, we'll cut open the sheetrock to widen the opening."

The young man seemed excited at the prospect of major demolition.

Jake wasn't going to like this. Not only was it going to be expensive, but we were going to have to close for several days. Plus the shop itself was going to have to be rearranged to allow Javier and Richard to go in and out. And worst of all, I was going to have to listen to Richard's innuendos and potty humor for at least a week.

I'd gotten lucky and my mother-in-law had postponed her visit. Something about urgent business elsewhere. Thank God. Between the furnace and the police, my patience was wearing thin.

Now I just had to get through the meeting with Chief Peterson without letting past grievances get in the way of catching a killer.

Jake had the windshield wipers going at turbo speed even if the car wasn't. The snow was blowing so hard that visibility was almost zip.

"We could turn around and go home," he suggested. "Build a fire and go through that crate of old books we had shipped back from New Hope from our last buying trip. I picked up some marshmallows at the grocery store yesterday. The tiny ones you like to float in your hot chocolate."

I hid a smile. Jake was the one who liked those marshmallows, but I had to admit that I was tempted. Sorely tempted. And my husband knew it. He really wanted me to bow out of the investigation. I was a little surprised at how strongly he felt about it. Of course with my headache and this weather, it wouldn't take much to convince me to give it up. The vision of him and me curled up on the living room sofa, the fire crackling, the taste of chocolate on his lips as I....

"I'm pretty sure my mother hasn't arrived yet. She said tomorrow."

Splat. That imaginary bubble of bliss was gone. "No, Jake. We should keep going. Chief Peterson is expecting me. I don't want to miss a word of her groveling."

He started to argue but was distracted when a Ford sedan cut in front us going twice what was safe on the slick roads.

"What the...." Jake braked hard and barely managed to keep all four tires on the road. "Did you get the license number? That guy's going to kill someone."

"No. The snow is too thick for me to see the plate. We need to follow him."

He gave me a sharp look. "What?"

"Go faster, Jake. He's pulling away."

"No, Valentine. Absolutely not. I draw the line at chasing speeders. You can't do everything for the police in this town. Let them earn their paychecks."

"I heard a baby crying. It's not his."

The blowing snow was both a blessing and a curse; the driver of the Ford didn't realize he was being followed, but we couldn't see much more than the speeding car's taillights.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Jake complained as he steered into a skid and then skillfully maneuvered our Chevy Tahoe back towards the inside lane.

Translation—he didn't want today to be the day that his brand new pride and joy got its first scratch. I sighed. I'd been through this with him once before. The week of our wedding he'd taken delivery on a new cherry red Pontiac Grand Am; his first new car. The week after our wedding I had backed it out of the garage without first opening the garage door.

Our marriage had gotten off to a rocky start. Jake hadn't yelled but I have a suspicion that he might have checked into the fine print of an annulment. Even after the car was repaired, he never felt the same way about it—or me. Every time he looked at it, I imagined that he was remembering how wonderful the first seven days had been and blaming me for ruining his dream car and picture-perfect marriage. Neither had really been perfect; the car's transmission had been suspect and as his mother had pointed out numerous times, we came from very different backgrounds and religions. But Jake had only seen what he'd wanted to see. I had been relieved when he sold the car to a cousin and bought a used Blazer for our antique shopping trips. Even

after five years, that car is something we don't talk about. A week ago he'd traded the Blazer in for a new Chevy Tahoe. Cherry Red.

"We have to stay close enough to see what he does," I warned, as the taillights disappeared.

"Try calling 9-1-1 again."

I looked down at the cell phone I was clutching. "I'm still not getting any signal."

"Is the phone charged? You never remember to charge it."

"Could we argue about this later?" He was right of course about the phone but I was at a loss as to how his observation was going to be helpful in the present circumstances. If he didn't have a thing about carrying one, we'd have a second phone to use.

"Fine, I'll start a list," Jake replied as he flipped the defroster switch to high.

I flinched as the Ford's back end shimmied when it crossed a particularly icy patch.

"Watch out for the—"

"I got it," Jake mumbled, his knuckles whitening as he gripped the steering wheel. "Tell me again—you're sure about the baby? Hell, are you sure the car is stolen? Maybe your circuits are still overloaded from this morning."

"Circuits?" I spared him a glare, then trained my eyes back towards the car. "He's turning."

Jake groaned. "This should be interesting—it's a dead end road. Next stop—the Long Island Sound."

"Why is he just sitting there?" Jake asked as he slowed the Tahoe to a sliding stop about fifty feet back from the idling Ford.

"I don't know." We had followed the Ford into the deserted waterfront park. The Ford had neared the picnic pavilion, then abruptly stopped.

"Can't you...."

"It doesn't work like that." I rubbed a hand across my dry eyes. I'd been staring at the Ford so hard that I'd forgotten to blink. "Imagine a radio playing in your head. It's always on but won't hold a station for more than a few seconds. Mostly the volume is so low that I can't make out any words, but every once in a while, usually when I'm asleep or upset, the sound turns up and I get whole thoughts or conversations."

"So all you're getting right now is static?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"Okay. So maybe I should get out and go see if the guy needs directions or something. I could pretend that—"

"No. He might panic. He's got a gun."

Jake's head whipped towards me. "You're only now thinking to mention a gun? He could have shot at us anytime during the past ten minutes. If I'd known, I would have—"

"Sorry, but I didn't know about the gun until I said it."

"I've got a full tank of gas."

"Huh?" His abrupt change of subject didn't make sense. Or maybe it just seemed that way since my headache was getting worse.

"I said that I've got plenty of gas so we can sit here until—"

"I can't think, the damn baby keeps screaming its head off. Why is that SUV sitting back there?"

"What?" Jake grabbed my arm. "Valentine?"

"Did I say that out loud?" I blinked and sat up a little straighter in the seat. "I heard him clearly that time."

The snow was getting heavier. I took a quick look around us. I couldn't see the gray ocean water that I knew was only a few hundred feet to our right. The rock picnic pavilion was about ten feet from the Ford. I could just make out the shape of the roof. If the Ford's lights weren't on, I wouldn't have been able to see it at all. Lights! "Shut off our headlights. Turn off the motor."

"Why?"

"So he won't worry about us. If he can't see us, he may think we left."

"And what do you think he's going to do if he thinks we've left?"

"He'll get rid of the baby. He doesn't want to get caught with it."

Chapter 4

"He's leaving." Jake swiped at the fogged windshield with one hand, partially clearing the glass. "Did you see him get out of the car?"

"No. Maybe." I unlocked the Tahoe's passenger door. "Let me out here and you follow him."

"Wait a minute. What are you—"

"Follow him, Jake. We need to be sure. I'll check around the pavilion."

I didn't wait to hear his protests, instead I stepped knee-deep into the fresh snow and slammed the Tahoe's door behind me. I think I heard him say something about my manner of closing the door, but I'm sure it was just my imagination. The love of my life couldn't be worrying about his new vehicle at a time like this.

As the Tahoe moved away I was hit by the full force of the winds. Stumbling, I tried to orient myself in the white swirling snow. Straight ahead. I told myself I just had to keep going straight ahead, one foot in front of the other.

Ducking my head, I slowly advanced towards the pavilion, all the while knowing its open sides would offer almost no protection from the weather—not for me and certainly not for an infant.

My half-frozen hand clutched the rock column, the rough surface a reassuring tactile sensation in the midst of the white-out conditions. I couldn't hear anything but the wind. I couldn't see anything but the snow. I closed my eyes and tried to concentrate, searching for any clue as to the location of the baby.

"Val?"

I turned and found Jake standing beside me, his clothing soaked, a baby car seat dangling from his hand.

"He tossed this in the Sound. Did you find...." The wind caught the rest of his panicked words but I didn't need them.

I took his arm. "We need to get you into some dry clothes and call the police. Let's go find a working phone."

"No, damn it." He shook off my touch. "You do whatever you do. Don't give up because of me."

I stared into his eyes. "Jake, I don't know what to do. I'm not getting anything."

He tossed the seat to the side and knelt down onto the snowdrift-covered floor. "Then we do what normal people do every day. Put out your hands and feel your way through the unknown."

The swinging doors opened and Jake walked through. He looked good in green scrubs. Younger. Or maybe it was the big smile on his face that I found so appealing.

I spared a glance at Detective Ellison. She was giving Jake the once over too.

Staking my prior claim, I met him halfway across the waiting room and wrapped my arms around his waist. "Are you, okay? Did you see the baby?"

"We're both great. He's pinking up nicely under that heating lamp. The docs say he's fine."

I grinned. "Detective Ellison says that the baby's name is Christopher Warren. Rudy and Alisha are his frantic parents and they're on their way from Queens courtesy of a New York State Trooper."

"You mean we don't get to keep him?" He laughed and gave me another hug. "I thought there was some rule that if they were over a certain weight or is it length?"

"That's fishing," Detective Ellison joked as she joined us. "You did a good job out there this afternoon Mr. Cohen. If you and Mrs. Cohen hadn't followed that stolen car..." She sighed. "We've got an APB out on the carjacker. But with this weather, it could be days before he's spotted."

"Are you ready to go home?" I was worried about Jake. He looked okay but he'd spent a long, wet, ten minutes with me out in the snow storm looking for the baby.

Jake nodded. "More than ready. I'm exhausted."

"We still need to talk about the Berman murders," Detective Ellison said. "Can I come by in a couple of hours?"

I wanted to say no. I even opened my mouth to say no.

The detective quickly added, "I'll bring lasagna from Aurelio's."

Jake perked up immediately. "With their garlic rolls and maybe a cheesecake? I'd be happy to buy, if you'd pick it up."

"I thought you were exhausted." Even if he wasn't, I was. I wasn't in the mood to meet with the detective about the Changs or the Bermans. The weather was getting worse and there was something else....Something else was about to happen. I could feel the pressure behind my eyes building.

He grinned. "Hey, even superheroes have to eat."

Superheroes.

I flashed on the image of a child with a dishcloth cape pinned to his t-shirt. Or maybe it was a her. She or he was small, not more than five or six years old. Curly hair, long for a boy but shorter than a girl would normally wear it. Wanting something that was just out of reach, the child was pondering a jump from the windowsill to the tree limb ten feet below. A door slammed. The child jumped.

"No!" I blinked and the boy or girl was gone. Jake and Detective Ellison were staring at me in surprise. Several other people standing near us looked concerned. Didn't take a psychic to pick up on their thoughts. Crazy person on the loose.

"Valentine?"

"No cheesecake for me; I'm on a diet."

"What was that all about?"

He was whispering. It was the first chance we'd had to talk since we'd arrived back at the house. The food was on the table and I was fixing iced tea, the detective declining the wine I'd suggested.

"Last week your mother implied I was getting fat, so I'm trying to cut back on the calories."

"She didn't say you were....Wait a minute; you're trying to distract me. You had a vision!"

"Just a little one." There was no shutting them down now. Quitting the case wasn't an option. Maybe it never was.

"A vision about the baby?"

Okay, I didn't see that coming. "What?"

"Christopher. Was it about him?"

Oh. The baby we rescued. "No. I don't think so. Why would you...." I sighed. "You really bonded with him, didn't you? I know you want a child and maybe I haven't been listening—"

Detective Ellison walked into the kitchen, her cell phone next to her ear. "Right. Two units. I'm on my way and I'll bring her with me. Get the dog guy over there too. If the killer's still in the area, I want him."

I was pretty sure I was the *her* in question. "What's going on?"

"We've had a report of a break-in at the Bermans' house."

"You want me to go with you?"

"Yeah." The detective glanced at the untouched lasagna on the table. "I'm sorry about dinner. But this might be our guy."

Chapter 5

"You sure you don't mind?"

Jake gave me a look of disbelief.

"Okay, let me rephrase. I really appreciate you going into the house with me. I know you don't want to—"

"Talk to victims of violent death? No, I don't. But I will, if it means this can be over and we can concentrate on our lives."

"There might not be anyone left in the house." If I really thought that, I wouldn't have asked him to come with me. As far as Detective Ellison knew, Jake was just there to hold my hand. She didn't know about his special talent. No one but his mother and I knew he could see and talk to the dead as easily as the living.

"Valentine, you know that family is one thing, but dealing with strangers and their issues is another. I don't need anything else on my plate. Tomorrow, I'm back to buying and selling antiques."

"Got it," I motioned for him to lean down and I gave him a quick kiss. "Thank you."

"Okay." He brushed the hair out of my eyes. "Let's just get this done. They're ready for you."

I followed his gaze towards Detective Ellison who was motioning for us to join her.

Jake wrapped an arm around my waist. "Remember—"

"I'll keep your secret," I assured him. "Just give me a sign if you need me to distract the cops."

Half an hour later, most of the police were gone except for a couple of patrolmen stationed outside the house. Detective Hardesty was down the block, talking to the neighbor who'd called 9-1-1 about someone being in the house. Detective Ellison was sticking close to me. Jake, who was ostensibly waiting outside in the Tahoe, was really upstairs trying to contact ghosts.

As for me, I was trying to ignore the angry emotions the killer had left smeared all over the house; his intense anger and confusion lingering like Pine Sol in the rooms. He'd been back. The killer. No question of that in my mind. For some reason he was compelled to return. But why?

His feelings were screaming at me, but they weren't giving me information I could use to identify him.

"How did he get in?" I'd heard all about the neighbor who had decided to give her dog a late night stroll in front of the murder house featured on the evening news. She had seen a light flickering in the upstairs windows and called 9-1-1, excited to claim fifteen minutes of fame.

"Broke a window in back," Detective Ellison answered. "The alarm was turned off because of all the investigators going in and out. We're going to have someone sitting on the house now—at least for the next few weeks.

"Is there a connection between the Changs and the Bermans?" I asked as we wandered into the den. The Bermans were partial to dark blues and grey color schemes. The sectional sofa and assorted chairs were a continuation of the colors used in the more formal living room. A single yellow silk pillow lounged in one chair, a loud, jarring note of cheer.

Detective Ellison shook her head. "Other than the house? Not that we've found. If you remember the Changs were third generation immigrants from China. The family had been in the New York area ever since arriving in the States. The Bermans were originally from Boston, but had spent the last fifteen years in Florida. They retired and moved back north last year. A cousin said they wanted to spend their final years in a place with four seasons."

"I don't guess there is any known connection between the Bermans and Alex Fletcher?"

"No. And believe me the Chief had us searching for one. There's always the chance that the killer is doing Fletcher's bidding; staging a copycat killing to get Fletcher a new trial."

Wishful thinking. Chief Peterson was a stubborn woman. The man on death row for the murder of the Changs was a piece from another jigsaw puzzle all together. Alex Fletcher hadn't been intentionally framed as his defense attorney had claimed; it was more that the chief of police and the district attorney had found a puzzle piece that was the right shade of grey and forced it into the open space in their murder puzzle. Now everything was falling apart because it never really fit.

I wondered what was happening upstairs. I hoped Jake was having a chat with some of the previous owners of the house.

"Mrs. Cohen?" Detective Ellison wanted to show me a photo album she'd just pulled off a shelf in the living room. "Would it help to see a photograph of the Bermans?"

"Why not?" I needed to buy time for Jake. Looking at photographs was as good a way as any.

Lois and George Berman were in their middle sixties but looked ten years younger. The years in Florida had been kind to them. Or maybe it was just good genes. From the notes written under the photos in the album, both Lois and George's parents and grandparents had been alive and active well into their nineties.

"How about children? Grandchildren?"

Detective Ellison nodded and pulled out a second album from the bookcase near the fireplace. "Three daughters. One in northern California and two in Boston. The two in Boston are married. The eldest, Claudia, has teenaged children. The one in California, Beth, is single. A college professor."

I traced my fingers over the glossy images. Claudia, Patricia, no Trish...she liked to be called Trish. I could hear Lois Berman's voice. She had touched these images, telling someone else about her daughters. Someone she didn't know. A man.

Flipping the pages, I paused over the image of two teenagers next to a motorcycle. Lois's words filtered through again. "My granddaughter Gwen and her boyfriend, Toby. My daughter Claudia doesn't like him. Thinks his view of the world is too dark."

I could hear the man laughing. His laugh was too loud. For some reason that made Lois uneasy, all at once she'd wanted him to leave. Her voice had become high and strained. "You'll have to excuse me now. My husband will be home any minute and I need to fix dinner."

"Mrs. Cohen?"

I shifted my focus from the pages to Detective Ellison. "Call me Valentine, please."

"Your first name is really Valentine?"

I grinned. "It's an old family name. Might have started as a spelling mistake on a birth certificate, or just some ancestor's idea of a joke, but my mother insisted on carrying on the tradition."

Detective Ellison pulled her notebook from her jacket pocket. "Tell me what you're getting from the albums."

"A stranger visited Lois in the last few days; he was pretending to be a decorator. But he asked too many questions about her family. At first she liked him but then she became nervous about his manner. She made an excuse and he left."

"Do you think he was the killer?"

"I don't know." I flipped to the last page of photographs. A photo was missing; its outline clearly visible on the page. "But whoever he was, he stole a photograph."

The microwave dinged and Jake pulled out the reheated lasagna. Jake could eat anything, any time and be fine. I'd probably have heartburn eating a heavy meal this late, but I didn't have the energy to put something else together.

"Did you talk to anyone?" I put two glasses of iced tea on the table.

He ignored me, wrapping a few garlic rolls in a paper towel and putting them in the microwave.

"Upstairs. Did you see anyone in the house?"

He waited the 30 seconds until the microwave dinged again. "Yes. George Berman is still there. It happened very fast. He doesn't understand why. He's angry and confused. And he's not alone."

"Lois?"

"No. It might be one of the Changs, but whoever it was didn't want to talk to me. Or maybe they were too weak to materialize." Jake stared at the floor, the bundle of bread still in his hand. "George didn't know his killer. Had never seen him before. Male. Light skinned. Tall. There might have been something on his head. A hat or a mask."

"That's all you got?" He'd been upstairs alone almost twenty minutes. I'd danced around Detective Ellison's questions until I'd been dizzy with the effort. Surely he'd gotten more—

He tossed the hot bread onto the table, one roll escaped and bounced to the tile floor. "Damn it, Valentine. You want me to tell you how much pain he was in? How many times he was stabbed? What his last thoughts were? How he begged for mercy?"

Sometimes I don't like my husband very much. He was going to be eating alone tonight. Maybe sleeping alone too.

By morning the snow had stopped completely. The sky was clear, a brilliant blue that was almost too bright to look at. Stamping my feet to clear the snow from my boots, I unlocked the backdoor and entered the kitchen. "Jake, are you up?"

I hadn't seen him before I left at 6 AM to trek down to the local bakery. I had walked down to the shoreline, then doubled back to walk five blocks from our house to the downtown area. The main objective was to clear my head of negative energy and prepare for the stress of another session with the police. My secondary objective was to purchase fresh bagels and a dozen of Jake's favorite cinnamon rolls as a peace offering.

The smell of coffee wafted my way. My husband was awake, even if he wasn't talking to me. "Jake? I've got food."

"He's in the shop—working."

I glanced to my right. My mother-in-law, five-feet, two-inches of pure meanness, was sitting at my kitchen table, my newspaper scattered in front of her. Her favorite blue suit and usual scowl was in place, but her normally gray hair was now inky black. The change was anything but flattering.

"My son has made several sales while you've been out gadding about town. He works too hard."

"Ruth." I tried to choke out more words, something pleasant and friendly, but failed. Ruth had an uncanny ability to find the worst times possible to pop in for a visit. I was serious when I'd told Jake the woman didn't like me; he just refused to face the problem.

"Nice hair," I managed to spit out. "Did you do that yourself?"

"Of course not," Ruth answered, reaching a pale hand up to see if anything had escaped from the well-lacquered beehive style popular in the 1950s. "Hilda did it yesterday afternoon."

"Hilda?"

"Hilda Rosen. She had a shop here in Seamount for forty years before she retired and moved to California."

"And she's back in the hair business?"

"Obviously." She pointed at my hair. "You should pay more attention to your appearance."

Okay, that was probably a fair comment. After all, I hadn't done anything but twist it into a messy braid before I left the house.

"Right." I unpacked my purchases on the kitchen counter. "I'm going to take Jake some breakfast. Do you want--"

I turned back around to face her but she was gone. Probably off to tell Jake again what a poor excuse for a wife he had. I hope she gave him the unabridged version of how unsuitable I am and how in some instances divorce is a wonderful thing.

Smiling, I decided to hold off on taking Jake some rolls. With Ruth in fine form, I might have time to drink a cup of coffee, eat a bagel, and scan the front page of the newspaper before she came back.

"Does the man do nothing but stare at the screen all day? Is he trying to put me out of business? Every damn time...."

Good thing nobody was in the shop. Jake was on a tear. I didn't need to be a mind reader or a psychic to know that once again Newton548 had scored something that my husband coveted.

"What was it this time?" I held out the plate with cinnamon rolls.

Jake waved me off and started to pace. He scuttled pass the early 20th century English Arts and Crafts leaded glass mahogany china cabinet which held the collection of Royal Worcester teacups and matching dessert plates which we had picked up a few weeks earlier at an estate sale in Bedford. Husband had died, the wife was moving to Philadelphia to be closer to her daughter. He circled around the Philadelphia Chime Clock which was almost eight feet tall and chimed on the quarter hour and bonged on the hour. It kept perfect time. An old family heirloom of a nice couple in Armonk who were downsizing to a condo in Florida. He finally settled behind the mid-20th century mahogany partners desk that had dovetail constructed drawers on both the front and back, carved legs, and claw and ball feet. We'd picked that up from a couple in Scarsdale. In the midst of a messy divorce, they weren't in the partner mood anymore. Every piece in the crowded shop had a story.

I put the cinnamon rolls on the desk.

"What did the old coot get this time?"

Actually I had no idea if Newton548 was old, a coot, or for that matter, a man or a woman. In the world of on-line antiquing, people can buy and sell anonymously. Jake and I had just gotten in the habit of calling Newton548 a "he."

"An old 1940s radio with bakelite knobs."

"Who's going to buy it?" I looked around the already over-crowded store. "Remember we've got to move most of this stuff into storage or upstairs so the plumbers can work. Maybe we should stop buying until after the new furnace is installed."

"We have plenty of room. Just have to reorganize the large pieces. Create a clear path." Jake reached for a cinnamon bun. He dribbled some crumbs on the desktop and quickly brushed them off. "The radio is in working condition, perfect for the eat-in kitchen at the Bed and Breakfast that Margo is decorating. I sent her a picture of it and she said the owners were thrilled. They're going for this vintage feel to the place. Price was right and I had it. Damn it, I had it when Newton548 swept in and bid like 50 cents above my last price in the final 30 seconds."

A good part of our business was working with decorators looking for one-of-a-kind items. They counted on us, mostly Jake, to know the real from the fake, and to get what they needed at a fair price. We marked up the item to make our profit, the decorator marked it up even more to make her profit. Margo was one of our regulars and I knew Jake would hate to disappoint her.

"Want me to check with the Internet provider again? See if we can get faster upload speed?"

"No." Jake got up and headed for the computer. "I'm going to register a new handle. Newton548 knows I wanted the radio and deliberately bid against me."

I took Jake's place at the desk, picking at the remains of his cinnamon bun. Calories don't count if you are just even-ing out the edges.

Jake's hands flew over the keyboard. "I think he's using my expertise to know what's worth buying and what's not. Probably got his own antique business and saving himself research time. I bet he's got a dozen aliases on eBay, probably acts as a shill for his own auctions. Putting in early bids under different names to drive up the price."

I pushed the plate across the desk. I'd left a smidgen of Jake's cinnamon bun. So all calories consumed were null and void. "Shilling is against the rules on eBay."

He pushed the enter button. "Yeah, well the antique business ain't for the faint of heart. Go big or go home."

"What are you going to tell Margo?"

"That I'll find her another one at the price we agreed on. There's a place in the city that carries those kinds of radios. It will cost us more, but...."

He didn't have to finish the sentence. Margo was a good enough client that it was worth it to cut our profit to keep her happy.

"That's weird." Jake was staring at the computer.

I joined him. He was looking at an ornate antique Chinese Painted Screen with inlaid glass and brass feet. The price was already at \$900 and there was more than a day left in the auction.

"Are you thinking of bidding on it? It doesn't look like anything Margo would want. You'd need a pretty big house to—"

Jake shook his head. "I've already owned it once."

"I don't remember it."

"Before I met you." Jake kept staring at the screen. "I recognize it. I wrote up that description a couple of years ago, but took it down when I got a private buyer."

I had no idea what was going on. "Who was the buyer? One of the decorators?"

"I sold it to the Changs the week before they were killed. How the hell did Newton548 get a hold of it?"

[READ THE REST OF THE BOOK BY PURCHASING IT AT AMAZON, BN.COM, OR SMASHWORDS.]