

The Tegen Cave

Prologue & First Chapter

PROLOGUE

As they drove away from town, Candice placed her hand on his thigh and gently squeezed. He turned, his dark blue eyes glowing, and gave her a coy smile. She sensed something was wrong from his distant behavior at the restaurant. She peered out the side window as the city lights vanished behind them and thought, *Does he know about me?*

Towering pine trees and leafy maples lined the road. Thick clouds snuffed out the moonlight. “The hotel was only a couple of blocks away,” she said.

“I want to take you some place special.”

She leaned closer and caressed his muscular arm. “Your room was pretty special last night.”

“This place you’ll never forget.”

Candice could no longer spot any house lights through the dense foliage. She felt a ping of uneasiness since she had only known her date for less than two days. Wanting to make her weapon easily accessible, she snatched her purse from the floor and lowered it onto her lap. “How far away is this place?”

“Right up here.” The blue-eyed man steered the car onto a dirt lane almost hidden by the overgrown scrubs and spreading trees. The corner of a stone house appeared, only lit by a sliver of the moon between the passing clouds.

“Whose house?” Candice asked. Then she blinked as the harsh glare from headlights approaching behind struck the side mirror. “I thought we were going to be alone?”

“Maybe the driver’s lost. Let me check.” He stepped onto the ground.

Candice turned, looked through the back window, and watched a man climb out of the vehicle as her date walked toward it.

The clanging sound of metal being hit echoed through the car. Candice swung her head around and saw a guy tapping on the car's hood, flanked by two other men. Her eyes darted between them looking for weapons. None were visible. Wondering what was going on, she stuck her hand into her bag, searched for her pistol, and smiled when she felt the cold steel.

Her car door flew open and she gazed up at her date. "You a cop?"

"Far from it." He leaned down and slid his hand behind her neck.

Something sharp scraped into her flesh. "Ow!" she yelled, tugging on his arm. "What have you got?" He flipped his hand over, revealing his palm. She stared at his fingers, trying to grasp what she was seeing as perspiration drizzled down her face. "What the..?"

"Crimes have consequences."

"Who ... what are you?" She attempted to raise her gun, but didn't have the strength to free it from the bottom of her purse.

He dropped a spider on her chest just above her low-cut sweater. She opened her mouth to scream. No sound escaped. "She's ready," he said to the other men.

They lifted her limp body and headed toward the back of the house. Passing the stone structure, her date envisioned the pretty brunette he spotted in the hotel lobby and thought, *She'll be the next one I bring here.*

THE PACKAGE

I stared at the brilliant crimson stone in the ring on my finger. He had given it to me when I moved into his home in Houston, Texas. That had been one of the happiest days of my life. My hand shook as I slipped it off, placed it on the shelf next to my cell phone, and closed the locker door. I leaned against the wall with quivering lips as I felt I had betrayed him. With everything I had learned, I knew we could never be together again. Still, part of me wanted to leap out the side doors and apologetically run back to him. I couldn't justify it to the voice inside me that screamed to never look back. My heart and mind warred against one another to rationalize my fear, obsession, and sense of justice into one clear guiding sentiment. I was left paralyzed and confused in the crossfire.

Inhaling deeply, I forced myself to put on a pair of large, worn jeans and a plaid shirt with tattered cuffs, the frumpy clothes I had brought in my gym bag.. Since I prided myself on stylish fashion, I hoped to avoid any recognition. Then I tucked my long, brown hair under a floppy brimmed hat and hid my eyes behind a pair of oversized sunglasses. Grabbing my previously packed duffle bag, I headed to the fitness center's exit.

The clock on the wall read 7:45 a.m. I had fifteen minutes to get to the bus depot before my imaginary yoga class came to an end. I hurried through the parking lot to the sidewalk and began to jog the rest of the way. I resisted the urge to glance over my shoulder. It felt as though my past was catching up with me already. I started to sprint and held back tears as the wind bit my dry cheeks.

I entered the brightly lit depot with floor-to-ceiling windows on one side. Sunlight shone on rows of seats filled with people, while others milled about. Despite the ban on smoking, stale cigarette smoke lingered in the air. I peered out through the automatic glass doors. No one had followed me. My departure in 20 minutes was bound for Rapid City, South Dakota, but that was not my final

destination. With potential danger lurking in any corner, I needed to get away fast, and that bus was the next one scheduled to leave Houston. I had purchased the ticket yesterday at a different location. It was here waiting for me under the name Ethel Martin, the name that appeared on a driver's license I had retrieved from the lost and found at work. I hoped Ethel, whoever she was, wouldn't get in trouble because of me. The picture on the license was hazy. I still held my breath when the ticket agent looked at it since, except for the brown eyes, the description didn't fit me. I was 24, five-foot-eight, and weighed 125 pounds. Ethel was older, taller and heavier.

With my ticket in hand, I went outside and scanned everyone I passed. I sat close to the rear of the bus and stared at the passengers as they boarded. Two broad-shouldered bald men wearing reflective sunglasses, black suits, and ties entered the bus. They began walking toward me. I froze, thinking they were coming for me and it would be over soon. Was that bulge I saw under one arm a holster? They moved along the bus aisle with a wide gait, then sat in a middle row without looking back. I sighed with relieved.

A stocky, gray-haired woman made her way down the aisle. "Is this seat taken?" she asked with a warm smile.

"No," I replied, and she sat down next to me.

The engine roared, and the bus pulled out of the depot. I lowered the brim of my hat, leaned against the window and cried as I thought about Conner. I hated leaving him. My heart was broken. He had become part of my life. Now I was alone again.

"Are you okay, my dear?" the gray-haired woman asked.

I tried to come up with an excuse and thought of a lie. "Yes. Lost my job and apartment."

"Oh, you poor thing." She handed me a tissue and patted my arm. "Are you traveling to relatives?"

She seemed like a sweet woman, probably someone's grandmother. "No. Don't know where I'm going. Just need to get away and find a job elsewhere."

"Maybe you should think about Billings, Montana. It's such a nice place with friendly people. That's where I lived until my husband passed away. Now, I travel around helping out the kids, but I miss Billings. My brother moved there and immediately found a job. Hope to go back someday."

For half an hour she raved about Billings' nearby lush forests, high-quality schools, and its wonderful climate with the changing seasons.

"I've never lived anyplace where it snows," I said, and thought maybe I could forget Conner in Montana. I decided to make Billings my destination. I leaned my head against the window again, my eyes watered, and then I sobbed.



During my first six weeks in Billings, I hadn't seen anyone following me or skulking around. I was pleased at how well I had planned my escape and was glad I didn't change my name. In the local phonebook, there were three people named Sara Jones. Thousands more across the country. My parents had chosen that name well; it suited my purpose in a way they never could have anticipated.

Now I had a job and a car. Hopefully with the help of Nancy Stewart from the property management company, I'd find an apartment. Then I could finally move out of the Towne Hotel.

On my way to the elevator I ran into Brett, a 25-year-old petroleum engineer living in the hotel while on a short work assignment. His room was right next to mine. He was good-looking, well-built at six-foot-three with a short-clipped beard and sandy brown hair setting off his deep blue eyes. I'd noticed him in the lobby when I checked in. He caught my glance as he left the hotel with a woman. I ran into him often in the hallway after he finished his morning jog. As good friends, we sometimes went out.

"Going apartment hunting?" he asked, dabbing his forehead with the towel hanging from his shoulder.

"Yeah."

"How about a movie later?"

"Sounds good."

"Give me a call when you get back. I'll be at work finishing a project."

"On Saturday?"

"Unfortunately."

"See you later."

He smiled, and then headed toward his room. While I waited for the elevator, I thought about how much I enjoyed being with Brett. He was sharp-witted, charming, and well-read. Maybe he could make me forget Conner.

As I entered the lobby, Ralph, the hotel clerk, raised his arm and motioned to me from behind the check-in counter.

"Good morning, Miss Jones."

"Hello, Ralph," I said, looking at the short, stocky man who greeted everyone with a smile.

He picked up a small package from the counter. "This was dropped off for you a few minutes ago."

A wave of terror crept through my body as I wondered if Conner's family had found me. "Thanks," I said, hesitantly taking the package. My eyes focused on it,

searching for the return address. There wasn't one. I noticed the postmark said Billings.

"Are you Sara Jones?" a well-dressed, slender woman in her late thirties said, walking up from behind me.

"You must be Nancy Stewart."

She nodded, stretched out her hand, and we shook.

"Would you mind waiting here while I run this package to my room?" I asked.

She held up a thick folder. "There's a long list of apartments that might interest you. I'd like to narrow our search before we leave. Could we talk about them there?"

"Of course."



When we reached my room, she sat on the sofa and laid out some documents on the coffee table. I stood next to the window looking for mysterious cars and opened the package. Inside was a gray box. I raised the lid and found a silver ring with a large black stone. No note—nothing indicating who sent it. Could it be from Brett? I knew he wanted to be more than just friends. I wasn't ready for that yet. Even though I knew his family's business, I still missed Conner and thought about him all the time. I put the opened box down on the table next to Nancy's documents.

"Oh, what a beautiful ring," she said. "Is that stone an onyx?"

"I don't know."

"I worked for a jewelry store several years ago. Would you mind if I looked at it?"

"No, go ahead." I wasn't concerned about the stone; I was concerned about who had sent it.

Nancy carefully took the ring out of the container and held it up in the light. "Oh, how brilliant." Rotating it around, "Ow!" she yelped, and dropped it.

"What happened?" I asked, anxiously, as panic hit, sending waves through my body.

"Something bit me!"

"What?"

"A bug! I think it was a spider!" she said, looking at her hand.

"Are you alright?"

"I can't move my fingers." Her lips quivered. "I don't feel well." Her eyes drooped and her face became shockingly white.

With all I knew about arachnology, I couldn't think of a spider that could cause this quick a reaction. My eyes flitted back and forth over the floor searching for it. I caught a glimpse of a brown spider crawling under the cushioned chair.

“Let’s get you to a doctor.”

She put her arm on the edge of the sofa and made an attempt to rise. “Can’t stand,” she sighed, her voice just above a whisper.

I tried to pull her up by her arm.

“Talk ... hard ... mouth ...,” she gasped. Her hands trembled; beads of perspiration trickled down her forehead. Then she became completely motionless.

“I’m calling 9-1-1!” I eased my arm around her and laid her down on the sofa. Picking up the phone, I felt my muscles tightening and a clutching sensation in my chest, fearing the Crussetts had found me and Nancy was suffering for it.

“What is your emergency?” a man asked.

“A woman has been bitten by a spider. It’s paralyzed her,” I said, breathlessly.

“You are calling from the Towne Hotel?”

“Yes. Room 841.”

“An ambulance has been dispatched.”

“Nancy, the ambulance is on its way,” I said in an uneven voice after the call. “Can you talk?”

No response. Her eyes were wide open and hazy, her skin ash white and shining with perspiration. I hurried to the bathroom, moistened a washcloth, and returned to Nancy, placing it on her forehead. Then I held her limp, damp hand and said, “If you can hear me, shut your eyes.” Fidgeting with my fingers, I gave her a moment to respond. Her eyes remained fixed, staring straight ahead. “Can you move them at all?”

A knock on the door startled me. I opened it. Two paramedics came in, pushing a gurney. Standing behind them, I continued observing Nancy, hoping she’d show some sign that movement was returning to her body.

“What’s your name?” a paramedic asked, leaning down next to her.

“Her name is Nancy Stewart,” I answered.

“How are you feeling, Ms. Stewart?”

She didn’t utter a sound as he checked her pulse while the other paramedic checked her blood pressure.

“When was she bitten?” he asked.

“Ten, fifteen minutes ago. Right before I called 9-1-1.”

After they finished taking her vital signs, they lifted her onto the gurney and rolled it to the elevator. I grabbed my purse and followed.

A crowd had gathered in the lobby. I watched along with numerous people as the paramedics put Nancy in the ambulance and drove away. As the crowd dissipated, I went to the front desk.

“What happened?” Ralph asked.

My eyes momentarily flashed to the entrance looking for familiar, unwelcome faces. “I’m not sure,” I said, turning back to Ralph. “I think she was bitten by a spider in my room.”

“Who?”

“A woman from a property management company.”

“Stay down here while I contact an exterminator.”

I headed to the pay phones that lined the far wall, called Nancy’s office, and explained what had occurred.

“What hospital?” the receptionist asked.

“I don’t know. I assume it would be the one closest to downtown.”

“Thanks for the call.” She hung up.

I sat on the bench by the check-in desk and worried about Nancy. She came to help me and now she was in the hospital, probably taking my place. But based on everything I knew about spiders, I suspected the paralysis was temporary and she might be fine after she received the medication to counteract the venom.

My mind drifted to the fate of the spider. My parents were arachnologists, and spiders were always sacred to them. They never would have allowed one to be harmed, even if it were poisonous. I was convinced the spider had been planted in that box. It didn’t deserve to die because of that. It’s just a scared, delicate creature doing all it knows. I hoped I’d have a chance to find it before the exterminator arrived.

Ralph leaned over the counter. “They’ll be here within the hour. You shouldn’t go back to your room until they’re finished.”

“I need to get a few things,” I said.

“Try not to be in there very long.”

I nodded and went to the elevator. In my room, I searched around the windows, the corners, the bathroom, and only found a black spider. I thought Nancy had been bitten by the chestnut brown one I saw on the floor. It looked something like a hobo spider.

After placing the black spider on the outside ledge where it would be safe, I heard a knock and closed the window.

Opening the door, I saw a heavysset man wearing a grey uniform with DB Exterminators woven above his pocket. “Please come in.”

He entered with his equipment. “Miss, you’ll have to stay out of your room for four hours. Also, you can’t sleep in here tonight. I’ll let the hotel clerk know.”

I picked up my purse and swept my eyes over the room one more time. I hoped I would spot the spider. When I failed, I bit my lower lip and retreated to the hall.

Just then, Brett stepped out of the elevator. “You okay?” he asked, putting his arm around my shoulders. “Ralph told me what happened.”

“Yeah. I was searching for the spider. It might help her if they knew the type it was.” I didn’t want to tell him how I felt about spiders. People always thought it was strange. “But now the exterminator is here.”

“The sooner it’s gone the better. I don’t want an ambulance coming for you.”

“Did you send me a gift?”

“No. Why?” he replied with a raised brow.

“The spider came in a package.”

“You thought I sent you a spider?” he asked with a furrowed brow.

“No! It was in a small box with a ring. I want to contact the jewelry store and tell them what happened in case there are other spiders.”

“The ring must’ve been sent by another admirer,” he said, smirking. “What was the return address?”

“There wasn’t one. It was postmarked in Billings.”

“Can I look at the box?”

“I’ll see.” I opened my door, stuck in my head, and asked the exterminator, “Can I get something?”

“Yes, but hurry,” he said, spraying a corner.

Only Nancy’s documents lay on the table; the box and ring were gone. “Have you seen a small box and a ring with a black stone around here?” I asked, pointing to the coffee table.

“No. I haven’t started working on that part of the room yet.”

I scanned the floor again, returned to the hallway, and shut the door. “Strange. I can’t see it anywhere. I told Nancy I’d come to the hospital so I need to get going.”

“Would you like me to go with you?”

“If you don’t mind.” I felt relieved I wouldn’t be going alone. Nancy had been bitten in my room so her family might think I was somehow responsible. I wondered if that might be right. If the Crussetts had found me, the wrong person became the victim. I knew whomever they had sent wouldn’t leave without getting their target. They’d be hanging around somewhere waiting for an opportunity.



When we stepped out of the elevator, Ralph motioned for me to come to the counter. “Here are your messages,” he said, handing them over.

“Thanks. Ralph,” I said. “Where’s the closest hospital?”

“Just a few miles away.” He pulled out a map from under the counter. “Let me show you.”

“Would you mind giving Brett the directions while I read these?” I asked, holding up the messages.

He nodded and talked to Brett as he highlighted the route on the map.

The first message was from Betty Madsen, the receptionist at Nancy’s office. It read: “I haven’t been able to locate the hospital where Nancy was taken. Could you give me more information?”

The second one came from Nancy's brother. It read: "Can you tell me where the ambulance took Nancy?"

There were three other similar messages. My eyes darted to the door and I tried to recall the name on the ambulance. Nothing came to me. I turned back to the check-in counter. "Ralph, do you know what ambulance company picked up Nancy Stewart?"

"No. Is there a problem?"

Tapping my fingers on the counter, I replied, "Her co-workers and family can't locate the hospital."

"Did you call 9-1-1?" Brett asked. "Or did Ralph?"

"I called."

"Let me check with 9-1-1," Ralph said. "They'll know."

Brett and I sat down while Ralph called.

The exterminator walked over to the counter and put his equipment down on the floor. As soon as Ralph hung up, the exterminator said, "I'm finished. No one should go in the room for at least four hours. And no one should sleep there tonight."

"I'll move her to another room," Ralph said. "Thank you for coming so quickly."

Brett took my hand. "You can stay in my room."

"Brett, I'm just not ready for another relationship yet."

He smiled. "I didn't mean we'd sleep together. You'd sleep in the bed and I'd take the sofa."

"Let me think about it. First I need to find Nancy." I went with Brett to the counter.

"They have no record of your call," Ralph said.

"That can't be! I talked to them!" I snapped. Shaking my head, I glared at the phone. "If I didn't, then who requested the ambulance? Let me call them." I picked up the receiver and dialed 9-1-1.

"What is your emergency?" a woman asked.

"Earlier today I called because a woman had been bitten by a spider in my room at the Towne Hotel."

"Miss, I just talked to the hotel clerk about that and checked all our records. No one has called today from the Towne Hotel," she said firmly.

"I talked to a man and he sent an ambulance."

"That is impossible. Our male employees all work the nightshift. This morning you would have talked to a woman."

"I called!" I hissed, feeling irritated they couldn't keep better track of their employees.

"I'm sorry. We log all our calls, and there wasn't one from the Towne Hotel."

I slammed down the receiver. "They claim I didn't call!"

Brett held my shoulders. “Relax. She’ll show up.”

After taking several deep breathes, I asked, “Ralph, can I see the yellow pages?”

He handed it over, and I flipped to ambulance companies. Only three were listed. Brett sat down while I made the calls. When I finished, I felt discouraged and gave Ralph back the phone. “None of them sent an ambulance. I watched the paramedics put her in one.”

“Even if I didn’t get the company name, I saw an ambulance. Here,” Ralph said, handing me more messages.

I quickly glanced through them. They were all the same: “Where is Nancy?” An uneasy feeling vibrated through my body as I became more convinced the Crussetts had found me. Conner knew that I liked spiders and that I wouldn’t have hesitated to pick one up. Did someone think Nancy was me? We were about the same size. We both had brown hair. Hers was short and curly, while mine was long and wavy. She was older, but, from a distance, they might not have noticed. If she had been mistaken for me, I knew she’d never be found.

Another large group of people converged into the lobby. Glimpsing out the window, I saw a parked tour bus and sat down next to Brett.

“Anything new in the messages?” he asked.

“No. I better contact the police,” I said, reluctantly.

“Do you want to call them from my room?”

My eyes darted back and forth over the crowd milling about as I searched for unwelcome familiar faces. “Yes. It won’t be noisy there.”



Brett had a corner room. It was painted mocha brown and had two windows, one on each exterior wall. It was furnished just like mine—a queen-size bed, draped in a flowered bedspread, two nightstands, a beige couch, a coffee table, and a light-wood desk. As soon as we entered, I placed the call and talked to an officer named Lieutenant Barnes. After I filled him in, he asked me to come down to the police station.

“I’ll be there soon,” I said and then clicked off.

“Let me take you.”

Standing quietly, I felt a knot in my stomach and bit my lips, speculating how much the police would want to know. If I mentioned the Crussett family and they weren’t involved, I’d be responsible for letting them know where I was.

Brett wrapped his arm around my shoulders. “Is something wrong?”

I gazed at him and saw the concerned expression on his face. He was my only friend in Billings. I needed to confide in someone. “I don’t know. I came to Billings to get away from some people, and now I’m wondering if they’ve found me.”

“I suspected you were running from someone. Whenever we go anywhere, your eyes are always scanning the crowd. Even today, I noticed you looking at everyone who entered the hotel.”

“I don’t know what to do,” I said with trembling lips. “Could they have put the spider in the package? How much should I tell the police?”

“You don’t have any proof that the spider was deliberately sent. If someone wanted to harm you, that was too elaborate of a plan. There wasn’t a guarantee the spider would bite you.”

“You’re right,” I said, rubbing my forehead. “Spiders can’t be trained. That’s just a conclusion I jumped to since there wasn’t a return address and with Nancy missing.”

“Before you say anything to the cops about your personal situation, wait and see if someone takes credit for the ring.”

“That’s what I’ll do. I didn’t mean to burden you with my problem.”

“Sara, I’m glad you did.” He tenderly squeezed my hands. “Ready to go?”

“Yes. Let’s get this over with before Nancy’s family shows up here.”



In the lobby, Ralph again handed me more messages. I thumbed through them. They were all about Nancy, except one. It was from Sherman’s, a department store in Billings, asking if I received the gift they sent.

I sighed with relief. “The ring came from Sherman’s,” I told Brett. “Last week, I was their 100,000th customer. They said I’d receive a prize, but I had no idea it would be that nice. Well, except for the deadly spider.”

“All that worrying for nothing,” he smiled.

“Now I hope I can find the ring when I get back to my room.”



Brett pulled into a parking stall in front of City Hall. We headed to the entrance while I admired the buildings Art Deco design with its ornaments and motifs.

Trying to delay my meeting with Barnes as long as possible, I stopped and read the police memorial. Then Brett took my hand, and we stepped across the threshold. The foyer was a large open space with signs posted next to the hallways. We went to the right, the one marked police department, and headed through another set of doors. We stopped at the information desk.

“May I help you?” a female officer asked.

“Yes. I’m here to see Lieutenant Barnes.”

Just then, a man approached the desk from the other side. “I’m Lieutenant Barnes,” he said, walking toward us. “You must be Miss Jones.”

“Yes,” I said, shaking his hand. “This is my friend, Brett Daborel.”

After they shook hands, Barnes led us into a conference room. Brett sat patiently at my side as I repeated everything that I’d already told Barnes over the phone.

“Nancy Stewart’s family and co-workers have been trying to locate her. They’ve left me these messages,” I said, holding them up.

“I’ll take those,” Barnes said, stretching out his hand as I handed them over. “We’ll locate Ms. Stewart and contact her family along with everyone who left you a message. In case we need any additional information, will you be staying in Billings for a while?”

“Yes. I’m planning on making this my home. Will you let me know when you find her?”

“We’ll keep you informed.”

I left City Hall feeling relieved that professionals would be searching for Nancy. They had the skills and resources needed to locate her.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it?” Brett asked.

“No. They didn’t ask anything about my personal life.”

“I didn’t think they would. Where do you want to go for lunch?” he asked, opening the car door.

“I just want to go back to the hotel.”

“You have to eat. There’s a new Italian restaurant that just opened. How does that sound?”

Since he had been so supportive, I agreed and said, “Good.”

During lunch, he talked about the new movies in town we should see. Finally, after working on me for an hour, he convinced me to go with him to a matinee; probably to get my mind off Nancy.



After the movie, we returned to the hotel; Ralph waved his hand, gesturing us over.

“Lieutenant Barnes and Sergeant Harmon just left. They asked some questions about the 9-1-1 call. According to them, I confirmed everything you had already told them. Then they checked out your room. They just did a walk-through because of the strong smell of pesticide.” He picked up a key from the counter. “There weren’t any rooms available on your floor so I’ve put you in room 720 for the night. You should be able to go back to your room tomorrow.”

“Thanks.” I took the key since I had just decided not to stay in Brett’s room, even if it was tempting.

My room reeked from the chemicals in the poisonous spray. I quickly gathered a few things and headed to room 720.



The sound of a door slamming awoke me. I flipped on the nightstand lamp and glimpsed at the clock; it read 1:30 a.m. I turned off the light, rolled over on my side, but I couldn’t seem to relax enough to drift off. Instead, I thought about Nancy’s disappearance. I couldn’t shake the feeling that the Crussetts were somehow involved even if they hadn’t sent the ring. Maybe the spider didn’t come in the box. I flicked back on the lamp, climbed out of bed, and checked the deadbolt lock to make sure it was securely in place.

Getting under the covers, I reached for the lamp switch and felt something drop on my hand. I looked and saw a chestnut colored spider, like the one I spotted on my floor after Nancy was bitten. A chill ran through my body as I decided to catch it. Climbing out of bed, I kept my hand rigid. The spider began to crawl up my arm while I walked to the bathroom. I took a tissue, placed it in the spider’s path, and let the spider move onto it. Carefully, I picked up the tissue with the spider cradled inside and dumped out the contents of my make-up bag. As my heart raced, I eased it in, zipped up the bag, and then smiled to myself.

Wondering if there were more spiders, I slipped on my robe and searched under the bed, the dresser, the nightstand, and pulled down the bed covers. Nothing. I was content that it was safe to go back to bed. Lying between the sheets, I found it impossible to sleep. I rose again and made a cup of coffee.

I sat down in the cushioned chair and appreciated the peace and quiet as I sipped it. Leaning back, I closed my eyes and pondered about everything that happened the day before. I felt a sting on my foot, looked down, and saw a chestnut brown spider crawl off it. I flinched, and my mouth popped wide open. I knew I needed to stay calm to slow down the spread of the venom in case it was the same kind that had bitten Nancy.

I picked up the phone and punched Brett’s number.

“Hello,” he answered, sounding groggy.

“I’ve been bitten.”

“Oh, shit! Be right there!”

Slowly, I stood, unlocked the door, and left it ajar. I eased back down in the seat and examined my foot.

Brett rushed in. “Have you called 9-1-1?”

“No. I don’t have any of Nancy’s reactions.” I raised my foot and wiggled my toes. “Maybe this was a different species. I caught one. It’s in my make-up bag in the bathroom.”

He went into the bathroom. I scanned the floor, attempting to find the spider. A minute later, he came back. “There wasn’t a spider in the bag. I pulled out the tissue and shook it over the sink.”

“Was the stopper closed?”

He nodded. “I closed it. A spider didn’t go down the drain.”

“I thought I had it well secured,” I said, feeling disappointed.

He knelt next to me and ran his hand over my foot. “No bumps. There’s a small red dot here,” he said, pointing to it.

“It must’ve been a different type of spider. Nancy became almost immediately paralyzed.”

“Maybe she just had an allergic reaction. Come to my room. If you display any symptoms, I’ll call 9-1-1. If that should happen, I’m going with you in the ambulance.”

I felt uneasy about going to his room. At the same time, I was scared and wanted company. “Okay,” I agreed.

He insisted I stay seated while he gathered my things. Holding onto my arm, he led me to his room. I told him I’d sleep on the sofa. He was determined that I take the bed.



In the morning I found myself refreshingly not-dead.

“When do you want to go to breakfast?” Brett asked, opening the drapes.

“Just give me half an hour.” I left his room to freshen up in mine.

As I stood in the hallway, fumbling through my purse for my room key, a tall handsome man with broad shoulders, deep brown hair, and dark eyes walked past me. He appeared just a little older than I was. He wore a perfectly tailored navy-blue, pine-striped suit and looked too polished to be staying here. This was a nice hotel, but definitely not a four-star.

He stopped at the next room. I noticed him glaring at me through penetrating eyes.

Feeling uneasy, I quickly turned the key, hurried inside, and bolted my door. As I sat on the bed, I sensed there was something familiar about him and wondered if he was connected to the Crussetts. Was he an employee?

The picture of my parents on the nightstand caught my eyes, and then I remembered. It had been four years ago at their funeral. He had glared at me there, too. I didn't have the foggiest idea who he was. I continued thinking about him as I showered and dressed.

Bending down to put on my shoes, I saw the ring with the black stone lying on the floor. Slipping it on my finger, I felt a slight shiver run through my body. Strange. The ring fit perfectly. How did Sherman's know my size?



Lieutenant Barnes and another man were standing by the check-in desk talking to Ralph when Brett and I stepped out of the elevator.

"Miss Jones," Ralph said loudly, raising his arm and waving his fingers. After we reached the counter, he continued, "I've been calling room 720. You didn't answer. Lieutenant Barnes would like to talk to you."

"I only spent part of the night in that room," I explained.

"Good morning, Miss Jones and Mr. Daborel," Barnes said, shaking my hand. "This is Sergeant Harmon. He'll be assisting me with the investigation."

"Hello," Harmon said, and we shook hands.

"Nancy Stewart's body was found around 1:00 a.m.," Barnes said. "We need your help to identify the paramedics who picked her up. We'd like you to come to the station and look at some mug shots."

I cringed. Mug shots? Even if attempting to murder someone by using a spider seemed completely ridiculous to some people, I knew the Crussetts had killed before in absurd ways. Maybe I was just being paranoid, but this happening after I escaped them—the coincidence was too convenient. My hands trembled; I held them together tightly and asked, "Where was she found?"

"Behind the Alta Bar. Signs indicate her body was moved to that location after she died. She wasn't easy to identify. We only received confirmation an hour ago that it was her."

"Why wasn't she easy to identify?"

"I'd rather not go into the specifics," Barnes answered. "When can you be at the station?"

Brett and I glanced at each other. “After we’ve had breakfast,” I said, wanting to calm my nerves before I went.

“I’ll take you,” Brett volunteered.

I nodded. Since Nancy’s body had been moved to a place where it could be easily found, I suddenly doubted the Crussetts were involved. Anyone who crossed their paths typically ended up in staged accidents, or they were never seen again. Easy discovery was not their MO.

“We’ll see you later this morning,” Barnes confirmed and left with Harmon.

“I’ll be going there this afternoon,” Ralph said. “Since the lobby was full of guests, I only saw part of their faces for a brief moment when they wheeled her out. Lieutenant Barnes still wants me to look at mug shots. I gave him the names of the guests I recognized in the lobby. He’s planning to contact them.”

“I don’t think I can identify them either,” I said. “I was looking at Nancy, not the paramedics.”

“Let’s get something to eat,” Brett said, taking my arm. He led me into the coffee shop.

After the waitress handed us menus, my thoughts drifted back to the Crussetts. Would Nancy’s death make the national news? Then they’d know where I was. My mind churned and foreboding pressed against my chest as I closed the menu. “I’m not hungry after all. I think I’ll just have coffee.”

“You need to eat something. How about toast or a bagel?” Brett asked.

The waitress returned with coffee and, to please Brett, I ordered a toasted bagel. He ordered a large breakfast that included a side order of pancakes. Obviously, the police investigation wasn’t affecting his appetite.

He took my hand. “Don’t worry. I’ll be with you. The cops just want you to look at mug shots, nothing more. If you don’t recognize the guys, that’s not a problem.” He held up my hand and gazed at it. “Is that the ring you were sent?”

“Yes. I found it on the floor and decided to enjoy my prize.”

We joked about what Sherman’s might give their 1,000,000th customer since this is what they gave their 100,000th -- maybe a car, boat, or trip around the world.

Our orders arrived. Brett took a couple of bites and then asked, “Have you got any plans for this afternoon?”

I still sensed I was in danger and needed to move out of the hotel as quickly as I could. “I have Nancy’s list of apartments. I want to check some of them out.”

“Would you like me to drive you around?”

Not wanting to be alone, I said, “I’d like that.”



Brett and I were at the police department for almost three hours while I searched through mug shots. Barnes had another officer put together a composite of the men based on what I remembered. None of the computer-generated images looked right. Both paramedics had medium-brown hair and were over six feet tall. Outside that my memory wasn't very helpful.

Walking to Brett's car, I saw a short, lean man putting a note on Brett's windshield.

Brett recognized him. "What's up, Adam?"

"I've been trying to reach you. Left a couple of messages on your cell," Adam said, retrieving the note.

"Turned it off when I got here. How did you find me?"

"The hotel clerk."

"What's the problem?"

"Baxter's going to be in town tomorrow instead of Tuesday."

"What time?"

"He lands at 8:30 and he's driving straight to the office. Have you got the report done?"

"Almost."

"That's what I thought. Housman still wanted me to track you down so you could work on it today in case it wasn't finished."

"Tell Housman I'll have it on his desk at 8:00 a.m."

"Sorry about ruining your Sunday."

"It's not ruined. See you tomorrow," Brett said. Adam strolled to a waiting sedan.

"You don't need to take me apartment hunting. You can work on your report."

"I want to drive you around. I'll finish the report tonight."

After a disappointing afternoon since we were only able to look inside one apartment, we ate dinner at the hotel and said goodnight.

Back in my room, I thumbed through the list of apartments again, trying to recall those closest to where I worked. I needed a Billings road map to pinpoint the locations. There was one in my glove compartment. I headed outside to get it.

My car was parked in a dimly lit area of the hotel parking lot, next to an alley. Moving in that direction, I heard heavy footsteps on the pavement behind me. My eyes darted right and left hoping to see other people. The parking lot in front of me appeared deserted. The footsteps became louder sending chills through my body.

My heart raced. My lips quivered. I sucked in air, and then I held my breath as I quickened my pace. I didn't dare turn around and knew I was being paranoid. People came and went all the time. Then I saw a couple getting into a car, and my heartbeat slowed down. Breathing easy again, I peeked over my shoulder. No one was behind me. I did see several people walking toward the hotel. Finally I reached

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my car, unlocked it, and opened the door. I leaned down and took the road map out of the glove compartment.

As I stood up, he was right next to me. His penetrating, dark eyes met mine. My breathing became erratic and I froze.