

Chapter One

"COME ON, Wren, I know you're in there!"

Wren Delacourt hugged the pillow over her ears, but there was no chance Lawrence was going to go away. Just last night, she'd told him to come by at noon today, and he'd seen her go into her unit in the condo, and if she didn't get up soon, he was going to start to worry that something terrible had happened to her...

No. Best not to think about that sort of thing. "I'm coming," she called, but weakly. No way he'd hear that through her bedroom door and across the kitchen. She had to sit up, then stand up, then open the door. She felt on the floor for her bathrobe.

Halfway to the door, she had to stop and put her hands to her eyes. The world seemed too *hot*. Not the actual temperature, which was pleasant enough, but it was as if something electrical were pricking at her, about to overheat like a transformer.

Or maybe it was just a hangover. She pulled open the door and saw Lawrence's expression fall.

"Oh my God, are you all right?" he blurted.

She must have looked a fright; Lawrence was never tactless. She leaned on the door frame. "Do I have raccoon eyes?" she asked, examining her palms for mascara smudges.

"You do," he said, pushing her gently into the apartment, "if a raccoon were run over by a school bus three or four times." He was carrying a paper bag and a wonderful smell came from it. "Go on now, why don't you get washed up and I'll squeeze some oranges?"

Wren did as she was told. Lawrence was a good neighbor and a good friend and she was glad she wasn't alone just now, even if he didn't know why she was such a wreck. She went into the bathroom and washed her face, finally giving in and using some cold cream to help remove the eyeliner and mascara. The waterproof kind was more trouble than it was worth, she decided, since it practically refused to come off even with goop. She ran a comb through her hair, still not used to how short it was. The cut was what her hairdresser had called "boyishly chic" and Wren thought it made her look a little like Winona Ryder. At the very least it made her eyes look huge, now that they weren't hidden under black bangs.

She slipped back into the bedroom to pull on some sweatpants and a clean shirt, then emerged to find that Lawrence, as promised, had squeezed juice for them both and had set out a few fresh-baked pastries. She sat down at the counter and bit into a chocolate croissant, still warm. "Decadence," she said.

He chuckled. "The fresh fruit is the decadent part for me. In Europe, croissants and chocolate grow on trees."

She poked him. Lawrence had only a trace of a British accent but liked to act like he was fresh off the Mayflower. "I've been to England. They had oranges and orange juice there."

"At exorbitant prices. Maybe the conversion to the pound made it not so obvious to you." He took a cheese Danish and ate in silence for a bit before venturing to ask, "Bad date?"

"You could say that," she said in a quiet voice, while she decided what to tell him. "Not that kind, though." She'd told him plenty of disaster stories about men before, but this wasn't one of those times, and she decided Lawrence could handle the truth without turning into a blithering idiot. "It's the anniversary of when my parents died. I went to visit their gravesite yesterday." She gave a little shrug, as if to say it was no big deal.

Lawrence took a sip of his juice. "I didn't know your parents were dead," he said, without undue emotion.

"Yeah, when I was a teenager." Wren shrugged again. "Car accident. My sister was only ten. She took it harder than I did."

Of course, that was all a massive oversimplification, but she really didn't want to get into it. Lawrence nodded and continued eating without pushing her to say anything more.

Which was probably why she did. "I usually see her there. At their grave, I mean. We don't talk much, but she hasn't returned my calls for like four months. Her e-mail bounces, but you know people change addresses. But—" She looked up from her juice to see Lawrence looking at her with a thoughtful expression on his face.

"You think something might have happened to her?"

"Yeah, I'm starting to worry. I mean, I wasn't really that worried, but...she wouldn't have forgotten this." Wren looked out the small kitchen window. From here, all she could see was a little bit of the Japanese maple tree across the street, and a red minivan almost the same color as the maple's leaves. "I suppose I could file a missing persons report with the police, at least."

Lawrence finished his Danish and licked his fingertips like a cat washing its paws. "It couldn't hurt. Even if it does turn out she's just...making a change or something. From what you've told me, she's not exactly the most constant person?"

"I know." It was one of the reasons they didn't talk much or see each other much. Abby was prone to new fads, new hobbies, new schemes to make money, new boyfriends...so much so that Wren wasn't even sure she'd recognize her sister from visit to visit. They tended to see each other at Aunt Brenda's for Christmas, have lunch around their birthdays in April, and now it was September, when they either went together to the burial site, or would meet there. Wren never knew if Abby would be blonde, brunette, bisexual, or born-again. "It's like every few months she tries to become some new person, as if *this* time she grows up, it'll bring our parents back or something."

Lawrence shrugged. "Maybe she decided to give up."

Wren shrugged back. "I'll call the police later. The more I think about it now, the more I think she's probably just joined a tree-hugging cult or something and doesn't know what day it is."

A week later, Wren had still not called the police and she wasn't sure why. Just a feeling she couldn't shake. She went to work in the mornings at the university, where she spent her days scanning and transcribing the rare books collection, and was home by five-thirty. Then it was forty-five minutes on the treadmill while watching TV, some dinner, and then more TV or a book until she fell asleep. The sum total of her excitement was that someone out there seemed to have gotten her cell phone number by mistake, and she kept seeing missed calls from Number Unavailable.

At first she'd thought, *could it be Abby?* But when she finally managed to answer one of the calls, when she wasn't deep in the library, it had been some guy claiming he was calling as a result of her personal ad and she sounded nice, could they meet for tea? She hung up. Part of her said, *hey, he sounded kind of nice, too.* What if it was fate that he dialed the wrong number and that was how they met and wouldn't that make a lovely "how we met" story for later?

But no. She started keeping the phone in silent mode in case the number *was* actually printed wrong in the paper and he wouldn't be the only caller. Otherwise, it was a boring week of the routine. She'd gotten a note under her door about scheduling some kind of utility inspection, but had ignored it, not wanting to sit home on a Saturday waiting for some guy to show up.

Not that she went anywhere, though perhaps she should have. On the weekend she had more quiet time, and the feeling nagged her as she watered her plants and vacuumed the rug in a vain attempt to stay busy. Call the police? Don't call the police? Why should it be such a big deal?

But each time she convinced herself to just call, by the time she got her cell phone out of her bag, something in her had decided she wouldn't.

Just a feeling. But despite what everyone had said, despite all evidence to the contrary, Wren still listened to her feelings.

It was one of the things she and Abby had fought about. When they were kids, Wren used to tell her things that were going to happen. Sometimes wonderful things, like when the first snow was going to fall, or where to find a lost kitten in the woods. Sometimes awful things, like Uncle Herbert's heart attack, or when City Hall was going to catch fire.

She'd stopped telling her parents about her feelings after the fearful and pained looks they'd tried to hide, and after they'd brought her to a child psychologist when she was five. She managed to get out of having to go back to the psychologist, but only by not speaking about those things again. But after a few years, Abby was old enough to talk to, and her sister had been the one to hear all of Wren's predictions, sometimes with delight, sometimes with dread, sometimes claiming she didn't want to know, other times asking her to answer questions for her. Would nine-year-old Bobby Calandra say yes if she asked him to go to the County Fair with her? Would Mrs. Peabody find out if she cheated on her math test? Would Daddy say yes if she asked him to get another cat?

Wren couldn't always answer, and Abby would accuse her of faking the whole thing if she didn't answer—or if she didn't like the answer she got.

The worst came when Wren didn't predict what would happen to their parents. She'd been thirteen, just starting

her last year of middle school, when disaster had struck. She hadn't seen it coming, but then she didn't predict everything, didn't know what was going to happen to every person every minute of the day. And even if she'd had a premonition of some kind, what would she have done? Begged and pleaded with her parents not to get in the car? Even at that age, she knew her premonitions could land herself in the nuthouse. And then there would have been no one to take care of Abby.

But Abby didn't see it that way.

Just thinking about it made Wren feel tired. But when Wren had a feeling, she trusted it. She wiped out the inside of the microwave, thinking it over.

If she really trusted her intuition, and her intuition said not to call the police, then could her intuition help her find Abby somehow?

Stupid idea. Crazy idea. She hadn't actively tried to ask for the answer to a question since she was eleven or so. At the time she'd made a game out of it, convincing her sister to sneak her a piece of chocolate out of her mother's stash above the refrigerator, and to steal a sip of Schnapps out of the liquor cabinet in the Dixie cup.

Come to think of it, that was the time she'd predicted Uncle Herbert's heart attack. Abby had wanted to know what he was getting her for Christmas, and Wren still remembered the sick feeling she'd had in her stomach as she knew with all certainty he wasn't going to live that long.

Some things, she had realized then, she really didn't want to know.

On the other hand, hiding from what had happened to Abby, if anything, wasn't going to help. Some things were scary *not* to know.

"Oh, screw it," she said, and went to change her clothes. It was only three in the afternoon, but Wren didn't feel she had to wait until sundown. The booze and chocolate probably weren't even necessary, but if she wanted to try to repeat what she'd done as a child, there was always the stash of gourmet chocolate bars in the kitchen for "emergencies," like really bad PMS. She got out a bar of dark chocolate and broke off a piece. Her kitchen table was a counter-height and did double duty as a cutting board stand when she cooked anything elaborate. She set the piece of chocolate on a napkin on the table, and then dug through the cabinet.

Last week, after the visit to her parents, she'd finished the half bottle of wine that had been sitting there for months, since that Italian meal Lawrence had cooked. What else did she have? Hmm, there was a bottle of dry sherry she used sometimes for cooking, an unopened bottle of coconut rum she had gotten as a door prize and didn't think she'd like, and a small open bottle of port, which she had bought to use in a sauce.

It would do. She poured a little into a glass and set it next to the chocolate.

What else? She sat at the table, her hands on the butcher block, and took a deep breath. Nothing else came to mind.

Well, here goes nothing, she thought. She swallowed the port, then took a bite of the chocolate, letting it melt on her tongue. Her eyes drifted closed. It was good chocolate.

She wasn't aware of her mind having gone quiet until she started to think again. It was a bit like falling asleep and not

realizing you had until you jerked awake. Only in her case, it was as if she started to dream.

Going down a set of stairs, like into a bar or nightclub. The too-sweet scent of disinfectant, hiding a more raw smell. Following a man with long red hair, starkly copper-colored against the black leather of his jacket.

Hands already bound behind her back. A rising sense of fear as she followed him. Down a narrow hallway, the light dim. Someone else following behind, making sure she followed.

Then rough hands pushing her, through a door, into darkness, the hands forcing her to her knees, and then the salty bulk in her mouth....

Wren jerked, sending the glass flying. It shattered against the tile floor and she was startled to see the shards glittering in the afternoon sunlight. It felt as if for those moments she'd actually been somewhere else, someplace where it was night. She could almost still smell the cleaning products in the air.

She rested her forehead on her hand. She'd never had a vision like that before. Was that something that had already happened? Or was going to?

Were those Abby's eyes she had seen through?

She eased her way out of the kitchen to get the vacuum cleaner, but found herself at her desk with her phone in her hand. Whether what she had seen was the past or the future, Abby was in trouble. The police would never take something like this seriously, though.

She opened her laptop and did a search for private investigators instead.

For whatever reason, the listing for Derek Chapman caught her eye. Perhaps it was that the first thing next to his name said "Missing Persons" and not "Cheating Spouses"—

although she didn't really register that until she was already calling his number.

She got his answering machine. "Uh, hi, yes, Mr. Chapman. My name is Wren Delacourt and I think my sister is missing and wondered if you could help. I last heard from her four months ago. Um, I don't know what else to say?" She left her number and hung up.

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A traffic jam outside the big church on Springfield Avenue slowed Wren's progress. She'd forgotten it was Sunday, forgotten to go around the other way. The policeman directing traffic in and out of the church parking lot seemed to eye her suspiciously as she inched past instead of turning in. But although she felt she was doing the right thing, going to meet with Mr. Chapman instead of calling the police, her head kept telling her it didn't make sense.

She pulled into the parking lot behind the post office and made her way to the building. It was locked on a Sunday, but she pressed the doorbell and the door buzzed. She took the elevator to the second floor, as he'd told her to on the phone.

He'd sounded very nice. Very kind. Not as gruff or tough as she'd imagined he would, but then her ideas of what a private investigator would be like came from movies and TV shows. She clutched her purse in both hands as she read the signs on the offices. An accountant, tax preparation... aromatherapy? That door was more colorfully decorated than the others.

The open door at the end of the hall had to be his. He probably had spoken so kindly to her because he was humoring her, she thought suddenly. But she hadn't told him the weird part yet.

Wren urged herself through the door and found herself face to face with a dark-haired young man. He was neatly dressed in a turtleneck and a windbreaker and she wondered for a second whether Mr. Chapman had a personal assistant. "I'm here to meet Mr. Chapman?"

He laughed, and his smile was warm. "I'm Chapman. You can call me Derek, if you like, Miss Delacourt."

"Wren," she said, holding out her hand.

His palm was warm even if the handshake was brief. He gestured toward an empty chair and then, to her surprise, sat next to her instead of going around the other side of the desk. The office wasn't large, but there also didn't seem to be much in it. One file cabinet behind the desk. A small table with old newspapers on it. "Wren, like the bird?" he asked.

"Yes, yes exactly." She was feeling more and more comfortable with him by the second. She sat with her purse on her lap, her suit skirt too short for her to properly cross her legs, but she had worn it to try to make a good impression. "Most people think I'm trying to shorten Renee, or something. Um, thanks for agreeing to meet me on a Sunday."

He shrugged. "I don't exactly work regular hours. So you said on the phone you're looking for your sister?"

"Yes." She took a deep breath. Where to start? Wren picked something concrete. "She hasn't returned my phone calls for about four months. Maybe two months ago, her voice mail-box got full. Now when I call, I get a message that sounds like she hasn't paid her bill. And her e-mail bounces."

He nodded. "And have you talked to other family members about her?"

Wren deflated. "The only person she keeps in touch with besides me is our Aunt Brenda, and by keep in touch I mean Aunt Brenda sends her a Christmas card every year, and Abby—that's my sister—shows up at her house Christmas Day. I didn't want to call Brenda. It seemed like tattling on Abby. Well, unless she's really in trouble. Or...I don't know."

"It's okay," Derek said, and his voice was soft. "I'm going to start taking some notes, if that's all right with you."

An hour later, Wren had told him all about Abby's tendencies to flit from one thing to another, one job to another, one relationship to another. Wren hadn't even been sure what her last address was since she'd mentioned moving back in April but had never given her the new address. And Wren told him about the fights they'd had, their parents, all of it. He listened, and he listened well, and oh, it felt so good to just tell someone about it and not try to pick and choose which parts to hide.

But now she'd come to it. The part about why she'd called him, when he finally asked if she'd notified the police.

She was looking at her hands, her neatly trimmed nails lined up on the top of her purse like birds on a wire, and not at him when she said, "My intuition said not to. I kept thinking I should, but...I did a silly thing."

He said nothing, but waited for her to explain.

"I decided to see if I could find out for myself what happened to her. So I tried to do it like when we were kids—we had a kind of magic spell or ritual we'd do, with chocolate and breaking into the liquor cabinet. I don't know if that was important or if it was just an excuse to be naughty." She could

feel herself blushing, but she went on. "Anyway, I had a little port, and some chocolate, and then...I had a vision."

Her voice was so soft by the end of her sentence she wondered if he could even hear it. "Maybe it was just, I dunno, a sick fantasy or something. But it was like I dreamed I was her. And these men were taking me somewhere dark, and my hands were tied behind my back, and...."

Wren put her hand over her mouth, remembering the smell of the air and the taste of the flesh that had probed her mouth. She kept her eyes open though, as if the sight of Derek's bare-bones office might dispel the vision.

"Would you like a glass of water?" he asked, looking concerned but not freaked out. "You've been talking a long time."

Wren swallowed, trying to stop hyperventilating. "Yes, yes, that would be very nice." But when he moved to stand up, she put her hand on his arm, holding him there. "No, wait. Please just stay here with me."

"All right." He settled in his chair again.

She took a deeper breath and let it out slowly. "I don't know if what I saw was the past, the future, or what. I...broke it off before I learned anything more. But it just makes me more worried for her."

He nodded. "Understandably so."

"Do you believe me?"

He put his hand over hers, and she realized she'd never pulled her own away. "It doesn't matter what I believe. Could it be your imagination conjuring up something to worry about? Maybe. Could your subconscious have put together clues from something she said to you or things you gathered without realizing? Sure. Could you really be psychic? Could

be. None of those things matters. If you're hiring me to find your sister, I'll use any information I can."

His eyes seemed very large and round as he said this to her, and Wren found herself feeling calmer again. Much calmer, although her heart seemed to still want to beat out of her chest. She slipped her hand back then, and said simply, "Thank you. And yes, you're hired."

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Wren invited Lawrence over to watch a DVD that night, and they ordered a pizza and watched *Moonstruck*, which Lawrence professed was one of his favorite films. "For a gay man, you sure do seem to go for these hot romantic comedies," she said as he slipped the disc into the player.

She found herself watching the movie in a daze, though, thinking about Derek Chapman and the way his hand had felt touching hers. People in the movies always seemed to have such Big Love that Wren felt like if it were real, it would eat her alive like a giant turtle. She didn't even like to fantasize about it. Lawrence, on the other hand, had an endless appetite for romances, whether in the news, in the movies, or in his imagination. He'd had about as many successful dates as Wren, which was to say not many, but he dreamed of meeting The Right One.

She hoped he would, even if he forgot all about her when it swept him away.

They called it an early night since both of them had work in the morning, and Wren got into bed and lay there looking at the stripe of light on the ceiling from the street lamp outside. She was restless and went to the window, looking

out on the neighborhood. Most of the houses were dark, everyone sleeping. Under the streetlamp the red minivan at the curb looked brown, the color leached from it. If she'd had a diary, she might have written about Derek. But what would she have said? *Dear Diary, Met a man today. He's got very kind eyes.*

She hadn't said a word to Lawrence about him.

Sleep claimed her eventually and in the morning, when her dreams were always the most vivid, she found herself moving through a dark passageway. Her hands were behind her back, but her mind had blurred the details. It was like the vision and yet it wasn't, and she was herself in the dream, she was sure of that. The man behind her herded her into a small room and closed the door. They were alone there, the ceiling low as if it were a basement room, and she went gratefully to her knees as if the weight of the building above her had been pressing down on her.

She couldn't see him. He was behind her. But she could feel his hands on her shoulders, petting them soothingly. "Wren," he whispered. "Do you know what sex is?"

She felt her lip tremble as she mustered her answer. "Do you mean, like did I have sex ed in school? Or is that 'know' in the biblical sense?"

"I know you're not a virgin, but you may as well be," came the soft, warm voice, thick and sweet as honey. "I meant philosophically. Metaphorically and literally, sex is entry."

Had she been naked this whole time? Perhaps she had. She shivered as his finger traced a line from her chin down her throat, over one nipple, and between her legs. He circled her clit, counting each movement as if tallying up what she owed. "One, two, three, four, five."

He stopped at ten and then slid lower. She could feel the roughness of his clothes against her back, his breath against her neck. His other hand was flat against her belly, while his index finger sought her wetness.

He slid his finger in the slickness there, sawing back and forth over her sensitive nub, but never quite putting his finger into her. "Six, seven, eight, nine, ten."

She trembled.

"Entry," he said again, a whisper in her ear. "Penetration. It doesn't matter what part of me enters what part of you. Once I'm inside, I'm inside."

She tried to speak, to say something, but she couldn't very well argue with that recitation of facts, could she? It was true.

"Eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen. Does that feel good, Wren?"

She nodded. She had never been a good liar, especially not in dreams. "Why...why are my hands tied?" she finally asked.

"Shackled by your repression," came the reply with a chuckle, as one slim finger began to press inward.

"Then be our tenth caller and you could win an all-expense paid vacation to Jamaica!"

Her body jerked at the harsh, loud voice. Oh God, the *radio*. Her alarm.

As she turned her head toward the clock radio, Wren found her neck damp with sweat and her hand in her panties. She pulled it out quickly, turning off the radio and hurrying into the shower.

Such a strange dream. A mystery man whose face she never saw, whose voice she could barely hear most of the

time, touching her that way. It should have disturbed her more than it did, except all she could think of was washing the smell and sweat away. She held the shower sprayer between her legs and nearly collapsed in the tub as she came.

She dried off sitting on the toilet lid, her legs still shaking, and then everything began to seem more disturbing. Was it a coincidence the dream came the night after she'd met an attractive man? Was it a warning? It hadn't felt like a warning, and it hadn't felt like Derek in the dream, either.

She shook her head. Sometimes a dream was just a dream, after all.

Wren looked up suddenly. How long had she been in the shower, then sitting there wool-gathering? She was going to be late for the Monday morning meeting. She pulled on clothes quickly and nearly ran out the door, happy not for the first time that her super-short hairdo needed no prep time at all. She combed it at a red light on her way to work.

She didn't even realize that she'd left her cell phone sitting by the computer, or that its message light was blinking.