



A Smokey Annicelli Mystery



EVE MISSING

Ralph Pezzullo

Praise for Eve Missing...



Eve Missing is missing absolutely nothing: plot, pace, characterization and denouement are technically masterful. But a good thriller, like good sex, needs more than technique—and atmosphere abounds whether in powerful, sometimes gritty rendering of the New York scene or lush and leafy California. The story is a great trip; all four horsemen—sex, jealousy, blackmail, and murder—are along for the full gallop. It’s roller-coaster ride that explores power, corruption and fear among people who slipped into quick-cash worlds and can’t pull out...This is not a book to leave on a Quaker grandmother’s breakfast table or a colleague’s desk: in either case, *Eve* will go missing in ten seconds flat, though the reason may differ.”

~ *ForeWord*

A roller coaster ride of deception, sex, murder and betrayal. *Eve Missing* will keep you enthralled and guessing until the last page. Pezzullo has created the beginning of a strong series...and readers will find themselves waiting for the next installment.”

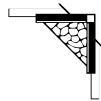
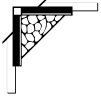
~ *Mystery Morgue*

“Ralph Pezzullo’s debut novel, *Eve Missing*, is as hard boiled a noir mystery as hard boiled can get. The writing is skilled, crisp, raw. The fast pace is constant and rhythmic.”

~ *Best Sellers World*

“What does ***Eve Missing*** have to recommend it? A whole lot. Great lead characters, a whole line-up of colorful supporting characters, some sexy and emotionally complex women, a terrific plot, great scenery...I could go on and on. Pezzullo’s a whole lot better than practically every other contemporary mystery writer out there and this is his first book.”

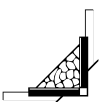
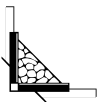
~ *Review Index*



Eve
MISSING

BY

RALPH PEZZULLO



ZUMAYA ENIGMA

2012

AUSTIN TX

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

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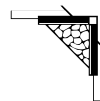
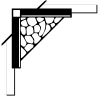
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***To the survivors and the
dead, and the dance that
never ends.***

Acknowledgments

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Chapter 1

It was drizzling when my partner Wolf and I got the call—some joker was smacking his girlfriend. A woman upstairs had the decency to dial 911. Nothing unusual about that, except that it was five-thirty in the afternoon.

I remember the time because we were sitting in our car listening to the Yankee game. The Bombers were losing, which was unusual that season. Mattingly was on the disabled list. McDowell was struggling with a sore shoulder.

The call came in. Wolf threw his coffee cup out the window. It hit the can and splashed all over the sidewalk, startling a fat Hispanic woman who started squawking and waving her umbrella.

“Stick a taco in it!” Wolf said. He smiled his big wolf smile and sped off, squealing rubber, which sent the lady into hysterics.

Wolf was tired. I’d been trying like hell to get him to take a couple of days off. Go fishing or something. Just chill out by himself and figure out his next move. I was telling him about the new Mexican place on Broadway I’d taken my wife Amy to the night before. He didn’t want to hear about it.

See, Wolf was in a real foul mood. I could hardly blame him. He suspected his wife of barely two years was fooling around. I mean, he had pretty good proof.

And he didn’t know what to do. He was struggling between just saying “To hell with you!” (which was my suggestion) and doing the manly thing, which to his way of thinking meant confronting the guy and his wife.

Two months later, he did confront them. He came home, saw the boyfriend’s SUV parked outside, went into his own house, found his wife sucking the guy’s tool on the living room rug and blew them both away. I

hear it was real ugly. He's been on the lam ever since. Rumor has it he's either renting sailboats in Aruba, prospecting for gold somewhere in Venezuela or raising Chihuahuas in the DR. Wherever you are, Wolf, *vaya con Diós*.

Like I said, Wolf was in a foul mood, and I wasn't doing so great, either. The night before at the Mexican restaurant hadn't gone well. The food was great, but Amy and I were snapping at each other like a couple of pissed-off turtles. She didn't like it when I took her into Manhattan; she preferred our little neighborhood in Queens. She said when I was in the city I acted like I was showing off.

The night hadn't been right, and the day wasn't right, and now we had this call.

So, we headed up Amsterdam, past the botanicas with their voodoo and Santeria statues, turned right at 108th Street, stopped in front of the building and got out. About half a dozen people were waiting for us, babbling in Spanish. One old woman pointed up at the fifth floor and rasped, "He got a *pistola!*"

Wolf, action junkie that he is, was already bounding up the stairs. I could feel the adrenaline pushing him higher, so I yelled at his back, "Careful, Wolf, he might be armed!"

That got him even more excited. I caught a glimpse of that wild look in his eye. The eye of the hunter. Wolf was out for blood.

Me, I wasn't in synch. My timing or my chemistry or my stars weren't right. I knew that for certain when I slipped on the second-to-last step and hit my chin on my knee. Stars in my head, blood on my lip, I entered. There was a boldly colored statue of Jesus. I kicked over some candles. A big velvet picture of some bare-chested señorita holding a dog. That got my attention.

What's up with that? I was thinking, when out of the corner of my eye I saw Wolf smacking the guy in the teeth with his nightstick.

"Wolf! Wolfie, for Christsakes, ease up!"

No dice. The guy's mouth was a mess of red, white and gold. His upper lip was curled into a scream, and he was pointing to a shiny gold tooth on the rug. A little brown dog wandered over with its tongue out. It was just about to lick the tooth when, in the mirrored leg of a table, I saw a pair of naked legs kick open a door. What door, I couldn't ascertain in the mix of sharp angles, deep colors and light.

I was totally disoriented, still wondering how I could get Wolf to stop. He was having too much fun. A whack or two I could tolerate. Especially for some boyfriend who liked to rough up his chick.

In our book, it didn't matter who was right or who was wrong. It would take two years and a team of experts to get to the bottom of it, and what-

ever they came up with wouldn't mean much in court. So, a whack or two was fine. Even I didn't mind that.

But this was already way beyond that, and progressing quickly into a long stay in the hospital and charges of police brutality. I figured the broad was no problem. I had to shut down Wolf.

I made a lunge for his stick. Grabbed it with my right hand, twisted it down and to the right. Wolf looked at me with eyes full of bile. Then I caught a flash of something that I knew was fear. It got my attention because it definitely didn't fit.

Wolf shouted, "Duck!" He propelled himself like an Olympic diver on speed behind a huge bamboo credenza. As he did that, the boyfriend crumpled on my feet. I mean, crumpled like a sack of potatoes. I couldn't move.

I had to look up. I had no other choice. She was the tallest Latina I ever saw. Pretty in a severe kind of way, very tense and holding a piece. A little silver automatic. Might have been a .32.

Two things registered in that half-second. One was her bottom lip, which stuck out like a bruised plum and shook so hard it was spraying orange-red blood all over the front of her frilly white blouse. It flashed in my mind, *She's anemic*.

The other thing I noticed was that she was naked from the waist down. No shoes, no stockings, no panties. Nothing. She had a thick tuft of black pubic hair that had been trimmed in the shape of a heart. I'd never seen anything like that. I think I actually had a smile on my lips when I met her eyes.

An old detective friend once told me that if a perp ever caught me in their sights, lock into their eyes like radar. Don't blink. Don't let the surprise or terror push you away. But the juxtaposition of elements—the lip; the orange blood; the girl's long, naked legs; and the pubic hair cut into the shape of a heart—I wanted to say something smart. Something like "Won't you be my valentine?" You know, to cut the tension.

The desperation mixed with hatred in her eyes hit me like a hurricane. I wasn't prepared. I couldn't stand my ground. It was the power in them, the power like when a person decides *This is where I draw the line*.

I flinched, see. I looked away.



The official story, printed in the papers, is that I either froze like a coward or made a move for her gun. As in too many news stories, neither was even half-true. And the iota that was true was totally misleading.

All of it happened in half a second, so I had no time to draw my gun. Like that would have made any difference under the circumstances. I mean, her bludgeoned boyfriend was bleeding at my feet. What was she supposed to think? She knew this wasn't a party.

She didn't say a thing. She just pulled the trigger.

The moment I heard the first brush of metal, I knew I was screwed. It was *bang, bang, bang, bang!* Searing pain ripping into my side. Both my knees buckled to the left and popped. As I went down, there was another shot.



I figured I was done for, but I felt nothing. Whatever the medics shot me up with worked like a charm. Just flashes of colors, faces and hallways. My head seemed big and rubbery. I distinctly remember someone asking me over and over *What's your name?*

I didn't answer. I *couldn't* answer. I remember thinking *What's wrong with this guy? Can't he read my nametag?*

I remember some fat guy in the ambulance talking about the girl, and how she looked so beautiful when they found her, even though her head had crashed into a tank of goldfish and there was a bullet hole in her forehead. But everybody swears there was no fat guy in the ambulance. Who the hell knows?

Weird shit happens. And really weird shit happens when people mess up. Wolf and I had messed up big time. We had messed up so bad we couldn't even tell our story. And what happens when you can't tell your story is that the suits swoop in and tell it for you. You become a character in some bad TV cop show you wish you could turn off. You're watching it unfold numbly before your eyes, and you don't even recognize yourself. It looks like you, but it's not you, really. Because you would never act like that. No human being would.

And the horror is that you find out the thing they've created is a lot more powerful than you.

I was so full of painkillers I didn't have a clue. I had a vague understanding I'd been shot, but my mind was filled with cotton candy. Impressions, faces, bits of conversation, parts of melodies would disperse into the haze before I had a chance to wrap my hands around them. I was gone. On holiday from reality. And a good thing I was, because had I known I would have croaked right there.



It was two and a half weeks before I could really latch on to anything. The first thing I saw was my wife. Amy had a puss on her three miles long. I tried to sit up. There were shooting pains in my side. I tried to move my head. It felt as big and soggy as a watermelon. I could barely move my arms, my legs. I was weak. Real weak. But at least my appendages were all working.

Amy had her furrowed forehead buried into a batch of what looked like sixth-grade homework.

I said, "I thought I was the one here who's in pain."

She looked up, squinted, shook her head slowly from side to side, biting the side of her mouth like she does when she's had it, and said, "Right, Tony, right." Then she started to weep.

"How long have I been lying here?" I asked.

"Over three weeks." She threw the papers down on a little table, wiped her eyes on her sleeve and stuck a Marlboro Lite between her lips. I thought for a minute she was actually going to light it. I was so amazed and disoriented, I didn't know what to say.

I bit my lip, summoned all my courage and asked, "Am I going to live?"

"If you want to, Tony." She got up and looked out the door as though she was looking for someone more interesting to pass the time with.

I wanted to feel sorry for myself, but instead I was getting pissed.

"What the hell's going on here, Amy?"

She turned back, shut the door gently, ruffled her hair and laughed. It was a hard, dry laugh, like shingles falling off a dilapidated house. This time, I noticed the black circles carved under her eyes. She seemed heavier to me. Her face was fuller. Her voice was ripped in places and still not fixed. And she had changed the color of her hair.

Amy had never really cared about her appearance, in a this-is-who-I-am, schoolteacher kind of way. But her makeup, her dress, the new pocketbook by her feet, the way she wore her hair were all more self-conscious, more planned. Something significant had happened.

I wanted to find out right away.

"Are you seeing someone else?"

The moment I spoke the words, it seemed like a totally preposterous thing to ask. But I wanted to find my footing.

"I wish I were," she answered wearily. She meant it. And in that moment, I knew our marriage was kaput. I didn't have an inkling why, but I knew it was finished.

I looked at her eyes. Something was dead. Something I had known since we first met in high school. Something I had depended on through summer vacations, dates, night in motels, marriage, struggles to get established, paying bills, raising kids. It was still there taking up space, but where it once sparkled with mischief, lust, envy, fear, hunger, now the light—the spark, if you will—was out.

Suddenly, I felt tired. Very tired.

I said, "Amy, you don't belong here. I want you to go home."

I closed my eyes and fell asleep and dreamed of throwing bluefish back into the Sound.



I saw her again two weeks later when she came to visit with her lawyer, a cold creep in a brown suit named Skorman who explained in absurdly circuitous language how Amy needed to get away. How she was taking our two girls and moving to some town I'd never heard of in Florida. How she wasn't shutting me out. How the whole thing had been an unimaginable strain on her. How she had defended me and taken all the blows while I was sleeping it off in the hospital. How it was more than most marriages could bear.

I just kept nodding at the curly-haired bastard, thinking, *What kind of human being can eviscerate a marriage, a sacred pact between two people, with such bland, careful language delivered in a flat monotone? Like it means nothing.*

I watched Amy the whole time. She kept looking away. Tending to her cuticles, mostly. I caught her eyes once, fleetingly, over his shoulder. Disappointingly, they were devoid of emotion.

Poor Amy, I thought. *This has overloaded her circuits.*

I can't say I was surprised. By this time, I knew the whole horror story that had been constructed in my absence. I'd heard it from lawyers and colleagues and from Wolf. He'd snuck in one night at two-thirty in the morning, stinking drunk, vowing to "set it all straight" and "stick it to the bastards," but I could see he was in way over his head.

I saw the headlines in the *Post*, the ones that screamed "Cop Freezes under Pressure!" "Lover Girl Shoots Cop in Self-defense!" "Cop Can't Defend Himself!" "Police Chief Won't Defend Yellow Cop!" "Disgraced Cop Broke Rules!"

The official version was so convoluted and wrong it took me weeks to fully comprehend. I don't know what Wolf and the boyfriend actually told them. I mean, they had to tell them something. I mean, they were the only people who were there.

Whatever they said, the suits constructed a story that was pathetically self-serving and weak. Still, everyone concerned—the press, the mayor, the police union, the commissioner, the community—chose to believe it.

It went something like this.

The girl, Virginia Alvarez, was suicidal. Her boyfriend was concerned she would kill him then take her own life. So, he called the police. When Wolf and I arrived on the scene, Virginia had a gun trained on her boyfriend, whom she had already pistol-whipped.

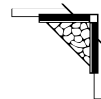
Wolf suggested we call for backup, but I, against stated department procedure, tried to get her to relinquish the weapon. When she wouldn't listen to reason, I closed in on her. That's when she shot me and killed herself.

Every damn piece of it was untrue. I was disappointed. Couldn't they have come up with something better than that?

Wolf got off clean. Why the boyfriend went along with the story is a story in itself, which stems from the fact he had a record and was facing another charge for assault-and-battery of a bodega owner. I came off looking like either a coward or an idiot, or some combination of both. According to them, I single-handedly managed to get shot and contribute to Virginia's taking her own life.

I wasn't in any condition to fight. I just wanted my health back. I wanted to walk out of that hospital on my own two feet and start my life over.

I got that and more. As a reward for keeping my mouth shut, I was retired from the force with a special disability, a full pension and a large monetary award. Basically, I would never have to work another day in my life. They wanted me to go away quietly. I couldn't. I'm not the going-away, retiring type.



Chapter 2

That happened almost eleven years ago. It took me a good nine months to get back on my feet. Physically on my feet. My right side is messed up from my shoulder to my foot. And the psychological wounds are still healing. Maybe they'll never go away.

With what I'm getting every month, I should be soaking up the rays in Florida. Reeling in the marlin and bluefish. But that's not me. Like I say, I'm a curious SOB. That's why my friends call me Smokey, as in "smoke things out."

My real name is Tony Annicelli. I was brought up to believe that good people are born to suffer. Like the early Christian martyrs, you take your slings and arrows like a man and wait for your rewards in heaven.

And suffer in silence I did. I even felt guilty about the money—the disability and pension I was collecting—so I did my damndest to piss it away on sports betting and ponies. Still, I was on my feet, and before the heavenly rewards came around, I wanted to do something.

That's why I eventually called a friend of mine—an ex-cop named Albert "Tiger" Vanderwall—to get together for lunch. Tiger was doing something on the commodities exchange I didn't understand. Sounded like a lot of number-crunching and shuffling papers. Tiger looked small, but he was making a pile of money, which he was trying hard to convince me eased the pain.

He knew I wasn't buying it, but he was buying lunch. It was a fancy new northern Italian place on the Eastside where ex-cops like us were seldom seen. We didn't fit in with the lacquered, blond, face-lifted ladies in their tight designer suits, the gay interior decorators and antiques salesmen, the steely-eyed businessmen and financial buccaneers.

We were fellow victims. We'd both been screwed. Even though Tiger hadn't caught a bullet, he was, in a sense, hurting even more than me. He'd been set up by a group of women on the force who charged him with sexual harassment. He had made the mistake of asking them out one too many times.

It was a period in his life when he was having some trouble with his girlfriend. She wanted to get married; he didn't. She threatened to leave him.

She started seeing some other guy. Tiger acted stupid, no question, but—harassment? No way.

He'd been warned by his supervisor to leave the three women alone. Like an idiot, he asked one of them out again. Asked her to meet him for a drink in the Oak Room of the Plaza. He still swears she's the one who suggested they get together; he was only naming a time and place. But in the climate of sexual paranoia that was sweeping the department, Tiger was sent packing. End of story.

It came out later the three women were out to get men. One of them even bragged to a friend that they had "bagged their first pig."

Tiger couldn't even get a hearing.

So, he got as far away from badges and patrol cars as he could. But he's still got a burn on. And he keeps in touch with guys on the force. He says he does it for selfish reasons—managing their financial portfolios, helping them invest their money. But the word around the station is that if you want help with anything, Tiger is the guy to tap.

So, I did.

There was no explaining with Tiger. He knew the real story. He wanted to know what he could do to help.



The waiter was clearing cannoli crumbs off the table. Tiger set down his cup of cappuccino.

"So, Smokey, what are you gonna do?"

"I gotta find something, Tiger," I said. "I'm only thirty-six. I wanta be useful."

"That's nothing to be ashamed of," he muttered, looking over my shoulder at the coat-check girl.

"I can't walk away from it like you."

He looked at me hard. He grabbed the waiter's shoulder and ordered us a couple of Sambucas. Then he pushed back his thinning black hair and reached into his pocket. He handed me a card.

"This guy's a friend of mine," he said. "Give him a call."

Sabino Goldstick. He had a reputation a mile long. Used to be a cop, walked off the job one day because he didn't like all the red tape, liked to do things his way. Was reported to have connections to the Mob, got things done, made a load of money, operated out of a townhouse on the Upper Eastside.

"Sab's a good egg. He'll like you."

"I don't want to work for him," I said.

Tiger asked for the check.

"Who said anything about working for him? You talk to him, he helps you. He'll want to help you, Smokey. You're his kind of guy."

We were getting our coats. The coat-check girl was flirting with Tiger. “What’d you mean by that, Tiger?” I asked. “What’d you mean when you said I’m his kind of guy.”

Tiger smiled and took me by the shoulders.

“You’re your own man, Smoke. You’re your own man. You always were.”

It was the nicest thing he could have said to me at that moment in my life. I carried that thought with me through the next several weeks, until I got up the nerve to call Sabino Goldstick.

His secretary took a message. An hour later, his personal assistant called back, inviting me to meet him the next day for a swim, steam and lunch at the New York Athletic Club. I accepted.

The next day was a Thursday, and it was raining hard. I took a cab uptown from the apartment I rented on Ninth Avenue and 23rd Street. All the way up Eighth, the driver was talking about how the marathon was going to be washed out. I wasn’t really listening. I kept thinking that I was approaching a crossroads in my life.

I wanted to talk about it, but there was only this driver cackling away about drowned rats and soggy running shoes in an accent that was either Spanish or eastern European. I thought about Amy and the girls, so far away in Florida. I hadn’t talked to my brother Joey in weeks. I was too embarrassed to call my friends.

Then it struck me—I was alone. Really alone. Sure, I talked to the girls a couple of times a week, but I didn’t really tell them anything. Amy had her own problems. Vanessa was fourteen; the younger one, Lara, was having trouble adjusting—she didn’t like her new school.

“You okay, mister?” the cabbie asked. We were stopped in front of the NYAC. It was time to pay the meter.

I handed him a twenty.

“Keep the change.”

“Hey, thanks,” he said.



Sabino Goldstick was waiting for me in the lounge. He must have been in his late sixties, a big, thickly built man with a handsome, weathered face that exuded a mysterious confidence. He didn’t dress to attract attention—he had on a beautiful gray suit that matched his slicked-back hair. There was something distinctly Mediterranean about him. I could picture him in southern France or Italy on a yacht.

Tasteful. Very tasteful.

He spoke in a soft but gruff voice and took me by the arm.

“I’m glad you made it. I hear you’ve had a tough time.”

He seemed to be in a hurry, ushering me past Wall Street guys, judges, media heavies, bankers, lawyers, doctors. The creme de la creme. Sabino had a funny glint in his eye.

“I like to take a swim and steam first. Is that okay?”

He wasn't pushing, but he made it clear he was in charge. In the carpeted, wood-stalled locker room, he waved at the attendants. They jumped. Soon, I had towels, a robe, slippers, a basket for my wallet and change.

“I don't have a bathing suit, Sab.”

“You don't need one here,” he said.

I wasn't really planning on going swimming anyway. Not that I didn't like swimming, but since the shooting I hadn't shown my wounds in public.

We were out by the pool in a grand atrium kind of room. There was only one guy in a bathing cap swimming laps in the pool. The rest of the swells took up the lounge chairs, wrapped in towels, talking, sipping martinis and beers.

Sabino pointed to his head and held up two fingers. Seconds later, an attendant was at his side with two yellow bathing caps.

“No white?” he asked.

“This is all we have today, sir.”

“I'll feel like a canary.”

He fitted it on his head and, with a big flourish, whipped off his robe. He had everyone's attention, and in a second or two, I knew why.

I had forgotten Sabino had been shot, too. Shot in the chest during a heroin bust, if I remember correctly. He had barely survived, and it was easy to see why. He had a deep scar that swung like a bandolier across his chest.

He winked at me, as if to say *See, we have something in common*. Then, with a bounce in his step, he headed for the pool.

An attendant showed me to a wicker armchair in the corner. He apologized that there weren't any more lounge chairs.

“No problem,” I said.

I didn't feel like I belonged. Taking it further, I started to think I was really a round peg in a world of square holes when, all of a sudden, I heard Sab chewing out one of the attendants. He was standing at the side of the pool, hands on his hips, stabbing a finger into the guy's chest.

Then he hurried over.

“Dumb asshole. Puts you in a goddamn corner.” He was fuming.

“It's okay, Sab. It's nothing.” I got to my feet.

We were in front of the whole gallery of swells when he whispered in my ear, “Drop the robe.”

It was a command, and uttered in a voice that was totally in control. It dawned on me the scene by the pool had been an act to get everyone's attention.

He whispered again, “Drop the robe,” and this time, he pulled at the cord.

So, I dropped the robe without thinking about why I hadn’t wanted to take it off.

There was a collective gasp from the crowd, then silence. All their eyes were on the four nasty red gashes that ran like steps down the side of my body.

Sab took me by the arm and escorted me proudly to the steam room.

He didn’t say a thing until we sat down for lunch. That’s when it began—the stream of judges, lawyers, bankers, bishops and assorted other dignitaries who came over to pay their respects to Sab. And to be introduced to me. We drank our Heinekens, chatted a little about the Giants. Then Sab leaned over and said, “Let’s get out of this dump.”

We had already ordered lunch, but that didn’t seem to bother Sab in the least. Everything up to this point had been done for effect, and, judging from his face, he was pleased with the results.

I was feeling a whole lot better myself.

We climbed into his car, a non-imposing gray Lincoln, and took off. Our destination was a quiet Japanese joint in the 40s off Sixth. We were escorted to a private room in the back, where Sab said, “If you’re not into Japanese, kid, they’ll make you anything you want.”

I ordered another Heineken and some shrimp tempura. Sab asked for sushi and soup. While we waited, two Asian girls in kimonos came in to massage our feet. I was feeling good for the first time in months when Sab’s driver hurried in. He whispered something in Sab’s ear and left.

Sab drank his soup and laced up his shoes.

“You okay, kid?” he asked.

“It looks delicious,” I answered. “Thanks.”

A hot steaming platter of shrimp tempura had just been set before me. It almost looked too beautiful to eat.

“I hate to do this, Smokey, but I’ve got to go. Problems. Always somebody else’s problem they want me to fix. But that’s my thing.” He stood and patted me on the shoulder. “Don’t be a stranger.”

We hadn’t really had a chance to talk. All I could say was, “Thank you.”

But that wasn’t nearly enough. I wanted to get to know him better. It was only after I finished my tempura and headed downtown I started to realize what he had done.

In a very short period of time, Sabino had restored me in a very fundamental way. The more I thought about it, the more impressive it became. In his own cunning, idiosyncratic way, Sab had given me back my reputation and some of my self-respect.

Everyone at the club had heard my story and probably dismissed me as some kind of loser. Seeing me like that, seeing the scars cut into my body, changed everything. I wasn’t a face, a name, a picture in the paper.

I was a real flesh-and-blood man who had suffered in the line of duty. People respected that.

I sensed they even knew I had been given a bad rap and had taken it like a man. They respected me for that, too.

I felt revived. I really did. Suddenly, Sabino Goldstick, of all people, had become some kind of guardian angel to me. Or, dare I say, my godfather. I didn't know Sabino Goldstick, yet he had gone out of his way to do something really special for me.

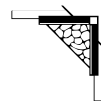
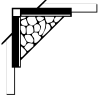
I felt better about myself. I wanted to fix up my place, throw out the instant and buy real coffee, make friends, get a life. I even cut back on the betting. Stopped spending my afternoons with the riffraff at OTB, lost the number of my bookie. Stopped concerning myself with how many points they were giving the Knicks against the Bulls.

I hadn't done anything wrong. I kept trying to beat that into my thick skull. Something bad had happened. I had to deal with it. Like my Neopolitan grandmother used to say, "Things happen for a reason." Why what happened to me happened I didn't understand...yet. But I was going to.

I took stock. My marriage was over, but that was no big surprise. As good and loving as Amy could be, she just wasn't very strong. How many times had I told her, "You can't hide from life. You can't hide from who you are. You can't hide from the truth." I wanted to face things, to find out what was going on. Amy, on the other hand, wanted to nest in her nice little house and shut out the world.

"Good luck, Amy" was all I could say.

The next day, I got a call from Sab's office. It was his personal assistant Gretchen, asking me if I needed anything. I told her I was fine. When I asked to speak to Sab she told me he was out of the country on business. I told her to ask him to call me when he got back.



Chapter 3

A month went by. Then, one Sunday afternoon in early December, I'm turning on the Giants game when I get a call from the lobby. The doorman tells me there's some girl downstairs who wants to see me. Her name is Lina something. I tell him to send her up.

She's shivering in the dim yellow light. She has a bony, dramatically structured face with deep-set green eyes. She reaches into her ragged sheepskin coat and hands me a card. I recognize it immediately. It's Sabino's.

"This man said you could help me out." Her voice is tired. She lets the cigarette fall from her lips then remembers and picks it up from the carpet. "Sorry."

I watch her crush it out on the bottom of her boot and stash the butt in her pocket. I'm standing in the doorway thinking I'd better let her in.

I take her mangy coat, toss it on the stack of papers next to my old leather chair and make her some tea. I order her a hamburger from the deli downstairs. Run a hot bath. Let her sleep in my bed.

After the Giants game is over, and the Jets, too, she reenters the living room rubbing her eyes. She's wearing a T-shirt and a pair of cotton underwear. I lead her to the sofa, give her a blanket and fix her some more tea. Now that's she's gotten some rest and some food in her stomach, I can see she's probably no more than fifteen.

"I'm fourteen. I'll be fifteen in February."

"What's your name?" I ask.

She looks up at me suspiciously then surveys my place.

"Lina."

"Hi, Lina, my name's Tony. My friends call me Smokey."

She sneezes three times in succession. I fetch her a box of Kleenex and a bag. Wiping her little nose, she asks, "You know a man named Rodney Heinslip?"

"No, I don't." I'm wondering if I should be calling Sab to find out what this is all about. Suddenly, she's weeping quietly. I don't intrude. I refill her cup, get her a pair of my old crew socks and let her cry.

When she stops she goes to the window and looks out. The neon on the store across the street turns her hair red. She stands there a long time. The room is dark. I don't turn on the lights. I feel she needs this time to herself.

With her back still to me, facing the window, she lifts her arms and removes her T-shirt. She bends down and removes her panties. I think, *She's trying to shed her past.* She faces the window for a long time.

After about twenty minutes, she picks up her clothes and throws them at me. They land between my feet and the coffee table. She turns and, with her hands on her hips, asks, like a little girl, "What do you want?"

I can't even see her. She's all in shadow.

"What do *you* want, Lina?" I ask back.

She's a tall, skinny teenager. Not sexy. No longer innocent. She's not even really young. She's just sad, angry and hurt. I feel her pain like a tight fist around my stomach.

"You want a new life, Lina?"

"I just want a life, period," she answers abruptly.

"I know what you mean."

I get up and walk into the bedroom, where I grab some of my underwear, a pair of khaki pants, a ski sweater and a shirt. I leave them for her on the sofa. Then I call Amy and my girls.

Lina listens for a minute, dresses and turns on the TV. I take her downstairs for dinner, where she orders another hamburger, hash browns and a side of cottage cheese. She tells me her dream is to become a fashion model. She tells me that, two summers ago at the beach, she was approached by a famous photographer, who took some pictures of her and told her she has "the look."

We go back upstairs. Halfway into *Murder, She Wrote*, Lina falls asleep on the sofa.

The next morning, the sound of her shutting the front door wakes me. She doesn't return. I think about calling Sabino but decide to go test-drive some cars instead. When I get back around one, my machine has two messages on it from a lawyer named Rodney Heinslip. He tells me it's urgent.

I call him back. He says he's Lina's guardian. He's sending a car out to get me and bring me to his office in New Rochelle.

I say, "Fine."

Two hours later, he's pointing me to one of his tufted leather chairs. Right away I don't like this guy. He's stuffed into a three-piece striped blue suit. His hand feels clammy. The grease from his hair shines on his forehead. He wears a smug, self-satisfied sneer on his yellow blob of a face.

Suddenly, it screws up into a scowl.

"Lina Paletti," he mutters, scratching the arm of his chair.

"Yeah?" I ask.

"You know her?"

"I've met her."

Heinslip leans his ample body forward; his face is a suspicious, straining-to-be-amiable smudge.

“When?”

“Why don’t you stop the interrogation, Rodney, and tell me what this is all about?”

He frowns at me and swallows hard. I have the urge to bury my fist in his very ample stomach. He rubs his double chin and lowers his voice for effect.

“Lina is a very, very troubled kid,” he says.

“I got that.”

“How?”

“I looked at her, Rodney. Now, why don’t you cut the lawyerly crap, and tell me what this is all about.”

“I can tell you have an interest in her,” he says.

“And I could ask you how you got my number.”

He pretends to laugh, as though he appreciates my moxie, but I know he’d rather put me in a vise. He strikes me right away as a squeezer. A guy who likes to squeeze people and find out what he can get out of them. I decide right there and then he’s getting nothing out of me.

His oppressed-looking secretary brings us coffee, a couple of twisted powdered donuts, and he begins to spin his yarn. As hard as he tries to sound sincere, I can tell right away it’s probably seventy-five-percent bull. The guy’s a lousy actor.

What he has to say goes something like this: Lina was referred to him a couple of months ago by the driving instructor at her school. Apparently, she had confided to her driving instructor she was having serious problems at home and was afraid her father was going to beat her up or even kill her. She made an appointment to see Heinslip but never showed up.

A month later, Heinslip got a call from Lina’s mother. Lina had run away from home and was living with a man in his mid-thirties. She and her husband hired Heinslip to go see the man, threaten him with legal action and get their daughter back.

Heinslip was willing to help Lina but reluctant to return her to her parents because of what he had learned previously about her father. He succeeded in finding Lina and having her put in the care of a legal guardian. Now, some four months later, Lina had disappeared again.

“Maybe she’s with that guy. The thirty-year-old boyfriend,” I suggest.

“No, Mr. Annicelli. Don’t you think that’s the first place I checked?”

“What do you want from me?”

“If you know where Lina is, I want you to get her back to me. I think she’s in trouble. Serious trouble. And she doesn’t know how to cope.”

“I don’t know where she is, Rodney.”

“Well...”

I get up and put on my jacket.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Heinslip stands up and maneuvers his pear-shaped body into my path.

“This is a serious matter, sir, involving an underage girl. If I were you, I would be very careful what I—”

I step down hard on his wing-tipped foot and push around him.

“Mind your manners, Heinslip.”



Conveniently, there was a car rental place across the street. That night, at around eleven-thirty, just as it starts to snow, Lina shows up at my door. I take her out to dinner and tell her Rodney Heinslip called. I watch as the mention of his name makes her practically sick to her stomach.

“I had almost the same reaction,” I say, reaching for the duck sauce.

“You have no idea.”

I tell her that, if she wants me to help her, she has to tell me her side of the story. It goes something like this: she’d been having problems at home since she was a little girl. Basically, her father didn’t like the way she behaved. Sometimes, when she acted up, he’d blow his stack and slap her around. Her mother blamed her for making her father mad.

Things got worse two summers ago when she met the photographer she had mentioned to me earlier. He took some shots of her. Nothing too provocative. When her father found out, he flipped out. He pushed her into the basement, stripped her naked and beat her with his belt. This excited him sexually. Lina didn’t want to talk about the rest.

The upshot was that she escaped the house that night and found Hans, the photographer. Hans introduced her to a guy named Harvey Mann, who owns a couple of restaurants and offered to put her up.

Apparently, Hans and Harvey ran in a pretty fast crowd, and Lina did her best to try to keep up. She admitted to doing coke and experimenting with other drugs and participating in several “sex parties.” I didn’t need to hear the details. I could fill those in myself.

That’s where Rodney Heinslip stepped in. He basically blackmailed everyone—Hans, Harvey and several of their friends. He made himself Lina’s legal guardian, bargaining sexual favors from her in return for not telling her dad about Harvey and Hans. She put up with that for about a month before she ran away.

Before seeking refuge in Manhattan, she stopped to see her driving instructor. By this point, she didn’t trust him, either, but she was strung out and needed help. He gave her Sabino Goldstick’s name and number.

The whole thing makes me sick, but especially the part about Rodney Heinslip. I call Tiger and a couple of friends on the force and ask them if they can meet me at Heinslip’s house in New Rochelle on Saturday.



It was a clean brick colonial set-up with two white columns in the front. We got there at ten in the morning, while Rodney and his wife were still eating pancakes. Rodney didn't want to let us in.

"That's all right, Rodney, be the rude asshole that you are," I say. Then I point out Lina sitting in the back seat of my car. "She wants to meet your wife."

"No! Now, hold on. Wait a minute..." He's sputtering like a pig wrapped in a silk paisley robe.

"Come on, Rodney, the kid wants to meet her." I wave to Lina in the car. She shoots Heinslip the finger.

He begs me to leave his wife out of this.

"It'll kill her, I swear!" he pleads. "She's got severe high blood pressure. She was just in the hospital for a mild stroke!"

I tell him he was right when he told me Lina needed help. And that he is the one who is going to provide it. He says he isn't going to be strong-armed. Tiger, who is with me, says he's been instructed by Sabino Goldstick to set up the appropriate financial instruments. Suddenly, Heinslip turns white.

"Sabino Goldstick?" sputters Rodney.

"You know him?" I ask.

The rest is simple. Rodney is eager to cooperate and makes all the necessary payments and takes care of all the paperwork on time. Lina is set up in a special rooming house in Greenwich Village. I see her through some really bad times. Somehow, she manages to pull through. We stay in touch, remain friends.



Now, almost ten years later, she's a supermodel with a seven-figure income, a townhouse on the Upper Westside and her face on the cover of *Vogue*. Her only male friends these days, besides me, are gay—designers, hairdressers, stylists, makeup artists. One of them told me she's into women.

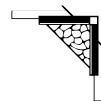
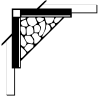
I really don't care. I know a little bit about what she's been through, and it kind of makes sense. She's no longer just a hurt, mixed-up teenage girl. She's a tough businesswoman who has learned the laws of the jungle the hard way. Even though we don't share the same lifestyle, I figure more power to her. She's survived. One misstep, and you can be screwed for life.

I've seen it happen, time after time and again.

In the last nine years, I've spoken to Sabino Goldstick a grand total of, maybe, half a dozen times. Every three or four months, like clockwork, he sends me another case. I've been to Iran, China, Mongolia, Malaysia,

Honduras, Guatemala, the Fiji Islands. I was in Pakistan last summer springing a kid from jail. I was in India last year recovering some film star's stolen airplane. I was in Colombia last month negotiating with the rebels for a kidnapped auto executive.

I'm a fixer. I like to fix things. I like the people part of this business the best.



Chapter 4

Like I was saying, I keep in touch with Lina. Every year she throws a big Christmas bash, and I drop in. Maybe twice or three times a year we get together for Peruvian chicken at a great little joint I know on upper Broadway. Or we meet for a drink. So, I didn't think anything was out of the ordinary six months ago when she called.

I call her back the next day.

"What's up, Lina? Want to have lunch?"

"Lunch? No, that's impossible. I've leaving for Milan tomorrow, and I have to talk to you tonight." She sounds rushed and like something is the matter.

I walk up Central Park West and knock on her door about eight o'clock. Her roommate, a gay black man named Eugene, answers.

"Come on in, darling, I'm just fixing some lamb. You're staying for dinner, aren't you?" He's wearing a purple Chinese robe that reaches his knees. An Etta James album blares from the front parlor, a room he and Lina keep stocked with an assortment of exotic plants.

"I've got to see, Lina," I say.

He points up the big mahogany staircase.

"She's in her room."

The place is in total disarray. It stinks of the lavender candles burning throughout the room. Clothes, shoes, suitcases and scarves cover everything. An assistant with a clipboard is checking things off.

"Is that you, Smokey?" Lina brays in a dramatic singsong voice. She's picked up more than a few affectations over the years. One is a variety of American and European accents that seem to change by the week. Tonight she sounds like she's from New Orleans.

I find her sitting in the back in a black bra with a towel tied around her head. She has another towel over her lap, and she's having some green gooey stuff spread over her legs. She's got legs. Sleek, long legs. Like Wolf used to say, she's got legs up to her butt.

She dismisses the young woman in a white apron who is doing the spreading. The woman looks up at me like I've just ruined her life.

"You sounded worried," I say.

"I am." She removes the towel covering her privates and starts looking around for something between her thighs. I learned a long time ago that Lina is not modest. I figure if she's got the nerve to flash her booty I've got the nerve to look.

"Do you like it shaved?" she asks nonchalantly.

"Yeah...very nice." I'm sure I'm blushing.

She points to a table behind her and, waving a long arm, says, "Be a sweet love and get my cigs." As I retrieve them, she adds, "And that portfolio over there."

She sticks a thin cigarette in her mouth and hands me a slender silver lighter. I oblige.

"Open it," she says in a burst of smoke, pointing a red fingernail at the portfolio, which is at my feet.

I fight with the zipper. A wad of pictures spill out; they're scattered at my feet. I start picking them up, stacking them neatly, when Lina shakes her head and says, "No, *look*."

I hold them up to the light. They're photos from a fashion shoot that have been marked up with red and white pencil. They show two women in what looks like a Parisian bathroom in the '20s. One model is dressed as the grande dame, the other is playing the maid.

"That's you, isn't it?" I say, pointing at the dame. "You look great."

Actually, I think she looks like she needs a couple more pounds of flesh on her bones, but that's her business. Besides, she does look great.

The grande dame is trying on clothes from her closet then handing them to her maid. She's seen in various states of undress. Then the maid gets into the act. She also tries on clothes. It ends with a series of photos in which the two women are locked in a series of romantic embraces. In the last two, they're both completely naked.

"There are more," says Lina in a low voice, almost like a coo.

"That's okay." I put them away.

"What do you think?" she asks.

"I think it's a strange business. I mean, excuse me, but I don't see what this has to do with selling clothes."

"Oh, Smokey, please," Lina purrs. "It's not rags we're selling. It's romance, fantasy, attitude. But, really, I'm talking about the girl."

"The maid?" I ask.

"Yes, the maid. Did she strike you?"

"Yes, she did." I pick up one picture for a second look. "Very, very beautiful." I don't know what else to say.

"We had a little *entre deux*. A darling, darling creature. Sharp as a viper, but brittle. Oh, my God..."

The way she says it, I think something is wrong. There's a tear in her eye. I almost applaud. I didn't think Lina still had it in her.

She takes my arm and pulls herself closer until I feel her chest trembling against mine.

“She’s gone, Smokey. Disappeared. I’ve looked all over. I’ve called all over. Nobody, I mean, *no one*, has seen hide or hair of her in a month. One *month*. I really...I shouldn’t say this, but I fear the worst.”

“Why?” I look into her rich green eyes. My pants and coat are covered with green goo.

“It’s a feeling,” she says. “Just a feeling. That’s just the way...she lived...”

She lets the sentence trail off like a puff of smoke.

Then she tells me the girl goes by the name of Eve, but her real name is Angela Bowman, and she works for an agency called Q. She suggests I start there.

I do.



I walk in early, carrying a cup of java, my jacket cradled over my arm. The receptionist with the telephone headset barely looks up before she points.

“Deliveries over there.”

“This isn’t a delivery,” I say.

She’s speaking to someone in French on the phone.

“I said, this isn’t a delivery.”

She picks something out of her teeth with a long purple fingernail and exhales hard like the weight of the world is on her shoulders.

“What do you want?”

“I’m here to see Rene Dupour,” I answer.

“You?” she asks, her voice sliding up as she looks me over from top to toe and twists her big mouth into a sneer. “What does he want to see *you* for?”

“That’s none of your damn business, sweetheart. Just tell him Smokey Annicelli is here.”

She smiles her drop-dead smile and points me to the bank of saffron chairs and sofas that line the deep-purple walls. Most of the seats are taken up by tall, skinny girls clutching portfolios and their disheveled, leather-jacketed boyfriends. The girl next to me uncrosses her legs, shakes her hair out and stares at something straight ahead. I look up to discover she’s checking herself out in the mirrored wall.

She sees me looking at her and smiles very briefly. For a moment, I’m self-conscious. Which is a strange feeling for me, because I rarely think about how I look. I know I’m decent-looking, in a rugged kind of way. My nose is pretty big but not out of control. I’ve got a full head of thick, wavy black-and-gray hair. I stand an inch over six feet tall and weigh 190 pounds.

But my eyes, which are big and brown like coffee, are my strongest feature.

I know I don't dress like much. I favor black pants, black boots, sport shirts and either a rough-looking brown leather jacket or your standard raincoat. I don't go in for designers. I hate to shop.

Even at forty-six, women tell me I have a strong but sensitive puppy-dog look. Whatever that means.

The most important thing to me is keeping in shape. Ever since I was shot and went through physical therapy, I've worked out regularly at the gym. I wouldn't say I'm a fanatic, but I want to stay fit. I still walk with a pretty pronounced limp, and some days, especially when it's cold, my left side knots up, and I hurt. The doctors say it's some kind of muscle reflex and there's nothing they can do. Mornings are the worst, and this morning is bad. I wince and sip my coffee.

The ash-blonde next to me looks up from her magazine and smiles.

"Rough night?"

"Rough morning," I say.

She brushes her hair back.

"I know what you mean."

Then I notice the receptionist pointing a tall, skinny man in my direction. He's wearing skintight pants, a tight black shirt and a lime-green scarf wrapped around his neck.

"Mr. Annicelli?" he asks.

"That's me." I stand, nod at the blonde and follow him back to his office. It's piled with stacks of pictures and portfolios. He clears off a chair and offers it to me.

"You're a friend of Lina's?" he asks incredulously.

"Yeah, we go back about ten years."

"Well!" he says, lifting an eyebrow, insinuating you know what.

"No, no. Nothing like that," I say.

"Well..." He seems to collapse.

"Look, Rene," I start, "I don't want to take up a lot of your time. Actually, this isn't about Lina. This is about a girl she knows named Angela..." I'm reaching for her last name.

He puts down his mug of tea and says with disgust, "Bowman?"

"Yeah."

"Fucked-up girl," he mutters quickly.

"Yeah?"

"Oh, yeah. Seriously. I mean, potential out to here." He spreads his skinny arms. "But dark. There's something dark." He's getting very serious. Suddenly, he changes gears. "Not that I know her. No. Nothing like that. But career-wise, she's a definite first-class fuck-up."

"What do you mean?"

“I mean, she gets great book. Great bookings. She’s steaming along and then...poof!”

“Poof?”

“She’ll drop out of sight. Won’t answer her phone. Misses appointments. Calls and says she’s leaving the business. Really pisses people off. Then, a couple of weeks later she’s back with a smile.”

“When’s the last time you heard from her?” I ask, leaning forward.

“I don’t know. I really don’t know.”

“Think, please. This is serious.”

“Why?” He looks scared. “Has something happened?”

“I don’t know yet. When’s the last time you people were in contact with her.”

He jumps to his feet and holds out an arm to indicate I should stay seated.

“I’ll find out.”

I look for my coffee, which I must have left in the waiting room. I’m thinking of what I have to do—pick up my laundry, go to the bank, call my older daughter, pick up a birthday card for my brother, pay some bills...

I’m still going through the list when Rene hurries back. He’s looking in a long black book.

“Let’s see here...” He puts on a pair of black-rimmed glasses.

“When’s the last time someone from this office spoke to her?” I ask again.

“Wait a minute...” He holds up his hand.

A heavy young woman with a nest of very black hair and thick makeup stands in the door.

“October twentieth,” he says

The woman stands behind Rene’s shoulder and holds a hand over her mouth.

“October twentieth,” she repeats. “He’s right. She had bookings on the twenty-first and the twenty-second but didn’t show up. We called her several times, both of those days. We called her through the next two weeks, in fact, and then we stopped.”

I remove a pen and notebook from my jacket pocket.

“Where did you call?”

“Her answering service, of course,” says the woman with the nest of black hair. “Five-five-five-two-four-two-five.”

I write it down.

“Thanks. Has anyone in this office seen her since?”

Rene and the woman look at each other with slightly horrified expressions then, in unison, shake their heads.

I address my question to the woman with the black hair.

“Do you know where she lived?”

“Oh, yes.” She bites the eraser end of her pencil and thinks. “She lived with a woman named Danielle Giroux. She’s a sportswear designer. A really fine person. I mean, she’s the one who got Angela started in the business. Really helped her out.

“But Angela—Eve—had been talking for several months, at least five months, about getting her own place. The last time I spoke to her she said she was in the process of moving out. I think her new place was on Bond Street—you know, in the Village. I think she said it was a loft. But...Danielle. You should talk to Danielle. She’ll know. She knows the whole story.”

“There’s a story?” I ask solemnly.

The black-haired woman shoots a meaningful look down at Rene before fixing her heavily mascara’ed eyes on me.

“Oh, yes,” she says in a tone of deep import. “Oh, yes.”

I take down the pertinent names and number and leave with a “thanks.” That afternoon, I hear from Eve’s answering service. She’s had eighty-six messages since October fourteenth and hasn’t called in since the seventeenth.

Today is December third.

If you enjoyed the sample, you need not stop there!

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