relative stranger

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CHAPTER ONE

Every Missouri child knows that if you mishandle stink bugs, you get stink. I wish I’d remembered that the day Firah sucked me into her family problems. Believe me; I had enough stink with my own family.

“So, you’re back to help with the Festival?” Firah paused at her easel, put down her artist’s brush, and massaged the back of her neck. Then she grabbed a black scrunchy off the counter and pulled her hair, dyed Pebbles Flintstone red, into a curly ponytail. Her third color choice in six months, she’d said. Lord, let her be able to change this one, too.

I took my eyes off Firah’s hair and glanced around her apartment. Open-concept. Faded orange and yellow wallpaper
in the kitchen that was peeling off in places, and dark paneling in the living room. A battered white cabinet with no doors displayed a few plastic cups, saucers, and plates. It leaned against an old harvest gold refrigerator that hummed along like a Zen master. Only Oscar the Grouch popping out of his garbage can could give the place a trashier look. I inhaled pepperoni aroma wafting through the window from the Pizza Palace on the first floor. I knew Firah—she’d have nothing to eat in the apartment. My stomach growled and I gulped down coffee to keep it quiet.

“No,” I said. “I came back because I can’t handle Daddy anymore, and Sophie said she could use my help with Letisha. She thinks Letisha has beginning Alzheimer’s or something, and she’s afraid Hubert Epley is going to worm his way into her heart and convince her to sell Harbor House.” Letisha is my stepmother, and Sophie is her housekeeper who helped raise me. Harbor House is the bed-and-breakfast in Portico Ferry, Missouri, that Letisha owns and where I spent most of my growing up years.

Firah’s brown eyes flashed. “Somebody ought to pass a knife across Hubert’s old wrinkled neck and put him out of her misery. He’s such a sleaze. He even made a pass at me once.”

Although I knew she didn’t mean it, it made me shiver to hear her talk like that. Firah is a fairy-like wraith of a girl, and to hear her talk tough is somehow disconcerting, like hearing a kitten bray.

I picked a few brown hairs off my sweatshirt and ran my hand over the wrinkles in my jeans. “So, how’s things going with you?” I asked.

“Bad,” said Firah.

“You know, you piss and moan a lot.”

“My family doesn’t love me.”

“Sure, they love you. Just give ’em time.”

Firah gave me a doubtful glance and picked up her brush again. She fired a blob of purple paint off its tip onto the colorful abstract that she was painting to add pizzazz to her apartment, which was like putting a Band-Aid on an elephant’s behind, in my opinion. “You’d be hard-pressed to know they love me from the way they act.”
I’d been living in Las Vegas for three years, and this was my first visit to Firah’s apartment since I’d moved back to Portico Ferry a week ago. Relationships can be a tricky business sometimes, and my relationship with Firah is that I’ve loved her since I first saw her back in seventh grade, and hers with me is that she tries to keep me at arm’s length while simultaneously pushing her boobs out at me. It’s a tap dance that’s required intricate foot peddling throughout the years to keep her from stepping on my heart.

“They’re giving me the cold shoulder. No, make that the frigid, icy shoulder.” Firah sipped coffee from a mug, and I noticed she’d eaten her nails down to nubs. “You’d never understand, Starr. Not in a million years. You haven’t been raised by a family stuck in the sixteenth century.”

Firah is second generation Iranian American. Her mom—everybody in Portico Ferry calls her Beezie because they can’t pronounce her name—and Grandma Abbasi came to America with Grandpa Abbasi and Beezie’s three brothers in the late seventies. How they got here is a whole history lesson. Short version: Grandpa worked for the Shah of Iran and when the Shah fell and the Ayatollah took over, they had to skedaddle to America for safety’s sake with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Grandpa died, and Beezie long ago married a local boy, Arthur Tregor, who was Firah’s father. The family embraced America wholeheartedly, and eventually converted to Christianity. But according to Firah, her mom and grandma are still old-school Iranian girls at heart and hold with many traditions of their old country.

“They can’t still be mad about you moving out,” I said. “You’re almost twenty, for crying out loud.”

“You’d think, wouldn’t you? I was born here. I shouldn’t have to abide by that…that archaic…” A tear formed in the corner of her eye. I knew an anger tear when I saw one. “What a fight it was when I moved out,” she continued. “It wouldn’t matter if I was fifty, I guess. In Iran, nice girls don’t leave home until they leave to move in with their new husbands, and that’s what they expected me to do, too. Believe me, I couldn’t wait that long. No husband in sight, and I had to get out of that old relic of a house if I was ever going to make anything of myself.”
“You lost your nice girl status?”

“Big time. They’ve cut me off and aren’t speaking. My store isn’t doing that great, either. I’m on a bad downhill slide.”

Firah had opened the Enchanted Portal, a New Age shop selling everything from potion-quality herbs and Wiccan books to handcrafted jewelry and milled soaps, next door to the Pizza Palace downstairs. Beezie and Grandma had a full head of steam on about that too, saying that a good Christian girl wouldn’t peddle pagan filth like that.

“And, God, I miss Jude—who is by the way a real dog and not some mutt face like that,” Firah said.

We both looked at Captain Jack, my Chihuahua. He sat on her island counter, his good eye squinting with pleasure at being noticed, and his other eye milky and blind. His little body hummed like a cell phone set to vibrate. He wore a nappy doggy faux black leather jacket. I wouldn’t own a dog that would let you dress it in a pink tutu.

“Pay no attention,” I said to Jack. “She’s just jealous of your style.”

“You know, those two witches sold my Camaro. Now, I’m stuck with that wimpy motor scooter and piece of trash van that starts only when it wants to. No heat in it. It’s okay now that it’s May. But, come winter, that won’t be much fun.”

“You’ll be okay,” I said. “All new businesses take a little time to get off the ground. Use some of that inheritance from your father and buy another car—not a fully loaded Camaro. Go with a used car like the rest of us worker bees. It’ll all work out. You’ll see. Grandma and Beezie will reconcile after they see you mean business about being your own person. They’re just trying to manipulate you into coming back. If it’ll cheer you up, I’ll kidnap your dog.”

“The landlord won’t let me have Jude here,” she said.

For pete’s sake, it’s not like that rottweiler could make the place look worse. “Then we’ll make it a play date,” I said. “Take that monster out to the dog park.” Made of concrete blocks and old car parts that somehow got molded into a real canine body, Jude would probably scare the sauce out of the other dogs and owners.

“I really miss that old softie,” said Firah.
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The pull of loving animals and familiar things is a powerful magnet. So is old money. I wondered if Firah would return to the mansion and her doting and controlling family. I mean, a free college education? That would be tough to turn down. But, I knew school had always been the biggest drag for Firah. Even after all the tutors Beezie had hired throughout the years, Firah still had a tough time reading. She once told me that reading or doing math was like watching hieroglyphics swim on the page. Her talents definitely did not run in that direction. Her art, her sculpture, her weaving—the things she’d created that I’d seen in her shop—that was her genius. But, could she run the business she’d started?

I stood up. “Well, I’d better get back before Hubert takes off with the silverware.”

Firah kicked at a lumpy spot in the rug, and a shadow of anger moved across her face. “Don’t go,” she said. “I’ve got things, very important things…I need to talk with you.”

I sat back down. “Shoot,” I said.

“Father told me before he died that Mom was…well, he called her terrible names.”

I knew that Firah had a somewhat hostile relationship with her mother—think the Tuttles of Orange County Chopper or maybe Wynonna and Naomi Judd. But Arthur had traditionally taken Beezie’s side of arguments. I was surprised that he would lambast Beezie to Firah.

Firah paused, holding her paintbrush like a cigarette. “Right before he died in that awful hospital room…I don’t know...he slipped into some alternate universe, I guess. Mom was out of the room and he thought I was Mom.” Firah put her brush down and locked eyes with me. “He said that he knew I’d never loved him...meaning Mom...and he cursed me...well Mom, I mean...for marrying him just for his money. He accused me...er, Mom...of killing him. Then, he sort of flashed back to the present, and then he died, right in my arms. Worst day of my life.”

I felt so sorry for Firah. What a terrible last memory of her father. “What do you suppose he meant by that?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” Her eyes were full of anguish. “Maybe he meant he’d internalized the pain she’d caused him by never
loving him and it ate at him. You know, they say cancer is anger turned inward.”

“I think that’s what they say depression is,” I said.

“Whatever,” she said. “The cancer was in remission. And, then suddenly…he dies? I wouldn’t put it past Mom to have murdered him somehow. Her rush to have him cremated was suspicious. Cremation is something Mom said she’d never do.” She gave me a hard look. “Do you think my mom is capable of killing my father?”

Wha, what? I was stunned that Firah would actually say that about her mom. Evidently, their relationship had deteriorated more than I thought. I shook my head. “Your logic train has really left the track, you know,” I said. “Beezie would never murder anyone. I think it’s more likely your father was talking smack because he was so sick. Maybe some dialogue he heard on TV caught in his subconscious and he was just repeating it.”

“I don’t know…” said Firah.

“T’m sure that’s what it was,” I said.

“Forget I even mentioned it,” Firah said, her shoulders sagging.

But I couldn’t forget it. It would be a shame for Firah to actually harbor this crazy notion and let it poison her relationship with her mother permanently. Geez, the Tregors had been married over twenty years. I’d known couples who’d sworn undying devotion with marriages that hadn’t lasted nearly as long as theirs. Since my heart had been broken by a beautiful twit named Alana Lang, I was ready to consider money as a more lasting reason for marriage than love, myself. “If Beezie were so miserable, she would’ve divorced Arthur,” I said. “I know your mother well enough to know she does pretty much what she wants. She would’ve taken him for a big chunk of change and carried on. You can’t seriously think that she would have killed him.”

Firah seemed to consider this. “It’s just that he was so sick for so long, and she considered him such a burden there at the end. And, she let him know it, believe me…in a thousand ways.”

Just then, Kathleen—Firah’s weird Goth girl roommate—sashayed into the kitchen, her magenta-colored toes peeking out
of pink fuzzy slippers. She wore a black nightshirt that ended at the bottom of her buns that had skull and crossbones on the front. She pushed her hair, a black chunky-cut short bob, behind ears that were pierced all around and walked in a half coma to the coffeepot.

“Kathleen...you remember Starr Spenser from sophomore year?” Firah introduced me.

“S’up,” Kathleen said, squinting at me with amazing gold-green eyes. She poured a cup and turned away from me, bending over to pick up the newspaper where it lay on a kitchen chair, revealing black panties with a red bull’s-eye right in the middle of the crotch.

I could not stifle my mouth. “Buying your underwear at Target these days?” I asked. Well, that was a snarky thing to say. Maybe Firah’s bad mood was contagious.

“Kathleen,” said Firah. “We have company in the house. Do you think it would be too much to ask that you cover up a...”

“Don’t start with me, Tregor,” said Kathleen. “You’re not my mother. I’m sure Starr isn’t seeing anything here she hasn’t seen before.”

Firah gave me a long-suffering look as Kathleen shuffled into her bedroom. I heard a click and SpongeBob Squarepants flared to life on the boob tube.

Kathleen Conti had graduated last year from Portico Ferry High, along with Firah. She wasn’t exactly the devil incarnate but with her pale skin and cat’s eye contacts she definitely had a creepy vibe. Rumor was—back when I attended PF High—that her dad had mob connections. I’d pass her in the hall every now and then as she wafted through in a cloud of Tabu perfume on her way to smoke a joint in the bathroom. She didn’t date anyone in particular, but most of the guys had her black lipstick on their collars. I’d looked at her cross-eyed once during her bout of PMS, and I found the Beanie Baby I kept in my locker stuck to the bulletin board with a nail file through the neck. “Unusual choice for a roommate,” I said.

“She’s always on time with her half of the rent,” said Firah, hunching her shoulders. “Beggars can’t be choosers.”

“Where’s she working these days?” I asked.
“She’s out at Peaceful Acres Mortuary, doing makeup on the cadavers for open casket funerals.”

Yuck. “Ever think about losing her in favor of a different roommate?” Like someone who doesn’t sleep in a coffin? Snarkity, snark.

“You remember I said the day I left the mansion was a big fight?” Firah said. “I wasn’t kidding. Mom called Uncle Azul. He came over and physically restrained me from leaving. You should have seen him. I thought he’d blow a vessel. He actually said he’d keep me in the mortuary basement if he had to and I could leave the mansion only if I had Kathleen as a roommate. He told me no self-respecting Persian woman would live alone. He and Kathleen’s father bought Peaceful Acres together about a year ago, so he had met her. I guess that’s the only name of a woman my age he could come up with off the top of his head. Since it seemed to be such a big deal for him, I agreed.”

I’d known Azul Abbasi since I was a little kid. Even though he’d been present at many of Firah’s family’s gatherings where I was invited to attend, he’d maybe said five words to me in my whole life. As I recall, they were get, out, of, my, and way. As far as I could tell, he never smiled. He had a reputation as a savvy businessman and owned a lot of real estate in PF. Since Arthur’s death, it seemed Beezie and Grandma had accepted him as the head of the family and what Azul said was law as far as they were concerned. Firah leaving the mansion was probably the first time anyone in the family had ever crossed him.

Firah sighed and put her paintbrush down. “I’m coming across like a spoiled little girl, huh?”

“Of course not,” I said. “Personally, I’d have called the cops. Azul had no right to treat you that way or insist on anything.”

“Nobody in my family gets it,” Firah said. “Even the twin uncles’ wives, my Aunt Sandy and Aunt Pat, think I should live at home. Most girls my age have left home, either to go to college or live on their own. Too long my whole family has thought of me as a child. I am not a child!” She slammed her palm down on the counter and Jack jumped and whimpered. I picked him up and stroked the sweet spot on his chest to soothe his hurt feelings and thought about what Firah just said. Emotionally, she was all
over the place. First, she rants about her mother, then she moves onto Azul?

It was true that Firah was no longer a child, but she’d been a late bloomer. Home schooled. Because of her learning disability the school system had placed her in my fifth-grade class back in the day when normally she’d probably been put in seventh or eighth grade. Her being the oldest kid in the class had never made a whit of difference to any of us kids. Probably the fact that she’d been tiny for her age had helped her to fit in.

I patted her hand and she jumped and drew it from me like I’d slapped it. “I’m doing the best I can!” she said.

“Of course,” I said. “You need to eat something, Firah. Here, put some sugar in your coffee.” I doused it with an ample spoonful and held it to her lips. She took a drink and the lines in her face softened.

“Truth is Father didn’t leave me as much as I thought he would, and since I had no credit established I had a heck of a time getting a loan. Tom Albertson at City Savings finally gave me a personal loan, but the way he was going on about what a risk he was taking, I thought I was going to have to give him a blow job before it was done.”

“Tom’s a tool, all right,” I commiserated.

“I have to be careful about what I spend.” Her chin quivered.

“Come on, girl. Let it go,” I said, putting Jack back on the counter and waving her over to me with both hands. “You’ll feel better.”

“I feel so alone without Grandma and Jude,” she said, tearing up in earnest as she came around the counter and we embraced. “I’m so freakin’ broke.”

“Zafirah...” I tsk-tsk’d and now-now’d as I hugged her. “Everybody has to be careful about what they spend these days. It’s just a lifestyle that’s new to you, but you’ll get used to it like everybody else. You’re not living in luxury, but you’re better off than a lot of people. And, don’t worry about your mom and grandma and the uncles and their wives. They’ll come around. You know you’re not alone. I’m just across town at Harbor House.”

A tear ran down her cheek and I kissed it dry before I even thought. It was salty and delicious and made me want to
devour her. Then, she surprised me by putting her hand on the back of my neck and kissing me, complete with tongue. I relaxed and let her push into my mouth. She tasted sweet and coffee flavored. We used to kiss when we were kids, but that had cooled in high school when she insisted that we were “just friends.” It encouraged me that Firah had never dated guys, though, even though she’d said it was because of her strict family.

“Firah, now that you’re on your own, why don’t you come out?” I ventured.

“I’m not really gay,” she said. “Something just comes over me when you’re around.” She pushed back a stray bang from my forehead.

*Right.* “So, you’re semi gay, then? Why don’t you semi come out? Start by semi dating me.”

“My family has made themselves strangers to me for leaving the mansion…but for that, they’d kill me.”

This was ridiculous. “Firah, they’d never hurt you in a million years. I’m not a psychologist, but I’d bet this is just your depression talking. Maybe you should go to that free clinic again...get your meds adjusted.”

“No. I’m talking reality, Starr, not something I imagine. You’ve never come up against Azul Abbasi.”

“Then, go live someplace else. You’re an adult now. You can live anywhere...be anything. At end of summer, we could head back to Vegas together.”

“I’ve sunk everything I own into this business. I can’t leave. Besides, despite what I say, I do love my family...even Mom and Uncle Azul. If I disgraced them in that way, they’d *never* forgive me, and I do want us to reconcile.”

I bristled, angry that she would consider loving me disgraceful. “You know, you can do whatever you want with your life, Firah.” My voice raised a notch and I pushed away. “But I’m *ob so* not going back to my old life. I’m not at Portico High anymore where no one wants to be seen as different. I’m out! When I left here and started high school in Vegas, I told everyone there I was a lesbian. Nobody thought anything of it. I was even an officer in the Gay-Straight Alliance club on campus.”
“Starr, this is not Vegas. This is real life in a small town. And, in real life, lots of people still have problems with the gay lifestyle.”

Man, Firah could make me mad—asking me to hide who I was. But I reminded myself that Firah was my childhood sweetheart, and that, like she said, Portico Ferry was no Vegas. I took a deep breath. “Okay.” I gritted my teeth. “I’ll probably just be here for the summer anyway. Maybe I can tone it down… whatever that means.”

“You know, don’t date anyone. Don’t go to gay bars. Don’t buzz your hair any shorter than it is.”

“For a while,” I said, “I’ll refrain from…whatever. I’ll probably only be here until the end of summer, anyway. But, if anyone asks, I will tell them the truth. You don’t know how much ‘don’t ask don’t tell’ grates on me.”

“My family would kill me if they thought I was gay. If they know you’re gay, I’m as good as dead by association,” she restated.

“You’re a nut,” I said. “You think your mother murdered your father, you think your uncle is without humanity, and you think if people knew you had the hots for me it would be the death of you. Do I have all that right?”

She hooked her little finger around my little finger. “So I’m a nut. I’m a nut that is your best friend.”

I let the tension and pique flow out of me as she leaned into me for another kiss. “You’ve got a little drool, right here,” she said, wiping my chin.

I didn’t doubt it.

The psychotic buildup I’d received from Firah left me thinking the only way I could help her with her problems was to call the mental health clinic. I didn’t tell her that. What I said was, “You said you needed my help. What help do you need?”

“I need to find my sister,” she said, her lips curling upward ever so slightly.

I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye. A white rat in a cage ran around an oversized wheel like a circus performer. Why anyone would want a white rat…Wait…had she said…sister? “What sister?” I asked.
Firah walked to the cage, plucked the rat out and ran her finger down its backbone. Captain Jack stood, tail wagging, ears alert. If it runs, I must chase it, is the Captain Jack motto. I put my hand on his haunches to settle him.

“C’mon, Firah. Just tell me. My belly button is flat against my spine I’m so hungry.” I’ve always been a big fan of food, and I don’t understand people like Firah who can go days on only a green bean. I walked to the fridge and studied the contents—a jar of apricot jam and a moldy loaf of bread. Tired or not, I told myself to get some groceries in the apartment before I went back to Harbor House. Firah wouldn’t bother to eat if the food wasn’t right in front of her.

And right then, the rat wiggled out of Firah’s grasp and Jack was on him in a nanosecond. “Stop it, Jack,” Firah yelled as she ran for Jack, who quickly let go of the rat. “Can’t you two think of something besides your stomachs for a change?” she shouted at us. I picked up Jack’s quivering body and soothed him. I was a little surprised that Firah would shout at me like that, especially when it was her fault for having that rodent out of the cage in the first place.

“You think I’m fat?” I looked over my shoulder at my backside. My bulky KC Chiefs sweatshirt may not have been the best fashion choice, but at five foot ten and one hundred sixty pounds, I’m no linebacker.

Firah looked at the ceiling. “Weeell…” she said. Question asked, question answered.

“You know, you’re making me kinda prickly,” I said as Firah put the rat back into the cage.

“I’m sorry. It’s just…this thing with my mom…makes me cranky,” said Firah.

So. We were back to Beezie. “Your mom was right,” I said, cuddling Jack. “Romantic love is a bunch of bull.” I picked up a paperback novel off the counter, a lusty pirate wench on the cover. “Nobody lives happily ever after anymore.” I pitched it into the trash can, knocking it over in the process.

Firah slanted her eyes at me. “Kathleen will have your ass for that.”
I walked over to the can, righted it, and fished the book out. I wiped coffee grounds off it and handed it to Firah. “Sorry,” I said. “I’m still getting over Alana.”

“The girl with the navy blue eyes that you brought home Thanksgiving?” she asked. “I’m such a dweeb. I’ve totally focused on my problems and forgotten to ask about yours. I’m sorry you got dumped. I guess it’s true what they say. You know, about kissing a lot of frogettes before you find Princess Charming.”

I walked back to the stool and straddled it like I was getting on a horse. “Evidently,” I said.

“So, what happened?”

I swallowed a lump I felt coming up from my heart. “Alana texted me and said it was over. I have no clue why. I wanted to talk to her about it, but she wouldn’t. It was like she dropped off the face of the earth after that.”

Firah barked out a laugh that sprayed coffee out her nose. I was at the same time repulsed at her insensitivity and glad she was finally laughing. “She broke up by text?”

“Hey, it was traumatic,” I said, remembering how stunned I’d felt.

“How classy,” she said as she reached for the tail of my T-shirt to wipe her nose. “Your luck in love is just so, so…”

“Lousy. Cruddy. Off the charts?” I slapped at her hands and handed her the tissue box.

“In the extreme,” she said.

I noticed a rare vacation snapshot that Firah had on her fridge of me, my older brother Rolly, and Daddy at the Grand Canyon. My brown hair whipped around my face, Daddy looked like he’d been on a three-day drunk, and Rolly had that sappy-happy look he always has. Alana, not wanting to be in the shot, stood in the background, one foot up on a rock ledge, looking up at a condor free-wheeling in the sky.

Our family had combusted shortly after that photo was taken. Rolly left one night, stealing ten thousand dollars from under Daddy’s mattress on his way out. He probably used it to buy some fancy camera. He always said he was going to travel and take pictures of everything he saw. Anger at Rolly leached into Daddy’s relationship with me, and it was downhill from there.
Then Alana dumped me. After she left, I’d had my hair cut in a short chunky style and streaked with blond. I got rid of my beige plastic frames and bought big vintage black ones. But whenever I took the time to check a mirror, I was still me—the girl with the pained brown eyes and a big neon sign on her forehead that flashed loser; visible to all who really took the time to look.

Firah studied me for a moment. “Maybe nobody does live happily ever after anymore.” Her eyes filled with tears again. “I mean, why even try to have a relationship? Life is easier with none of that heartrending romantic stuff to deal with.”

I cursed myself. I hadn’t wanted to say anything to Firah that would have driven her deeper into a funk. At least she’d let go that stupid talk about her mother being a murderer. “About that sister…” I said.

Firah walked over, opened the window and inhaled pizza flavored air. “That my parents weren’t simpatico wasn’t the only thing I learned the day Father died. In one of his lucid moments, he told me my mom had been pregnant with me before he married her.”

“No way,” I said. This was a stink bomb I hadn’t expected. Grandma Abbasi had lectured Firah and me about how American boys are only interested in sex since we were in training bras. I always imagined that she’d kept Beezie in an iron chastity belt growing up.

“Yes way. By some guy in a traveling fair, of all things.”

“What…like gypsies?” I asked.

“More like folks who put up carnival rides in parking lots, charge too much for your kids to ride them, and then move on after a week. There was a boy working at the carnival named Zander. Anyway, I guess he was good-looking and charming and Mom was young and stupid.”

“You mean, Arthur Tregor was not your biological father?” I asked.

Firah threw up her hands. “I think that’s what I just said.”

“And then this Zander guy disappeared with the traveling fair?” I guessed.

“Not exactly. Father told me he’d met Zander back then, too. Zander had been helping out at the carnival, but wasn’t part of
the traveling troupe. He was just some country hick who made deliveries to the pharmacy where Daddy got his medicine. Father never told Mom he knew Zander or that Zander had bragged to him about getting Beezie pregnant, as well as another girl, in the same week. Word was Zander married that other girl and they moved away after the baby, a girl, was born.”

“What a secret for your father to keep all these years! Do you know whatever happened to Zander?”

“No. It would be good to get to know my real father, but the person I’m really interested in is my sister.”

“Arthur was your real father.”

“He just raised me, turns out.”

“Isn’t that the very definition of being a father?”

“Zander’s blood runs though my veins,” Firah replied.

“Have you asked Beezie anything about this?” I asked.

“No!” Firah’s eyes went big and round. “Father told me she was so traumatized at having sullied the family honor that she was scared to go home and face what she thought was a sure beating. She was by Tunny Bridge, thinking of suicide, when Father found her. I wouldn’t dare bring this up with her.”

“Good grief, girl. You almost didn’t exist.”

Firah nodded her head in agreement. “Mom blurted out everything to Father. He admitted to her that he’d loved her from the first time he saw her. He asked her to marry him and she agreed for my sake, even though she didn’t love him. When I was born they told everyone I was premature.”

“Arthur kept this secret from you all his life. Why not take it to his grave?” I asked.

“I think it was because...you know, he’d missed so much of my life because of his being sick. My recitals, birthdays...stuff like that...would go by, with him in bed. I think he wanted me to know he was there for me when it really counted. He wanted me to know that he’d saved my life. And, he thought I might want to know my sister.”

I shook my head. “It’s crazy that someone would kill herself because she was pregnant,” I said. “Or, marry someone they don’t love.” I pictured Arthur with his long sad face and red hair lank and lifeless due to illness. It was easy to see why Arthur thought
the beautiful Beezie was an opportunity at love he’d never see again. “There were other options for Beezie,” I said.

“Mom comes from a different world, Starr. They play by a whole different set of rules in Iran. Father knew one family that Mom told him about who actually killed their pregnant daughter. It was considered an honor killing—to protect the family honor—and nobody said boo about it. Mom didn’t think Grandma would kill her, but she was so ashamed. You know, the Iranian community in PF is large...she had many friends who she felt would scorn her, plus people back in her village in Iran she still corresponded with.”

“Beezie’s secret is safe with me,” I said.

“Old news,” said Firah. “Nobody but Grandma would care about that now. What I care about is my sister. Will you help me find her?”

I knew I looked doubtful. “Emotionally very risky,” I said.

She let me go, and put her hands on her hips. “Will you help me or not?”

I looked at her beautiful face and came to a decision. “Tell me exactly what I have to do.”

“Letisha told me you’re getting your old job back at Portico Ferry General Hospital for the summer. Right?” Firah asked, her manner all business.

“Yes. I know my way around from when I used to volunteer, so they’ve hired me as a part-time grunt.”

“Good,” she said. “Surely, they have birth certificates on file somewhere.”

I scratched my head. “No. Birth certificates are kept at the courthouse.” I thought a moment. “The nuns had me file some old microfiche once, from before the computer conversion. On it were forms from years when you and I were born. It was a Catholic hospital until the diocese sold it, and the nuns kept their own records, I guess so they could maybe do some converting for the Church. Information like religious preference, baby’s name, parents’ names, birthdates, addresses and stuff. They were filed by date.”

A trill of anticipation weaved into Firah’s voice as she said, “Check that fiche and see if you can find a child born within a
week or two either side of my birth date that lists the father as Zander something or other. Portico Ferry General was a small hospital back then. There can’t be that many forms. If I can get Zander’s last name and the mother’s name, maybe I can find out where my sister is, on the net.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “It may be against hospital policy.”

Firah snorted. “Against policy? Look at you. You’ve got a parrot tattooed on your ankle. Since you’ve been back in PF, I’ve seen you spray hot pink stripes in your hair. Are you really the kind of person who cares about policy? Starr, you know I wouldn’t ask you if it wasn’t important. Without a last name, it’ll be impossible to find my sister. I can’t stand not knowing,” she pleaded.

“Okay,” I relented. I turned to Jack, looking for unbiased input. “No one would care if I got someone’s name off an old hospital form, right?” Jack blinked at me in the same rapid fashion as when I picked him up at the vet’s after he’d been neutered. It was a look that said, “Scream. Run. Hide.”

*Oh, pshaw, Jack. I mean, what harm could it do?*