

LANSEL

a novel in progress

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Lansel: A Novel in Progress.

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This novel began as a fiction serial in *The Tactile Mind Weekly* e-zine that ran from 2001 to 2005. The first 99 chapters originally available online have been consolidated into this PDF ebook for your convenience so you can catch up to speed when you start reading the latest in *Lansel* in the *Handtype Weekly E-zine*. Special thanks go to John Lee Clark for his continued faith in my work.

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Chapter 1

“You lie finish.”

She stared at me as I picked up the last of my suitcases and walked out the door of our house. I pushed them into the trunk of my car. She stood there, shivering in the cool evening wind; looking more beautiful than ever with her tight jeans and a V-neck pink cashmere sweater. If I hadn't known what she really was like, I'd have fallen in love with her all over again. Her eyes were those of a siren's, beckoning me back into her world of darkness and madness.

We had been married for not even a year, but I kept telling myself: She was the one who lied, not I. We had met a year ago at one of the basketball tournaments at the Lansel School of the Deaf; I had been divorced for a few years, and I was there with Dale Burton, my best buddy in town. Dale's son was on the Lansel team, and there she stood across the court. She was wearing a designer parka with its hood lined with mink fur, and she was waving to me.

The tight game—Olney High, a hearing high school a two-hour trip away, was leading by ten points—suddenly felt inconsequential.

At least that was what I thought she was doing until I saw who she was waving to.

I turned around and saw Robert Biggles, the football coach at Lansel. He was short, squat, and moustached like a walrus. I had known Robert slightly, but I felt comfortable enough to ask him later who that woman was after Lansel won against Olney High, 112 to 95. His eyes strayed carefully away from hers. He was, of course, married.

“Angela Marstone,” he fingerspelled before he glanced around to see where she was. “Don't mess with her finish.”

I turned around to look for her, and there she was. She had thick lips that begged to be kissed and savored. More than that, her eyes had a fire that flared out of nowhere, and it was burning like a geyser for me. Her eyes never swayed from mine as she walked across the court.

I don't think we even noticed Robert removing himself as we made small talk. It turned out that she was a third-generation deaf woman from north of Lansel. She seemed pleased that I had grown up with hearing parents, and that I was the new counselor at Lansel. As the janitor swept onto the court with his wide mop, I looked up at her. “Introduce myself finish?”

She laughed. “Funny how strangers deaf bab-bab-bab before name introduce.”

I felt warm inside. “Me name A-l-a-n W-o-r-x.” My name sign is

the letter “A” in the sign for “work.” I added, “Last name sounds like ‘works.’ Yours?”

“A-n-g-e-l-a M-a-r-s-t-o-n-e,” she said, adding her name sign as in an “A” hitting her fist as in the sign for “stone.”

She looked up at me and smiled. “Funny how name sign yours mine almost similar.”

We gazed into each other’s eyes, laughing and carrying on. It was so thrilling to feel able to talk to a woman so easily without feeling that constant shadow of the code of ethics that all counselors are to follow.

I felt a hand clasp my shoulder firmly. “What?”

It was Robert. “Excuse me,” he said to Angela. “Alan-me whisper-private must.”

We went to the hallway around the corner from the locker room. “Angela bad n-e-w-s. Almost destroyed my-marriage. Angela come here? My wife not come. That why my wife not here. Don’t involve Angela finish.” Robert’s eyes were full of warning.

As I left for the basketball court, I found her standing alone by the folded bleachers pushed against the brick walls. People kept a certain distance away from her. I think in that moment of weakness, I felt both desire and pity for her. Little did I know that as I approached her, the game of love we were about to play would be far nastier than any basketball game I’d ever seen.

Chapter 2

A good buddy of mine at Westminster where I had earned my M.S.W. heard from a pal of his that there was an opening for a counselor at Lansel School of the Deaf in upstate New York. I hadn’t been happy working at the Nebraska School for the Deaf in Omaha, especially when there was a constant threat of being downsized and compared to the Iowa School for the Deaf only seven miles away, and across the state border, from Bluffs Council. When the state legislature finally shut down the Nebraska School of the Deaf, I was frustrated that competition for openings in Iowa became just impossible, I was understandably relieved to hear from my good buddy.

I had graduated fifth with a B.S.W. in my class of ’88 from Gallaudet University, and a M.S.W in Counseling for the Deaf from Westminster College. I had grown up in Ashland, a small town in northern Wisconsin. I didn’t learn ASL until I arrived at Gallaudet, but my instant proficiency—uncorked after all those years of bottling

my parents saying, “No, you can’t use sign language, or your speech will suffer”—in the language meant that I had been destined to use ASL all along. Once I learned how to fingerspell and gesture without using my voice, there was no going back. I liked the familial feeling that I always felt whenever I was in a group of signers, even if they were all strangers to me. I felt home in such crowds for the first time.

I applied, interviewed, and moved to Lansel by the end of that summer after getting my master’s. My parents weren’t too pleased that I’d chosen to live so far away from Wisconsin, and not so easily accessible by plane. From the first day of orientation at Lansel School for the Deaf, I knew then I wanted to be nowhere else. The people were enormously friendly and didn’t seem prone to the blatant politicking that pervaded so many deaf organizations. My contract would be good for three years, which gave me a peace of mind that I hadn’t experienced in a long while.

Those years in Omaha had left me with a bitter aftertaste. It was there that I met my deaf wife Julie; she was an elementary schoolteacher. I had been something of a social outcast during my high school years so when I finally met a woman who seemed to like me, I thought that was all I needed to make my life complete. I wasn’t very experienced with women, even though I tried to date them at Gallaudet. I was too much of a late bloomer and too horny to stop and think about the consequence of proposing to her.

A few years passed. In those days and nights, it became clearer to me that we weren’t suited for each other. We made love, yes, but it all felt more like a duty. The night she told me that she’d deliberately made sure that she’d never get pregnant even when she knew how much I had wanted children was the end of everything for me. It was the only time in my life that I was grateful for not having had children.

Suddenly freed as a single man, I drifted in my free time after work. I worked out. I hung out in deaf professional happy hours at Joe’s Bar. I took my time with other women, always careful not to sleep with them on first—or even third or fourth—dates. I dreamed about all sorts of women, but all the good ones, it seemed, were all engaged or married to someone else.

The night I met Angela Marstone on that basketball court: Well, I suddenly felt alive in ways I didn’t know I could be. It was much more than the physical desire that kept me alert with ache; it was the unexpected hope that I would meet someone good enough to make mine.

The night I drove Angela Marstone home into my apartment: Our

hands fluttered and braided each other's as we looked straight ahead into the night while the white dividing lines on the two-lane highway from the school blipped.

The night I took Angela Marstone home right into my apartment: Our tongues and hands and hips were alight on fire. We could not get close enough even in that thin sheen of sweat that enveloped our bodies in the half-lit darkness shrouding our bed.

The night I confessed to Angela Marstone that I loved her on first sight: She closed her eyelids, smiled, and snuggled up to my chest. It was the sweetest sleep I ever had with another human being.

My mistake was being afraid to ask what she truly meant when she said, "Me reputation have finish."

Chapter 3

I was finishing up an email to my boss when the door light in my office flashed. I looked up to find Jamie Blinks, a petite sophomore who was still having a hard time dealing with her hearing parents. They belittled the fact that she seemed to have given up on speech therapy, and the fact that she wasn't as attractive as her other hearing sisters. "Come-in, close-door, sit-down," I said.

She closed the door and sat down timidly in front of my desk. Her moping factor detracted everyone from the fact that she was indeed beautiful. The mousy bangs hung over her eyebrows whenever she read a book borrowed from the school library.

"You all-right?"

She shook her head no.

"Tell-me. Please."

She fidgeted.

"Home problem-problem same-same. Nothing new."

"Same-same? You-sure?"

"W-e-l-l . . ." Her fingerspelling trailed off into space.

"Me here for you."

She looked past me into the skies framed by the window behind me. My office has a nice view of the courtyard, where trees were not planted in the corners but between corners so that we can see onto the green from the corner windows. The entire campus was designed by the deaf architect Olaf Hanson more than a century ago. I love the campus except for the new dormitory building that was built in the early 1970s—it is all steel and concrete slabs—and everyone complains that it

looks like a corporate office building instead of the dormitory it is.

“Beautiful day.”

“Want become like your parents? Continue discuss-discuss weather then.”

She sighed. “Parents argue whole time me there. Why visit for-for?”

“You-know what-they-comment?”

“Hard lipread contorted-face argue-argue.” She paused, and then looked straight at me. “Why you can’t adopt me? Then life perfect.”

“Me not ready take-care children.”

“Me not c-h-i-l-d! Me 15 old.”

I inhaled. “Sorry.”

“Not fair! Some kids deaf parents have. You deaf, perfect father.”

“Prefer get parents down here, get interpreter here, then discuss, clarify problem issues? Me can arrange that i-f you-prefer.”

“Me feel strange parents here. They not want learn signs s-o”

“Decide-for-yourself.”

I watched her as she looked down at the floor. “O-k.”

“Great!” At that moment my door lights flashed. “Excuse me.” I got up and opened the door to find my ex-wife Julie.

Chapter 4

As much as I didn’t want to, I invited Julie to come sit in my office after Jamie left. “What’s-up?” I figured that I might as well get the meeting over with. Other than a short haircut with some frosting, she looked the same—blouse and slacks. Just made up a little more than usual.

“Don’t kill me but did interview j-o-b here.”

“Wrong-wrong Iowa deaf-institution?”

“This school pay better. Plus want new life. Plus heard good school.”

“If you-follow me here, finish,” I warned her.

“Me not! Us-two friends want.”

“Have someone special?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

She didn’t blink when she fingerspelled, “Laurie Cates.”

“L-a-u-r-i-e woman that?”

“Yes. She work printing company downtown Lansel.”

I nodded slowly.

“You shocked?”

“Yes.”

“Hope you not feel ego-deflated.”

“No. No. J-u-s-t”

“Should email you first, but not sure get interview.”

We chatted a bit more before she left; she chose not to share details about her coming out. I closed the door behind her and felt a swelling of tears surge within my chest but I didn’t dare cry. I stood there for a long time until I realized that I was shaking uncontrollably.

In that moment I ached intensely to be with Angela Marstone. I wanted to see her eyes filled with the flames of desire, her body wanting me even more as our tongues and hands poured out secrets and dreams sometimes best kept quiet. I knew she worked somewhere downtown, and seeing that it was almost lunchtime, I might have a chance of catching her on the street.

Chapter 5

Driving around downtown Lansel, I teased the gas pedal—sometimes going fast, sometimes slow—as I searched the streets for a sign of Angela. Office workers flocked past each other into delis, grocery stores, and restaurants, but none of them looked like her. I knew it might be a wild goose chase, but the memory of our lovemaking the night before really seared me to the bottom of my soul. Who knew that I could feel like a lost man found in the arms of a woman? I knew I had been drifting for a long time, but I had no idea how far gone I’d become until I found myself with her. She had become my atlas, and I had to find her again.

A century ago Lansel was a thriving town, thanks to it being one of the stops on the Erie Canal that connected it eventually to the Hudson River, which then led steamers and boats down to New York City. Lansel was situated in the bottom of a valley, another reason why I loved the place so much. Years of living in the flat lands of Kansas had filled me with an intense craving for green heights, and a river to match. Erie Canal wasn’t exactly a river, but its faint fragrance of water gave me a presence of moist earth. My apartment overlooked the town, and with a telescope out of my living room window, I could pinpoint the Lansel School for the Deaf far to the southeast of me. The steepness of hills that threatened to dwarf Lansel have reminded many people of San Francisco’s legendary slopes, but the houses of Lansel are nowhere

as pretty as those in San Francisco, though. Lansel is all about keeping warm against the long winters.

When I first moved here, I loved driving up and down the hills. Sometimes I would do this for hours. I was afraid that some people would recognize me as that nut who couldn't get enough of letting go of his car brakes just to feel the slight thrill of danger and the happy thlupp of pressing the brake pedal just when the lights turned to red. Eventually I took the hills for granted and decided to bicycle down the hill from my apartment, then pedal across the canal and weave my way through the hills while my legs pushed hard. It was a great workout, especially so early in the morning when the town stretches its arms while awakening.

Seeing that I had only 35 minutes before my next appointment at the school, I decided to park my car on Patton Street and grab a sandwich from Bob's Deli. I knew that many deaf people frequented that place because the owner himself was deaf. Maybe I would find Angela there.

Chapter 6

When I entered Bob's Deli, it seemed that half of the people in the place were signing. It was *the* place where those who didn't work at the Lansel School for the Deaf showed up for lunch during the week. The town was physically small enough and never had what the bigger cities called "rush hour traffic," so it was very easy for just about anyone to drive by for lunch and be back in time for the afternoon's work.

As I joined the line, I surveyed the eating area for Angela. I felt a great pleasure in knowing that half of the people there, I knew. There was Ruth Berbas, the divorced librarian assistant with three children in college, who was studying for a M.F.A. in playwriting at Lansel State; there was Ted Biggles, Robert's younger brother, who worked as an engineer for the Department of Transportation; there was the Larks, a retired couple who used to work at the Lansel School of the Deaf and now spend their lunches at Bob's; there was Paddy McGlynn, an Irishman who lost his hearing as a teenager during the Troubles in the 1970s and moved to America when he married Joan Spinst, now an attorney with her own practice a few doors from here.

I surveyed them all, and I felt good about being deaf. This is what I never felt while growing up, and that is why I can understand some of my students feeling anger from that suspicion of missing on something

vitaly important when living with their hearing families. They do not know how good they have it when they are among their own kind.

I found myself in front of Bob. He winked at me. "Same like before?" It was strange to see his thick hands sign through his see-through plastic gloves.

I nodded.

Bob was quick and deft in pulling together a huge sandwich—a thick layer of roast beef and a smothering of mayo on rye bread—and placed a juicy pickle next to it on a paper plate. He looked up and smiled. "New job going o-k?"

"Yep." I picked up the plate. "Thanks."

I paid and sat down by the window. No sight of Angela anywhere. I took two bites before I looked up to find Robert Biggles standing before me.

"Mind join-you?"

I raised my eyebrows yes as I bit a big piece off my sandwich.

As he sat down and drank some Coke, he glanced around. "Person you-I know, mental breakdown awhile-ago. Tend perfect, easy life, flow together wow. But . . ." He glanced around again and smiled at Paddy, who waved back. "I-f herself feel trust can't, finish." He extended the trembling fingers of the sign "finish" all over as if it was a nuclear bomb explosion. "Warn-warn awful."

We both looked out the window when we sensed a flicker of shadow across our table. It was Angela herself standing and looking in at us from the sidewalk.

Chapter 7

The minute Angela strode forth into the deli, there was a sudden crack in the air. Bob's effusive grin turned a little taut. Others averted their eyes and resumed their conversations. Robert, sitting in front of me, raised his eyebrows to point this out while she strode closer to me.

"There-you-are!" She bent down and kissed me on the cheek.

Paddy's eyes opened a bit after seeing this. He was a very nice fellow who was very laid-back about a lot of things, and that she could produce such a reaction in him made me wonder—

"Look-at-me!"

I gazed up at her.

Robert checked his watch and said, "Me b-k class teach." He scooped up his sandwich and Coke. "See-ya-later." He waved bye-bye to

his brother Ted sitting over by the wall and left.

“Later.” I turned to her, now sitting in front of me.

“Mind-me take that?” She pointed to my pickle.

“Go-ahead.”

She picked it up. She bit into its green crunchery. Her eyes never left mine, and I felt my whole body go into flames of desire. How could a woman make me feel like that so quickly? What was her secret?

I swallowed my lemonade to stop from choking on the oversized bites of my sandwich.

“Easy-does-it. Calm-down.”

“Me fine. How your-morning?”

“Boring. Paperwork file, et-cetera.” She leaned forward. “Know woman name J-u-l-i-e W-o-r-x?”

I nearly choked again. I hadn’t realized that my ex-wife would visit the printing company where Angela worked, but then I remembered her girlfriend worked there too.

“Used-to-be wife,” I said after I drank some more lemonade.

“Divorce why?”

“Me not comfortable comment here. People-over-there.”

She glanced their way, then turned to me and shrugged. “Gossip anyway. Tell-me.”

I checked my watch and it was nearly 12:30. “Silly-silly-me. L-a-t-e finish!”

“Page boss l-a-t-e, easy.”

“N-o. My clients h-s students.” I got up and carried the remains of my lunch to a trash can. “Sorry, but bam-off must.”

As I rushed out of Bob’s Deli, I turned to look in the window. She was sitting there, quietly munching on my pickle. There was a look of far-away in her eyes.

Chapter 8

Jud was waiting outside my office when I ran up the stairs. “Me-sorry.”

“That o-k.”

I fumbled with my office keys and finally unlocked the door. It was the first time I sped through the hills of Lansel to the school, and I had been so paranoid about being caught. I turned on the lights and closed the door behind Jud.

I sat down before Jud. At 13 years old, he had a terrible acne

problem and a pair of buck teeth that protruded a bit. He never liked the name sign—the letter “i” pointing to the teeth—so I fingerspelled his name whenever possible. “S-o, J-u-d, what’s-up?”

“Me learn a-lot last f-e-w days.” His green eyes seemed brighter than before.

“Oh, great. Tell-me learn what.”

“Me search Internet search information.”

“About what?”

“Guys like me.”

“As-in . . .” My open palms did quick Ferris wheels in the air.

“Me think me g-a-y.”

I paused. The fact that he was gay didn’t bother me so much as the fact that he *already* knew at the age of 13. Thirteen!?! But then again I knew I liked women at that age too. “How decide that?”

“You shocked?”

“No. Feel honored that you inform me.”

“You counselor, can’t spit-out world.”

“How feel you g-a-y?”

“Great!” He beamed. “Confusion none.”

“Have boyfriend?”

He shook his head no.

“Know law here in New-York State not allow sex with m-i-n-o-r young kids. Can’t have sex with anyone until 18 years old. Understand?”

“Not fair!”

“That law finish.” I paused. “Know some kids here against people like you.”

“You against me?”

I shook my head no. “Want you happy, but you-I need discuss clarify do-do s-o you won’t suffer much.”

I looked quietly at Jud and prayed that he wouldn’t.

“Contemplate tell parents.” I liked his deaf parents, but I wasn’t sure how they’d cope with that. They were grassroots.

“You ready for that?”

“Internet real-fine, me not alone, me not only deaf g-a-y h-s kid.”

I had to smile. “Internet not real world. They-out-there, not here. Best step-by-step slow.”

He nodded. “Me-curious. Last night basketball game, you-met woman, right? Her-name what?”

“Me prefer keep personal life out this.”

“But you expect ME tell-you everything. Not fair!”

“Yes, I met woman last night. Nice chat, finish.”

"Me know her very w-e-l-l."

"Oh?"

"Me hate her."

"Why?"

"She convince father leave mother, then when divorce finish, she change-mind not-want him any-more." A single tear trickled down his cheek. "Mother not-want him b-a-c-k."

I held my breath. Was Angela Marstone truly that bad?

Chapter 9

Angela, Angela.

Her face arose out of the foggy mists of my office where I stood, looking out the window. The courtyard was filled with 101 statue replicas of Angela caught in various poses. Around all their feet crept snakes of poison ivy. I turned back to Angela sitting before my desk. She wore a white fox coat. Her eyes were suddenly pale blue as in the color of eyes in deaf Dalmations.

"Counselor, me need help."

The sun haloed her with an aura that I wanted to touch and to be enveloped in. "Me can't help. You-deflate-me."

Angela, Angela.

She laughed. "You big-man. C'mon!" She stood up and beckoned me to kiss her.

I leaned across my desk. As I did so, the floor under my desk gave way. I found myself falling helplessly a thousand feet below to the canal that squirmed through the Lansel Valley. I held my breath as my body knifed into the chilly water.

I opened my eyes and discovered that I didn't need to hold my breath as I finally floated down to the kelp-dancing sand. I was able to breathe and see across the murky waters around me. There, Angela's body shimmered with a dazzling iridescence that I had to squint. The aura was still there, and I felt her warmth drifting towards me.

Angela, Angela.

"Dare follow-me no-matter where-I-go me impressed."

I float-walked towards her. My feet felt as if on the tiny whirlwinds of heaven; if this was heaven, I wouldn't want to leave this peaceful place where my eyes filled with water and did not cry. Just when I was about to pull her into my arms for a deep kiss, she flickered into a white octopus with blue eyes that dared me to kiss, kiss, kiss.

Angela, Angela

I felt nauseous, ready to retch.

In fact, that was how I snapped out of my daydream, trying to soothe my gut-wrenched stomach while I hung my face over the gaping toilet bowl in my bathroom stall. I stared at the gushy whirlwind of water and vomit disappearing into the hole. I would tell her that I had been deeply mistaken the night before when I told her how much I loved her and wanted to spend the rest of my life with her.

Chapter 10

I was making some photocopies of my client files in the copy room when I noticed through the crack of a door slightly ajar where I could see Robert Biggles and a short and curly-haired brunette who I'd seen around the school but hadn't yet met whispering with their hands. "Heard rumor go-around?"

I rolled my eyes. Why was it that deaf people have to gossip so? I was about to turn away when I caught Robert's eyes widening at the woman's revelation. "Quit for-for?"

The woman made the name sign for Howard Stafney, our superintendent. ". . . tired fight-fight state legislature for money, cut budget, try new budget, same-same. Just-tired."

I liked Howard; he was a clean-cut guy who seemed to be everywhere you looked and yet he wasn't. He had a way of making you feel like you were his best friend, and enabling you to trust him so much. After I left my first interview with him for the job, I felt freaked that anyone could have that kind of charisma. He was of course made me feel that Lansel was the only place in the universe perfect for my skills, and I believed him. I still believed him. He was married with three hearing children now going to Lansel High School near downtown. His wife was hearing, but she was very fluent in ASL as she was a CODA herself.

Robert nodded and then caught me looking at them. He turned cold towards the brunette and came into the copy room. "Squeal world—don't."

"Of-course not. Me counselor, me-used-to code-of-ethics."

I scooped up the last of my photocopies and stormed out.

Robert caught my arm just when I was about to go down the hallway.

"W-h-a-t!" I said.

“Here school many secrets.”

“Every place plenty secrets. S-o?”

“Respect secrets, your job fine.”

“Mean what?”

“Nose-poke-in-closet, bad. Clear?”

I nodded and left.

As I entered my office, I kept wondering how many secrets Angela Marstone must’ve had. I decided to page her via email and asked her to come to my place tonight. As I clicked on my pager’s button for “Send,” my entire body swelled with ache and fear at the same time.

Chapter 11

After I finished inputting my notes on some of my clients on the computer, my TTY light flashed. I nearly jumped out of my chair—it has been that long since anyone has called me by TTY. I’d thought everyone had email and pager addresses by now. I picked up the receiver and placed it in the TTY’s cradle. “HELLO ALAN WORX HERE HOW CAN I HELP YOU QQ GA”

“THIS IS RUTH BERBAS I SAW YOU EARLIER AT BOBS DELI BUT YOU LOOKED BUSY SO I DIDNT WANT TO BOTHER YOU BUT I DID WANT TO REMIND YOU ABOUT TONIGHTS MEETING THOUGHT YOU HAD A LOT OF THINGS ON UR MIND SO JUST A FRIENDLY REMINDER SMILES GA”

I stopped, and then it hit me. I took out my PDA and checked my calendar. Yup. Ruth was right. I had promised her a few weeks before about showing up at the next board meeting for the Lansel Deaf Theater Company and seeing if I could volunteer in some way. “THANKS URE RIGHT ABOUT THAT SORRY I FORGOT ABOUT THAT 7 PM RIGHT QQ”

“WE CAN GET TOGETHER EARLY FOR DINNER IF YOU LIKE GA”

Was she looking for a date with me or . . . ? I couldn’t tell. After all, I knew she was married very young and divorced very young too. She had three kids, if I remembered her telling me correctly. But Ruth wasn’t the woman I wanted, and I was still waiting to hear from Angela. I checked my pager, saw no response from her, and cursed its erratic service. What the hell, I thought. I don’t know Ruth very well. “SURE WHERE QQ GA”

She gave me directions to Darcy's Steak and Fries, just outside of Lansel. All I had to do was to go down to the Erie Canal and follow Patton Street east. Darcy's would be impossible to miss after two miles. I hung up.

As I locked my office, I felt a slight buzz from my pager. I unsheathed my pager to read a message from Angela: "emergency situation cant see u tonite page u later."

Oh, great, I thought to myself. Now I won't be able to concentrate on Ruth. No, I paused. Maybe I would try to find out a bit more about Angela's past, which no one seemed willing to share in great detail with me. Besides, I was quite hungry.

Chapter 12

As I was about to walk past Howard's office on the first floor for the parking lot, I caught sight of him in the reception area; his secretary must've just left for the day. He was putting his pager back into its belt clip and beckoned me to come into his office. "How-you doing?"

"Good. No complaints?"

He chuckled. "Wow. Me impressed with myself finish."

Even I had to laugh.

"Inform you, people out-there comment you good counsel, know how make kids feel good themselves. Me-happy hired-you. You good fit here."

"Thanks. Helps when everyone coordinate-together. Makes my job easy."

He smiled and then turned serious. "Then don't screw-up."

"Me won't. Why tell-me that?"

He pushed his chair forward as he leaned closer to me. "Rumor, o-k? You involve A-n-g-e-l-a M-a-r-s-t-o-n-e, right?"

I looked about Howard's office. "Wow. Privacy none here."

"Rumor true-business?"

I nodded.

"Bad n-e-w-s."

I jumped to my feet. "Why people backstab her for-for? Herself nice me!"

"Sit please."

I sighed and sat down. "Now w-h-a-t?"

"Me don't-like comments negative other people, but seems no-one

inform-you stories A-n-g-e-l-a.”

“What stories?”

“One guy die for her finish. Another guy imprisoned for her. And she tend do-do what? Chase married guys and screw-up marriages.”

“Me single.”

“Exact-l-y.” He sighed. “Not mean interfere your personal life but . . .”

“Thanks.” I stood up. “Me running l-a-t-e dinner with friend.”

He scribbled a phone number on the back of his business card and handed it to me. “My home phone number. Call-me i-f you-know. . . .”

“Prefer pager anyway.”

We shook hands, and I left.

In my car I kept fingerspelling her name “A-n-g-e-l-a” over and over again while I took my sweet time towards Darcy’s Steak and Fries. No, I wouldn’t talk about Angela tonight.

Chapter 13

In Darcy’s Steak and Fries, I sat before Ruth in a booth. I had just ordered sirloin steak, medium rare, and she recommended that I also try a side of their garlic mashed potatoes instead of their fries even though we were going to a board meeting for the Lansel Deaf Theater Company in 90 minutes.

As the waitress walked away with our orders, Ruth turned to me. “Me thrilled you-interest involve theater.”

“J-u-s-t thought fun volunteer do-do something different.”

“Great, great! Me-curious you experience theater finish?”

I shook my head no. “Enjoy watch shows.”

“Feel important preserve A-S-L.”

“How your school studies coming along?” I knew she was studying for a M.F.A. in Playwriting at Lansel State.

“Me try whole new play, but hard wow.” She paused. “Professor expect me write play like hearing but deaf people not always same hearing people.”

“He don’t-want deaf plays. He wants hearing plays about deaf,” I said. “Plays with hearing point-of-view on deaf, right?”

She chuckled nervously. “Wow. You true-business point!”

“Then why bother study under hearing teachers not care if you different? You same them must? No.” I stopped when I realized I was being pushy.

“Go on.”

“Not mean tell-you do-do. Me know nothing-in-head theater.”

“Book knowledge not everything world. Common-sense important t-o-o.”

“Right. Tell-me more story about Lansel Deaf Theater C-o.”

As there were about 3,000 deaf people who lived in the area, she felt fortunate that about half of them always attended their shows. She told me one horror story after another about other deaf theater companies that always seemed on the verge of mutiny and dissolution due to a variety of factors—politics among board members and a growing apathy among audiences over a series of bad plays and hearing plays translated into ASL. The deaf community, she felt, didn’t feel as strong about deaf theater as they used to because *their* stories weren’t being shared onstage. She made an interesting observation: The deaf community was stronger in the old days because the world was much simpler back then—it was us against the hearing world. Now that there were many hearing people eager to learn signs and appreciate deaf culture to the prevalence of sign classes in high schools and universities, the deaf community couldn’t always say that the hearing world was all bad.

The waitress waved her hand at us. She’d served enough deaf customers to know that speech wasn’t enough to caught their attention. I smiled. It sure felt good that hearing strangers could be so understanding of our needs, even if it was a simple thing as waving for our attention instead of yelling at us so needlessly.

As I tasted Darcy’s garlic mashed potatoes for the first time, I stopped when I saw something out of the corner of my eye.

“W-h-a-t?” Ruth followed my gaze to the entrance where there stood Angela gesturing with a different waitress behind the takeout counter. Ruth had a better view of Angela than I did.

I turned back to Ruth and knifed my steak so hard I thought I’d break the plate in half.

“Me won’t sign,” she said in very small motions so not to be noticed. “Us hearing people.” She assumed the slightly grimaced expression of a hearing person who’d never cared to use her face much as she dug into her mashed potatoes.

I tried not to look her way.

Ruth’s eyes directed me to hers, not over there.

I smiled slightly and mouthed, “Good, good.”

She smiled slowly as she ate.

I forked another bit of steak and chew on it slowly while she

watched.

Finally her shoulders drooped.

I turned to the takeout counter.

There was no Angela anywhere.

“Excuse me,” I said as I got up and rushed to the entrance.

Chapter 14

Out there in the parking lot under in the musky winter night Angela was opening the door to her sedan when I rushed out of Darcy’s and waved for her attention. She turned with a flash and the look on her face made it clear that I wasn’t to come any closer, let alone acknowledge her.

“Why ignore-me for-for?”

She put her takeout bags in the front seat, and it was then I saw the shape of a man sitting in her car.

“Who that there?”

“None your business.”

“Me love you.”

“Love not mean know everything necessary.”

“Tell-me his name, explain later.”

“You too-nosy finish.”

“You comment emergency pager afternoon. Him not look like emergency.”

She stopped when she noticed the passenger’s hand waving for her attention.

“W-h-a-t?”

I came closer and bent down for a look into her car.

“NOSY FINISH!”

I didn’t care. I moved her aside and saw that it was none other than Robert Biggles. “YOU TELL-ME AVOID ANGELA BAD N-E-W-S,” I shouted with my signs. “Obvious now you keep her yourself. W-t-f?”

Angela stepped in front of my view of Robert. “Him going-through hard time now. Me explain later.”

“He tell-me you y-o-u you bad n-e-w-s. Ask-him what that means.”

I went back inside Darcy’s. In a weird and unexpected way, I found the sight of Ruth sipping her ginger ale oddly comforting even though I barely knew her.

Chapter 15

“See A-n-g-e-l-a finish satisfied?” was the first thing Ruth said when I returned to our booth at Darcy’s.

“Me okay.”

She leaned closer to me. “Every deaf community here and there have person who decide become asshole for whatever reason. Can’t avoid those people. Some them feel ignored growing up then pah find deaf community, sign, want attention finish. They hurt find when deaf community not accept them.”

“But Angela not like that.”

“Oh?” She sipped her ginger ale. “A-n-g-e-l-a before act plays, but deaf theater c-o bulldozed A-n-g-e-l-a, had t-o.”

“Why?”

“Herself switch-back-forth-between two men c-a-s-t. Screw-up show, actors memorize can’t. Awful. Worst production Lansel Deaf Theater C-o finish.”

“Thought most men actors g-a-y.”

“Lucky hit me guess.”

I decided to change the subject. “You write plays now?”

It was then she told me the story of her life. She lost her hearing to meningitis at the age of four. A year later she entered Lansel School for the Deaf, where she stayed until her high school graduation; her family lived in Olney, a small town some two hours away. When she was fifteen she met John Berbas, who was the new sophomore from Albany; it was not long before she herself was pregnant—twice. She married John when she was sixteen, and her parents insisted that she earn her diploma even though her husband had dropped out of school to become an auto mechanic in downtown Lansel. It was a huge scandal when her parents brought along her two children to watch their mother Ruth graduate. John was silent the whole time. Later that night, after the graduation party at their house had ended, he turned explosive with rage. “You graduated, me feel deflated finish. Friends look-through-me, me nothing. You shiny-shiny brain, me hands-hang fix-fix. Me nothing!” She tried to calm him down, but his rage turned physical. He punched her out in the kitchen that night, but she thought that he had to get it out of his system once. The summer proved her wrong, and after one emergency room visit too many, she finally asked two of her closest friends to help move her and her children’s stuff out of their house while her husband was away at work. He would not grant her the divorce for ten years even though he would go on to father three more

children among two different women. By the time John finally relented on the divorce and gave up on his quest for custody of the children, she had managed to graduate from Lansel State University with a B.A. in Library Science. Two months later, she was asked to replace the school librarian Ellen Novak who died suddenly of a heart attack. It was the only full-time job she ever had in her entire life, and she had been working there fifteen years. Now she decided to go back to school and get a M.F.A. in Playwriting. “Me feel funny sometimes. My kids both enter college finish, and me in college t-o-o!” She chuckled. “But me want see my writing improve. Deaf theater c-o all-over need r-e-a-l plays b-y deaf writers. Me tired see see hearing plays translated put-onstage perform. Where deaf real stories? Where? That why me decide see-see write plays can. Me find double-enjoy write plays. Once-a-while my plays produced Lansel Deaf Theater C-o, but me busy now school, writing.”

Then she noticed the time on her pager. “Silly-silly. Us-two l-a-t-e board meeting.”

I whipped out my wallet to pay my half of the bill, but she placed her hand on mine. “Don’t worry. Can pay next time.”

“Thanks.” I got up. “Me meet you there.”

As I got out of the restaurant, I walked to my car in the parking lot and found Angela stamping her feet in the cold, waiting for me.

Chapter 16

I zipped up my parka and didn’t say a word as I unlocked my car. Angela trotted around the back of my car to the passenger side as I got into my car. I turned on the ignition to warm up the car a little even though I knew she was tapping furiously on the window.

Suddenly she stopped.

As I turned on the headlights, Angela was weeping. “Robert took-off-boom my car, left-me-here cold.”

I turned on my dashboard lights to make my signs easier to see. “You not have t-o freeze. Go restaurant warm u-p.”

“Me thought you love me finish!”

“Me start wondering my definition l-o-v-e different from yours.”

“Can me enter car sit? Please?”

“Me l-a-t-e meeting. Me bam-off.”

She didn’t move from the path of my car.

I inched my car forward with my gas pedal and prayed that she

would step aside and let me go.

Still, she refused to budge. Her lips were taut and her eyes were full of fire.

I moved closer and closer until I was sure that I was only one inch away from her knees. “Me go-ahead move.”

“Not until us-two sit c-a-r discuss.”

I nodded. “O-k.”

The second she stepped out of the way around the front of my car, I slammed my foot on the gas pedal and sped off.

In my dashboard window, she was screaming and signing curses at me. I couldn’t help but laugh. After all, she could always use her pager to bail herself out of this crisis.

Chapter 17

As I sped through downtown to the board meeting for the Lansel Deaf Theater Company, I felt a sudden pang of guilt. What if she would start spreading rumors about what I’d just done to her? But then I thought to myself: Could I, a professional counselor, treat a woman like that? Did anyone know about her relationship with Robert Biggles? What was truly going on here? The passion and connection I felt with her the night before came back with a full force I hadn’t realized it had, and before I knew it, I sped past the building where the meeting was and back to Darcy’s.

There was a stretch of highway that goes from downtown to Darcy’s that goes through nothing but a valley of fir trees sloping down to the two-lane pavement. The pale moonlight fell across the snow, and in that wintry silence I felt a peace that I hadn’t felt in a long while. I wanted so much to park aside the highway and get out of the car and climb the slope just to inhale the drug of tranquility, but no. Maybe later tonight, I thought.

I turned onto the parking lot at Darcy’s. No sight of her. I parked and ran into the restaurant. No sight of her in there either.

I whipped out my pager, sent a quick email to Ruth, and doubled back to the board meeting.

Chapter 18

When I entered the small building off Willard Street for the board

meeting in the meeting room at the Lansel Deaf Club on the second floor, I stopped. Angela was sitting on the steps, looking miserable and sneezing and blowing her nose.

“What’s-up you here?”

“R-u-t-h drove-me here.”

“Thanks.” I was about to climb the stairs past her when she stood up suddenly and glared into my eyes. “Abandoning-me not nice.”

“Lying not nice either,” I shot back.

“You not c-a-r-e about me.”

“Me d-o c-a-r-e about you, but me l-a-t-e, o-k?”

She stood quietly, gazing quietly into my eyes. The heat between us flared up, hotter than a volcano threatening to erupt, and I had to look away to break her spell.

“Look, me drive drop you off your home after meeting, o-k?”

She slowly lit up with a smile.

I felt giddy as I skipped every few steps on my way up to the meeting. Just outside the meeting room, Ruth turned to me. “True that you left-her-behind parking l-o-t?”

I sighed. “Yes. Like you comment, herself bad n-e-w-s.”

“Still r-u-d-e.”

“Don’t judge me, o-k?”

Ruth and I went into the meeting room. As it turned out, I had met most of the board members before, as they were the ones who usually gave a great deal of money to help keep the Lansel School of the Deaf going even though the state legislature had made it clear that they’d much prefer to shut down the school during yet another yearly round of budget cuts. I had some private misgivings about seeing rich hearing people on the board for deaf organizations, but the problem was, I knew, most deaf people weren’t always wealthy. I was always afraid that some of these hearing people would try to take over these deaf organizations when they had no right to.

Still, it was nice to feel reassured when I saw who was running the group. Mickey Bunz, a heavy-set deaf man with a beard and belly, was clearly meticulous, his fingerspelling and signing so precise that it was almost like reading a book where each sentence was carefully crafted. I liked him immediately. After the meeting, I went over to Mickey.

“Where you work?”

“C-h-e-f, work at Hotel Prater.”

Hotel Prater wasn’t a fancy place, but everyone agreed that its restaurant was the best in the entire county. I had heard a great deal about the food when I first moved to Lansel, so I splurged a meal all on

myself there the third night in my new town. When I later learned that the chef was deaf, I thought to myself: "Another reason to be proud of being deaf." It's pretty difficult to argue when you are tasting the most subliminal food. After all, deafness does attract a lot of people who think they were put on this earth to save us from the imagined calamity of never being one with the hearing world, and maybe a great feast would shut them all up. I told Mickey this, and he laughed. "That r-e-a-l compliment. Thank-you."

"Welcome."

"You married now?"

"No."

"Looking?"

"No."

"O-h."

It was then I realized that he might be attracted to me. "Me not g-a-y, but g-a-y people not bother me."

He looked a little crestfallen, but he smiled. "Good know."

"Me would happy us get-together lunch something."

He beamed. "How about dinner party my house?"

"S-u-r-e."

"Email address?"

After I gave it to him, I turned to Ruth. "Angela still down there?"

"Me eye-check not."

I bid everyone good-bye. I went to the stairs and found her leaning against the glass door, looking out at the occasional car going past. As I went down the steps, I saw myself appearing almost magically in Angela's reflection. She turned and smiled.

"Sorry s-o long. Meeting exaggerated."

"Alright." She smiled.

As she wrapped her arms around me for a kiss, I gently pushed her away. "Please. Not here." I opened the door. "Come-on."

She leaned forward and kissed me on the lips as I held open the door. I felt as if she had stoked the last of my dying ashes into a blizzard of fire sparks, and I knew there was no more denying my desire.

Chapter 19

She followed me to my car, but she pulled me past it to the snowbanks surrounding the parking lot. It was dark out, and I could see the stars sprinkled high above us. I wanted to stop and stare, but she

kept pulling my hand.

“Do-do now?”

She said nothing until she scaled the snowbanks and stood atop them. She smiled down at me. “There! Perfect.” Even though her back was to the solitary street lamp a short distance away, I could see the white flash of her teeth.

“Perfect what?”

“Come-up here.”

I glanced around, and I saw that my car was the farthest away from the Lansel Deaf Club building in the parking lot. I climbed up the clump-crust-ed snowbanks and tried to balance myself on the summit. She grabbed both my hands and leaned forward for a kiss. The street lamp showed her face in all its glory, and more than that, her eyes were like that beckoning fire inside Ashby’s Rink that awaited me each winter day after I finished ice-skating there as a boy. It was always cold out on the rink, but knowing that your stiff feet could uncurl while staring into the hypnotic fire made the mad rush of skating even the sweeter.

As I kissed her, her tongue reeled out like a fishing line, and she hooked me close to her as her arms gripped around my body. In that fleeting moment I didn’t care if I stood or fell, and in that fleeting moment, we both fell to the other side of the snowbanks. We didn’t care whether tiny chunks of snow popped inside our scarves or between sleeve and gloves; we couldn’t get enough of tasting each other’s tongue. She withdrew her tongue and stared deeply into my eyes. The street lamp melted in her eyes.

I rolled her around so that her body lay atop me. I mouthed the words, “I love you.”

She slowly smiled as she unzipped her jacket.

Never in my wildest fantasies did I think I’d meet a deaf woman who’d dare me to do the most unexpected things. I glanced around. No traffic anywhere.

“But . . .” I pointed to the street lamp above us. “Over-there dark better.”

She got off, gave me a disappointed stare, and climbed over the snowbank to my car. I brushed the snow off my pants and followed her.

“Me confused. Thought you want sex now.”

“You not proud me.”

“Me counselor,” I said and took off my gloves so I could sign more freely. “Me work j-o-b, reputation clean must. Me involve not appropriate behavior. Me willing sex dark, but out-there not-care who

see-us?” I shook my index finger no.

“Take-me home. Me freezing.”

I unlocked her passenger door, walked around my car, and got inside. As I turned on the ignition to heat up the car a bit, she placed her hand on my thigh.

“No more games, please.”

“Why?”

“R-o-b-e-r-t B-i-g-g-l-e-s, what’s-up that?”

Chapter 20

Angela stared at me. “Can’t share personal business finish.”

“Sleep-with-him still?”

She shook her head no.

“Where you-live now?”

“Me thought us-two-go your home.”

“Time l-a-t-e, me have-to go work early-morning.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “Why attracted me for i-f concern about reputation?”

“Me felt dead long time finish. You-pop-up. Me feel alive a-l-i-v-e.” I reversed the car and swerved the wheels enough to enable us to go back on the two-lane highway.

Her hand, now ungloved, reached for mine as I drove home. I did not look directly at her each time I made a turn, but I knew she wasn’t looking at anything else but me. I felt weak—and angry that any one person could make me feel so completely malleable. True, I knew, it had been a long time since my heart had felt the twitchings of affection for another woman after my divorce, but the intensity of my desire for Angela kept taking me by surprise.

Chapter 21

It was 5:30 a.m. when the alarm buzzer underneath my pillow went off. I awoke to find her lying on her back, staring at the ceiling. I reached forward to give her a peck on the cheek. I navigated my body closer to hers. “Good morning.”

She turned to me. “Why up s-o early?”

“Me work-out, sometimes run.”

“Me go shower.”

I reined her in to lick her flawless throat. She remained completely stiff in my arms.

“Me not like men try control me.”

I released her and watched her disappear into my bathroom.

An hour later she instructed me to drop her off at the corner near the printing company where she worked.

“No one parking lot there. You okay there?”

“Have keys enter easy. Some people enter 7.”

“Okay.”

As I drove away from the printing facility, I kept an eye on her in my dashboard mirror. She walked slowly to the side door and shook its handle. It didn’t open. She stood there, stamping her feet, as I made the last turn before she faded from sight toward the school where I worked.

Chapter 22

After showering and dressing up for the day, I stepped out of the locker room to find Robert standing in the hallway. I was still feeling invigorated from the ten laps I’d done in the school’s swimming pool.

“Good morning,” I said as I readjusted my duffel bag. “What’s-up?”

“Angela inform-me you-abandon her at-work.”

I stared at him and inhaled in order not to lose my temper. “S-h-e inform-me herself keys have.” I walked past him, but he grabbed my arm.

“You-rude awful. Me not finish.”

I glanced both ways to make sure that the hallway was indeed empty. “Fine. Me have few questions ask-ask-you. Number one—”

“Not about me. Not about her.”

I gave him a puzzled look. “Meaning?”

“Nothing.”

“You lie finish.”

“What me comment? Remember? Angela bad n-e-w-s.”

“Then why she join your car last night?”

He paused. “Me want tell-her . . . Me want her move-away. My wife insist Angela show-up court tell judge us sex finish, so my wife can win more money a-l-i-m-o-n-y.”

“O-h.” I turned to leave. This time he didn’t try to stop me. As I made my way down the hallway, I looked back to Robert just when I pushed open the door that would lead me to the stairs up to my office.

He was leaning against the cement wall, looking lost while staring straight ahead.

Chapter 23

As I headed towards my office, I found Ruth standing before the school library. She was unlocking the doors. She looked up at me.

“Good morning.”

She nodded frostily.

“You o-k?”

She entered the library and gathered up a few books that had been left in the drop-off bin. I followed her.

“Why you s-o . . . mad?”

“Because Angela wrong woman for you.”

“You not involve with her.”

“Not-matter if me happen lesbian, me won’t involve with her. Mess-up mess-up all-over. Famous pursue married men.”

I sighed. “But me not married.”

“You different.”

“Me different?”

She nodded. Her face was quiet, but I could see a sea of tears building in her eyes.

“Me sorry.”

“O-k. Me must go work.”

“O-k.”

As I left the library and thought of the tenderness in Ruth’s face, I couldn’t help but think that maybe I should truly try to forget about Angela altogether.

Chapter 24

The lights blinked in my office while I was trying to rearrange some of my old textbooks on the shelf so that I could squeeze in more that I’d brought in the first day I’d started working here. I turned to the door and opened it.

It was Jamie. She was wearing a tight blouse and hiphugging jeans with lots of makeup on her face. It was so clear that she hadn’t done this sort of thing before.

“What’s-up?”

She walked in, sat on the chair before my desk, and tried to lean forward provocatively so that I could see some of her budding bosom. I didn't go to my desk.

I inhaled. "Sorry, but that kind behavior not appropriate for here. Me school counselor, you student client."

"If us-two married, you-feel different, right?"

I walked to my desk and sat down before her. "First, you my client and prefer see you work improve relationship parents. Second, law not permit sex with m-i-n-o-r-s. You under-a-g-e. Third, me will never marry you."

"Behave different to me now," she said. "Means you attract different."

"N-o. Me not-want people get wrong idea us-two."

She refused to leave her chair.

I checked my watch—I had only 15 minutes before my first appointment of the day. "Me-willing sit-down-with-you discuss this situation—"

She looked away from me.

I waved for her attention.

She finally turned to me.

"Me not preach here, but me know Stafney will want see you if you-go school like-that."

"Don't care."

"Why not?"

"Nobody love me."

"Why feel that way?"

"Friends here none. You my only friend."

"Why you-think that?"

"People not come-up-to-me."

"What d-o you wish see happen?"

She looked intently at me. "Me tired lonely. Me not like parents. No place fit me anywhere."

"You think your clothes agree you?"

She looked at herself, and then at me. "Me want boyfriend. Some girls here-and-there have finish."

"They your friends?"

She shook her head no.

"Why not?"

"Stuck-up. Me not sign s-o good."

I paused. "Next time we-sit-down-together, us-two should analyze what friendship means you. Okay?"

She held her books close to her bosom as she stood up. "Me go dorm now."

"See you Tuesday."

She nodded and left.

Chapter 25

The morning went quickly. I was thrilled to get paged by Dale Burton, my best buddy in town, and one of the computer technicians on the other side of the campus where we worked; he was finally free to have lunch with me at Bob's Deli. He was already sitting at a table, chowing down a huge sandwich and talking with Ted Biggles across the deli. That's the beauty of signing: One doesn't need to scream just to be heard above the din. Dale stood up and slapped my shoulder heartily.

"You o-k?"

I nodded. "You? Wife? Kids?"

"Good. Thing-s busy."

"Let me get something."

As I stood in line, I watched the conversation between Dale and Ted, who seemed oblivious to everyone else. "Seems brother R-o-b-e-r-t divorce will."

Dale nodded slowly. "Sorry hear that. Kids?"

"Leave-alone. Me not discuss, grill questions. Leave-him-alone. Tell-me later will."

I turned around to the menu behind Bob when I felt a nudge. A bearded man twinkled at me. "Remember-me?"

"We met other night Lansel Deaf Theater."

"M-i-c-k-e-y, right?"

He beamed. "Thrill you remembered. How you?"

"Good. You?"

"Today off work. Busy do-do. E-r-r-a-n-d-s, you-know?"

I nodded.

Mickey signed his sandwich order to Bob, and then turned to me. "That man over-there who?"

I glanced back to Dale and Ted, still talking.

"Which one?"

"Left."

"D-a-l-e?"

"Last name?"

"B-u-r-t-o-n. Want introduce?"

“Yes.”

Minutes later, I sat opposite Dale and introduced the two of them. “D-a-l-e name sign Dale, M-i-c-k-e-y, name sign Mickey. Dale works computers Lansel institution, Mickey c-h-e-f Hotel P-r-a-t-e-r. Him involved deaf theater a-lot.”

As I chewed down my hot reuben sandwich, I could tell that the chemistry between the two men wasn’t there. Dale was not very comfortable, and Mickey inhaled. “Sorry bother you.”

Dale shook his head and said, “O-k. Sorry. Many things-buzzing-in-my-mind now.”

“Us-two talk later, o-k?”

With that Mickey picked up his tray and went to a table in the front window. Dale glanced around before he signed discreetly: “Him g-a-y?”

I nodded. “Think he likes you.”

“Me not comfortable.”

“Later discuss, o-k?”

He smiled from relief. “S-o. What’s-up?”

“Nothing much.”

“Nothing?” He leaned forward. “What’s-up A-n-g-e-l-a M-a-r-s-t-o-n-e?”

“Meet her finish?”

He shook his head no.

“Cherish marriage?”

“Of-course!”

“Then suggest leave-alone.”

“Heard stories many. Whew.”

“Trust-me. Leave-it alone.”

A rush of winter wind tumbled in as the door swung open. We all turned to look.

Angela.

Chapter 26

Angela looked glamorous with a scarf around her head, and a long coat hanging from her shoulders. She’d somehow managed to get home and changed her clothes, because those were not the clothes she’d worn the night before. She ignored everyone’s stares as she sauntered towards me. I still couldn’t believe that a woman of such allure could desire me, let alone look at me.

“Hello.”

“Nice surprise!”

She turned to Dale. I could tell he was a little struck. “Who you?”

“Me introduce you. D-a-l-e B-u-r-t-o-n name sign Dale, A-n-g-e-l-a M-a-r-s-t-o-n-e name sign Angela. Dale works Lansel institution, and Angela works printing company downtown.”

They shook hands, and in that split second I knew that everything would change.

“He marry finish, two kids finish.”

She peered down at me. “Means you trust-me can’t?”

I checked my watch. “Bam-off should time.” I stood up.

She stood very close to me. “Us-two just met.”

I wanted so much to clutch her body to mine and give her a kiss she’d never forget. But no, this was Bob’s Deli, and what’s more, there was no mistaking the look of hatred on Ted’s face boring down on her back.

“Us-two can always talk later.”

“Right.”

“Sorry, but bam-off.” I looked at Dale. “Coming?”

He stuttered. “Y-y-yes.” He stood up. “Nice meet-you.”

“D-a-l-e B-u-r-t-o-n, right? Heard that name somewhere before.”

He looked like he wanted to die. “Been-around.” He took his tray and cleared his lunch off before placing it atop the wastebasket shelf.

I smiled at her as I cleared off my tray and left.

I ran up to join Dale toward his car. He turned to me with a flash. “Trouble finish.”

“That her.”

“You fell-in-love finish?”

“Trying not t-o.”

“Inform-you confess me-look-her erection-fast finish.”

“You right. She trouble. We-two o-f-f must.”

“Not realize that woman screw-up R-o-b-e-r-t marriage.” He inhaled. “You sleep-with-her finish?”

I nodded.

“Lucky bastard.”

I didn’t want to talk about this anymore. I checked my watch.

“Want plan come-over dinner my house one night this-week?”

“Sure. Page-me, o-k?”

I watched him get into his car and take off. I walked across the street, and I was about to unlock my car when I noticed my ex-wife hurrying towards me.

Chapter 27

“Hey there!” My ex-wife Julie waved to make sure she’d gotten my attention; she was all bundled up, but she always made sure her gloves were thin enough for signing. “Guess w-h-a-t.”

I walked around my car to the salt-dotted and snow-packed sidewalk.

“What?”

“Got job institution finish!”

I said nothing.

“You not happy?”

“You my e-x-wife. What you expect?”

“Me thought us-two friends agree finish.”

“Me trying, o-k?”

“You crabby. What’s-up?”

“Interest none discuss, o-k? Me late work, o-k?”

“Wow. Cranky-you. Relax.”

I walked back to my car, turned on the ignition, and sped off back to the school.

Chapter 28

That afternoon I tried to concentrate, but I couldn’t. Was she really going to destroy Dale’s marriage? How could I have been so blind to have fallen for her like that? I tried to work on one of my reports about a client, but I just couldn’t. I was too happy when Jud came into my office.

“You busy now?”

I glanced at my computer. “That wait can. How can me help you?”

He glanced around. “Mind door closed?”

“Leave-alone fine. No traffic hallway none.”

He fidgeted a bit.

“Learn new things Internet search?”

He looked at me directly. “Me want you sit with me tell parents me gay.”

I stopped. “Why feel must tell parents?”

“Me read many stories people suffer hide closet. Don’t-want that.”

“Tell-tell-tell world not good i-f you not ready suffer.”

He gave me a puzzled look.

“Internet not world, you know that. Many people not use Internet.”

Me mean, look at San Francisco. Flocks-flocks g-a-y people, guys hold-hands public not-care, but guys hold-hands public here Lancel? Me-doubt here. Me personally not-care people g-a-y, but some people may not accept here.”

“Still want tell parents. Tell two-them truth before rumors spread.”

“Good point.” I was about to consult my calendar until I realized something else. “Why me?”

“Parents like you, respect you whew. They listen-you will.”

“O-k. But we need sit-down discuss how approach. Me refuse talk for you.” I paused. “You explain yourself.”

He nodded. “Thanks.” He got up.

“See you Monday.”

He nodded with a smile and left.

As I returned to my computer, I couldn’t shake this sense of foreboding.

Chapter 29

An hour later I decided to slip out of my office a little early. I was too restless to sit in my office, and what’s more, the last appointment of the day had cancelled. I was grateful. Even though it was only 3:30, the gray clouds had made the winter light seem a bit darker than usual. As I tried to take out my car keys, they fell out of my hands.

I reached down to pick them and found Ruth standing there.

“Hello—”

“Me something tell-you. Me tired keeping-all-in. Must tell-you. Me fall-in-love you finish.”

I stood there flabbergasted. I’ve must’ve looked like an idiot.

Tears crept slowly into her eyes. “Say something!”

“Me confused.” I glanced around. “Us-two go-together somewhere private chat?”

“Where?”

“Public library downtown? Near Hotel P-r-a-t-e-r?”

“Perfect. Time?”

“15-20 minutes.”

She smiled. “Thank-you.”

I watched her walk quietly to her car. She waved to me as she backed out of her parking space and left. I looked up at the darkening skies.

Chapter 30

Even though I'd promised Ruth that I'd be there in 15-20 minutes, I felt I just couldn't zip down the valley to downtown Lansel right away. I was too restless. I powered my car into the opposite direction, higher above the valley, where bleak and barren trees seemed to be holding down a tent of gray clouds at the edges of the horizon all around me. The road up was icy in patches, but I knew that as long as I was slow, I would be fine. I parked at the Telegraph Point and surveyed the land below.

What would it mean to be involved with someone like Ruth? She wasn't as wild or mysterious as Angela, but she didn't seem to indulge in playing games or keeping way too many secrets. And it would feel strange to get involved with someone whose children were already in college; why, she could be a grandmother anytime soon!

I checked my watch. I knew I would be at least ten minutes late, but in a small way, I didn't care. Maybe I wasn't ready to be involved with *anyone*, but I had to remind myself that I could easily feel that way for the rest of my life. I had to make those small baby steps with my heart.

I returned to my car and with my foot resting lightly on the brake pedal, I coasted easily down the winding road down the valleside. It felt so easy and light to give into the pull of gravity. Snow was falling gently. As I moved easily around a left bend, a navy blue SUV came up out of nowhere and bumped into the front of my car. I spun around as the back of my car banged against the metal railing overlooking a drop into rocks and trees.

The SUV spun slightly before it slid backwards down the road towards me. There was no way for me to get out of my car in time and not get run over. I felt helpless while I watched the SUV coast towards me. The driver looked like Angela.

Chapter 31

As the SUV crashed against my car, I felt my car stopped again by the metal railing. I let out a puffy breath of relief. Just when I was about to turn to the SUV driver, I felt my car give a sudden lurch over the edge. I rolled down my window, took out my keys, pushed my seat way back, and grabbed my bag, as I tried to push myself over my window sill into the tiny space between my car and the SUV.

I still couldn't tell who the driver was, but I had no time for conversation. Her face was partially hidden by the cushion of her voluminous white airbags. I couldn't tell if she was dead or not.

I finally slipped between my car and the SUV. As I did so, my ass pushed against my car. It seemed strangely in slow motion, as if I was watching a movie unfold right there in front of my eyes, that my car would fall away from me. I followed it to the edge and watched my car bounce and tumble down the craggy rocks. It didn't explode so it wasn't as dramatic as in the movies, but my car finally landed upside-down next to a welt of birches below.

I turned back to the SUV.

I knocked on the window next to the stilled driver. I yelled, "Hey!"
No response.

I checked her door handle. It wasn't locked. But it took some doing to pull it open. When I finally did, I noticed that the back of her SUV had seemed to slip a bit as I forced the door open. But I couldn't tell if that was my imagination or not.

I turned to the driver and finally saw her face. It was Laurie Cates. My ex-wife's girlfriend.

Chapter 32

I tried to nudge Laurie awake, but she seemed unconscious.

I took out my pager and emailed Ruth: "Car accident here on Wirsky road from Telegraph Point. Need 911 ambulance here ASAP."

I glanced around. Not a single soul around except Laurie and me. Snow fell softly on my shoulders as I gently prodded her arm. No response.

I looked at her and kept thinking, "This is the woman my ex-wife wants to have children with when my ex-wife never wanted them with me." At any other time I would've spit on her for making Julie the woman I wanted but never got when I was married to her, but not now. She seemed almost like a bird, whose one of its wings was broken, and asleep in a pain she didn't know she had. I wanted to cradle her and tell her that she'd be all right, but there were the unseen head and neck injuries to consider. It was best, I knew, to leave her alone until an ambulance came.

Minutes passed.

I checked my pager. No response from Ruth.

I looked closely at Laurie again. Yes, she was breathing; I could

see a few foggy breaths seep out of her. I thought of paging Julie, but I didn't have her pager address. I decided to open the other door of her car carefully to see if she had a pager with Julie's address on it. Her purse was spilled open on the floor near her feet, but I recognized the Sidekick pager. I reached in and swung it open. I rolled down to her email program and clicked on it. Not surprisingly, there seemed to be a list of dozens of read emails from Julie. I clicked on one, memorized her pager address, closed the pager, and put it back into her purse.

I took out my pager and was about to email Julie something about the accident when I realized something else. Would she be angry and suspicious if she realized how I'd gotten her pager address? And the coincidence of us having an accident on a winter afternoon.

No. I decided against it.

Chapter 33

Once the ambulance came up the road, everything seemed to turn into a blur of red lights and thick-coated paramedics angling to get Laurie out of her car safely. The show of efficiency was impressive to watch; it was as if they'd done it a thousand times on a slippery and icy slope. When the ambulance left, I found myself facing a man I'd never seen before. He wore a thick parka while his men and women took photographs of everything—evidence for our insurance claims. Two guys were already standing next to a big bag of snow salt waiting for the go-ahead.

"Ready for some questioning?"

I tried to speak clearly as I could. "It's too dark for lipreading."

"Wanna come down to the station for some questioning?"

"Interpreter?" I gestured my hands while I spoke the word.

He nodded, whipped out his cell phone, and mumbled something while I looked out over the valley below. The sunset was already gone, leaving behind a trail of streetlights and house windows that punctuated the darkness below.

Chapter 34

Following Detective Markins's car down the winding road to downtown Lansel, I kept wondering: Would he truly understand that the accident was just that, and that the coincidence of Laurie Cates

being just that?

I parked my car behind the police station while Detective Markins stood by the door. It was as if he half-expected me to run off. I felt my pager buzz, but I ignored it.

After a few minutes of waiting, I followed Markins into a tiny room. There was a curly-haired, lithe, and short man I'd seen at various deaf events around town, but whom I'd never got to meet. He stood up, and spoke and signed at the same time. "Hello, I'm Tony Vertinelli, and—" he turned to Markins—"I'll be interpreting Detective Markins."

"Nice meet you." I shook hands with Tony.

It was clear that from the way Markins sat down and right next to Tony, that the detective didn't need to be schooled in how to use an interpreter. That immediately put me at ease. He simply looked at me and fired a series of questions.

"Tell me what happened."

I described.

"What is your connection with Laurie Cates?"

I explained my history with my ex-wife, and how I'd learned recently that she was moving to Lansel to be with Julie.

"Are you still angry at Julie?"

I shook my head no. "Want her be happy. Not care if lesbian not. Not matter."

He nodded slowly, but I sensed a slight disbelief on my part.

"Me counselor school. Me show support dual-a-l-l s-e-x-u-a-l orientation, not matter g-a-y straight lesbian b-i-t-g."

Tony stopped me. "What does 't-g' stand for?"

"T-r-a-n-s-g-e-n-d-e-r-e-d. Some men feel women stuck in their bodies, some women feel men stuck in their bodies. Some men feel more comfortable dress-up like women, some women feel comfortable dress-up like men."

"Do high school kids feel that way when they're young?"

I nodded.

"But that's . . ."

"Everyone's different. My job what? Make sure round students have best support during most c-r-i-t-i-c-a-l time when they explore try understand discoveries about world themselves. A-d-o-l-e-s-c-e-n-c-e most important time develop identity future adult."

He nodded slowly.

"But here small town. Coincidences hit-all-over often than big city."

He chuckled. "You can say that again!" He looked down at his file and sighed. "Does Julie know about Laurie . . . you know, in the

hospital?”

“No. Not have pager address hers.” I lied. “But me can contact friend for address if you like.” In that moment, I thought of Ruth Berbas. Where was she now?

Chapter 35

Knowing that the public library was only two blocks away from the police station, I ran over even though I knew that I couldn't count on Ruth to wait over two hours for me. It was already past 8:30 p.m., and I wasn't sure if the library closed at 9 p.m. or even earlier than that.

I bounced up on the salt-littered steps to the front doors. The sign in front said CLOSED.

I whipped out my pager and found a string of emails from Ruth, which ended with, “I don't know what happened or why youre late but Im going home now. Its 735 now so talk later. RB.”

I emailed her back with, “Sorry that I couldn't make it to our mtg at library. Can I come see you? Where do you live? Hope you can forgive me. Alan Worx.”

As I walk along the main street of Lansel back to my car, I looked up at the sky. There were few stars out, but there was no mistaking in the distance Angela walking towards me.

Was I dreaming?

I stood there paralyzed, my car keys dangling as tender snowflakes danced downwards, as I awaited her.

As she came closer to me, I had to blink my eyes. Had it been my overheated imagination that I'd confused my ex-wife Julie with Angela?

“Perfect! J-u-s-t man me want see!”

I had to shake my head. “Think you someone else. Sorry.”

“Hear you involve accident L-a-u-r-i-e.”

“Help call police finish.”

“That-all?”

“Yes.”

“Me suspect you want hurt me through L-a-u-r-i-e.”

I scoffed. “Me not-care you-two lovers. Me want see you-two happy. Me feel strange you lesbian AND you move HERE instead of go big city crowds lesbians. Me feel you pursue me something.”

She sighed. “Where you go now?”

“Home. You go hospital L-a-u-r-i-e?”

“Not sure where hospital.”

I signed the directions. Signing is so ideal for directions as it gives you a clear picture where to go, where to stop, and where to turn.

“Thanks.”

She leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek. “You good man.”

“You welcome.”

As she walked into the snowy distance, I found myself in an unexpected heave of sobs. It really hit me, how much I’d missed having someone regular in my life.

Chapter 36

As I got into my car, my pager buzzed. It was Ruth. “314 Tatum Street, near Wickham. RB.”

I knew where it was; just had no idea that she lived so closely to my home. I responded, “Coming now.”

As I drove across the bridge over the slender canal to the other side of the valley, I kept thinking of Julie and our years together. I used to torture myself over my own failings of masculinity—wasn’t I muscular enough? Sensitive enough? And so on—in the first year of separation and divorce. And then I saw her less and less, and I thought of her less and less when other deaf women, single, began appearing out of the woodwork, or at least that’s how it appeared to me. I’d never truly looked at other women while married to Julie, so their interest in me shocked me. But I was so careful with each one of them, careful to emphasize that a night out at a restaurant with no sex afterwards was “not dating.”

As my car climbed up Wickham Street and as her trim gray house rose in view on Tatum Street, I swore to myself that I wouldn’t count this evening as a “date.” Just an attempt to undo the slight of not being there when I’d promised to be.

Chapter 37

Ruth was already at the door before I pressed the softly-lit buzzer. “Me see car lights sweep-past window, easy know come on-time perfect.”

“You not mad?”

“No. Me should?”

I shook my head no and followed her inside. I took off my coat

and stamped my boots a bit of its snow clusters before I took them off. My feet always feels weird when walking on a slightly cold carpet after being warm inside their boots, but there I was, standing in her arts-and-craftsy kitchen and drinking a cup of hot cocoa. I told her all about the accident and Detective Markins.

She set down her cup and smiled quietly at me. "Why you escape me?"

"Me not."

"Lie finish."

"Me not search relationship right now."

"Angela poison every relationship. She married three times, know that?"

I stopped.

"See?"

I set down my cup.

She signed more slowly and carefully. "I-f you love her, me will k-i-l-l you finish."

"Why not us friends?"

"You don't get-it?"

"What left discuss? Friendship us fine."

She took my cup and pointed to it. "Know what that?"

"Cup hot c-h-o-c."

She shook her head no. "That A-n-g-e-l-a." With that, she threw it down to the floor. The cup shattered to bits on the linoleum floor. A few soggy mini-marshmallows lay in a small brown puddle. "Look-at-me! Me not beautiful s-e-x-y hot like her, me j-u-s-t ordinary woman with two kids. College-a-g-e kids. Me not young. Me o-l-d. Men want perfect woman when themselves not perfect!" She burst into sobs.

I pulled her into my arms.

After her sobbing faded, I lifted her chin to look into my eyes. There was something dangerously adrift in her eyes, but I couldn't see what it was. She didn't blink as I searched deep into the well of her drying tears.

Without blinking, our lips met and our tongues reached out to hook each other.

Chapter 38

Sex with Ruth was different from the sex I had with Angela. Ruth was not as wild or reckless; I sensed in her a certain set of boundaries.

I almost felt as if she was a client, as if I had to respect limits inherent in a counselor-client relationship. Still, I felt a strange peace afterwards in a bath of light and sweat lying next to her in her bedroom. There was no heaving anxiety that I'd always felt from looking at a contented Angela in the aftermath of our passionate sex.

She traced my nipples as she looked intently at my chest before she turned to me. "Enjoy yourself?"

"Of-course. Most men complain sex none, horny a-l-l time."

"No. Me talk about you. What you feel?"

"Me not m-o-o-d talk deep like counselor client. Enough job. Me want enjoy body-content."

"Oh." She rolled slowly onto her back.

I rolled my eyes. "J-u-s-t because we-two slept-together not mean l-o-v-e instant. See-see how-things-progress."

"Mean me second choice."

"Choices said-nothing."

"Angela ruin you finish."

"Finish! Why obsess Angela for-for?" I got out of bed and gathered up my clothes.

She waved for my attention.

"W-h-a-t?"

"Advice have: one, that's-all. Angela use men till no-good, dump finish. Then search next man use till no-good/no-good." She paused. "Me not like that." She slipped out of bed and put on her bathrobe. "G-o. Night still young till heart breaks finish."

I looked at her for a minute, realizing that there was nothing left for me to say. I walked out of her bedroom and her house. The sudden chill of the winter air nearing midnight slapped me. My body suddenly felt alive, as if I had snapped out of a long dream where nothing happened. I wasn't quite ready to go home and sleep quietly; I felt my entire body aching to move, to jolt awake its deadened limbs. Yes, it was time to go down to the bridge at the bottom of the Lansel Valley.

Chapter 39

As I drove away from Ruth's house on Tatum Street and coasted slowly down streets toward the Lansel drawbridge, I kept feeling the emptiness of everything gnawing at me. Just what had I done? I liked Ruth, but I knew I didn't love her. She was a lovely person, to be sure, but she couldn't hold a candle to Angela, who was so full of fire that

even I had to shield my eyes at times.

Much to my surprise, I wasn't the only car parked in the lot near the bridge. I checked my car clock: 11:23. How was it possible? The night still felt edgy in my veins.

I got out of my car and strolled through the plowed path leading down to the north tower of the drawbridge. Snow was falling lightly, and I held out my hand to land a few snowflakes for a taste, purer than water itself, on my tongue. Then I noticed something else I'd never seen before: People—all men—walked slowly past each other, their eyes averted then not so for that click of understanding, of desire.

Just as I thought of leaving immediately so not to be mistaken as a gay man in search of sex, I recognized a man coming up the path from the parking lot: Mickey, the acclaimed deaf chef from Hotel Prater.

Chapter 40

The look on Mickey's face changed from a flicker of recognition to a flash of hope and shock as he approached me.

"What's-up doing here?"

"Me not looking sex."

He sighed.

A man in his 30s paused slightly, checking out Mickey before heading to the parking lot.

"Still, what doing here?"

"Me fidgety tonight. Don't-know agh."

"You curious g-a-y taste?"

"No, not that."

"Angela?"

"W-h-a-t? What you talking about?"

"You obsess Angela." It was more a statement than a fact.

I nodded.

"And you slept-together someone else finish."

"How you know?"

"Straight people not know how hide their secrets."

"Very funny."

"True! Not making-up. True business true!"

"Me go home now."

"Going already?"

I nodded.

"Me scare you? Afraid me gossip about you here boom-spread?"

“Not that. Me want be-alone, resting.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. Why you here?”

“Me lonely. Thirst horny awful, so me come here, hope meet someone not afraid deaf.”

“What about Internet?”

“Many cute deaf out there but nobody want move small town.” He looked at me intently. “Deaf people prefer big cities, more mingle social life, more do-do-around-city. But you move here, wow.”

“J-o-b here. Good opportunity.”

“See, different for straight people. They not think where move next, ask enough straight deaf there?”

“Me-guess.” I headed towards the parking lot.

“Want talk more coffee something?”

“No. Thank-you anyway. Me should go home.”

As I got into my car and drove away, I noticed in my dashboard mirror Mickey watching me leave.

Chapter 41

That night I tried to fall asleep alone in my own bed. I wanted so much to wrap my arms around Angela, but her empty space beside me made me feel even more restless. Where was she? What did she truly do at nights when she wasn't with me? She never told me much about her own life. Was the fact that she seemed like a mysterious spirit who knew all the ways how a man could be sated that compelled my hunger for the unknown when all else in my life were made of known quantity?

Angela, my Angela.

Her fluency of our common language far surpassed my own. She had deaf parents who no longer lived in Lansel; they had relocated somewhere near a large deaf senior citizen community in Florida where the winters were of course much warmer some years back. She never shared much more about her parents, which was somewhat odd given how close many deaf parents were to their own deaf children, but I thought not to press the issue. If she was ready to share, she would.

Angela, my Angela.

Somewhere on the other side of Lansel Valley, she was sleeping alone in a house I'd never seen. I'd never driven her to her home. She never said whether she had a housemate, or whether she'd lived alone.

I rubbed my eyes and pulled out my email pager. There were two

messages.

One from Ruth: "Thinking of you. RB"

The other one was from Angela. "sorry, not get back u before busy many things happen can I see u tmw qq what time good for u qq thx angela"

I typed back: "4 pm after school would be good. Where should we meet? Your office or my school?"

A minute later she responded: "office bad idea school good but cant leave until 430 that ok qq angela"

I typed back: "4:30 p.m. at my office is fine. See ya then." I hesitated. Should I use the word "hugs" or even "love" at this point? I settled for the lesser word. "Hugs, Alan."

Oh, Angela, my Angela!

I bundled my remaining pillows into the shape of her body, wrapped my body around them, and finally fell asleep.

Chapter 42

When my alarm clock went off at 5:30 a.m. the next morning, I knew in my own heart that I was in no mood to go to work. Yet I kept thinking of my clients who had only one meeting with me a week, and some of them, I knew, didn't have many friends. No, I didn't feel pity for them, but I knew I had to be their bridge to a better future where in time they'd find friends to call their own.

I thought of Dale Burton, my best friend, and how strange it had been not to see him or hear from him for such a long time. I knew he was busy with upgrading some of the school's the network infrastructure, but still, it wasn't that hard for him to drop me a line now and then via email. I decided to page him: "Hey Dave ... want to get together for lunch today? Your office or mine? Al."

After I pissed into the toilet, I stood in the mirror and stared at my naked self. I was nearing 40, and it was clear that if I didn't work out more often, I would accumulate some belly flab around my waist. I brought up my arms and flexed my biceps. Not bad, not bad. I felt them and saw that the skin covering my muscles were still taut. I rubbed my pectorals. Not saggy at all. Still, I knew I'd have to work out more often and not use the winter blahs as my excuse to avoid the gym. I checked the clock in my bathroom, and realized that if I didn't shower but headed straight to the school workout room, I could squeeze in a good 45-minute workout before crossing the campus to my

office.

In five minutes I was wearing my winter jacket, sweatpants, and boots. Yes, I would sweat and work hard to become a more fit man. The memory of Angela smiling while coyly surveying my naked body came back with a force, and it took my all not to press the gas pedal through the quiet streets of Lansel towards the school in the dawning sun.

Chapter 43

Even though I was the only one in the workout room, I felt compelled to hit the treadmill running, lifting weights and doing 50 situps. I was racing against myself, and the clock still showed I had 20 minutes left before showering. Then I felt a wind move past my sweaty legs and I looked up. It was Robert Biggles, carrying a battered duffel bag.

“Hello-there!”

I sat there, a bit surprised. It was as if Robert hadn’t suffered anything, or as if he wanted to forget about the last time we’d talked, which was about the woman in both our lives. “Good see you again.”

We shook hands. Then he went off to the locker room.

I continued moving my torso and right elbow to left knee, back to floor, torso and left arm to right knee, and counting. . . . 42, 43

Robert returned in a pair of sweatpants and a sleeveless shirt. Even though he was a short and squat guy, he was very muscular. Somehow the walrus moustache made him look like something of a boxer from the late nineteenth century. He got on the treadmill and began running on it as the red numbers on the board kept track of his progress. He didn’t look at me.

. . . . 46, 47

Still ignoring me.

. . . . 48, 49

My stomach was already sore so I forced myself to hit 50 . . . right knee. I fell back to the mat. I was truly out of shape. I turned to Robert, whose eyes were straight ahead.

I caught my breath and then got up to my feet. I stood in front of Robert. “Ignore-me why for-for?”

“Warn you finish.”

“Angela talk a-b-t?”

He didn’t say anything.

I waved for his attention. “Look-at-me. Me can’t read your mind, o-k? Me want us-two friends.”

“Last time see Angela when?”

“Two days ago.”

“Know D-a-l-e B-u-r-t-o-n know him?”

“Of-course. Him-and-me close-friends.”

He said nothing and continued jogging on the treadmill.

I waved for his attention.

“Jogging now.”

I went around and pressed the treadmill’s off button. Robert nearly fell over. He turned to me, eyes flaring, and leaped onto me.

Chapter 44

Before I knew it, Robert was pummeling my body with his thick fists as I fell backwards, my back hitting the edge of a weightlifting bench, scraping against my neck and the back of my head, as we both collapsed to the floor. I felt a jarring of stars flash inside my eyes as the angry drips of sweat from Robert’s face splattered all over my face as I tried to grab his fists from hitting me further.

But even as I tried to focus on him, it was clear that he was weeping while he pounded me with a fury I’d never seen before. I rammed my knee right up at his butt, and he oomphed forward where his jaw bounced against the weightlifting bench. I was already twisting his torso away from me, but I was lucky enough that I wasn’t feeling the full brunt of pain, that I was able to get up, however shakily, and stagger out of the workout room. As I left for the hallway, I saw Robert crouching, almost like a fetus, in a puddle of blood as he wept uncontrollably.

Chapter 45

As I fell asleep in the school infirmary after staggering in my bloodied workout clothes across the campus in the winter cold, I dreamed of nothing. It was so weird and unsettling that I didn’t have a dream tiptoe across the floor of my brain. It was as if Robert’s fists had frightened them all away.

Minutes—or were they actually hours?—passed as I lay there on the cot. I was in a nowhere land, and it didn’t bother me in the least that I

felt lost in the nothingness I drifted through.

When I finally came to, it was late afternoon and I was no longer in the infirmary. I was in a different room, and after a minute of glancing around, I knew that I had to be in the Lansel County Hospital. Somehow I had slept on the trip between the school's infirmary and the hospital.

But when I turned my body a little to see what was on the table next to my bed, it was that first jab of pain searing through my back.

Tears of agony shot straight out of my eyes.

I screamed.

Strangers came running.

I screamed again.

I couldn't believe the amount of pain that could be so contained in the middle of my back, right there in my spinal cord.

I tried not to writhe from the jolts of pain.

The last thing I saw was a doctor flicking a syringe before injecting it into my arm, which was held down by two pairs of hands. A prick, and then the clouds of dream and hallucination scattered away. I was now still underneath a bright blue sky with not a single bird in sight.

Chapter 46

It seemed like years before I woke up to a dull pain in my back, but only two days had passed since two of my vertebrae were realigned back into my spine. My mouth felt parched so I glanced around for a button or something that I could use to command a nurse. It was then I saw Angela standing over me. She looked almost like a mannequin, but I could see the winter sun shining in her eyes as she looked down on me. In that moment, I felt an illumination of love radiating from her, and I felt warm and peaceful. So she *did* care, after all.

I tried to sign, but my arms felt so tired. I simply let the weight of my arms fall back against my body. "You came b-a-c-k?"

She smiled. "You alright?"

I nodded and reached out to hold her hand. Then I noticed someone else sitting in the corner. It was Dale Burton, my best friend. He smiled weakly at me, and then radiantly at Angela. She turned back to me and said, "Me something tell-you."

Chapter 47

“W-h-a-t?” I don’t know why I’d felt very afraid about what Angela would tell me next. She did love me, didn’t she?

“Your parents here.”

I looked up at her blankly. “Why? Who told?”

“Seems school phone-call.”

I glanced around and sighed. “Where now?”

“Think downstairs eating cafeteria.”

At that point Dale stood next to Angela. He looked a little sheepish.

“You-two sleep-together finish?” I couldn’t help myself.

Dale turned a beet red as Angela turned livid and left the room.

“Dumb question! You should not ask.”

“D-i-d you?”

“No.” He shook his head. “She hot still. Incredible. But my wife.”

I nodded.

“Honest me suggest real dump her. Beautiful, yes, but trouble-trouble all-over-the-place.”

“How w-e-l-l you know her?”

“She girlfriend first.”

I stared at him. “Why not tell me before?”

“Long time ago. Twenty years.”

“You not warn me?”

His eyes were suddenly lined with guilt.

“Tell-me everything. Angela.”

Chapter 48

Dale sighed. “My family three generations here, Angela’s family two generations here. Her family tend screwup mistake bad marriages.”

I nodded. “That explain why herself not explain family history.”

“No-no. Herself not kind person explain deep family history nothing.”

“Angela married before?”

A look of surprise flickered across Dale’s face just when Angela returned with my parents. They didn’t know signs, so they were so clearly uncomfortable at the idea of having to gesture. Mom said, “Alan! Are you all right?”

She walked over to me and hugged me. I don’t know how it is

possible, but Mom, who once loomed so large in my growing up years, now feels like a little bird in my arms. Dad, who next hugged me, seemed almost ethereal. How is it possible that age can seem to reduce their power to damn me should I not speak? I knew they never got over the day I returned from Gallaudet University, a child who had turned his back on the promise of oralism for ASL and quite proud of being a signer. Still, they had only one child, and one child they had to make do with their dreams, which now had been reduced to their hopes of having a grandchild.

Dad looked intently at me, and then tried to gesture with his eyes without drawing attention to the object of his question. I knew what he wanted to know whether Angela was the woman I'd hope to marry.

I coughed and cleared my throat. "Hello, Mom and Dad." It felt so weird to speak after how many months of not using my voice.

The look on their faces was the same: How could you still do this to us, after all what we've done for you?

"Mom and Dad, this is Angela Marstone." I spoke and signed at the same time.

She leaned forward to shake their hands and flashed a disarming smile at them. The look on their faces to me was the same: She's so gorgeous, is she taken, are you seeing her?

I continued on. "Dale Burton over there is my best friend here in Lansel. Mom and Dad, this is . . . yes." Dale was already shaking their hands. "Dale Burton."

He was gesturing, "Nice to meet you."

My parents gestured back.

Then all four looked to me. It was clear that I was expected to interpret.

Chapter 49

"Al," Mom intoned slowly, ingrained from the years of always making sure that I was looking at her face whenever she spoke to me. "Are you all right?"

I signed what she'd said for Dale and Angela's benefit.

Dad sighed and glanced back at them. "Son, you don't need to do that, do you?"

I tried to speak and sign at the same time. "I want everyone to feel included."

Angela waved her hand for my attention. "Me should go." She

turned to my parents and gestured, "Me time wow-wow. Nice thumbs-up you-two." They beamed as she left.

Dale nodded. "Me go same." He nodded acknowledgement to my parents.

Alone with them, I felt strange. It was almost as if I had become stuck with them, and in a way, I was. I was strapped to the bed due to my back brace.

Mom glanced back to the door. "Now tell us about that nice girl we just met."

"Mom, she's not a girl. She's a *woman*." It was much easier to speak without having to interpret. I still don't know how some interpreters can voice and sign at the same time.

"Are you planning to marry her?"

I wasn't sure but I thought I caught a slight flicker of yearning in Dad's eyes. "We're not even at that stage. We're just . . . you know."

"No, I don't know."

I turned to Mom. "What did you just say?"

"I said, I don't know."

"About what?"

"You said, you know."

"Oh! Sorry. We're not really dating."

Dad snapped his fingers. "Darn."

"We're still waiting for our first grandchild."

"Mom. How many times have we had that conversation? What if my child turns out to be deaf? What if I chose to sign with him and not teach him to speak?"

"Al, Al."

"No. I have my own expectations, and you have your own expectations. I have to follow mine. Please, Mom, Dad, please be happy for me even if I don't give you a grandchild."

"Son?"

"What?"

"You queer?"

"No. And why should it matter if I'm gay or not as long as I'm happy?"

"So you're a faggot."

"No, Dad. I don't have a problem with homosexuality. I'm just not gay, that's all. If my child grew up to be gay, fine. I don't see why that has to be a problem."

"You know, that college really messed with your head. Strange ideas and all."

“No.” I sighed. Dad had been mostly removed from the social and political changes spawned by the sexual revolution of the 1970s. “Can we talk about something else?”

“Like what?”

I turned to Mom. “Like my back here? Why I’m here? Why you’re here?”

She looked away for a brief second and then turned to me. “Right, right. I’m sorry.” She patted my hand.

“Thank you.”

Dad just stood by the window and gazed at the sky without turning back to me.

Chapter 50

After my parents finally left after an hour of meandering conversation in which Mom proceeded to tell me about their neighbors in our hometown—who died, who moved, and who was still alive—I felt exhausted. Maybe it was because I wasn’t in the habit of lipreading non-signers for an extended period of time. Maybe it was because Dad had chosen not to stick around. He mumbled something about having to get a cup of coffee, and he never returned.

Mom, of course, never noticed. Or if she did, she didn’t let on.

As I was about to close my eyes, I caught a flicker of glint from a woman’s ring on the wall next to the window. I turned to see who it was in the doorway.

“Hello!” Ruth was all lipstick and smiles. “You o-k?”

I nodded.

As she leaned down to give me a hug, I caught another flicker of light. I turned back to the doorway. Angela was staring, her eyes threatening to burst lava from the volcano of her heart.

Chapter 51

Ruth detected a shift in my posture and turned around to see who it was in the doorway. She flashed me a look of did-you-ask-her-to-come-here-or-what. I’d never seen such biting hatred on a woman’s face before.

Seeing the nonchalant look on my face, Angela sauntered in with a smile. “R-u-t-h! Look-at-you! You look good.”

Ruth gave a tight smile. "Wish real true-business compliment."
She returned a look of puzzlement. "Me not understand. Me true-business meant that. You look good."

Ruth sighed. "Thank-you."

"I-f you want, me go-leave now."

I shook my head no.

"Fine."

Ruth turned to me. "You tell-her stay? What kind man are you?"

"Look-at-him. Stuck hospital room. Obviously lonely," Angela said.
"Can you blame-him?"

Ruth held up her index finger, intending to say something but waiting for a perfect comeback.

Angela shrugged and glided past her to give me a hug. I inhaled her musky perfume and saw the perfect contours of her neck just when I felt the most awful throttle of her being pulled back and off my body. Ruth swung her fist at Angela's face.

The blood spittled all over my white gown as Angela tried to stop her nose from bleeding.

"Finish!" I said.

"Me-don't-care." Ruth's right hand was covered with some blood.
"That bitch destroy-destroy-destroy everything good deaf community here." She turned to Angela. "YOU move-out Lansel, understand?"

Chapter 52

Angela turned frosty as she held her bleeding nose. "None one command-command-me finish. Me live here. You not like, too-bad. Me can sue-you, you-know that?"

Ruth gave a grim smile. "Real-l-y? Every-one here know you lie-lie a-l-l time. Who willing stand court lie about your 'truth?'" She paused to let this sink in. "You burn many bridges finish."

Angela turned to me. "Why you interest her? She nothing."

"Me-didn't-say-anything."

She held up her middle finger at Ruth before she left.

Ruth broke into a helpless laughter.

"What s-o funny?"

"First time see her laughter-caught-in-throat. First time! Imagine that!" She caressed my hand. "I-f you involve her, me will k-i-l-l you. Understand?"

I didn't say anything.

She came closer and leaned over to look into my eyes. “Why you not say any-thing?”

“Mind confuse groggy.”

She stood up. “Right.”

“Back hurts, still. We-discuss more later when out of hospital.”

She smiled, and then looked out into the distance beyond the window. “How long you-stay here?” She turned to me.

“No idea. Ask will.”

“Need someone pick-up mail, water plants, something?”

“Think parents take-care for me.”

“Oh. That good.”

“Don’t worry. Me fine. We-two get-together discuss will, okay?”

She nodded and leaned down to give me a kiss. As she did so, I felt one of her hands rub across my pectorals. Her tongue didn’t leave mine as she continued to rub harder against my nipples. I felt a jolt of blood rise up in my brain and groin.

Suddenly, she stopped.

“Stop for-for?”

She gave me a cryptic smile and did not say anything more. I was alone again.

Chapter 53

My two weeks in the hospital passed slowly. Because I had to lay supine, it was difficult for me to use a laptop to get on the Internet, so I chose to read one book after another instead, especially with this wonderful contraption that could hold the book open, in place above your face, without you having to hold the book while you were on your back.

My parents visited me every day, but we never talked much. They talked mostly about the weather, how it was going to be a brutal winter in these parts. They occasionally asked about Angela, who never came back to the hospital. I never told them about Ruth, who seemed to have a knack for avoiding my parents even though they’d never met by dropping by after three p.m.

I felt strangely lonely with her. I got the vibe that she wanted to bag me, to claim me as hers and hers only, and I wasn’t sure if I wanted that, not with my unfinished business with Angela.

At the end of my two weeks at the hospital, my doctor and interpreter came in and said, “Guess what, Al? The x-rays came back,

and your vertebrae looks completely aligned. I'm going to replace your chest case with something slimmer and a bit flexible, but not too flexible."

A few hours later I found myself wearing this beige-vest. It felt strange not wearing my chest cast, but by that point the pain in the bottom of my back was a fading numbness. "You must be extremely careful when you bend down to tie your shoes or anything like that. Give your back a bit leeway so that it'll feel more and more like itself, okay?"

I nodded. "When do I go back to work?"

"Give yourself another week. I'll write up a letter for your boss."

"Thanks."

It felt strange to walk again, and to gather up my books and personal belongings into a huge plastic shopping bag. I took one last look around the room. It was a bright crisp day where both people's breaths and car exhaust fumes would rise up as sharply outlined puffs of smoke.

At the nurse's station, I asked, "Didn't someone tell you that I was to be picked up?"

She merely pointed to someone behind me.

I turned around. Robert Biggles was standing there.

Chapter 54

"You?" I glared at Robert Biggles, who had his jaw held in a head brace. "What you doing here?" He wore a thick parka and snowmobile boots caked with road salt.

"Me come pick-up."

I shook my head. "N-o. Me page someone." Maybe I should've asked my parents to pick me up instead.

"D-a-l-e ask-me take place."

"Why? What happened?"

"You want go home or w-h-a-t?"

I glanced back at the signing-impaired nurse, who'd been gawking at our conversation and not understanding a word.

"Not trust you any-more finish. Understand?"

He nodded slowly. "Sorry."

"That a-l-l you say? 'Sorry.' Me stuck here three-weeks and—"

He raised his hand to interrupt. "You not-yet heard?"

"W-h-a-t?!?"

“My wife jail now.”
“What happened?”
“Police think she try kill Angela.”

Chapter 55

I walked, stunned, outside in the marrow-cold air to Robert’s SUV. As he drove quietly and slowly up and down the hills of Lansel Valley to my home, my mind spun around with the news. I knew that Robert and his wife were having problems due to the affair he had with Angela, but that had to be history. They had broken it off, hadn’t they, before I met her? I kept looking at Robert. His eyes were straight ahead and alert for any signs of naked ice on the streets.

Up on the hill I saw my apartment building. “Want come-in explain deep happen your wife?”

“No. Me go police, wait lawyer interpreter show-up, pay b-a-i-l five thousand finish, go home.” He looked so sad.

“Sorry. Sorry about your wife.”

“Remember what me say before? Angela bad n-e-w-s. I-f you smart, avoid her finish.”

“Angela o-k now?”

His face tightened. “She fine now, but still warn. Sometimes me wish kill that bitch.” A tear trickled down his cheek.

“W-e-l-l, thank-you for ride.”

He smiled slightly. “Hope we-two friends anyway.”

I inhaled. “See-see, o-k?”

The minute I stepped into my apartment, I made a beeline for my TTY stand, pulled out my TDI Phone Directory book, and looked up Angela’s phone number.

Chapter 56

I watched the blinking red light purring its rings as I waited for Angela to answer the TTY.

No answer after ten rings, and her answering machine wasn’t even turned on.

I hung up and glanced around the apartment. After being cooped up in that hospital room for three weeks, I felt unable to sit still in my apartment. Problem was, my car was still over in the school’s parking

lot. I looked through the list of email addresses in my pager, saw Mickey Bunz's name, and fired off a quick email to him. I knew that chefs sometimes worked strange hours, and I figured he might be free.

Three minutes later I felt my pager buzz. I opened it up and found his response: "tell me where address is, ill come get u, ok? mickey."

I typed in my street address and apartment number, and sent it off. While I waited, I took out the contents of my shopping bag and rearranged my books, all now read from cover to cover, on the shelves above the row of my unread books. Whenever I travel, I always check my shelf of unread books and pick out one or two titles, which saves me the hassle of looking for an interesting book in an airport bookstore. I was so grateful that I'd been organized well enough with my bookshelves for my parents to find these books for me.

I felt my pager buzz again. "im outside waiting for u, mickey."

I zipped up my jacket and stepped out into the darkening afternoon with my car keys in hand.

Chapter 57

Mickey was already out of his car when he saw me lumber a little bit out of my apartment door. "You o-k?" He was wearing a parka that wasn't even zipped up. Just a T-shirt and a pair of loose pants tucked haphazardly inside his snowmobile boots.

"Yes." I walked down the steps. To be truthful, my lower back was a little unused to all that activity after being inside a warm hospital room for a few weeks, but no, I had to find out what was going on with Angela. It had to be the biggest news in Lansel, and no one had ever told me a thing about it!

Mickey grabbed my hand as I tried to get into his car. I had no idea how much my back's flexibility had enabled me to slip into smaller cars, so it was awkward. Finally, he hit on the idea of dropping the back of my passenger seat. There, it was much easier for me to slip inside.

I lay there.

He looked down at me. "You-know w-h-a-t?"

"What?"

"You problem slip-into-car, worthless you-go-drive-your-car-back."

I nodded. "Turn-up h-e-a-t, tell-me about R-o-b-e-r-t B-i-g-g-l-e-s wife. Not have t-o drive."

A minute later, Mickey was in the car. "You comfortable? Good. Me now tell story exaggerate deep, so don't fall-asleep, o-k? Can't

tell who elaborated story to me, o-k, so not spread-story-all-over.” He smiled. “Anyway, two-weeks-ago Robert met Angela some store somewhere, probably S-e-a-r-s something, not sure where, but anyway, they-met. Robert not know wife Barb already there two-aisles-over, she caught sight Angela kiss Robert on-the-lips. Big-finish! Barb ran grabbed b-a-g salt--big-big bag s-a-l-t good road snow—flung Angela. She-fell-backward, store shelf corner end-aisle almost slice neck. Robert blew-top, grabbed Barb, shook her like nothing, like r-a-g doll. You-know w-h-a-t next? Barb kick Angela stomach while Angela lie-there-sideways. Barb bawled Robert: ‘You help that bitch, you never see our-kids never!’ Someone store call 9-1-1, then police came, no interpreter, then wait, and then, you know.”

“How Angela doing?”

“She around still. Small scar here-on-neck, that’s-all.”

“Barb? What happen, do-do?”

“Last I heard, what? Robert f*ck-f*ck Angela, finish, support Barb. No divorce, nothing.”

It was then I heard a strange tapping coming from the right side. I turned to see Angela standing right next to Mickey’s car. I turned to Mickey, and he looked as if he’d seen a ghost.

Chapter 58

I opened Mickey’s car and stepped out gingerly. I was still feeling an occasional stab of pain in my lower back, but I had no idea how much I missed Angela until I leaned on her for support. She nearly buckled under my weight.

“Sorry.”

She nodded okay and closed the car door behind me.

I turned around and waved to Mickey. “We-two talk later, o-k?”

He nodded, clearly disappointed, and backed out of the driveway.

Once he was gone, Angela nudged me. Looking into her eyes somehow made me forget that I should not be in love with her, that she had caused so many people so much misery, and that a continued involvement could jeopardize my standing within the deaf community in Lansel. But with her, I felt of-course, natural. I felt complete with her.

We entered my apartment, but we didn’t stop moving until she turned on the lights of my bedroom and we were at the edge of my bed. My parents had apparently washed my sheets so it was all folded

with my pillows lightly flattened. We didn't say another word until she guided me to the bed and pulled the pillows under my head.

"Thank-you."

She smiled as she untied my shoes and peeled my socks and the rest of my clothes until I was naked. She kept smiling coyly at me as she too unclothed herself. I couldn't believe what a gorgeous creature she was, and that she wanted to sleep with me. I felt her pull the cold sheets down under me and over me, tossed the light comforter on top, and slipped her flame of a body next to the thawing ice cube of my body.

Things were finally all right with the world, I thought.

She turned to me and said, "You special man. Every-one out-there want kill me, but you not. You very, very special me."

It was then she leaned forward to kiss me, and with that, I realized I had to marry her.

Chapter 59

When I woke up the morning after, I found Angela gone. Had the passionate lovemaking the night before been a delirious dream in which we had orgasm after orgasm? I couldn't believe how hot she was for me, and how madly we combusted in our insatiable heat. It seemed as if our lovemaking had somehow reduced the amount of sharp pains in my lower back, and even if it did hurt, the look of pleasure on her face more than made up for whatever jolts I felt. I slept like a baby in her arms.

But she was gone. Again.

No, I thought. She's got to be in the shower.

As I turned my head to the bathroom, I saw something on her pillow. I picked up the scribbled note. "Al, sorry but have no car so have to walk downtown for work. Will email you later. Love, A."

I looked at the clock. It was already ten in the morning. Had I really slept that late?

I swung my legs over the edge of the bed, hobbled to the bathroom, and turned on the lights. As I stood before the toilet, I noticed something very odd on the floor just behind the toilet base. I leaned forward and picked it up—an opened and empty condom packet. It wasn't my brand.

Chapter 60

Even though my doctor had specified that I rest for a few more days before I started driving, I just couldn't. I couldn't remember whether I'd given Angela a set of keys to my apartment or not, and this I had to find out, or I'd never be able to have a good night's rest. The problem was, my car was still parked in my school's parking lot.

I went online to look up Lansel's bus transit system, which I knew wasn't a grand affair but I knew it went past my building enough times in a day to a nursing home a few more blocks up the hill. I checked the time on my computer and saw that my next bus ride would arrive in eleven minutes. I bundled up and went out.

The wind was sharp and whipped my face, but it enabled me to pay less attention to the occasional spike of pain in my lower back as I climbed up the hill to the nearest bus stop. There, a few senior citizens stood waiting inside the lobby of the nursing home. I nodded acknowledgment and waited.

The mini-van arrived, and after all had boarded, I stepped aboard and gave two dollars to the crusty bus driver. I sat in the far back and watched the locales of Lansel change from that of a steep valley—in winter, the bus took the longer-winding road that criss-crossed the valleyside instead of taking the straight-down route for safety's sake—into the facing rows of low-slung buildings at the foot of the valley.

While on the bus I thought of Ruth. I felt stricken with guilt. It had been a while since I'd thought of her. But what else could I do, if all what my heart wanted was just Angela? I whipped out my pager, sent a quick hello to Ruth, and put it away. Up ahead was the printing company where Angela worked, so I pressed a yellow vertical stripe on the wall between windows to request my stop.

Just as I got off, and before I went into Angela's office building, I checked my pager. It was Ruth. Right. She wanted to see me.

I went into Angela's office building and there stood Laurie Cates, the woman who'd nearly died in that car accident some weeks before. With her coat still on and her boots still wet, she had clearly just gotten in. She turned around when the receptionist noticed me. Her face turned from surprise to rage as she walked directly to me. Without another word, she swung her fist at my jaw.

Chapter 61

I caught Laurie's fist just in time, and I was quick enough to catch her other fist. The sudden twist of my chest induced sharp pangs of pain in my lower back. I tried not to double over from the pain as I backed away.

"You bastard!"

"What do-do?"

"You not page Julie when our cars hit. She not know where me gone hospital for six hours."

"Sorry, but don't have her pager address. Never gave-me."

"Impossible."

"Before wife not mean best-friends inform everything."

She glared at me. "Not believe you."

"You put down name who contact if emergency?"

She said nothing.

"That explains why." I paused. "Glad see you okay." I turned to the receptionist's desk, and as it turned out, it seemed half the workers had clustered around to watch us. If they were expecting a fight, I was happy to disappoint them. I smiled when I saw Angela. She looked a bit flustered.

She quickly turned away and removed herself from the small crowd.

"I'm fine," I spoke and gestured with my thumbs up. "Thank you."

As they dispersed, I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was Laurie again.

"Obvious you fascinate-with Angela. Me-same." She sighed. "She break my heart finish."

I inhaled. "Herself b-i?"

"Not-say that."

"You-two lovers before?"

She shook her head sadly. "My advice what? Ask-her who E-r-r-o-l M-a-r-c-u-s."

"Why?"

She glanced around to make sure no one was looking. "First husband. Dead."

"Dead? How?"

She fingerspelled discreetly and so slowly that it looked as if she wasn't really spelling a word, but by the time she left me standing there to go to her cubicle, the word registered fully in my brain and only on its last letter: "M-u-r-d-e-r-e-d."

Chapter 62

With the pains in my lower back starting up again, I leaned against the wall and looked across the cubicle farm. I didn't know where Angela's cube was, but I was determined to find out. But my mind was more preoccupied with trying to process the fact of her first—wait a minute, that word “first” must mean that she must've been married at least twice—husband being murdered.

Who? How? Why? When? Questions raced through my head. And why hadn't she *even* mentioned the fact that she was married? She certainly knew that I had divorced.

There was a good deal more to Angela than she'd barely let on. With that, I knew I'd need to do a little research first before I confronted her with the evidence. I headed out of the building and went to my car.

By the time I got into my car, I decided to page Robert Biggles and have him tell me the unexpurgated story of Errol Marcus's death; he too had to know more than he was letting on. I sent it off to him and drove my way back home. There was nothing else for me in the meantime but to take a quick round of meds for that biting pain in my lower back and rest at home.

Chapter 63

The flashing light off the side near the doorway to my living room awoke me, and I got up groggily from my long nap. I glanced at the red-numbered clock on my bedside table. 6:37 p.m. I couldn't believe that I'd slept that long. I pulled on my bathrobe. The pain in my lower back had subsided a good deal.

Robert stood before me at the front door. “Me come bad time?”

I shook my head no. “Come-in.”

He stomped his boots free of snow, and after entering, he glanced around my living room, unsure where he should sit.

“Before us-two sit, want something drink? Hot chocolate, tea, what?”

“Nothing right now. Thanks anyway.”

He sat on the sofa while I slowly sat onto my La-Z-Boy chair.

“Sorry fight awhile-ago.”

“O-k. Happened so”

“Angela sleep here still?”

“Big clash bicker-back-and-forth none interest me.”

He adjusted his posture. “Fine. Then why me come-here for-for?”

“Not realize Angela married before. No one told-me!”

He chuckled.

“Not funny!”

“Sorry. Thought you heard all Angela stories finish.”

“Her first husband dead. Why?”

“W-e-l-l . . .” He looked at me. “Long story.”

“Never knew Angela short story.”

He beamed.

“You d-o really love her.”

He didn’t say anything.

“Things o-k with wife?”

“Don’t-want discuss, o-k?”

“You-two plan marry?”

“She told-you that? Bitch.”

“Think about this. If you willing affair while married, why anyone want marry you for-for?”

Robert nearly leaped to his feet but instead he gripped the sofa’s arm rest next to him.

I slipped into my neutral counselor mode and waited for him to say something. I could see the wheels turning in his head so I thought best not to say anything more.

He finally turned to me. “Then ask yourself why *you* want marry her if tend affairs with other men?”

“Same reason you want marry her.”

“Wrong!”

“You murdered E-r-r-o-l M-a-r-c-u-s?”

He jumped to his feet and pounced on me. “Who—WHO—told-you that?”

Chapter 64

I winced from the jolts of pain in my lower back. Robert pushed himself off me and towered over me. “Who told-you that?”

“No one. Guessed that’s-all.”

“First time hear that.”

“Don’t worry won’t tell-spread-all-over.”

“Thank-you.” He glanced around my living room before he sat down on the sofa. “E-r-r-o-l name-sign-E . . .” He then elaborated on

the story of Errol Marcus's life: Errol had grown up in the New York School for the Deaf (Fanwood) in White Plains, but when his hearing parents divorced, he went upstate with his mother where she found a professorship at the Lansel State University where she taught medieval history. He was fifteen, and Angela was sixteen. No one recalls just how they'd met, but it seemed that from day one, these two were inseparable. Sometimes they fought in the hallways when Angela was rumored to have slept with this or that boy on the football team, but they always made up. Errol himself wasn't well-liked, probably because he seemed like a rich kid after having lived in White Plains and because he always scribbled poems in his notebook. When they graduated, Errol was the class valedictorian with plans to attend Lansel State for free, thanks to his mother's working there. But Angela had no specific plans.

Their first summer after graduation went by quickly. He worked downtown at Bob's Deli a few hours a day. Bob really liked him because he was so smart about how things should be organized from the counter to the storage room, so he felt a strong paternal affection for Errol. Somehow or the other, Errol and Angela had suddenly eloped one weekend, and returned husband and wife. This threw everyone off because no one had ever thought that these two would marry; they had seemed more like best friends than a couple in love. Rumor said that it was because Angela was accidentally pregnant and it wasn't necessarily Errol's child; another rumor said that she married Errol just to get back at some guy she'd been seeing on the side. There were so many rumors that even Errol felt compelled not to show up for work at Bob's Deli for a week.

When Errol finally returned, Bob forgave him for not calling in. They went back to work as if nothing else had happened. Angela and Errol were living together in the basement apartment at his mother's house, so that wasn't a problem. Then the Friday after Thanksgiving Errol showed up early as usual because he knew that that was the busiest day of shopping in the entire year and that meant a lot of hungry shoppers. That day went by fast, but he didn't come home when the deli closed at ten p.m. Angela waited and waited, and finally she decided to drive over to the deli and parked in the back. There was her husband, lying dead with his head bashed in by a loose brick from next door.

Rumors flew all around for weeks afterwards. Some said that he was a homosexual who had made the moves on his boss, who struck back; others said that Angela's ex-boyfriend was still hopping mad over

his marrying Angela; still more said that she killed him so she could marry that football star ex-boyfriend. To this day, no one could figure out who killed Errol Marcus.

When Robert finished telling me the tale, I paused. "Wow. Never realized . . . but why she not tell-me?"

He shrugged. "No idea."

"O-k . . . but who before second husband hers?"

He stood up and gave a tight smile. "Who you think?"

"You?"

He nodded.

Chapter 65

I sat there so slack-jawed that I didn't notice Robert leaving my apartment. So many questions and yet so many answers that didn't quite fit swirled around my mind.

For instance: What did the police truly say about Errol's death? Why did Robert and Angela get divorced? Why hadn't anyone ever brought up Errol Marcus's name before? And why were Robert and Angela having an affair, if that's what they were having? And if Robert had truly wanted me away from Angela the first time at the basketball game where we had met, it would've made sense for him to mention that she was his ex-wife. That would've given me a long pause, because the deaf community can be so small that their relationships can seem almost incestuous at times. Yet everyone had seemed so eager to backstab Angela but no one had seemed willing to spell out the precise reasons why.

I swore to myself that once my lower back healed, I would pay Mrs. Biggles a surprise visit.

I fell asleep in my big chair without realizing it. When I awoke to the door lights flashing, I was startled to find that it was a bright gray morning. Someone was at the door.

Even though I had to go to the bathroom really bad, I got up and crouched by the door, intending to tell my visitor to wait. I opened the door and saw Mickey standing there with a huge Tupperware bowl cradled in his arm. "Morning!" He beamed. "Chicken n-o-o-d-l-e soup."

"Me toilet. Go-ahead enter. Me-right-back."

When I returned from the toilet, Mickey was already browsing through my kitchen cabinets and drawers. "S-p-o-o-n where?"

I pointed to the drawer next to the dishwasher.

“Thanks.” He took out a spoon and set it on the table before he opened the Tupperware bowl and poured some into a smaller bowl. The friendly smell of fresh chicken soup wafted. “Sit.”

“Yes, s-i-r,” I jokingly said before I sat down at the table.

“Good boy.” He sat down opposite me. “Thought out cold, warm soup you-need, so me make easy finish.”

“Thank-you.” The soup was absolutely delicious and perfect, and warmed my insides. I had no idea how much I needed such good food after having been fed hospital food for so long.

“Plus want talk-to-you.”

“About what?”

“E-r-r-o-l M-a-r-c-u-s.”

I nearly spit out my soup.

Chapter 66

“What funny?” Mickey looked at me.

“Excuse-me.” I wiped my chin with a napkin. “Not expect that.”

“E-r-r-o-l M-a-r-c-u-s? S-o?”

“Me *recent* talk with Robert-Biggles. Not realize Angela married before.”

“Old n-e-w-s that.”

“But why not people tell-me?”

He sat down on the sofa. “L-o-v-e hands-off, you-know?”

“Wait.” I lifted the bowl of soup and drank the last of it. “Good soup, whoa!”

He beamed. “Used true-business home-made chicken s-t-o-c-k.”

“W-o-w. Delicious!”

“Me bring more can.”

“Thank-you. How work?”

“Same-old, same-old. Try new r-e-c-i-p-e-s, taste, test. Nothing whoa yet.”

“Understand. But Angela?”

“You-know something? Me jealous her. Really pro gets what she-wants. Finish, then flick-them-out. Want my opinion? When bored with-you, she flick-you-out will.” He frowned. “See all-over, repeat-over-again.”

“Won’t happen me.”

“See-see.”

I didn't like this at all. "Whatever. What about Errol?"
 "How know his name sign?"
 "Robert-Biggles told-me."
 "Oh." He looked at me as if to decide whether to tell me something truly important. "If me-tell-you secret, keep-your-mouth-tightly-shut?"
 "Of-course. Me work school counselor."
 "Right, right. Me forgot. Anyway, Errol died back Bob d-e-l-i, right?"
 "Yes."
 He hesitated. "Me need you do me favor."
 "Sure, what?"
 "Mind making-moves flatter Bob, see if-true-business g-a-y."
 "Why? Me not g-a-y."
 "Me have evidence may prove Bob killed Errol."
 "No. No. No interest middle rumors spinning-around."
 "Okay." Mickey stood up. "Just inform-you: Robert-Biggles wife plan request r-e-open Errol c-a-s-e."
 "But why?"
 "She believes Angela murdered Errol. True-business."
 "Then . . . what about Bob?"
 "My evidence against hers. We used-to-be best-friends." Tears slowly trickled down his cheeks. "Me don't-want see-you hurt."
 "But why . . ." I inhaled deeply for a moment. "Oh." He was so in love with me!

Chapter 67

As I got up with my empty bowl and hobbled to the kitchen, I felt Mickey's eyes bore right into me. I rinsed the bowl and found him standing in the doorway. "Can us-two clear-up something?"
 "Tell-me you don't need t-o."
 I sighed.
 "Me don't-want hear, o-k?"
 "Sorry—"
 "Don't need t-o—"
 "Me not g-a-y."
 He let out a long sigh. "Me stupid, then."
 "No, you not. Me flattered that you like-me, but . . ."
 "Me wish nice deaf guy move here."

“Come will.”

He fidgeted. “Errol . . .”

“Why not you ask Bob i-f gay? Maybe you-two get-along real-fine?”

“Feel funny. Suspect Bob Errol dated.”

“But why Angela marry him for-for?”

“I-f not-mind s-e-x, gay guys cool husbands straight women.”

“Got-it.” I stood there while an awkward silence passed between us. He looked about himself. “W-e-l-l, hope soup good.”

“Perfect! J-u-s-t perfect.” In the corner of my eye, just beyond Mickey’s shoulder, my pager blinked on the dining room table.

“Excuse-me. Pager.”

I walked slowly past Mickey and checked the screen on my pager. It was from Dale: “Need 2 talk 2 u rite now. Page me if free now.”

My thumbs punched in, “Come over now,” and clicked on “send.” I turned to Mickey. “Emergency pop-up. Friend come now.”

“Who?”

“None your business.”

“Bet D-a-l-e B-u-r-t-o-n, right?”

My jaw dropped. “How you know?”

“Heard rumor Dale Angela sex finish.”

Chapter 68

“Out.” I pointed Mickey to the door.

“Rumor, o-k?”

“Enough-enough. Go.”

“Sorry. But—”

I shook my head.

When he finally left, I slumped in my chair, if such a thing was possible with a sore lower back. I knew I had to rest it, and I also needed to relax. All this talk revolving around Angela, who was clearly far more mysterious than she’d originally let on, was making me both tense and tired at the same time.

I went to the bathroom, turned on the hot faucet in the tub, tossed in a few cups of Epsom Salt, lit a few candles, turned off the bathroom lights, and stripped to float in the water. Ahhhh, I thought. My limbs felt instantly loose and my back sighed as I bobbed gently in the steam. While the flicker of candlelight danced softly in front of my closed eyelids, I thought of Angela again. Why hadn’t she ever invited me to her house in all this time we’d been seeing each other? Was she

involved with someone else or No, no, no. She couldn't possibly be a woman of so many secrets, but then again, I was starting to see that Lansel—or at least the deaf community who lived there—was a town of deep-seated secrets. I'd just have to dig a little more and find out what the real story of Angela was.

As the water turned cool and the candlelights ran low, I thought to myself: Screw it. I'm just not gonna talk to anyone. I'll just lay low for a while and disappear.

Chapter 69

Days of white and gray at home passed in a blur. Even though I got many emails from Ruth Berbas and other people, I declined to see anyone. Over the course of two weeks, I went to the grocery supermarket and bought a ton of microwave dinners. I wasn't in the mood to stand in the kitchen and watch the stovetop. I just ate and watched a lot of television and read a few books and gained an inch or two around my waist.

Then came my visit with the doctor for a follow-up. He examined my spine along with an X-ray, and then a physical therapist worked with me to work towards stretching my back muscles slowly, slowly, slowly. That left me exhausted, but I was told that I could go back to work the following week if I wanted to. I decided that it was time to email Ms. Biggles and ask for a visit. I needed to know exactly the history of her husband's involvement with Angela.

She responded to my pager with: "I can come tmw morn, 9 am ok 4 u?"

I hit the reply button with a "yes, pls."

She showed up on time in a simple tweed jacket and a beret; I'd forgotten that she still had aspirations to dress a little stylishly like what she imagined New Yorkers wearing these days. I had met her before, from time to time, but she had dark circles under her eyes that I'd never seen before. Her long hair, once free-flowing, was pulled back in a tight ponytail. Her smile was tighter.

"Happy you-could come. Want coffee something?"

She shook her head no. "I know why you ask-me come-here. My husband and Angela, right?"

I nodded.

"First, must confess if see Angela, me would kill-her finish."

I said nothing.

“Just wonder if gun you have. You-don’t-mind me-borrow?”

Chapter 70

I was mortified. “You-want kill your husband?”

Kate Biggles shook her head. “Of-course not.”

“You can’t kill Angela.”

“Why not? Many people here thrill if-if she-dead finish.”

I stared at her.

“Ohhhhhhhhh. Understand clear now. You fall-in-love finish, right?”

“Not-say-that.”

“Marry her you-should.”

“But why?”

“My husband say if-if divorce happen, he marry her will.”

I paused. “Then tell-me full story these-two.” I had to ask even though I knew her story would be colored by the rage she’d felt against Angela.

This was her story in a nutshell: Long before Errol Marcus and Angela had eloped that one weekend in the summer of their high school graduation, Robert Biggles and Kate Friel had dated sporadically, but he seemed unable to commit to a steady relationship. Kate was very proud of the fact that she won over Angela as the Homecoming Queen at the Lansel School of the Deaf, but she was still bitter over the fact that he ran off with Angela after the crowning and stood her up when the time came for the last dance. Kate ended up dancing with Errol, and it was then she learned his big secret: That he was homosexual. The very notion of meeting someone like that stunned her for days, but she agreed to keep mum.

That summer, though, something changed in Robert. It turned out that he wasn’t entirely comfortable with the idea of hanging out with Angela while Errol was there. He’d gotten tired of being ogled, but who could blame Errol? Robert worked out regularly and made sure that everyone knew how muscular he was by wearing sleeveless shirts and gym shorts whenever he could on those hot summer nights at Bob’s Deli. In those days, the Lansel Deaf Club was around the corner from Bob’s Deli before the deaf community pooled enough money to buy a bigger building further east on the other side of Lansel a few years later. So in those days, when the Lansel Deaf Club closed at 1 a.m., people went to Bob’s Deli which closed at 3 a.m.

That was how Robert became more interested in Kate: She had no gay male friends, and she was quite surprised when he popped the question to her. They hadn't talked of marriage, but it was two days later that she'd learned that Errol and Angela eloped that same weekend. Kate was relieved because it meant that Robert had truly loved her after all; *he* was the one who asked to marry her, wasn't he? She felt a little bothered by the derogatory comments Robert made about Errol behind his back, but he stopped making them when Errol was found dead.

Kate was furious to find out later that Robert and Angela had hooked up together at Errol's wake at the deaf Catholic church, but after such a blistering row outside Bob's Deli, Robert acquiesced to his earlier promise to marry Kate. She kept a close eye on Angela whenever she was around, but as far as she could tell, nothing but history remained between her and her husband.

Until I came into town. Without my knowing it, my arrival—and Angela's attraction to me—had rocked the boat, exposing the fact that Angela and Robert still carried on during all those years, even though they had three children.

"Me want you marry her, then move far-away like California. Keep her away finish."

"Me can't d-o that. Not easy find good-paying job in my field."

"Sorry see that," she said. "Someone kill you could. Warning finish."

With that, she left my apartment. There was no telling what she might do next.

Chapter 71

After a nap, I decided to turn on my computer and check my emails, which I hadn't done so for a while since I came home from the hospital. I found a batch of e-cards from Ruth, which touched me. She had truly thought of me while I was gone. I decided to email her and ask her to come to my place.

A few minutes later she responded, "Great! See ya at 6."

Five minutes after six, she showed up. She looked absolutely luminous with a shorter haircut that somehow lent a shiny luster to her being. I was a bit stunned.

"Wow. What happen you, wow?"

She smiled and turned around for my benefit. "Me decide me dress

like Angela. Why many men attract-attract her? S-t-y-l-e.”

“Wow. You really beautiful.”

“Thank-you.” I hobbled to her and hugged her. In that moment, I saw a flicker of Angela’s face in the living room window. Had she been watching us? Or had I been imagining things?

“Wrong-wrong?”

I hobbled to the window and peered out. “Think someone peek-in window here.”

She turned to me. “Who?”

“Angela.”

“That i-t.”

“What?”

“Me promised i-f you comment obsess Angela, us-two finish.”

“Not sure that Angela, o-r my imagination. Face disappeared.”

“You-know w-h-a-t? Me go investigate footprints outside window, okay?”

She went out while I searched below the window for a sign of Ruth checking. But I didn’t see any. A few minutes had passed, which was too long for something as quick as checking for footprints in fresh snow.

I hobbled to the front door, grabbed a coat, and peered out. Ruth was lying face down on the snow, and the footprints away from her disappeared onto my driveway.

Chapter 72

The flicker of a car’s backlights caught my eye as it turned the corner. I couldn’t tell whose car it belonged to, or whether it was just a coincidence, or if it was another hallucination.

I hurried down the steps, tromped across the snow in my slippers, and turned Ruth gingerly over onto her side. A little blood trickled down the side of her head, and her eyes were closed. She was completely out of it. I held her head carefully as I rotated her onto her back. I leaned closer and saw that her nostrils were ejecting small puffs of carbon monoxide, which meant she was alive.

I ran back into my apartment, dialed 911, and tried to speak clearly even though I couldn’t tell if anyone had picked up the other end: “Please come to 7411 Hancock Street. Woman was in accident, possibly a murder attempt. Please help!”

I kicked off my slippers, slipped my snowmobile boots on, and

hurried out to her.

She was already awakening.

I waved in front of her. "You alright?"

She touched her head and looked at her hand, now covered with blood. The look on her face said it all for me. She turned to me.

"Me call 9-1-1 finish. Me go get coat keep you warm until help arrive."

Then there was a quick flicker of recognition in her eyes. "Don't enter a-p-t."

"Why?" I followed her gaze back to my opened front door. "Nobody here."

"Me see someone enter finish."

"Really?"

"True-business." She moaned. "Head hurts."

"Me right-back one-minute."

"N-o!"

"You cold, me can't permit you become sick freeze!" I got up and tiptoed up to the front door. A flicker of shadow from the lights inside my apartment fell across the welcome mat, and then it disappeared. *Someone* was definitely in there!

I turned slowly and looked.

Chapter 73

I peeked into my apartment. Nothing seemed any different. I scanned across the carpet of my living room for clumps of snow, but I saw none. I thought of Ruth lying there in the snow, and how much she needed help. Besides, if anyone was hiding in my apartment, the only two places left were my kitchen and my bedroom, and you couldn't get out of either room very easily.

I hurried quickly to my video phone terminal and clicked on the screen for a video relay interpreter. A woman I'd never seen before—it was still strange to have such interpreters introduce themselves as a series of numbers rather than names upon appearing on the TV screen—asked if I'd like to make a call.

"Call 9-1-1, deaf friend fell outside a-p-t, not sure how fall, trip or someone push. Seems minimal head c-o-n-c-u-s-i-o-n."

I watched the lips of my interpreter to make sure that I was being translated properly. As I did so, I noticed a flicker of motion behind my head in the other screen next to the interpreter.

I whirled around. It was Angela, visibly frightened and ready to burst into tears.

“What’s-up here?”

“Someone try kill me.”

It was then she turned to the video phone relay, and then to me. “Interpret-interpret watch-me finish.”

I turned to the video phone. It was clear the interpreter had been waiting to respond to me.

“Ambulance arrive soon will.”

“Thanks.”

I hung up and turned around. Where did she go?

Chapter 74

The ambulance came and went. It was strange to see Ruth carried on a gurney into the back of an ambulance.

The police came and stayed. It was stranger to see Detective Markins raise an eyebrow when I wondered if anyone had seen Angela in the proximity of my apartment building. “What was she doing here?” A police staff interpreter voiced for him.

“Me plan ask-her, but she-disappear when ambulance arrive.”

He nodded to one of his underlings, a twentysomething in a navy-blue parka with the Lansel police insignia sewn on its sleeve. I knew what Detective Markins wanted to know as I did: Was she hiding somewhere in my apartment?

“I have only one question.” He held up his finger. “How well do you know this Angela Markins?”

“We-met last J-a-n, then date occasionally. We not boyfriend-girlfriend. Nothing like that.”

“But you do want her?”

I nodded.

He smiled. “That woman holds more secrets than anyone in this town, and she’d be the only reason I’d want to learn sign language.”

“More secrets than any-one Lansel?”

“The deaf community here is full of secrets. That’s why my job is so difficult. Can you help me with something, though?” He stepped a bit closer. “Has Angela ever said anything about Errol Marcus?”

I blanched. “Why?”

“I might be overstepping here, but I suspect that what happened tonight has had something to do with him.”

"Me never knew him!"

"That's okay. Can I trust you?"

"Unh, sure."

Detective Markins whispered. Even the interpreter had to lean closer to him in order to hear him and translate. "I've been working on Errol's case for twenty years." He glanced around, and turned to the interpreter. "Please keep your signing small. I don't want other signers to see our conversation." I huddled closer to the two of them as he continued. "Thanks. If you really want to help me out here, I need you to find out *exactly* what Angela was doing on the night Errol died."

"She not tell-you?"

"Yes, but . . ." He sighed. "I don't have enough evidence against her."

"What sort of evidence?"

"That she herself may've killed Errol."

I jumped back. "Why you-tell-me for-for? You try me against Angela for e-v-i-d-e-n-c-e? That, games police play? N-o, me will *not* snoop s-p-y for you. Me not P-I. Me school counselor, that i-t. You should learn fluent-signing make job easier."

But I noticed something else odd: The detective's eyes were looking past me. The underling had brought forth Angela. Her hair was a bit disheveled.

The interpreter translated him. "She was hiding in the bedroom closet."

Chapter 75

Angela's eyes shone with a smoldering rage as she glared at Detective Markins. "Me see every-thing! *Every*-thing you probe him about me. Me nothing hide!"

He looked at me, and then at her. "Then why don't you tell me the whole story of what happened the night Errol died?"

"Nothing happen finish. Day after Thanksgiving busy shopping."

The detective stared at her. "I've heard that deaf people are big on gossip."

"Hearies no different."

"Try this one on for size." He beckoned the police staff interpreter to come closer with him. "Kate Biggles wants me to reopen the case. Why aren't you more concerned about your first husband?"

Angela inhaled. "Kate want r-e-open c-a-s-e?" The look on her face

said even more: That bitch.

The detective smiled. "I've been watching you. For years."

"Everyone stares no-matter me d-o. Agh!"

"Tell us why you were hiding in Alan's bedroom closet."

"Someone try hit-me but hit R-u-t-h instead. Me frightened, hide near shrub next-to door front. Me enter when A-l try help R-u-t-h lay-there-on-the-snow. Me afraid hurt, dart-into closet hide when ambulance lights flash window there."

I turned to Angela. "Who try hit-you?"

She smiled grimly at Detective Markins. "Your best-friend K-a-t-e B-i-g-g-l-e-s."

Chapter 76

"That woman famous lie-lie a-l-l time." With that, Angela retouched her hair and zipped up her jacket. She looked at me. "Me-need ride home. You allowed drive?"

I caught the police staff interpreter voicing Angela's signs and turned my face slightly to the side. She caught the tenderness in my eyes while I lied with my hands: "Sorry, not feel right. Lower-back hurt little still."

"Fine. Me go-ahead email-page c-a-b." She walked out of my apartment.

I turned to Detective Markins. "You not e-v-e-n question her."

"I don't have to. I know where she lives."

I stopped.

"You've been dating her, and she doesn't tell you where she lives?"

I sighed. "That right."

"Ask around in the deaf community. Someone will tell you."

"Then why not tell-me?"

"Legally, I'm not to divulge such information."

I gave him a dirty look. "Then me nothing more tell-you." With that I sat down in my living room chair and waited for everyone to leave. I refused to look at the police staff interpreter or Detective Markins. They too left.

I locked the door behind them and breathed a long sigh of relief. As I turned from the door, I caught a weird bluish glint of light in the dining room window. I walked to the window and peered out. It was Angela. God! How I loved that woman!

"Me wait ten more minutes before me-go-round-building enter."

I nodded.

Those ten minutes seemed like an eternity: Emails, straightening out my bedroom closet, and some news. Finally, the door light flashed.

I hurried to the front door, opened it, and pulled my Angela into my arms. Our tongues jumped out at each other and wrestled while we clung passionately to each other. Just when we were about to unzip her jacket, the doorlight flashed again. We both froze.

Chapter 77

Angela and I looked at each other as the doorlight flashed again.

“Do-do? Me hide again?”

“No, lie bed room wait dark.”

She nodded and scurried off.

I peered through the peephole and saw a faint flicker of gray and black. It was so dark out. While keeping my eye on the hole, I reached for the light switch and flicked the front door lights on. The figure of shadow was none other than Robert Biggles.

I swung the door open, pretending to be a bit tired. “O-h, that you. What’s-up?”

“Sorry bother-you but you-see my wife?”

I inhaled nervously. “Why?”

“Me page her, no answer. Should home b-y nine, but”

“She stopped here brief but took-off.”

“She story Angela?”

“She concerned about you-two marriage.” I bit my lip. How much should I tell him? I sighed. “She want me marry Angela finish, then us-two take-off.”

He stared at me. “Angela love you?”

“Don’t-know.” I gave a small smile. “Why not you ask-her? She in my bedroom.”

“She can’t cheat me finish!”

I moved to block his tracks. “You married still.”

“Heart-here still want marriage her.”

“You stay here. Me go ask-her come-here.”

He shook his head no. “Should search K-a-t-e.” He pulled out his pager and checked its backlit screen. “None.” He sighed. “Me should go home, wait wife arrive home. Sorry bother-you.”

“O-k.”

He turned and left for his car.

As I closed the door, I turned to find Angela waiting in the darkness. “Me feel guts something bad happen finish.” As I approached her, I caught the glint of moonlight in the few tears streaking down her face.

Chapter 78

That night Angela and I didn’t make love for the first time. It felt so odd in a way to hold her softly like a little sparrow in my arms there in my bed. She was almost a stranger whose name I knew but whose life I had only known the barest outlines of. I don’t think I slept a full four hours that night. So many thoughts ran through my mind as I looked deep into her sleeping face in the moonlight. God, she was so extraordinarily beautiful!

When I saw my bedside clock switch from 5:59 to 6:00 a.m., I decided that it was time to get up. Besides, I figured that I could always catch up on my sleep in a nap once Angela left. After going to the bathroom, I went into the kitchen and turned on my coffee maker. As I pressed down the lid, I looked up at the window. There, on an undeveloped lot beyond our backyard, was a group of policemen corraling off some bundled-up curiosity seekers as a group of paramedics, all wearing orange vests over their parkas, brought out an empty gurney from the ambulance. I couldn’t see who was lying there on the snowy field.

I hobbled to the living room where I kept my binoculars for checking out constellations and hurried back. I refocused my binoculars on the covered body the medics were carrying. Who could it be? As the ambulance took off, I caught sight of Detective Markins glancing around until his eyes stopped, seeming to fixate on my apartment building and then squinting even more to my kitchen window. Had he really caught me looking?

Chapter 79

I stepped back from the kitchen window, and found Angela wearing my bathrobe in the doorway.

“What’s-up there?”

“Seem find dead body there.”

“Who?”

“Don’t know. You-go work now-day?”

“What time now?”

I glanced at the teal-lit clock on my microwave oven. “Six-fifteen.”

She smiled slowly as she walked closer to me. “Me miss you awful.” Her arms slithered around me as she looked up to me for a kiss that would demand release the second it was unleashed.

I glanced back to the kitchen window. “Know who there?”

“Let me guess. Detective M-a-r-k-i-n-s, right?”

I nodded.

“Soon he-come questions-probe. Himself search hard find blame deaf people. Himself big-peabrain, true-business.”

“Himself do job, s-o?”

She smiled. It was as if an extra burst of sunlight had exploded in the kitchen, and we both fell into a hot passionate embrace. Just when we were panting amidst our clinging and clawing to the bedroom, the front doorbell flashed its light. She closed her robe and disappeared into my bedroom while I straightened my flannel pajamas.

Detective Markins, with one of his staff interpreters standing beside him, stood grinning—gloating, almost—at me. “Good morning, Mr. Worx. I believe you have Angela Marstone hiding somewhere in your apartment, do you not?”

I didn’t respond.

“I need to bring her down to the station for some questioning.”

“What wrong?”

“Kate Biggles was found dead this morning.”

Chapter 80

I stood there in the doorway. “Over-there that K-a-t-e?”

“Yes. She *was* here last night, wasn’t she?” Detective Markins cleared his throat. “What about Ms. Marstone? Isn’t she staying with you?”

“Excuse-me. Me right-b-k.” I closed the door and took a deep breath. The look in his face made me feel like a condemned murderer. Of course, Kate had stopped by the night before, but I certainly had no intention or motive for killing her! I turned toward the bedroom, where I found her hiding in the closet.

“What’s-up hide there for-for?”

“Detective leave finish?”

I shook my head no. “He won’t leave until you go-up-to-him.”

She pushed herself out of the closet and glared at me. "You-tell-him finish. Trust you me-can't." She was about to storm out of the bedroom when I grabbed her arms.

I released her. "Wow. You decide finish not ask-me. He himself decide you here. You-know who body out-there?"

She held up her arms. "Who?"

"Kate Biggles."

"K-a-t-e? True-business?" She looked ready to collapse, so I put my arm around her.

"Yes. Dead finish."

With that, she fainted.

Chapter 81

As I stared at Angela's body on the floor before me, I yelled, "Come 'ere!" I didn't know whether Detective Markins could understand my speech, but I hoped that the urgency in my voice would summon him to my bedroom.

He showed up in a flash. "What happened?"

His staff interpreter stepped into my bedroom and translated me. "Me inform her K-a-t-e body over-there. Reaction what? She fainted there."

"Thanks."

"What?"

"You shouldn't have told her."

"Why?"

"Never mind." He whipped out his cell phone, mumbled some things, and then hung up. "An ambulance will be here shortly."

"Can me help anything?"

"No." He stared at me. "I want you to come with me."

"Why?"

"Because she tried to send you an email from her pager. Right before she died."

"Oh." What could she possibly want to tell me? I glanced around for my pager, which was on the bedside stand next to my bed. "Me can check if get."

Detective Markins stood right in front of the bedside stand. "You can't look at it now. You're coming to the station with me."

"But me not d-o anything wrong!"

"Says who?" He picked up my pager and pointed my way out of the

bedroom as the first wave of paramedics tumbled into my apartment. I put on my coat and boots, grabbed my wallet, and followed him into his police car. It was my first ride to the police station, and as history would later demonstrate, it wouldn't be my last.

Chapter 82

Down the hills of Lansel I rode in the back of the police car and tried to slink below the window of my passenger side. I didn't want anyone to see me in the back, especially when the car slowed once inside downtown. Still, I found it a bit incredulous that Detective Markins, even with his staff interpreter, felt he could order me around. Being considered a suspect for a murder was one thing, but there was something else fishy about the whole thing. What was it, though?

At the police station, I got out and followed Detective Markins inside. He indicated an interrogation room with a big glass window on one side. I knew immediately it was a one-way window with a videotape camera on the other side. I sat down, and waited for Markins and his staff interpreter to seat themselves.

"I'll make this quick and painless as possible." Markins leaned forward. "How long have you been seeing Angela?"

Then it hit me. "You not r-e-c-i-t-e M-i-r-a-n-d-a warning before order-me come-here. You not follow order p-r-o-t-o-c-o-l."

"Oh, sh*t."

"Me must lawyer here. Must!"

"Okay, okay." He was clearly annoyed with me.

"Lawyer contact information in pager."

"You want Joan Spinst's pager address?" Joan was the only deaf attorney in town, and she was married to Paddy McGlynn, a deaf Irish man I had some casual beers with when I first moved to Lansel. "I have it on my desk."

"N-o. Must use pager."

"Hold on." Markins took out my pager, scrolled through it, and pressed some keys before pressing the scroll button, and then the delete key.

"What doing?!?"

"I don't want you to read what Kate Biggles sent you. I forwarded it to myself. For evidence's sake."

"Me not kill her!"

He handed the pager to me. "There you go."

I snatched it quite angrily. “Thank-you.”
“I’ll be back in ten minutes, okay?”
“Fine.”

I opened my pager and scrolled down to the trash folder. What Markins didn’t know was the fact that every email deleted the first time had to be emptied out of the trash as well, and what’s more, I always kept a copy of sent emails, so even if he emptied the trash folder, I still had a copy of the forwarded email. There, I saw Kate’s email and clicked on it

Chapter 83

The subject header of Kate’s email to me was blank, but I was not prepared for what I read next: “help angeruth hurt me back field.” I paused. Who was “angeruth”? Then it hit me—maybe she’d meant to say Angela when she typed in Ruth’s name in the middle of her pain? Or was it the other way around? I forwarded Kate’s email to my personal email address and deleted all traces of it off my pager.

Scrolling down, I noticed an email from Ruth. She was in the hospital. Damn, I thought. In the middle of all what had happened the night before, I’d totally forgotten all about her! I responded with my thumbs typing: “Hope you’re ok. Am in police station right now. Where are you now?”

A minute later, she shot back. “Already paged joan spinst on her way to you now. Will be there in 10 mins.”

Ten minutes? Then I remembered that the Lansel County Hospital was five blocks away, almost outside of downtown, further away from the river that divided the Lansel Valley.

Strangely enough, I felt a bit woozy. I knew I needed that prerequisite of the day—a cup of freshly-brewed coffee, a little toast and jam, and a grapefruit laced with sugar—without which I felt unable to function fully. Also, I hadn’t slept well the night before. I held my pager tightly as I sat down and rested my head on the table. I needed a few moments of peace.

It was so sweet to close my eyes if only for a minute or so, or at least I felt a soft tap on my shoulder. I looked up to see Joan Spinst, a beautiful short-haired brunette in a pinstriped blouse and skirt and a pair of sharp boots. “A-l W-o-r-x? You o-k?”

I nodded. “You came-here fast.”

Joan glanced around. “Me already ask us-two talk different room.”

She pointed to the opaque window. "Videotape everything there."

At that moment, Detective Markins entered with his interpreter. I was surprised by the depth of his crestfallen look when he saw Joan standing there.

She smiled effusively and sauntered to him. "Me s-o thrilled see you again." She extended her hand which he shook rather lamely. "A-l W-o-r-x my client now. Can us-two go another room talk private?"

It was so clear that Markins wanted to say, "What's wrong with this room?" but he didn't. "Room 4A should be vacant. I'll go check."

He left the room as his staff interpreter watched us.

"Thank-you come here."

"None problem."

Markins returned. "Room 4A's yours. Down that way."

Joan and I walked past Markins and his interpreter down the fluorescent-lit hallway down to a smaller room. She turned on the lights, closed the door, and leaned against the door as I sat down at the table.

"Why you here?"

"M-a-r-k-i-n-s seem think me suspect murder K-a-t-e B-i-g-g-l-e-s."

"Kate-Biggles?"

"Yes."

She glanced about herself.

"You o-k?" I stood up and went to her as she covered her mouth in great thought.

"O-k, o-k. Let me guess. Kate-Biggles found face-down field, right?"

My jaw dropped. "How you know?"

"Happened from-time-to-time before, and always deaf women."

"Me not understand."

"Me suggest when Detective M-a-r-k-i-n-s interrogate you about deaf women your life, ask-him back point-blank if he-date deaf women back-then."

"Why?"

"Me grew-up here. None deaf women killed until six-months after M-a-r-k-i-n-s arrived here. Me can't prove, of-course."

I stood there, dumbfounded. It seemed so implausible, but in a perverse way, it all made sense. A hearing policeman with a deep-seated hatred of deaf women moves to a town famous for its deaf community, and he doesn't try to sign even though he must interact a lot with its deaf residents

Chapter 84

“But right now not worth discuss possible link M-a-r-k-i-n-s three—no, four—deaf women murdered already.” Joan said before she drew up her chair and sat in front of me. “Need you tell-me everything all-up-to now?”

So I did, leaving out nothing about Angela, Robert, and Ruth. I knew that if I did leave out something, my professional credibility as a school counselor would be shot down in court, and I’d never be able to work in that field again. I did enjoy working with students, and that was something I wanted very much to continue.

When I was done, it was already ten-thirty in the morning when Joan checked her watch. “You lucky me no big plans this morning. Me call M-a-r-k-i-n-s interrogate get over-with.”

As I waited alone in Room 4A, the door opened. I looked up to see Ruth. It was nearly a shock to see her, for her head was bandaged, but otherwise she looked okay. She was still wearing the same clothes from the night before.

I rose up. “You o-k?”

She nodded. “Saw Joan leave this room, me feel you here.”

I walked around the table and embraced her. It felt so odd to hold her there in a cold and impersonal room.

She raised her face to mine.

“You sit need?”

She shook her head. “Head bump really nothing. Thank-you anyway.”

“Good.”

She fixed her gaze on me. “Know who me saw outside your a-p-t last night? Angela Robert.”

“Together?”

She nodded. “Together. Which means they hit-me last night.” She smiled grimly. “Me explain deep their relationship history M-a-r-k-i-n-s finish.

“But how . . . ?”

“I-f you want save yourself, you can’t say Angela your girlfriend.”

“But why?”

“Kate-Biggles murder may be best thing for L-a-n-s-e-l deaf.”

“W-h-a-t?” I couldn’t believe that Ruth, of all people, could say such a thing.

“Time for Angela stay-put prison forever.”

I stared at her while a most frightening thought entered my head:

What if Ruth herself had somehow killed Kate prior to her own arrival, staged her own assault attack, and faked her way in the hospital? No, she couldn't possibly do such a thing. I almost broke into a guffaw.

"What funny?"

"Sorry, but strange thought popped-up."

"What, what?"

"For some reason me thought you murder Kate before you arrive my a-p-t, then faked your head-hit"

Her face turned ashen-white.

Chapter 85

I don't know why I'd implied that Ruth might've killed Kate; it just came right out of me. I was very surprised by her reaction because I'd expected her to be totally indignant. "You o-k?"

"Sorry."

"You true-business kill Kate-Biggles?"

"No, no. Me shocked you think me murderer."

"Me j-u-s-t make-up see-see happens."

"Obviously Angela influence-you finish."

"Meaning?"

"You make-up see-see what happens. Same Angela."

"Not true."

The door opened. It was my attorney Joan Spinst, who stopped in mid-track when she saw Ruth standing there. "What's-up here?"

"He want see me s-o me came-in here."

"But me thought you not have"

"Me none girl-friend."

"Very good." Joan smiled. "Because she happen under suspicion for murder."

I turned to Ruth. "D-i-d you?"

"D-o what?"

"Kill Kate-Biggles?"

"Why that important? Herself dead finish."

Joan closed the door. "Me know you many years. I-f you half brain-in-your-head, you kill Angela first. Herself many, many enemies. Not Kate-Biggles!"

Ruth said nothing.

"My advice you what?" Joan stood right in front of Ruth. "Get lawyer before M-a-r-k-i-n-s interrogate-you. Al here got-me first, s-o

will page my hearing legal partner come-represent you. Himself fluent sign. You met him finish. Name: K-e-l-l-y J-u-s-t-i-n-s; name-sign Kelly-Justins. You may have-t-o wait one-hour him come, but important you not answer questions until Kelly-Justins there-with-you, o-k? Very important. Understand?"

Ruth nodded. "Thanks."

"Good." Joan turned to me. "Come-on. Time interrogation."

As I left Room 4A, I glanced back. Ruth was already sitting at the table, her eyes glassing over. Could she be really guilty? As I followed Joan down the hallway while she fired off a quick email off her pager to Kelly Justins, I had to wonder.

Chapter 86

Detective Markins was suddenly much more cordial when he grilled me about my association with both Kate Biggles and Angela Marstone. What had happened? But I held back nothing, and told all I knew, all the while noticing that my lawyer Joan Spinst was trying not to smile.

When I finally left the interrogation room at the police station, I nudged Joan. "What's-up tiny-smiles?"

"Thought-pop-in new. Realize oh."

"Realize what?"

Joan glanced around before she faced me. "My new theory perfect."

"Meaning?"

"Come outside," she said. "Me drive, drop-you-off home."

"Thanks."

Once we were in her car, she turned to me. "Nothing personal, but Angela s-l-u-t."

I winced.

"Not judge her, but inform-you f-a-c-t. Me suspect Detective M-a-r-k-i-n-s Angela slept-together finish, and she flicked-him-out-of-her hand. He might-be pursuing her for revenge."

I said nothing as we coasted down and then up to the hills to my apartment building. There was only one thing left for me to do.

"Thanks." I said and waved to Joan as she backed out of the parking lot and left. I looked up at the gray afternoon sky, and pulled out my pager. I scrolled down to Angela's name in the To: field and began thumb-typing. "Angela," I wrote, "I have been doing a lot of thinking. I think that due to the circumstances surrounding Kate's death, it'd be best if we stop seeing each other. I wish you the best of

luck in your future. I know I will always miss you, but I hope you will understand. Yours, Alan Worx.”

With that, I pressed the Send button.

A minute later, she responded: “too late now. you’re going to be a father. see you in 20.”

Chapter 87

Me, a father-to-be?

I didn’t know what to think as I stared a bit too long at the screen of my pager showing Angela’s email. I had long wanted to be a father, and in fact, the main reason why I’d divorced my first wife was because she didn’t want to have children with me after all. Maybe it’s selfish of me to want children of my own when so many deaf orphans in other countries go begging for adoptive parents like myself, but I knew that adoption laws in this country needed to be a bit easier to enable potential single fathers or mothers to adopt. Surely having *one* parent had to be better than having *no* parent.

As I sat down slowly in my living room chair, a new question came into my head: Hadn’t I always used a condom when I had sex with Angela? I tried to scan my memories of our lovemaking, and then I remembered our first time together, which was so beautiful and glorious at the same time, and yes, I didn’t think to use a condom. I probably knew in my bones during that first time, I had wanted to marry her. I was surprised that she didn’t object, which led me to believe that she was a single woman. But all my other times with her, I’d always used a condom.

While thinking about all of this, I had to admit to my own self that Angela probably slept with Robert Biggles and possibly my own best friend Dale Burton, either of whom could’ve impregnated her. I just didn’t feel entirely that comfortable in asking either man if they had condom-free sex with her, *if* they truly had sex.

The doorbell lights flashed. I rose up to answer the door, slightly happy that I would get to see Angela alone again at last. When I opened the door, I saw Jamie Blinks, one of my clients who was a sophomore student and who had long begged me to adopt her what seemed like eons ago. At one point, she’d dressed rather inappropriately for one of our sessions, and I had to send her to the principal’s office. But the difference now was, she was all bruised: Her forehead was scratched, and her left eye was puffy and blue. She wore

only shoes, not boots, a pair of tight jeans, a T-shirt, and a thin sweater. Even though it was March, snow still lingered outside.

“You all-right?”

She stared while panting.

“W-h-a-t?”

“Not-realize you-live here. My home three blocks that-way.”

“Oh. Come-in. Me summon ambulance.”

“No! You can’t!”

“Why not?”

“My father true-business k-i-l-l me if found hospital.”

“Your health more important than him.”

As I went to my videophone, I dialed for a video relay operator. I was happy to see that one came on so suddenly, which shocked me.

Today was my lucky day, I guess. A few minutes later I hung up after giving my street address and the level of care that might be needed for Jamie.

I turned around in my office chair. My front door was left ajar. I glanced around. Jamie had disappeared. As I ran out of my apartment, I saw Jamie hurrying down the street towards the whirling-lights ambulance climbing up the hill to my apartment building, and then I noticed something else further up the hill. A clean-shaven man wearing an old navy blue parka was running down the hill. In his hands was a hunting rifle, and he looked very, very angry.

Chapter 88

Even though I knew it was stupid to do so after having been in the hospital for a while back and still having an occasional jolt of pain in my lower back, I rushed right into Mr. Blinks’s path. He stopped a few feet away from me and raised his rifle to aim it at me. I couldn’t understand what he said, but I knew what he wanted to do—shoot his own daughter, who was still running down the hill.

He moved quickly to the side and fired. It was strange to hear such a sharp sound even without my hearing aids.

I turned to see where the bullet went.

One of the front tires under the whirling ambulance climbing up the hill went kaput. The ambulance lost control and slammed into the snowbank across the street.

Jamie kept running, but a parka-jacket-and-orange-vested paramedic leaped out of the ambulance and grabbed her.

In that moment, she turned to look at us.

I turned to her father who hadn't moved his rifle down.

Without thinking, I grabbed his rifle and pushed it down.

He shouted obscenities at me, and then shoved me backwards where I was able to cushion my fall on a snowbank next to the driveway. I was so lucky that I had been standing so close to the snowbank, or my back would've given out.

I pushed myself onto my feet as Mr. Blinks walked slowly down the hill to the ambulance. The paramedic put himself in front of the shivering Jamie as her father continued walking.

I ran down the hill and screamed. Now, it's not in my nature to scream, but I felt I had no choice, particularly when most hearing people are more freaked by the sound of a deaf person's unmodulated voice screaming.

Mr. Blinks turned quickly, but it was just enough of a look away that the paramedic pounced on him. The rifle fell and slid a little bit down the hill.

I kept running down and lifted the rifle off the salt-bitten street just before Mr. Blinks tossed the paramedic aside. I wasn't prepared for its weight, but all I knew was that he should not have it.

Meanwhile the other paramedics had gotten out of the ambulance and surrounded Jamie. They said something, to which Mr. Blinks muttered something.

Mr. Blinks turned back, and I followed his glance.

He suddenly lunged at me and pulled the rifle from my hands. He had fooled me, the bastard!

I nearly toppled over but caught my balance.

By then I heard that sharp sound a second time. I looked up.

Jamie's chest started to soak with crimson. Her eyes were wild with pain and fear as the paramedics rushed around her.

Her hands signing grew weaker as she bored her eyes into mine: "Wish you my father not him." Then her eyes went dead, and her mouth no longer gave out warm puffs.

Mr. Blinks dropped his rifle, rushed up to me, and gripped my lapels.

"What did she say?"

I cleared my throat before speaking. "She said she wished that I was her father, not you."

He turned back to Jamie, and without another word, he quickly picked up the rifle, inserted it into his mouth, and pressed the trigger.

Chapter 89

I didn't know what to think—I had never seen anyone shoot himself like that. I think a part of me died in that moment when I saw how a person could commit suicide so ruthlessly. Sure, I was trained to help counsel students through their suicidal impulses and help them change their way of thinking and finding more constructive solutions, but nothing in my education had prepared me for that sense of dead shock. I felt more like a robot when I stared at that mangled face. It was then I noticed a flurry of people scurrying around me.

I turned and watched the paramedics try to save Jamie's life, but I knew it was hopeless. Most people never survive a shot that close, and in the heart too. As I watched the paramedics sigh puffy breaths in the cold air as one of them pulled a white sheet over Jamie's face, I felt a strange flicker of unspeakable sadness. I had barely known the girl! Yet she saw something in me that somehow made her think that I would make a better father than her own. I had never met Mr. Blinks prior to that day, and I knew that now both father and daughter were dead, I would probably never know conclusively what Mr. Blinks had done.

Then I noticed the paramedics turning their heads up the hill. I followed their gazes, and I saw an older woman, completely distraught in her bathrobe and cap and slippers. She had a big coat over her body, but there was no mistaking the look of helplessness as she caught sight of the paramedics hauling Jamie into the back of the ambulance, and then of Mr. Blinks's body, already covered with a white sheet.

In turn I followed the woman's gaze down the hill, and I saw Detective Markins climbing up the street. He didn't have an interpreter with him.

I caught the look of distrust on his face, and I immediately surmised that he had been called to their house on some noise disturbance charge or something or the other. I almost didn't want to know. I turned back to the woman who had flung herself on Mr. Blinks's body and who was now beating his dead body with her bare fists and lashing out words that I couldn't lipread but her body emitted a staccato symphony of rage that didn't need lipreading.

When Detective Markins stood next to Mr. Blinks's body, the woman stopped and stood up. She said something while pointing back at the ambulance.

I walked closer for a better lipreading.

Mr. Markins caught sight of my intent and moved sideways in line of my vision. In that moment I had to wonder if he knew more

about deaf culture than he was letting on. As he turned briefly to the ambulance, I caught something strange about his profile, which had a slightly crooked nose. Where else had I seen that profile?

The woman suddenly ran past me and pulled open one of the doors in the back of the ambulance. I followed her, as did Mr. Markins, and watched her pull the white sheet off Jamie's head, which was leaning sideways. Yes!

I turned to Mr. Markins.

"What?" He said.

I spoke and gestured, "I bet she's your daughter."

Chapter 90

Mr. Markins spoke and gestured back: "I don't know what you're talking about."

I squinted at him, and he knew that I wasn't going to let this one go.

As I turned back for my apartment, I felt a hand grab my elbow.

"What?" I said when I saw who it was. Him.

"She's not my daughter. Do you understand?"

I merely pointed to his nose and then to the ambulance. I mouthed, "Same." I gestured what else there is to argue.

His face turned a bit pale. That was the moment when I realized why my lawyer felt that Detective Markins was not entirely agenda-free when it came to investigating the deaf community. I would definitely page Joan and share with her my suspicions; I knew in my bones that she would have a field day, particularly if I suggested that the DNA coding of both Jamie and Markins be compared.

He didn't try to stop me when I turned back for my apartment. As I walked, I glanced down the hill. There, in the middle of that winter light, was a dream come true: Angela, my Angela, caped in a bright red coat and spiked with black boots, was climbing up the hill.

I waved to her.

In that moment, I noticed that Mr. Markins was also waving to her. I caught a sliver of warm familiarity on his face which turned cold instantly when he caught a warning look on her face. Had there been a secret history or a private agreement of sorts between them?

I decided to find out right then and there.

"There-you-are!" I gestured happily as I walked down the hill. I knew parts of the street had small icy patches so I looked out for those.

As Angela and I walked closer to each other, I glanced back at Mr. Markins. I had never seen such stoniness in a man's face as I scooped her into my arms and swung her around so I could see his reaction to my full-on-her-lips kiss.

She pushed herself away.

"Wrong-wrong?"

"Nothing." She glanced back at Mr. Markins.

"Know who dead over-there?" I pointed to the ambulance, and then Mr. Blinks's sheet-covered body.

She glanced and turned to me. "Don't-know who don't-know."

I put on a poker face and signed, "Girl look-like M-a-r-k-i-n-s daughter."

Angela's face turned pale. What the hell was going on here?

Chapter 91

"You o-k?" I asked Angela, who had already regained her composure.

She nodded yes. "Me cold. Me want enter a-p-t talk private."

As I escorted her onto the driveway to my apartment, I couldn't help thinking a very wild thought. What if Angela and Detective Markins were lovers at one time? But no, that was not possible. After all, Angela had been here in Lansel all her life, and Mr. Markins had moved here how many years ago? This was something I knew I'd want to ask my lawyer, but then again, I had this vague feeling that she might be holding a few other cards closely to her chest that I didn't know about. I would have to play this card very, very carefully.

Once inside my apartment, Angela fell into my arms. How sweet it felt to hold such a beautiful woman whose body emitted pliability and submission, and to feel how much she wanted me. I stroked her hair and inhaled her perfume that failed to mask the musk of her sex. I slowly took off her coat and tossed it onto my armchair.

God, I needed her! After all that stress and drama over the last few days, my desire for her was never keener than ever in that moment when I rubbed my nose across her neck that felt smooth as silk. She felt so soothing that it reminded me why some men could not live without their women in spite of the problems they had in their relationships. She anchored me with her body enveloping around me, and I knew I had to extricate myself from her arms just to undress.

As I kicked off my shoes and took off my shirt, I stopped.

Detective Markins was staring at us through my front window.

Chapter 92

I stopped in my tracks when I saw Detective Markins disappear from the window.

Angela turned around to look, but he was already gone. "Who that?"

"Detective M-a-r-k-i-n-s. He spy watch us-two here."

She touched my face slowly. "Sorry, but must go."

"Me thought you want discuss something."

"O-h. Right."

"W-e-l-l?" I paused. "You woman many secrets list."

She smiled. "That why you want me."

"Not enough. Tell-me more."

"Like what?"

"What's-up detective you-two? What's-up that?"

"None your business."

"You-know w-h-a-t me-think? That girl J-a-m-i-e your secret daughter, and detective her real father."

She stared at me, and for a split second there, I thought I had her. But a second later she broke into convulsions. "You funny!"

I stared quietly at her. "Me not joking. Will finger-beckon you hospital pull-blood test D-N-A prove connection."

"You crazy?"

I shook my head no.

"Cranky-cranky, no-no please."

I didn't realize how angry I was. "All-along you lie-lie, right? Tell-me truth."

She glanced back at the door and then turned to me. "My first husband die because of her."

"Your first husband die because of her, o-k. Who first husband?"

"E-r-r-o-l M-a-r-c-u-s."

"S-o?"

"N-o, n-o," she said to herself. "Me can't tell why. Me can't!"

"Fine. Me go-straight-up-to-him detective, explain recent you comment, force you tell every-thing."

She broke into a laugh. "Waste time."

"Why?"

"E-r-r-o-l younger nephew detective."

Chapter 93

I stood aghast at Angela's revelation. "That conflict interest. Him-resign must!"

She shook her head slowly.

"Why not?"

"Long boring story." She leaned forward to pick up her coat from the armchair. "Some other time."

"You-leave me-hanging-in-the-air you-can't!"

"Sorry. You would never understand."

"Try-me. Bring-it-on."

She put on her coat. When she finally looked up at me, I saw what a magnificent vision she was. She easily could've been a supermodel in New York; she was that beautiful, and her beauty alone made everything she wore even more flattering. "N-o."

"Tell-me exact where you-live."

"For-for?"

"Me-thought us-two steady-together. Right?"

She rolled her eyes. "Why men think sex with-me mean steady-together?"

"You telling-me you not l-o-v-e me?"

She paused. "No one owns me. Got-it?"

With that she walked out of my apartment and my life. As she closed the door, I walked to the front window and watched Angela walk down the incline past the ambulance, police cars, and a forensics truck. She was almost an apparition fleeting past the blinking lights flickering on the somberness on everyone's faces.

No, I knew, that my life with her wasn't quite yet over. In fact, I knew it was only beginning.

Chapter 94

I felt so empty inside that I didn't weep for Angela. I just sat in the armchair, vegging out while the sun above my apartment building moved from east to west, until the last glimmer of sun seeped into my front window. I initially felt sad, but the more I thought all of what'd happened since I moved to Lansel, the angrier I became. Why were other people protecting Angela? If she was truly dangerous, why didn't the local deaf community warn me about her long before I'd met her?

I took a shower and reheated some rice leftovers in the microwave.

My lower back felt curiously free of pain; sitting still for so long had most likely helped. I went to my computer and checked my emails. Nothing of note.

Then I checked my pager. Nothing. Scrolling down in my electronic address book, I espied Joan Spinst's name. I had a lot more questions to ask than the day before when I'd seen her last. I typed in a quick message and sent it off. Then there was Ruth Berbas. Yes, I thought to myself, it was only fair that I should go to her place and try making amends. True, she wasn't as sexually exciting as Angela, but everything else about her was great. She'd make a good wife if that was what I truly wanted, but that was something I'd have to worry about later on. I needed to have my questions about Angela answered first, and not from Ruth; she'd have gotten the wrong impression that I was still in love with her.

I sent Ruth a quick message.

It wasn't long before I got a slight vibration from my pager. I looked at it. As it turned out, Joan had some questions that needed answering. I was to meet her at the lobby of Hotel Prater in 30 minutes.

I buttoned up a flannel shirt and threaded a belt through the loops of my jeans. I was surprised to see that twisting slightly from the waist hadn't produced sharp spikes of pain. I scooped up my keys, glanced around my apartment, and locked the door. Little did I know that my life would change overnight later that night.

Chapter 95

In the well-appointed lobby of Hotel Prater, I sat in a leather couch. It was by far the most elegant hotel within a 200-mile radius, and of course, everyone else outside that radius usually stayed the night after eating one of Mickey's legendary meals. But Joan hadn't said whether we were going to eat there, which I doubted, since eating there wasn't cheap.

As I glanced idly at the ceiling and the colonnade, I noticed a hand waving right in the bottom part of my vision. I glanced down to find Mickey beaming at me. He was wearing checkered pants and a pair of orange clogs, which he later told me was a homage to his idol Mario Batali, one of the Italian superchefs in New York. "What's-up you doing here?"

"O-h. Wait friend come here."

“You-two plan eat there?”

“Not say.”

“O-k. Will peek where you sit later.”

“Thanks. How’s every-thing?”

“Good.” He grinned.

“You look happy. What’s-up?”

“Recent start dating someone.”

“He know signs?”

He nodded. “Me never thought him g-a-y, but--” He stopped himself. “Sorry.”

“That o-k. Important you happy.”

He smiled. “Me go work now.”

“You take-care.”

As he headed into the restaurant behind me, I saw the lovely Joan saunter into the lobby. For a fleeting second there, I thought I was seeing a brunette version of Angela with a shorter haircut, but I snapped out of it. It was the simple-cut coat that reminded me of her, dammit. In any case, I stood up and was about to say something when she held up her hand and glided past, beckoning me to follow her.

Chapter 96

Joan gestured that our mouths be kept shut as she pressed the “C” button on the elevator button list. I followed her eyes to the blinking numbers above the closed doors.

“What going on?”

She shook her head no. Her eyes were still fixated on the number’s light hopping from one floor to the next. This gave me an opportunity to look at her closely. Even though she was a bit older than I was, she was still quite attractive. Up until that moment I hadn’t entertained the thought of sleeping with her, but I think the fact that she was a lawyer intimidated me. Well, of course, she was married, but if she wasn’t, I think I’d have felt a bit intimidated. But who was I to talk? Some women had found my profession as counselor a little off-putting, as if I was a carrier of dirty secrets in the same way that some sign interpreters feel.

Off the elevator and down the hallway I followed Joan to Room 713. She inserted a plastic card into the knob’s slot, and then pushed the door open for me. There, I saw the shadow of an older woman sitting on the bed and turning to me as an older man standing by the window

caught her turning to me. Both very well-dressed, they approached me and smiled.

Joan stood between them and me. “Me realize this odd moment but me feel important that two one meet. These two asked meet because your name pop-up often tied Angela.”

Now that my eyes were used to the slight dimness, I turned to the couple. The older woman wore a pair of pearl necklaces on a blouse but she wore them with a better panache than Barbara Bush. And the older man, who was slender, wore his vest tightly with an ascot.

They peered at me.

In that moment I felt strange, as if I was an exhibit at a zoo. “Who you-two?”

They smiled slowly, and I saw a familiarity in the woman’s smile. Where had I seen her before? But no, I was quite sure that I hadn’t seen the woman before.

Joan waved discreetly for my attention. “Me happy introduce these-two.” She pointed to the woman. “Here M-o-l-l-y M-a-r-s-t-o-n-e, name sign Molly, and here F-r-e-d M-a-r-s-t-o-n-e, name sign Fred. This here A-l-a-n W-o-r-x.”

As I shook their hands, it dawned on me: They had to be Angela’s parents from Florida!

Chapter 97

“Nice meet you-two,” I tried to say with a hint of confidence, but I think it was clear that I totally didn’t expect to meet the Marstones. Angela had barely mentioned them.

Mr. Marstone patted me on the shoulder. “Not worry. You fine. Angela never keep-in-contact us-two.”

I turned to Ms. Marstone. “Why you come here?”

“Funeral. You know Kate-Biggles?”

I nodded.

“Her mother good best-friend growing up. Felt must come.”

I nodded if only because I had nothing else to add to the conversation. I turned to Joan. “Why secret arrive?”

Mr. Marstone beckoned me closer. “Let explain daughter. Herself grew-up strong stubborn. Then married that gay boy. Us-two saw him first time, moved around almost like woman, us-two knew g-a-y finish. Us-two couldn’t bear embarrass, so us-two cut money off.”

I inhaled. “When last time you-two saw Angela?”

“Twenty years ago.”

I wanted to say, “Wow,” but I checked my face. “What real reason you-two come?”

Mrs. Marstone gave a brittle scoff. “Little bird squeal Angela pregnant.”

I paused. “S-o?”

“Us-two plan stay here fight c-u-s-t-o-d-y that baby court.”

I nodded. *Very, very* slowly.

“Us-two understanding you father that baby, right?”

“Angela-me not yet discuss details.”

Mr. Marstone frowned gravely. “Honest, you yourself believe Angela become good mother?”

What was I supposed to say? There was no question in my heart that I truly loved her. I turned to Joan. “Can us-two talk private?”

She nodded to the bathroom. I followed her and closed the door behind us.

“What hell that!?”

“These-two my clients, you my client too. Me thought c-a-s-e your stronger if let-go Angela.”

“You not C-u-p-i-d, you lawyer finish. You fired.”

Chapter 98

I opened the bathroom door and walked to the main room of the suite where the Marstones were sitting. “Me sorry can’t involve what you-you want. Good evening.”

As I turned for the door, Joan stood in the way. “Who better parent, Angela you?”

“Don’t-care!”

“You better c-a-r-e. Your c-h-i-l-d. You want c-u-s-t-o-d-y? These-two can help.”

I glanced back at the Marstones, and to Joan. “Need time alone think.” With that I stormed out of the hotel suite and resisted all urges to pound the walls of my elevator going down. I’m normally not the type of guy to want to pound walls, but somehow I felt betrayed. I thought Joan was truly above this sort of politicking, but to mix two of her clients together . . . ? That was something I had to think about a bit more clearly.

As I walked out of the lobby elevators, I noticed Mickey looking slightly flushed and walking back into the restaurant while Dale was

leaving the restaurant. No. That couldn't be. They couldn't be an item. After all, Dale was as straight—and married—as they come.

I raised my hand for his attention. He took one look at me, and he broke into a hurry through the lobby to the doors outside. I followed.

Chapter 99

I saw Dale's SUV wheel quickly out of the parking lot. Without thinking about what I was really doing, I hopped into my car and sped after him. He held steady, winding up the valley hills past Lansel Country Club and over the mountain. If Lansel could be said to have a suburb, it was down the mountain in a huge development lot filled with rows of prefabricated houses that lit up almost like L.A. at night, but it was of course not as sprawling. Many employees of the Lansel School of the Deaf bought these houses because they were cheap, and those who didn't work at the school often bought houses there too.

As I watched Dale's SUV coast down the mountain, I expected him to make a left onto his part of the huge suburban tract, but no, he didn't. He continued racing past.

What? He wasn't going home at all!

I whipped out my pager and in between the occasional stops at the intersections, I thumb-typed a quick message to Dale: "Dale, why are you avoiding me? Something the matter? Am following your car right now. Al."

But I didn't click on the send button just yet. I wanted to see exactly where he was headed, and so into the night I went.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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