



Blood Is Quicker Than Water

A Danny Haase Mystery Novel

Katherine Smith



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by

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Wayward Sun

The Summer Bones

Dedication

To Alex. This one is for you, buddy.

Many thanks to Giovanna Lagana, a wonderful editor and someone I consider a dear friend. My appreciation also to Deb Womack and Jan Janssen.

Prologue

It was only the beginning of the dream; Cassandra Beaumont knew that as well as she knew she lived and breathed.

The waiting was over, the votes counted, and after an endless night of flash bulbs, cheers, and infinite handshakes, at least they were going home.

The world outside was gray and wet, a thin November drizzle heralding the expanse of dawn on the horizon. Drooping with exhaustion, Cassandra dimly heard Robert decline a waiting limousine. Someone, a polite stranger with no face, helped her into the passenger seat of their Mercedes.

Her husband hummed as he pulled away from the building. The wheels squealed on the wet pavement.

“Landslide!” He hit the steering wheel with the palm of his hand and laughed out loud in satisfaction. “I knew I’d win, but a damned landslide?”

“The youngest man ever to be elected senator in the history of Illinois. It’s wonderful.” She leaned her head back against the seat and shut her eyes. “God, I’m so tired.”

“Tired? How the hell can you be tired, Cassie? I won.”

Lifting her lashes and glancing over, she stared at his profile, seeing the faint smile on his mouth. His stand on abortion and plans to reform the state budgeting structure aside, she couldn’t help but wonder how many of the female voters had been swayed by his looks and name, that image so carefully created and exploited by the press. He fairly exuded the infamous Beaumont charm, even at five in the morning. The trace of a daybreak beard only lent a certain dash to his lean face, his dark hair was ruffled attractively, and he’d discarded his jacket and tie, his shirt open to show off a muscular upper chest and strong neck.

They’d been married for five years and she still thought he was one of the most handsome men she had ever seen.

The tires whined as they gained the beltline and changed lanes. The rain pelting the windshield had changed over to ice, pinging against the glass with audible rhythm. Even the inside of the car smelled stale and dank with the dying autumn.

Not wanting to disrupt his jubilant mood, she still couldn’t help but murmur, “You’re driving awfully fast.”

Robert looked amused. “Darling, I always drive fast and there is virtually no traffic at this time of morning.”

“Yes, but—”

“Just relax. Can you imagine how Morris is feeling right now? For an incumbent, he sure got handed his ass.”

“Robert, please, I know you're excited, but you're going nearly eighty.”

The words stuck in her throat as at that very moment she heard something crack and the vehicle lurch sideways in a sickening wave of motion. Suddenly the world was a melee of swirling colors and screaming metal.

Robert cursed, wrestling with the wheel.

They hit the guardrail hard, slamming her forward against her seatbelt. Losing her breath, she dizzily realized with panic that the ragdoll sensation she felt meant they'd gone over the side of the road.

“No,” she screamed in silent terror.

Chapter 1

Her shaky return to the world was filled as always with gray edges and inner ghosts.

At the moment, she wouldn't mind never sleeping again.

Cassandra Beaumont rolled over and pushed the damp hair from her forehead, still trembling in the aftermath. Her heart pounded, sending the blood roaring in her ears. Her nightgown was soaked with cold sweat. Blinking up at the ceiling, she let her breath out very slowly. Control. She needed complete control.

The room was dark but cool. Large, familiar, with the armoire in the corner and the long windows she loved across from the bed so she could look out into the garden in the summer. The air-conditioning hummed in low seductive song. She gazed upward at where the oblong pattern of relief from the security lights penetrated the curtains and touched the ceiling of her bedroom.

Everything was normal. Quiet. The alarm hadn't sounded.

It was just another damned nightmare. Her subconscious worked overtime lately and she was sick of it.

“Mummy?”

“Tim.” She came to a sitting position so swiftly that the room whirled for a moment. Her hands flew backwards to support her body. The bottom sheet was damp to the touch. “Go back to bed.”

A pair of solemn, dark blue eyes gazed at her from the doorway. “You yelled. I woke up.”

“I'm sorry.” Swallowing hard, she tried to smile but her lips felt as stiff as dried leather.

“That's okay.” It was forlorn forgiveness.

Framed by the darkened doorway, her son was light and shadow, his curly dark hair sticking up in tufts, his precious blanket clutched in his arms. Wearing cartoon pajamas and red socks, he looked so very ... very young.

And so very much like his father.

“I'm fine. I just had a bad dream.” She wiped her damp hands on the blankets in a self-conscious gesture. Her legs were still trembling in betraying little convulsions. “Do you want me to take you back to your room?”

“No.” His stocking feet shuffled against the carpet. “Can't I sleep with you?”

She should have known he would ask. It was the same battle every night, over and over. Ever since the accident he'd been very dependent, rather unlike the forthright young child he'd been before.

How she hated it. The difference was pronounced and a little frightening—actually, a lot frightening.

“We've discussed this, honey. You need to be a big boy and sleep in your own room.” Flinging back the covers and throwing her wobbly legs over the side, she swung out of bed. She crossed the room to pick him up, his body small and firm in her arms. His little arms went around her neck and he sniffled slightly against her skin and clung to her.

God, she loved this precious human being. It was almost as frightening as her dreams how much she loved him.

Throat tight, she said, “Timmy, you know everything is okay, right?” She pressed her face against his silky hair and smelled baby shampoo mingled with his special childish scent.

A sob shook him slightly. “Yes.”

“I'm here.”

“Mummy, I know. But ... Daddy isn't.”

No, she thought with as much emotional detachment as possible, *he isn't*. Very gently, she promised, “You and I are going to be great on our own, sweetheart.”

* * * *

To him, the show was a complete fiasco.

Michael moved like a shadow through the elite crowd, feeling rather like an automaton, a smile plastered on his face. His jeans and denim shirt were well-worn, a contrast to everyone around him, but long ago he'd had his fill of formal wear and stuffy affairs. The long gowns and tuxedos made his casual appearance conspicuous, but that was the point, wasn't it? Drinking bad champagne from a long fluted glass, it was all he could do to look anything other than bored with the whole social thing. He'd even signed a few autographs with reluctance, always feeling like a sham.

A great artist?

He certainly didn't feel like one.

Oh yes, his paintings sold in record numbers. It was ... amazing. But he felt somehow cheated and maybe a little Hollywood cheap. Damn all, he thought darkly and emptied his glass as he saw a portly man detach himself from a group of over-dressed, over-weight ladies. He *was* Hollywood cheap.

The director of the gallery smiled like he'd just eaten a pound of the finest caviar. Drifting close, he murmured, “A success, Michael. Congratulations.”

Standing in an alcove where he could watch the flow of people, Michael murmured, “The turn-out is much bigger than I expected.”

“Oh, no. I was sure this display would draw quite a number.”

“Interested in my work?” The delicate question was as much a challenge as anything. The evening grated on the good manners that had been pounded into him since he could toddle across the floor. He felt a little like strangling someone. Mr. Alcott, as it happened, was at the top of the list of potential victims. Michael hadn't wanted this at all.

Trevor Alcott had the grace to turn the slightest bit red. “I ... yes, of course.”

“Not my family and the illustrious Beaumont name? That full-page ad in the paper looked more like a

political banner than an invitation to an art showing. Why didn't you tell me you were going to do it? This is New York, half the world probably saw it."

Alcott's eyes widened slightly in the folds of skin under his heavy gray brows. "You are a Beaumont. That doesn't hurt, Michael, you know that. Whatever gets your work out there so it can be seen helps. Having a famous name is in your favor."

"I am sure you feel that way, I'm just not sure I do." Michael did his best to not snarl out the words.

Obviously stung, the man said, "I am in the business of promoting artists and their creations. Selling their pieces. That is what I'm doing. Here. For you."

"I want people to enjoy what they see. To purchase a painting that will grace their home and enlighten their life, not just to have them buy something, even if they think it sucks, just because my last name is in the corner."

"I am giving you great exposure." The protest was more of a bluster.

Michael lifted a brow and smiled coldly. "Using all means possible, is that it?"

Above the perfectly immaculate collar of his white shirt, the director's plump mouth tightened. "Yes, that is it. You won't object when I hand you the check from tonight's proceeds."

Michael could easily point out that that logic was extremely flawed, since the very name that Alcott had hung the bank on was the one that ensured Michael did not have to do anything as pedestrian as worry about making a living at painting, or anything else for that matter.

He was a goddamned Beaumont.

Lucky him.

"I'm absolutely starved. Are we nearly done?" A slim arm slipped through Michael's and a hand came up to suggestively caress his shoulder. The interruption might have been welcome except when he turned his head, he looked into a pair of sea-green eyes that owed nothing to genetics and everything to colored contacts. He could even see the little rings around the irises. The woman clinging to his arm exhaled a delicate blast of gin across his face. "Darling, I think I'm in the mood for Thai."

He said shortly, "I didn't think you ate real food. At least you never have in my presence."

"I'm off my diet, just for tonight."

"Well, sorry, we're not done."

"How soon?" A pout pulled full lips into a bow.

Mr. Alcott, both tactful and relieved, took that moment to drift off—maybe not drift. He was moving at a pretty fast pace. With reluctant amusement, Michael watched the man fade into the crowd and then replied, "Darling Tiffany, I have no idea. An artist is supposed to be available for his adoring public."

"Adoring public?" The vacant aqua eyes widened. "What do you mean? Like ... groupies?"

Lord, help him. Groupies? Michael said gently, "I'm joking, of course."

"Oh." A troubled frown briefly crossed Tiffany's lovely face. Blond, leggy, and as absent of intellect as she was full of bodily charms, she looked very nice on his arm ... but at that point the attraction was over. He'd found that out after the first date. After the first five minutes of the first date. Why she'd shown up here was a mystery to him. She certainly had no interest in paintings, his or anyone else's. But in her very short, very tight designer black dress, there were plenty of interested eyes on her.

He suggested, "As far as I'm concerned, you can leave and grab a bite any time."

“Without you?” She actually batted her lashes at him. It was a maneuver he’d never seen done before, except maybe in cartoons.

He wanted to laugh out loud. “I don't think you need me. Half the men in this room are staring at you with their tongues hanging out. Just pick one.”

“Oh, Michael,” she hit his arm playfully, “stop it. You're so funny.”

Hilarious. Yeah, that was him. He needed to get rid of Tiffany before he moved her to the top of his need to strangle list.

“Odd, I wasn't trying to be. Here,” he put one hand on the small of her back, guiding her toward a corner, “let me introduce you to a friend of mine. I think you two might get along.”

* * * *

Cassandra looked at the number displayed on her caller ID box and sank slowly into a chair. Had she not already been sweating, she would be now. Her throat seemed oddly clogged as she tried to swallow. Her hands began to shake.

She was calling. Again.

The number was displayed in bold print, undeniable and nerve-shatteringly real.

What was she going to do?

The phone pealed, insisting she do something.

No.

With an unsteady hand, she reached out and grasped the receiver, slowly bringing it to her ear. “Hello.”

“Mrs. Beaumont, you've been out.” The whisper was eerie, sibilant, deliberately unrecognizable.

“How do you know that?”

“I know a lot of things.”

“I ... I just went to play tennis with a friend.” Good God, was this maniac watching her all the time? Her heartbeat kicked up another notch.

“Of course.” The caller gave a hoarse laugh. “That's what all good rich little wives do, isn't it—tennis at the club, lunch with the girls, our nails done at three and a massage somewhere in between? What's it like, princess?”

“What do you want?” Cassandra hated her raspy voice for the betraying vehicle it was.

“The world hasn't forgotten you yet, have they?”

Forgotten her. Oh God, she so wanted to be forgotten.

She drew a breath. “I want you to stop calling me. The police know all about this. They ... they can trace this, find you.”

“Let them. That would be just too bad for you, wouldn't it? Everyone would know.”

“Know what?”

“Our guilty little secret. Now, now,” soft, silky admonishment drifted down the line, “you know what I want.”

“Money.”

"Sure. I want money. Or else I'll publish those pictures and spill my guts all over the tabloids."

The phone was slick and wet in her sweating hand. Swallowing hard, she said, "Robert is dead, I—"

"Sweetheart, don't try to sell me some load of crap about how you don't have it. He left you a fortune, no question about it. I just want a little cut and I'll keep my mouth shut."

God. Cassandra shut her eyes. "How much?"

"Fifty grand."

Relief was definitely a relative term. Expecting a much larger amount, she waited a fraction of a moment before saying, "If I agree, how should I get it to you?"

"Oh, honey, I'll be in touch, don't worry. Get the money, keep it with you, and I'll let you know when and where to drop it."

But she *would* worry. And she knew very well that blackmailers bled their victims dry. Desperately, Cassandra fought to make her voice firm. "This is the last time. I'm not going to be strung along and I want those pictures, free and clear."

A laugh. The line went dead.

Dammit, Cassandra thought wearily, slowly replacing the receiver. Cradling her head in her hands, she tried to still the tremors in her body.

The phone began to ring again.

Lifting her head with quivering dread, she looked at the display box. The number there was almost as unsettling as her unwanted last caller. This, now, was the very last thing she needed. There were tears on her lashes and she blinked hard. Taking a deep breath, she picked up the phone. "Marie?"

A soft feminine voice spoke, the overtones modulated and smoothly pleasant. "Cassandra, how convenient modern society is, telling a person who is on the other line. I guess I should be grateful you didn't decline to answer my call."

Her mind felt blank, numb. "Of course not."

"Don't say that, my dear. We haven't seen Timmy but a few times in the past six months. It isn't right. I feel something is wrong, that your neglect is deliberate. I wouldn't want any unpleasantness between us over this issue."

Unpleasantness. Still dressed in her sweat-stained clothes, slumped in the chair by the window overlooking the park, Cassandra managed to murmur, "I know it has been a while since you've seen him, but I thought we needed some time together, just he and I. He is still ... adjusting. I'm trying, he's been to a therapist, but it upsets him, so I've just tried to be here for him."

Silence.

When her mother-in-law spoke again, it was in a brusque tone. "Well, this will be perfect then. Timothy sounds like he needs his family, and that does include us, dear. We're going up to Thirty Birches in a few days. I'm planning a party for Gerald's birthday. We'd like you two to come. It will be a relaxed occasion, Anne and Stan are going to be there, Michael is invited, and the two of you."

Michael? Things were going from awful to unbearable at a fast clip. Her chest felt tight with tension. And she didn't imagine for a minute it would be just a family occasion. She'd learned a long time ago that with an invitation like this one, there was usually an agenda of some kind.

Biting her lip, Cassandra raced for an excuse. "I don't know ... the antique shop has been very busy—"

“Then just send Timmy. I hate to put it this bluntly, my dear, but we have rights.” Her mother-in-law's voice was very cool, very precise. The tone implied politely that there were a pack of lawyers employed by the Beaumonts that would ensure those rights were thoroughly honored.

You'd like that, wouldn't you? Cassandra thought darkly. *Having my son all to yourself without me. Fat chance.*

She murmured, “Actually, I think I can get away. When exactly shall we meet you there?”

If Marie Beaumont was disappointed or triumphant, she didn't show it with her usual elegant and formidable self-possession. She said, “Three days from now—on the tenth. We'll expect you, my dear.”

“Great.” Sweat trickled slowly down her back as she hung up the phone. She felt chilled, even though she was sweating on a summer day in Chicago.

Michael aside, she tried to chide herself; maybe she was looking at this the wrong way.

If she left town, she'd be out of touch, away from unwanted contacts and threatening phone calls. Thirty Birches was like an elegant fortress, the closest thing to a castle that she could think of in this country. A summer home built in the grand old style and stuck up high on the upper peninsula of Michigan, she couldn't think of any place more remote or more inaccessible.

Maybe this invitation was actually a Godsend.

* * * *

Michael sat on the terrace and stared over the vastness of light, form, and movement, raising the glass to his mouth in slow automatic rhythm. The city seemed to hum with electric energy, even when it should have been long asleep. Office windows here and there shown with the hunger of late-night ambition, cars crawled along darkened streets, and the occasional faint but definite blast of music floated upward in ghost-like echoes, telling him that there were people out there on the prowl, looking for God-knew-what and probably finding it.

After all, this was New York.

“God, I hate this damned place,” he muttered into the night air.

“Then why the hell are you here, Beaumont?”

Startled, Michael turned his head and stifled a low laugh. A tall, middle-aged man wandered through the open French doors of the apartment. “How did you get in, Gary?”

“Key—from that trip to France you took last month. I came to return it.” His visitor held up the object in question.

“Oh yeah, I forgot. Since you still have it, keep it and take in my mail again for the next few weeks, will you? You keep the plants alive better than I do anyway.”

“Do I know her?”

“It's not a her.”

Gary smiled, a shark-like gleam of white teeth. “I won't even bother to ask if it's a him, more's the pity. Family thing?”

“Unfortunately.” Michael couldn't keep the sour note out of his voice.

“Chicago?” Gary Rivers dropped into an opposite chair and lifted an elegant eyebrow. He was wearing khaki knee-length shorts, a navy shirt that spanned his thin shoulders, and had a heavy gold watch on one wrist. His blond hair was thinning but still brushed back perfectly from his broad forehead and his

features were regular and unremarkable—until he spoke. Then something ... rare, a spark of humor and undeniable intelligence lent that bland face all the charm of Cary Grant on a good day.

Michael shook his head. "Not Chicago. Michigan."

"A return to the rustic family homestead, eh?" Gary indolently lifted a glass of what looked like scotch to his mouth. The glass was the finest English crystal. His loafers were slim, soft, very expensive leather. His legs crossed casually at the bare ankle as he asked, "I thought you hated the family scene almost as much as you hate New York."

Michael admitted candidly, "Pretty much. But it's my father's birthday, so I don't have a real choice. I haven't been up to the place in about five years. I'm sure the whole ordeal will be a lesson in the different ways people who are supposed to love each other achieve nothing but alienation and discord."

In mock disgust, Gary shook his head. "Good God, you are jaded. I get so tired of you tortured artists disliking everything and everyone."

"Don't forget that proverbial thin line between love and hate." Michael grinned. "It gets the creative juices flowing."

Thin brows lifted and the ice in the scotch glass did a little dance. "Yes, I heard about the show. Big success. Congratulations."

"Didn't see you there," Michael commented dryly.

A vague look of horror crossed Gary's face. "Dearheart, I hate that post-modernist shit you paint, you know that. It takes practically all the courage I have just to walk through your living room. I find that if I just look straight ahead and don't glance at the nightmares hanging on the walls, I'm okay."

"I was joking, don't worry. I didn't expect you, and in truth, you didn't miss much."

"Now," Gary smiled without humor, "if you would do what you're really good at, I'd be your biggest fan, first in line with my checkbook. I have a need to be immortalized for all time."

"There isn't a market for portraits." The argument was an old one. Michael regretted often agreeing to paint a portrait of Gary's mother. Somehow his friend had got it into his head that Michael had some sort of genius for reproducing the human form.

"Perfect. I doubt you need the money."

His response was tinged with weariness. "Shit, Gary, you know it isn't about money, it never was. If someone decides they are going to paint for money, then they had better find the nearest building, put on a pair of coveralls, and pick up a roller. We could have this argument everyday."

"We almost do," Gary murmured.

Michael gazed at his empty glass with apathy. He wanted more wine but didn't have much enthusiasm for getting up and going inside to get it. His whole body felt like lead. The next week yawned like the jaws of hell.

Thirty Birches.

His family.

Cassandra.

Damn.

Getting to his feet with a resigned sigh, Gary said, "After all these years as friends and neighbors, I can read you like a map. Your unfairly handsome face is practically screaming depression. Here, give me

your glass. I'll get the wine."

"Thanks." Michael transferred the glass to Gary's hand and moodily contemplated the lit window of an apartment across the street. Through the blinds, it appeared the occupant was either doing aerobics or having incredibly gymnastic sex, bobbing into view again and again. Since Michael knew the resident was an extremely good-looking young man who worked at the gym down the street, either scenario seemed possible.

Gary came back with a full glass of dark ruby liquid, passed it on, and sank back down as he noticed the direction of Michael's gaze. His lips quirked as he remarked, "Makes one wonder where he gets the energy. Too bad I know for a fact he's straight."

Considering Michael felt as if a grain combine had backed over him several times, he simply lifted a brow.

"I'm wondering about something else that has nothing to do with our vigorous neighbor." Gary thoughtfully clinked the ice in his glass and looked bland. "Will your ex-girlfriend, slash sister-in-law, be attending this little Northwoods soiree?"

"Truth is, I didn't ask."

"Hence the pensive mood?"

Michael stirred in his chair and felt his face tighten involuntarily. "What pensive mood? I'm just sitting here, tired as hell and dreading at least a week of my dysfunctional family's antics. If that's defined as pensive, all right, I'm pensive."

"Don't forget defensive."

"Gary, lay off."

"Hey, that girl did a number on you once. I just wondered if maybe part of your avoidance of anything remotely to do with the Beaumont family hasn't a great deal to do with her."

Michael fought the urge to shift again uncomfortably in his chair. Instead he fastened his gaze on the winking lights of a jet circling in the velvet night sky. The air smelled slightly of exhaust tinged with the musky scent of the potted geraniums scattered around them on the stone terrace. He muttered darkly, "I thought you were a stockbroker, not a shrink."

"My new hobby."

"Couldn't you have taken up needlepoint or something more appropriate to your sexual orientation?"

Gary chuckled, once again crossing his very elegant ankles. "The stereo-typical insult draws no blood, my friend. Apparently I'm good at this. I believe I've struck a nerve."

Michael shook his head. "Don't pat yourself on the back too soon. The truth is, I could care less about that greedy little bitch."

Chapter 2

Cassandra carefully lifted the vase from the packing in stunned disbelief, letting the shredded newsprint drift over the counter without care. Glancing up, she could not help smiling. Her question was one swift word. "Where?"

"Pawn shop in Cicero. Can you believe it?" Ella Parker cracked a laugh that sounded more like a gunshot than an expression of humor. Her sharp dark eyes gleamed in a face that was plain and angular,

free of any cosmetics that might have downplayed the lines and telltale creases created by the inevitable passing of time. Dressed in a faded flannel shirt and old jeans that hung on her spare body, she looked more like a down-on-her-luck homeless woman than the wife of the president of one of Chicago's largest banks. "I was looking for old costume jewelry, got the idea from a friend of mine who collects it. She says there is a market for the stuff. I thought we might need to add a display."

"Sure, partner. Whatever you say." Cassandra gazed at the beautiful object in her hands with awe. "Who would pawn a Tiffany vase? For that matter, I'm impressed the pawn shop owner would recognize it and hand over cash for it." Cassandra reverently ran a finger along a beautifully done flower etched in the glass. "It's flawless."

Ella snorted. "Oh, honey, he didn't recognize the signature or the real value—at least not as what it is. He thought the piece was pretty, but the mark meant nothing to him. Otherwise, I would have had to pay more than twenty bucks for it. Some old woman brought it in and he felt sorry for her."

Twenty dollars. God in heaven. The thing was worth thousands.

"A sympathetic pawn shop owner, who would have thought? I almost feel guilty at such a stroke of luck." Placing it cautiously back in the protective nest of box and paper, Cassandra felt the familiar quickened heartbeat of elation over such a valuable find. The two of them had made some good purchases in the past couple of months, building up stock from auctions and thrift shops, but this was a windfall of the highest magnitude.

"Luck?" Ella leaned one skinny hip against the counter and looked offended. "Hardly, missy. I worked hard for that vase. I had to dress in these old rags and scuff through every nasty dive in that part of town before I found a damn thing worth buying. If anyone I knew had seen me, they would have fainted dead on the spot. Luckily, none of them would venture within miles of where I've been today. As a treasure hunt, it wasn't the most glamorous, I assure you."

Cassandra moved toward the back of the store where a door led to the office. She said tentatively over her shoulder, "But still better than an afternoon of playing bridge with Chicago's most distinguished matrons?"

The older woman's smile was genuine and rueful. "Yes. I admit when you mentioned you were going to open this place, I thought that owning an antique shop sounded like perhaps the most boring thing on earth next to one of Beatrice Wright's cocktail parties. You know, the ones where she chooses a theme?"

Going through the door into the office and opening a cabinet, Cassandra gave a small shudder. "I know. Robert and I went to one or two. Pretty awful."

"An understatement, yet we all show up. Why is that?"

Cassandra gave a smothered laugh. "I have no idea. I'd hate to think we had nothing better to do. Tell you what, it's almost closing time, shall we have a glass of wine to celebrate?"

"Absolutely. I'll just go ahead and lock the door."

Cassandra took a bottle of white burgundy out of the tiny refrigerator and searched for the corkscrew in one of the drawers while Ella went off with keys in hand. The office had once been the kitchen of the old house that she and Ella had bought together for their intended business venture. They'd had the old scarred cabinets torn out, the counters removed, the floor sanded and stained. Besides the necessities of microwave and refrigerator, an old farm table sat in the middle of the space, mismatched wooden chairs surrounding it, and in the corner by a stained glass window that was original to the house, sat a lovely roll-top desk with a computer, printer, fax machine, and all the other various modern necessities for running a business.

Cassandra loved this room. It reminded her of her grandmother's homey old farmhouse and represented her ability to get away from the life she had adopted when she had married into the Beaumont family. Deftly uncorking the bottle of wine, she filled two glasses half-full and turned to hand one to Ella as she came into the office.

"Thanks." Ella took a sip, lifted her finely plucked brows in appreciation, and sat down at the table. Plunking her elbows inelegantly on the smooth worn surface, she murmured, "To our growing business. May we have more days like today. Finding that vase was a rush, honey, I loved it. As I said, I thought this whole thing would be dull as a butter knife."

"If I may ask ... then why'd you ask me if you could invest?" Cassandra didn't sit, but rather leaned a hip against the edge of the desk, holding her glass. It was a question she'd wanted to ask for all of the past five months but didn't know how. Especially when the already surprising offer to put up half of the money turned into even more astounding active participation. "I was very surprised."

"Don't know what exactly prompted it." The older woman shook her head, her tousled gray curls at odds with her normal perfect coiffure. "Maybe it was because everyone at the club, the committees, the damned theme parties, they all were talking about it like you were insane, and I thought to myself, she needs something to *do*. Her husband died, she's alone, she's beautiful and bright and wealthy enough to never have to worry about money in her life, and she still needs something. And she thinks this antique shop is going to give it to her."

It was only too close to the truth. Cassandra took a large uncomfortable mouthful of wine. A fly buzzed drowsily at the colorful window. "I majored in Art History in college. I love beautiful objects, old or new. And antiques are all the rage. It sounded fun."

"Art History, really?"

"In New York," She let the brief statement stand. Her days in school seemed like a distant dream, something that happened to someone else.

"I see." There was a pause. "I don't know if you understand this, but—" Ella hunched her shoulders. For a moment, her elfin face looked unutterably weary. She stared at her glass and her slim fingers, absent of the usual array of impressive diamonds and other gems, toyed with the stem. "You know, honey, I realized that I needed something too. Always had maybe, something of my own. Richard, he's always had the business. He lives it and breathes it. Oh, sure, the kids were a distraction, but they're grown now, and even when they were little we had nannies because we traveled so much."

The wine made her throat feel thick. Cassandra said hoarsely, "I let our nanny go the week after I got out of the hospital after the accident. I have someone who comes in during the day when I'm here, but I mostly take care of Tim."

Dark eyes raised and looked at her. "You have the option, don't you? Your husband is gone."

Yes, Robert was dead. Oh God.

"Anyway," Ella lifted her glass and swirled the bright contents, "I thought to myself, hey, why not? Young Mrs. Beaumont wants to collect old things and sell them; you like antiques and have a lot of time on your hands. Maybe she would welcome a partner. It isn't too late, you can work a little, see if you like it, if not, get out. It wasn't like I was particularly enjoying my life before. What exactly did I have to lose?"

When the very elite, very formidable Mrs. Parker had approached her with her offer of a partnership, Cassandra had been floored. They knew each other only casually on a social basis, their forty-year age difference a gap, as was their husbands' opposing politics.

"You know," Cassandra fought to keep her tone even as she fingered her wine glass, "most people would condemn both of us for complaining one bit. Because of our husbands we have everything we could possibly want right at our fingertips, Ella. Big houses, servants, expensive cars—"

"More public exposure than any human being could possibly endure," Ella interrupted smoothly. "I don't know how you handled all those reporters following you around, snapping pictures every minute, plastering your picture on the front of their slimy little rags. At least the press and their love affair with you seems to have died down."

Due in a large part, Cassandra thought bleakly, to the fact that she had accepted being a virtual prisoner in her own home and offered them nothing to sink their sharp little teeth into. She murmured, "Robert was a public figure, I knew that when I married him. I guess I just didn't expect that one photograph from the funeral would promote such—"

"Infatuation? Darling, you provided the world with a fairy tale, the beautiful widow of Robert Beaumont on crutches at her husband's graveside."

Cassandra closed her eyes briefly. She could swear for a moment Robert's hauntingly handsome face swam before her darkened vision. Then she said softly and truthfully, "All I really want is to get on with my life."

Lifting her glass high, Ella murmured, "Let's drink to it, then, shall we? To this little bit of the past blending with the present that gives us purpose and pleasure."

Cassandra moved and their glasses touched. She said in a subdued voice, "Ella?"

"Yes?"

"I have to go to Michigan for a few days. Can you handle things here?"

* * * *

His plane was late because the weather was dreary and wet in New York, and then the airline topped off the trip by losing his suitcase.

Luckily, Michael carried his tools of the trade in a satchel that would not fit in the overhead compartments but had to be stowed up front near the crew. His clothes he could do without. His paints and canvases were another matter. Assaulted by loud speakers announcing flights and summoning people to courtesy phones, he carried the precious bag down the echoing busy space and dutifully filled out the form at the lost baggage desk, gave the address where the errant bag needed to be delivered, and then went to pick up his rental car.

He had refused to tell his mother his flight number or his date of arrival. He'd ridden in chauffeured limousines most of his childhood and absolutely hated the high-profile arrivals and departures. Besides, the drive to Thirty Birches was both beautiful and relaxing, especially late on a summer afternoon. He was looking forward to it. Smiling at the pretty young clerk as she handed over the keys, he turned around.

"Michael. Here you are."

"Stan?" Stifling an inner groan, Michael looked at the man who had materialized in front of him. Fair hair waved back from a broad brow, thinning much worse than the last time they'd seen each other. His brother-in-law had even, pleasant features, light blue eyes, his body not thin and not quite yet fat as it solidly approached middle-age. A cautious smile showed perfect teeth in a lightly tanned face. Michael asked in resignation, "How'd you find out when I was coming in?"

Stan Ransom laughed. "Do you have to ask? The Beaumonts have their ways. Hope you weren't just

spending your money renting a car. I came in the—"

"Limo."

Stan nodded, still looking amused. "Yeah, of course. Your mother sent me to pick you up. The car is right outside, parked in what must be a towing zone, though I am assuming the airport guys won't dare."

Michael held up his keys like a prize fish, dangling them from his fingers. People streamed by just to his left, an endless procession of humanity determined to make it from one place to another with all due speed. He said, "Sorry you made the trip for nothing, Stan. I tried to tell my mother I wanted my own transportation and thought I got through to her. That's why I didn't want to tell her my arrival time."

Dressed in his usual conservative style; tan pleated slacks, crisp light blue shirt, expensive loafers on his feet, Stan looked unsurprised and un-offended. "I just do as I'm told, you know that. Anne is really busy right now, your mother has one of her headaches, and God knows your father can't be pried out of his office with that big merger going on, so meeting you sort of fell into my lap. I wondered if you knew I was coming."

Michael had always liked his sister's husband. Stan and Anne had been married now ... what? Eight years? He was a perfect foil for Anne's formidable personality; easy-going where she was intense, accepting of her inherited Beaumont ambition, willing enough to step into the background and let her claim the spotlight. Michael had been surprised at his sister's choice in a spouse at first, expecting someone athletic and attractive. Quiet Stan was a corporate lawyer, a pencil pusher who didn't argue passionately before crowded courtrooms but rather gathered tedious legal details into even more tedious depositions. He was sedate and unruffled, took his wife's very busy schedule in stride, and should be probably nominated for sainthood considering he not only worked for the Beaumont family but also had married into it.

God knew Michael couldn't stomach more than a few days with them.

He said, "Tell you what, Stan. Why don't you ride with me? I'd like a briefing anyway on the upcoming week. Mother told me on the phone that it was just going to be a family gathering, which I don't believe for a second."

"Er ... why not?"

"Beaumonts never gather; they run in packs, hunting their prey."

That won a low laugh. "You said, it, buddy, not me."

Michael glanced at his watch. "Send Hal on back with the limo and you and I can stop for a beer or something on the way back. We have time, don't we?"

Stan grinned. "That sounds great."

* * * *

Her heart pounded so loudly that she could barely hear the radio.

It was the same man, the same car.

This one wasn't a reporter, Ella was right, that had all died down and Cassandra was all but forgotten. No, this was the same one she'd seen before, trailing her on her way to work one day last week, parking down the street from the shop. God, she was sick and tired of being followed, of people prying into her life. Turning on a side street, she glanced again in her rearview mirror.

It had started, of course, with the police. After the accident, they'd questioned her and Robert's

neighbors, their friends, his business partners, anyone who could have had a possible motive to tamper with the car that fateful evening. They'd come to the hospital time and again, looking at her with sympathetic eyes as she lay in that sterile bed, one leg in a cast, stitches in her side and face, asking their inexorable questions.

Who might want her or her husband dead?

She didn't know.

Would her husband's political enemies be suspects in her mind?

She didn't know.

Did he have financial troubles or interests that might generate the kind of hatred that would cause someone to contemplate murder?

She didn't know that either.

What she did know right now was that a tan sedan had been behind her for at least five miles of city streets and she needed to know if she was just being paranoid or not. Turning a quick left, Cassandra spun the car into the parking lot of a fast food place and found a parking space. Getting out and hurrying inside, she made her way to the bathroom, grateful that it was empty. Sliding into a stall, she pulled out her cell phone with trembling hands, pushed a button, and stood with her back to the closed door facing a semi-clean toilet.

Emaline answered on the second ring. "Hello?"

"This is Mrs. Beaumont. I might be a little late. Have you packed Timmy's things for our trip? I think I've changed my mind, we might go ahead and leave tonight."

"Oh, yes. Everything is fine and ready to go."

"Thank you, Emi."

"You're welcome." The woman's placid voice was comforting.

"Er ... keep the alarm on and Timmy inside, will you? I won't forget to disarm before I come in." To her own ears, her voice sounded husky and distressed.

"Is something wrong, Mrs. Beaumont?"

"No ... no." She took a deep breath. "I'm just edgy today for some reason. Maybe this trip to Michigan is making me nervous, I don't know. Humor me, please?"

"Certainly."

Pushing the button to end the call, Cassandra considered her options. Though she was used to being followed and photographed and generally hounded to death, underneath there was always a quivering rage that someone would and could affect her privacy in such an invasive way. She wanted to storm out and confront the driver of the car, demanding to know why he was tailing her.

But her husband had been murdered.

There were dangerous people out there, people who tampered with cars and didn't care about the other possible casualties as long as they achieved their objective. The police and FBI may well believe political issues motivated the sabotage, but how could she be sure? Someone, yet unknown, someone who still walked and talked and slept like any other human being, had planted a small explosive device that destroyed the steering mechanism that rainy November morning and fate had tipped her hand in the killer's favor by sending the car over that bank. Cassandra had been lucky to escape with only a

fracture and several sets of stitches. Robert hadn't been lucky at all.

Timmy couldn't afford to lose another parent. She was already being blackmailed, she was being followed, and she was definitely frightened, but fear for her son paralyzed any action she could take, right down to contacting the police.

Damn.

Slowly she washed her hands in the stained sink and dried them, blotting the damp towel across her hot cheeks. The image that stared back in the mirror was not very reassuring. She was pale, she was shaky, she was hollow-eyed. Good, maybe no one would recognize her. Swallowing, she clutched her purse tightly and walked out into the main building.

The counter was almost empty. She took her place behind a plump woman with two young children and waited. When it was her turn, she ordered an iced tea and took the cup to a nearby booth and sat down. The young girl behind the counter had glanced at her twice but apparently couldn't quite place her.

A small chill edged up her spine as she glanced out the window.

The tan car was there.

It had lodged itself about four spaces down from her small sports car. Cassandra could see the driver, a baseball cap pulled over his face, bent over as if he ... or she ... were reading something.

It was a decent neighborhood. If she went out of the other side of the building and walked down a block or so, she could surely catch a cab home and just leave her car—and him—behind.

But then he would know she'd spotted him. She wasn't sure if that was bad, or good.

Viciously sucking on her straw, she tried to think.

Her address wasn't exactly a secret, how could it be after the past year? She just didn't like the idea of having the tan car follow her to where she and Timmy would sleep that night. How in the hell was she supposed to crawl into bed and turn out the lights with the thought that someone was outside on the street, stalking her?

At least he was nowhere near her son. It gave her some measure of comfort that she could see him, see his car. In fact, she realized as she sat there, she could see the license plate. Quickly taking out a pen, she found a gas receipt in her purse and scribbled down the number. Having that made her feel better. Marginally.

She waited an hour, shuffling the ice in her glass, before she finally went out and started her car.

When she pulled out of the parking lot, the tan sedan was right behind her.

Chapter 3

The pines stood straight and tall, an army of branch-to-branch comrades, guarding a crystalline stream that wound over glossy rocks and foamed knee high before it dipped into deep cobalt pools. Everything smelled of resin and earth and a thousand years of fallen leaves.

So, Danny Haase thought as he very slowly lifted his arm, *this was heaven*.

Or maybe it wasn't. Surely heaven didn't have mosquitoes as big as army helicopters.

Maybe it just wasn't hell. He'd been there; he recognized hell, all right. Hell was the blaring traffic and steaming asphalt of the dark side of a big city. It was splattered blood and abandoned decaying buildings and a street gang logo carved into every bit of public property in sight.

Hell was deciding between losing his sanity and losing the woman he loved.

His sanity had won that battle.

And Laura. Well, as a result, Laura was long gone.

God how he needed this escape—with every cast, every sweet breath, he could feel the habitual tension in his body easing bit by bit.

Upstream, about thirty feet, he could see his friend bent in concentration, his pole arcing up and down in rhythmic movement as he edged between the rocks. The air was as clean as the water swirling around his waders, and if Danny hooked more trees with his inept casting than he did fish, well, that was just too damn bad. Mosquitoes aside, he was really enjoying himself.

“Any luck?” The question drifted slowly in the afternoon air.

Danny shook his head. “You?”

“One Northern Pike under the length limit.” Craig Ralston, whipcord lean, fifty-ish, and dressed similarly in a flannel shirt, jeans, and waders that looked like over-sized diapers made of rubber with attached feet and suspenders, shook his balding head in apparent disgust and fiddled with his reel.

“Better than nothing.”

“The fishing is lousy today, I told you it would be. So, speaking of nothing, I'm parched. There's a tavern about a mile from here. What do you say we chuck it in and have a beer?”

“I say you've read my mind.” Danny grinned.

Not ten minutes later they were seated on well-worn bar stools at an even more well-worn bar, sipping cool frosty local lager. The place smelled vaguely like a mixture of dead fish and stale pizza, but the pool table was brand new and the jukebox had nothing but old country music. Which, thankfully, meant not one of those modern rap songs.

Except the song playing was sad, Danny noted wryly, a ballad about two doomed lovers. The last thing he needed. Smoothing the ice off his glass with idle fingers, he murmured, “I've been thinking about it, you know.”

Craig wiped his upper lip with an idle finger and squinted at the bar, pointing at his already half-empty glass. “Thinking about what?”

“This.” A sweep of Danny's hand indicated the room. “Do you regret it?”

If Craig had eyebrows left, they would have risen to his scalp. “Sitting in a cheap bar?”

A chuckle, half-hearted, escaped. “Kind of. I mean leaving IPD. You did what I did, but you did it first. Left a promising career in big city law enforcement for a quiet and low-key place like this. Chief of Police in Lynchburg, Michigan, isn't exactly the big time. Do you think back and ever wish you hadn't made the move?”

The answer was swift, without meditation. “You serious? No, I don't. Not ever. Oh, the money sucks, but I wasn't exactly a millionaire before.” Decisively, Craig shook his head. “What's this about? Do you wish you hadn't left Indianapolis PD?”

Willie Nelson filled the room with plaintive apologies, demanding some sort of redemption from a lost love. Danny stared at his glass. “Maybe. Sometimes. Well, hell, of course I do. When I'm heating up a can of soup for dinner and hoping that the mindless crap that passes for television these days isn't a bunch of reruns, then I wonder what was wrong with me.” Danny could hear his laugh crack and took a large swallow of beer to hide his expression. “I spend a lot of evenings by myself. The truth is I'm glad

when I have to work late, it takes my mind off of things."

Craig said quietly, "Yeah, divorce is tough."

Divorce, Danny thought bleakly, was much worse than tough. And the loneliness, God help him, the utter loneliness ... he hadn't been prepared for it. Once upon a time, before Laura, he'd been a bachelor and enjoyed it. Now he found it impossible to go back.

"But ... I was burning out, Ral." He shook his head, clearing his throat to disguise the unsteadiness in his voice. "I know you understand what I'm talking about. With every arrest, every teenaged hooker or tax-dodging slum lord, it just got worse. I couldn't sleep. I felt frustrated and angry and helpless half the time. And when I moved to homicide, it became unbearable. The damned system was making me crazy. We're there to help people and we get treated like scum. I wanted to be a police officer ever since I could remember. But I was really hating the job."

Ralston looked ironically amused, and there was a weariness to his smile. "You're preaching to the choir here, Danny. I know all about it, all those crappy feelings. If you want someone to tell you you did the right thing despite what it did to your marriage, well, I honestly think you did the only thing. But if you want Laura to understand, she's back in Indiana, pal."

Danny caressed his dripping glass, making lines in the condensation and then lifting it to drain it. Maudlin wasn't his usual style and he felt a little embarrassed.

Both he and Craig suddenly found their drinks extremely fascinating. Willie Nelson began again, someone in the place definitely having a hang up on depressing tunes.

"At any rate," Danny said after he swallowed the rest of his beer, "your invitation was perfect timing. Ral. I really needed to get away and do nothing for a while."

Ralston smiled, a gleam of white teeth in his thin face. "Good thing. In Northern Michigan, we've got plenty of nothing."

* * * *

In five long years, not much had changed. Michael watched the gates open in a fluid motion, the wrought iron of the ornate barrier belying the soundless efficiency of the well-oiled hinges. The high-tech cameras and digital pad that needed a code for entrance did sap some of the ambiance out of the rustic beauty of the place, but then again, Beaumonts had never stinted on security.

Easing the rental car through the opening, he relished the long shadows thrown by the corridor of trees that lined the long drive. Slender white trunks stretched as far as the eye could see, topped by a canopy of green fluttering leaves. The place should have been called Thousand Birches, he thought not for the first time. Above, the sky was very blue, topped by wispy lazy clouds, and the air coming in the open windows smelled sharp with summer and damp earth.

Stan tapped his finger thoughtlessly against his thigh in a random pattern. Michael watched the restless movement out of the corner of his eye and wondered what his brother-in-law wasn't telling him. Something about placid Stan—the unusual chatter of the past hour, the twitching of his hands and mouth—was sending off bells. They'd had their beer, but the conversation had been pretty pedestrian. His brother-in-law had been downright evasive.

Michael suspected he knew what this invitation to visit might be about. There had been hints, little tidbits. Not from his family, he thought cynically, but the media could be helpful at times. "So," he finally steeled himself to ask, "has Anne decided what she's going to do?"

"About?" Wariness crept into those bland blue eyes.

“The race for governor, Stan.” Michael laughed. “Please, don't pull that slack-jawed act with me. My sister is fairly salivating to take on that old incumbent bastard that sells himself as the great humanitarian. I can feel her licking her lips all the way from New York. She's damned hungry. So what's it going to be?”

“Maybe I should let her tell you herself.”

“In other words, a big fat ‘yes’ I thought so. Being a congresswoman wasn't going to satisfy her for long. No one who knows her well thought it would. Robert served one term and moved on like a rocket.”

Giving a resigned sigh, Stan murmured, “There's going to be a big party here Saturday night—caterers, champagne and caviar, people flying in from everywhere. She's making the announcement then.”

“Ah, with her loving family all in attendance. I see.”

“What's wrong with that?”

Dappled sunlight slid over the hood of the car as they rounded the turn and slowly took the ascent to the house. Michael smiled grimly. “I was told to come for just a little family get-together. I knew that was bullshit. Good thing I knew it and packed a decent suit. My mother just can't lie well; she won't lower herself to it. You can tell she wasn't born into the family. I thought something bigger was going on the minute she told me that load of crap about all of us together here at Thirty Birches for the first time in years, so on and so forth.”

Stan looked pained. “Michael, Anne will make a wonderful governor.”

A wry laugh erupted. “Oh sure. I know she will. I guess I just don't like being hauled here under false pretenses. I suppose my mother knew if she told me the real reason, I wouldn't want to be part of this. I refused for years to go to any of those back-slapping extravaganzas that Robert invited me to attend.”

“False pretenses?” Stan murmured, “Really, I doubt that was Marie's intention ... maybe she didn't want to steal Anne's thunder. Maybe—”

A resigned weariness seemed to settle somewhere in Michael's stomach. After all, his brother-in-law wasn't the one who had wheedled him into coming. He interrupted quietly, “Stan, forget it, will you? Defending my family is not worth it and not your job, lawyer or not. They live and breathe politics, it has sunk into their membranes, flows in their bloodstreams, permeates everything they do. Maybe that's why a little honesty is so hard to come by with the Beaumonts.”

Outside the car, the birches bent and waved gracefully in the light breeze as they drove slowly past. Looking a little sheepish, Stan murmured, “You're so cynical, Michael.”

“Hell yes, I am. Wonder why?”

“I ... er ... don't know.”

“Yes, you do. Think about it. For that matter, how come you aren't?”

His brother-in-law laughed out loud. “Come on. You don't really expect a comment, do you?”

“Ever the husband of a congresswoman and a lawyer too, aren't you? Okay, let's bypass this subject.”

“Fine by me.”

Around the bend the house came into view. Michael drew a sharp breath of childhood memory. The structure rose above the veil of trees, white and gold in the dying sunlight, palatial and yet somehow not ludicrous in the wild setting of water and forest. The facade of the mansion was high and wide, railed porches running the long length of the building on both levels, flanked by huge shining windows.