

*Just a sample...*

## **HEARTLESS IN NAPERVILLE: LOVE NEVER DIES**

### **Chapter 1**

The last chapter of the first half of my life was now closed. It happens. Friends, lovers, and other once-promising ventures ended in strife, failure, boredom, and sometimes death. For the past hour, I tried to reconnect with my old friend, a coverless beat-up classic mystery novel. Like a child's tattered teddy bear, it served as an emotional support device helping me survive my journey across America. I read a few pages, put it down, gazed out the window of the *California Zephyr*, let my mind wander, and resumed reading. The mystery story was familiar and I would anticipate the next event to unfold, but I was often incorrect.

The story of my adult life has also been based on assumptions and anticipation. I've trusted my gut and thought I understood what was happening. I didn't. I was only an actor in a play, and unlike some characters, I had no script. I lived my life and played my part with other people, all the while searching for a true path, confidently anticipating an unknown future, often exploring dangerous places, encountering wild animals and people, and somehow remaining unharmed. Maybe I was simply fortunate. But when I returned to the 'civilized world', my innate sense of peril weakened. I was unaware of the duplicitous, desperate, and dangerous humans who hovered near me. I did not anticipate the barrage of subtle, weird, and perilous situations I faced each day. Like most people, I was naïve.

I traveled here from Denver because not long ago, my brother Otto Reinhart informed me our father Frederick was on his deathbed, and my brother asked, almost begged, me to come home. I guessed Otto was ill and assumed my father was nearing death, but I was dead set against returning to Naperville. Nevertheless, a stubborn person, like me, will relent and make an exception when his family has troubles and needs help. And beyond all such justifications, some nagging memories, romanticized and filtered by the passage of time, enticed me, against my better judgment, to come home one last time.

As the train slithered through Illinois farm country, I was perched like a bald eagle, comfortable in my upper deck nest. I took a moment to comprehend my panoramic view of the heartland of America. Squinting, with my nose almost pressed against the cool, green-tinted window glass, I was confused by thousands of bright orange dots that flashed and disappeared into a smoky horizon. Numbed by the pulsing heartbeat of the train, I struggled

to connect the dots until I understood what lay before me. Ripening pumpkins of all sizes and shapes covered with dew glistened in the late-morning sun. Endless rows of embryonic monsters awaited the harvest, anticipating surgical transformations into fearsome jack-o'-lantern creatures of the night. I peered out, maintaining a loose grip on the tattered mystery novel, and realized Halloween, the anti-holiday, with all of its wonder and weirdness, was about to haunt me again.

Now thirty-three years into my life, this annual event, ever so important in my youth, came and went without me exclaiming a single emotive 'boo' or hopeful cry of 'trick or treat'. Evaporating over the decades, my childhood died, and I buried the painful memories of this spooky holiday. But as I drifted back in time, the little orange dots released painful memories of my mother's tragic death, her ugly decay, and the unhappiness of my youth. Such are the risks of coming home.

Outside, familiar images appeared and drifted away. A few pleasant warm memories floated into my head, but the skeptic in me recognized nostalgia only buffed down the rough spots of history. Soon the reality of the nation's breadbasket, bucolic, boring, and banal, returned. I was coming home to Naperville, a decent-sized town by cornfield standards, but corny just the same. More often now, the soulful *Zephyr* horns announced our approach followed by warning bells growing louder and fading as we rushed through empty rural highway crossings. I checked the time; only thirty minutes remained for me to shoehorn my thinking into the insipid world of my provincial past about to be thrust upon me.

## Chapter 2

"The doctor does not approve, Mr. Reinhart, but since it is important...go ahead. But, please, try to make it short."

Otto Reinhart gave the woman a half-smile as he glanced around the empty reception area. Medical people thought Otto, they think they run the world. He connected with his wife's phone. "Hey, Kath. I'm here in the doctor's office..." he cupped his hand around the phone to keep his voice from causing a disturbance, "going slower than I thought. Has Alex arrived?"

"No. I guess his train is behind schedule," she said. "So you're both running late."

"Well, apologize for me, Babe. Pop open a bottle of wine and make my brother comfortable. He'll be worn out after his cross-country excursion."

"I can do that...how long?"

Otto glanced up at the woman behind the desk. Over her half-glasses, she studied him, presenting an unmistakable vision of displeased entitled authority. He got the message. "No idea. Listen. Got to go now. Bye."

His wife's last words were cut off by his obedience. He silenced the phone and returned it to the inside breast pocket of his suit coat. The woman at the desk nodded slightly and went back to her keyboarding. Otto resumed his waiting, and he thought about his own clients. Typically, in his business, they were distraught because someone close to them had died. In the natural order of things, death was the end of everything. But his livelihood and life depended on people dying on a continuing and regular basis. He carried a tinge of guilt knowing good news for him was bad news for others.

As an innkeeper for the dead, his funeral home business offered a certain future for those who now had nothing but a past. He spent his days smoothing and straightening the unknown path leading to the graveyard. Bereaved relatives and friends found comfort in his words. They sobbed, cried out, and sometimes became almost inconsolable, and all through it, Otto Reinhart maintained his patience and understanding.

They might be meeting him for the first time, days, sometimes only hours, after the death of their loved ones, but Otto was a master salesman. He would guide them from one painful decision to another, counseling them, and always convincing them that he was not selling anything but wanted only to help them in their time of need. He believed this as truth. Most of the customers of the Reinhart Funeral Home and Crematory, his Naperville neighbors, were traditional people who spanned generations and preferred to do business with the man with his name on the door. The family mortuary was a dignified yet homey, comfortable environment for his clients to make difficult and uncomfortable decisions. And in contrast to the looky-loos who explored the showrooms of nearby automobile dealerships, often only seeking entertainment, his customers were never stokers. They faced a painful situation that dictated their need to buy. As he often reminded his staff of front-office morticians, no one goes shopping for caskets to amuse themselves on a Sunday afternoon.

Today was different; the roles were reversed. Bad news for him was good news for others; the medical business depended on human frailty for its existence, and Otto's doctor's diagnosis pinpointed his weakness. Though never a religious man, he suspected today's meeting with his heart specialist would be a 'come to Jesus moment'. The doctor's office was at the top of the medical mountain, and his gut told him that his appointment with Dr. Ansel Rickenbacker was outside the usual schedule of his monthly medical visits. And that same detection device knew the venue had changed from the typical small exam room to the great man's office, on the upper floor of one of the taller office buildings in town. This was a place where Rickenbacker did business, not the three-story rabbit-warren building where he prescribed, probed, and poked. The location change put Otto on edge and suggested something unusual was in the air.

He felt like a wayward priest shopping for an expensive wedding ring. Inexperienced and nervous, he fidgeted in the overstuffed leather chair, ran his hand through his thinning black hair, and wondered if anyone would see him perspiring. He dabbed his forehead with his handkerchief and waited, breathing with some discomfort. Soon he would be facing a difficult decision, one which could only be resolved by the medical industry. Otto Reinhart always encouraged his funeral home customers to accept death as the natural consequence of living. And his doctor would use selling techniques similar to his own. But Rickenbacker was in the death-denial business, or at least the death-postponement business. Today he was selling the possibility of life to a young thirty-year-old man facing his mortality; unknown to Otto Reinhart, he was about to become a potential customer, purchaser, and consumer of one of the most expensive items the medical community offered, a vital organ.

Aside from the rush of air from the ventilation system and the delicate clicking sounds emitted by the receptionist's keyboard, the room was dead quiet. The trim, middle-aged woman with tight black hair, wearing little make-up and dangling half-glasses from her neck ignored Otto's anxiousness. He studied her for over five minutes waiting for something to happen. It did when she answered the buzz of her phone, listened for a moment, repositioned the handset, and then beckoned Otto to enter the private office behind her. Hunched over he walked the last mile and entered the inner sanctum. The doctor, a tall, imposing man dressed in a suit and tie, faced an expansive window that offered him a heavenly view of the fall-colored patchwork quilt of Naperville suburbia below. He turned to face Otto and greeted him with a weak smile and the patient reached out to shake hands.

"Beautiful day," said the doctor, "fantastic time of year. It's best to enjoy these days before winter arrives.

Otto nodded. "Right. Enjoy it while you can. A few more weeks, fall will be over, and winter will be back again."

Doctor Rickenbacker, a lion in his world of beating hearts, was not famous for his small talk, nor his scintillating personality. 'Time is money' might describe the business side of his professional mindset. Therefore as they both took their seats, his smile dissolved and he opened a discussion of Otto's health and future.

"How are you, Otto?"

"Well, my blood pressure might be a bit dicey today. Today is an exciting day for me," said Otto. "My older brother Alex is arriving from Denver. Haven't seen him in ten years."

"Well, that is exciting," said the doctor. "Don't worry. I won't keep you long. But we do have to cover some important items"

Otto breathed deeply. "Fire away," he said gamely.

“I’m glad we can meet today. You know we and you are doing everything possible to improve and maintain your life. You have followed our recommendations, taken your meds, and on the whole, maintained your diet. A little more cautious exercise would help, but we all fall off that sled.” He smiled but didn’t let it stick, nor did he appear to expect a verbal response from his patient. Instead, he offered up a solemn declaration. “But...you need to plan for the future, Otto.”

Otto did not want to hear those words and that tone of voice. His own end-of-the-road hospitality business was frequented by guests with empty futures, but Rickenbacker managed a hope-business, a help-business, or worst-case, a never-say-die business. The patient summoned some reserved courage and replied “Sounds ominous.”

The doctor placed his elbows on the heavy mahogany desk and steepled his hands. “Quite the contrary. But we are now in a different phase of your care. A phase that may require you to make some difficult decisions.”

Otto listened to what sounded like a replay of one of his funeral client discussions, except he was the star attraction of this show, not the deceased wearing a wooden overcoat headed for Cement City. He waited for the punchline.

“We’ve been over this, but let’s review. You have a congenital heart condition. Eisenmenger Syndrome aggravated by your years of recreational cocaine use. We have monitored, mediated, and medicated your situation for about twenty-seven months. Your decision to abandon your addiction and go cold-turkey with the substance abuse no doubt saved your life, but the damage is done. Increased heart rate, elevated blood pressure, and vasoconstriction put additional strain on the heart and lungs, which could lead to complications. Blood clots, arrhythmias, and even heart failure. That cannot be undone.” He paused, but Otto said nothing. “Your heart is not operating like a normal heart.” The guru paused again and then spoke the magical words. “It has deteriorated to the point that there is only one viable option...a heart transplant.”

Otto Reinhart choked up. He tried to talk, but the words wouldn’t come. Those two words, ‘heart transplant’, were taken as a sucker punch driven hard into his belly. His breathing quickened now and a surge of adrenaline electrified his body.

Sensing Otto’s reaction, the doctor backtracked. “At the moment, it’s just a possibility. You would have to decide if that procedure is for you. To some degree, others will have a say-so also, but nothing will happen until you believe it is right for you. There are many factors involved including health insurance coverage and your overall financial situation.”

Otto fell back into the chair; his thoughts muddled, and he stared out the window. His eyes glazed over. “What’s the survival rate? Success rate. Whatever you call it?”

Rickenbacker stuck a finger in the back of his starched collar and straightened in his chair. He appeared to think before answering and each tick of the schoolhouse wall clock above his desk increased the tension in the air. “If you have it done here in the United States, which I recommend, the outlook is quite acceptable. First-year survival rates are over ninety percent, and five-year rates are above seventy. Some patients' lives are extended by fifteen or twenty years.”

Dejected, Otto took another deep breath. “So it might buy me twenty years. What about Plan B?” He offered a weak smile. “What if I don’t go for the transplant?”

Rickenbacker cocked his head. “Any prognosis would be an educated guess.”

“And...” Otto waited for an answer. Not getting one, he looked away from the doctor and stared at the annoying wall clock. Its two flat black hands shaped like the pickets of an iron fence seemed frozen in time while the eager red dagger paused and then ticked ahead relentlessly. The doctor was on the spot and when Otto’s sad eyes, pleading for a response, slid down from the clockface onto Rickenbacker’s visage, there was nowhere to hide. “Well, it would be all guesswork...you know that your condition deteriorated over the last couple of years. The most likely outlook is more of the same...your heart health will not improve on its own. My best guess...three to six.”

“Years?”

“No...Months...” His answer slowly drifted over his desk and died.

Otto swallowed hard and struggled to release the words. “So you are recommending a transplant? There’s no other choice?”

The doctor spoke in a quiet voice. “Yes. That is my opinion. But it is your decision. Think it over, Otto. But the earlier you decide, the earlier you get on the national transplant waitlist.”

“And the faster I can have the operation?”

“Not quite. Thousands of patients are waiting. Each one with different circumstances. You can apply here, and you can also apply elsewhere, but that doesn’t always result in a faster timetable. A donor heart may be available tomorrow or may take months...or even years.” He glanced at the paperwork on the desk. “You’re thirty years old. That’s helpful. You would be expected to recover well from transplant surgery. All things considered, you are, other than your heart condition, healthy. You are not using recreational drugs, a non-smoker, and a light

drinker. Plus, you have proven to be a responsible patient. And therefore, the transplant, in my opinion, is your best choice.”

Otto nodded. “Heart transplant. OK. I understand.” He paused. “It’s not a choice. I must have it. Right? I put my name in the hat. And if I can find a heart, odds are in my favor to survive the operation.”

The doctor nodded. “You will also have to deal with the uncertainty and waiting. That is an unfortunate aspect of the official protocol. You could get a call anytime. So you would always have to be prepared.”

Otto didn’t like what he heard. For the first time, he focused on the doctor’s smooth bronze tan, elegant grey-streaked hair, and his fingernails, clean, polished, and trimmed by a professional. Anger rose inside of him, but he kept his tone conversational. “I’d be kind of like a backup quarterback. Suited up. Always ready. Always in the game, mentally and physically. Just hoping for the number one to go down...so I can take over...if I live long enough.”

“That’s one way of looking at it. That’s it on your end. It’s all about timing and availability. The right donor heart must be available, and you must be ready.”

“You mean not every donor heart will work?” asked Alex revealing his concern as he began to sense the difficulty factors were increasing in number.

“No. Blood type, tissue type, location, and the height and weight of the donor must be consistent with your needs. Just like in football, everything must be in sync to increase the odds of success. You have to be a patient bench warmer with a correct attitude.” He smiled as he explained the rules. “And...you will always need to be within four hours of the hospital while you’re on the heart transplant waiting list; otherwise, you go on the inactive list. But in this case, thousands of other backup quarterbacks are waiting to get into the game.” He smiled. “It’s best to stay on the active list.”

Dr. Rickenbacker checked his watch, pushed back his chair, and stood, signaling the end of the session. Otto took the hint and lifted himself off the chair. The effort drained him.

“Think about it, Otto,” said the doctor as he came around the side of the desk and they shook hands. “It’s quite a decision, but one better made sooner than later.”

Otto drifted out of the doctor’s office in a fog. Robotically, he spoke with the receptionist. She handed him an oversized envelope and told him the information would give him an understanding of the procedure and the issues involved. He made the next appointment and exited the building. His mind drifted as he walked almost in a trance. Once in his car, he stared out the windshield. His thoughts locked into a nothingness pattern. Not worried

or frightened, he floated in a callous circular pool of What If? and Why Me? After a few minutes, he shook his head and muttered, “fuck it.” Then he started his car and drove off uncertain of his next destination.

As he drove, thoughts of his brother, Alex, competed with his thoughts about a heart transplant. Otto could use his family to guide him in his decision. But he wouldn’t tell his wife Kathy, no point in worrying her. Still, a second opinion from someone close would be welcome. Alex would be one. He had been around the block; he was older, responsible, experienced, and an intelligent risk-taker. Otto’s father, Frederick, had health issues of his own, so Otto would not burden him now. Once he decided to move ahead with the transplant, he would tell him. Frederick was not only his father but also the sole owner of the family funeral business. But business was business for the old man, and no matter who was dying, Otto assumed his father would say, “Life goes on until it doesn’t.” His father’s biggest concern would probably be the availability of another person to replace his son. In the old man’s mind, people come and go, but the family business, built over half a century, must endure.

The car was moving. Otto drove on autopilot, thinking, worrying, and talking to himself. “Three to six...” He mumbled failing to shake off the negatives and replace them with counter-measures, alternatives, and hope. Angry, disgusted, and disappointed, he concluded that, in the end, the world was programmed to always deal him a bad hand. He had to take action. Beyond his family, the only other person Otto could trust to advise him would be his personal doctor, one of his few friends and sometimes business associate, Dr. Stephan Jarek was a man devoid of emotion, forthright, and not afraid to provide his version of a straight pragmatic answer. It was a plan. He would talk to Jarek first.

He drove aimlessly, in no hurry to get home. He didn’t want his long-awaited meeting with his older brother to be a depressing experience; his current sour-puss attitude had to be dissolved. He drove to a forest preserve area, parked his car, opened all the windows, and lit up a joint. First, he coughed, but not long after, he wore a smile on his face and relaxed.

## Chapter 3

The train slowed and I awakened. I closed my book, stuffed it into my bag, and looked about. The handful of passengers along for the ride also appeared as if they had been hypnotized by the rhythmic swaying, clicking sounds, and backward sliding landscape. But everyone shook off his reverie like a sleepy dog in response to the conductor’s announcement: “Naperville is next...Naperville. Last stop before Chicago.”



This was my last stop, the nomadic prodigal son returning only to pass on my regrets, collect my inheritance, and kiss the bride. I'll give everyone a pat on the back, a hearty 'goodbye', and a sincere 'good luck'. But tomorrow, whenever it arrives, I will be gone again, dying to start a new adventure and a new life.

As the train rolled to a smooth stop, a few passengers assembled near the door, jostling like anxious cows heading for the slaughterhouse. I lagged behind carrying a single bag hung over my shoulder, stepped off the train, wandered along the walk, and gathered my senses. Next to me, the train silently slipped away and sped toward Chicago leaving behind the lingering odor of diesel fumes and a sense of emptiness. I was a stranger in my hometown. I stood on the platform and looked about; nothing had changed. It was quiet, peaceful, and boring. After ten years of abandonment, I was back in Naperville.

The historic train station, red brick with limestone accents, anchored the traditional grassy park across the street, a diagonal sidewalk bisected the square, and a pole with a waving American flag punctuated the center. The park was empty of people, but full of mature trees majestically displaying the rusty foliage of fall. After listening to a thousand miles of train track click-clack, the absence of noise was soothing. Some crows fluttered in the tree tops above mildly complaining about something, but I drifted into the quiet, peaceful, long-buried world of my youth. I awaited my ride at the curb stretching my legs and decompressing my thoughts.

A few minutes later, a vintage buff-colored Lincoln town car rounded the corner headed for me, and the driver proclaimed his presence with persistent toots of his horn. The limo stopped. I recognized the man behind the wheel. He popped open the door, flipped his navy blue limo-driver hat onto the seat, ran around the car, rushed up, and hugged me.

"Alex Reinhart...damn. It's really you." He backed off, his arms outstretched and his head nodding, his face in amazement like I was some kind of rock star.

I smiled. I was surprised and pleased by the arrival of my old friend Terry Walker. Stocky and broad-shouldered, wearing a ruddy face with a winning smile festooned with a walrus-like mustache, his forehead reaching to the sky, he was the same guy who drove me to O'Hare ten years ago to send me on my way into the exciting unknown world away from Naperville. "Driving the same shitbox, Terry. I can't believe it." My greeting was natural and uncensored, the words popped out of me without thought.

"You're gonna hurt her feelings, you brute. You loved her when we double-dated at the drive-in movie and folded down those backseats. Those were the days. Right? Anyway. This baby's paid for and runs like a top. Jump in, and we'll roll. Jeez, I'm glad to see you...you old bastard."

I was glad to see him also. I needed a friendly face from the past to welcome me back to Naperville. He tossed the bag into the trunk while I climbed into the passenger side. The car didn't move; we took one look at each other and chuckled. Terry's oversized mitt gripped my left leg just above the knee. "You ready? Everyone's pissing their pants with excitement that you're back."

"What about you? Should I check your pants?"

"That's just for the ladies, Alex." He laughed with gusto, the same old Terry Walker. Wheeling the car out of the lot like he could do it with his eyes closed, he glanced at me and then looked ahead talking into the windshield. "When Otto called me and told me you were coming. I told him straight off: 'Otto, I'll pick him up at the station. Don't you worry.'"

"I appreciate it, Terry."

My buddy looked puzzled. "Are you kidding? Everything I have I owe all to you. We would have never got our mortgage without you. Hell, we're ten years into the thing now. Another fifteen and we'll have it paid off. It's the wet dream of every suburban homeowner."

"Didn't cost me a nickel to co-sign," I said. "I'm glad it all worked out."

Terry reached for the CD player. "Want some music? Got some super new ska." He didn't wait for an answer. Loud sounds of brass, guitars, and beating drums leaped out and filled the interior. He checked my reaction.

I raised my eyebrows and gave him a look. "I was just settling into the peace of country life," I said in a loud voice.

"Maybe later," he said as he killed the music. "We should just talk now, anyway. We gotta catch up."

I settled down feeling comfortable now. His chauffeur's license was attached to the back of the sun visor; the black and white mug shot made him appear fifty years old. I tapped on the visor with my index finger. "This your gig now?" I asked in a friendly way.

"You mean first-class professional limo driver?" He rolled his eyes and smirked. "Between assignments. Truth is I'm a private dick now...an investigator."

"Cool." I smiled.

"This limo job is a cover. I spent three years with the Sheriff's Department. I was a good cop, but the wife couldn't deal with it. Weird hours, bad diet, strange friends...and stranger enemies. So now I drive this rig for pin money for the wife and kids."

“Sill married to the same woman?”

“Fourteen big ones last June.”

“Sounds exciting. Is it dangerous?”

Terry smiled. “P.I. work or Margie?”

“I know women can be dangerous. What about your cases?”

“In Naperville?... You gotta be kidding.” He shook his head. “Nah. Lots of peeping, library work, and internet searching. But I’m good at it. And it’s a decent gig if you get past the people, the traffic...and the cost of gas.” He laughed. “As I said, it’s pin money...whatever that means.”

We drove south through the historic district, past the college and the cemetery with me rubber-necking like a tourist, focusing on one place or another. “Looks about the same,” I mumbled. “More people.”

“How’s that?”

“I said it seems like there’s more people.”

“You got that right. They’re moving here from everywhere. The schools, the restaurants, the shopping, hiking. Whatever. Naperville’s got it. We’ve been rated the best U.S. city to live in.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope. That’s a fact.”

I was mumbling to myself now feeling I was lost in America without a compass. “OK, I guess I missed that.”

“You’re a busy beaver, Alex. No time for hometown pride. But you’re a local hero. You spend your time in exotic places showing all of us what’s outside our little world.” He chuckled. “I’ve been following your travels. Great stories and photos. Last year, one of them hit the Sunday insert. Egypt...love that mummy shit.”

“I didn’t realize anyone cared. I’ve been gone a long time.”

“Cared? You got to be kiddin’. You’re the talk of the town. But, you look thinner in person. They say television makes you look heavier. You haven’t gained a pound since you left. Have you?”

“I’m about the same. More facial hair and shorter head hair. A couple of scars.”

“And the limp.”

"How's that?" I asked.

"You've got a slight limp. Left leg. I mean I saw it...didn't I. " He smiled.

Surprised by his deductive skill, I gave him credit. "You are an observant S.O.B."

"I spotted it watching one of your TV shows. I am a detective, Alex."

"I'm impressed. I got it when I fell off a trail in *Machu Picchu*. Busted up my left knee in the middle of nowhere. But don't tell anyone. It might affect the adoration of my fans."

"You know I can keep a secret." He rubbed his cheek, as he stopped at a red light and looked at me. "Sure...I could tell stories." He laughed. "But I won't."

I viewed the world through the windshield. Left to right, I analyzed my hometown. I didn't get it. For me, it was a larger version of Mayfield or Mayberry or wherever the Beaver lived. Still sleepy. Still filled with little boxes. Still conventional. "All-American," again I mumbled to myself.

"How's that?"

This town. It's the quintessential All-American town."

"And your point is...?"

The light turned green. We drove on. Terry glanced at me. "Otto says your father is having a rough time healthwise..." He waited.

"Cancer. Some kind of cancer. I haven't been told much of the story. I have to talk to him. That's one of the reasons I'm here." I nodded. "Time to make peace with the old man, see Otto and Kathy, and get out of Dodge."

"Hey, Bud, no need to rush. You and I have a lot of blanks to fill in."

"Sure," I looked around, "are we getting close?"

Terry nodded. "Yep. A few minutes. That's right. I forgot. You haven't seen your brother's new digs. You didn't make it to the wedding. Or did you.?"

"No. Never did. Everyone still happily married?"

He gave me a quick look. "Far as I know." He snorted. "You're still interested...I can tell. I see your old squeeze every so often." He smacked his lips and nodded. "She stays in shape. Great body. Still turning heads."

Without sarcasm, I responded. "I'll bet."

"Whatever happened to you two? From an outsider's view, it was a thing."

I thought about getting into it with Terry but tossed out the usual answer. "Too young. Way too young to get serious."

Terry chuckled. "I get ya. Have to pick the fruit when it's ripe."

"Something like that." I chuckled. "You still have a way with words, Terry."

"Well. At least you kept it in the family. Your brother is a lucky guy. But..."

I gave him a look. I doubt he saw it, but limo drivers and ex-cops have eyes in the back of their heads.

"Nothing. I'm just saying. Kathy's an attractive gal," he said as if he was about to let me in on something.

Not wanting to encourage his speculation, I didn't respond. I sensed where he was going, but I didn't want to talk about Kathy's history. People talk without thinking. Someplace other than Naperville, no one would care, but at its roots, the Big "N" remained a small town with small-town thinking.

We exited the highway and crossed the river passing through a wooden-covered bridge, the tires thumped and echoed in the confined space and then all was quiet as we exited into a small forest full of mature oak trees. Reaching a clearing, houses popped into view. "New subdivision?"

"For you...maybe. This turf is hot money, Alex. Your brother must be making a killing by burning and burying those bodies. Not my idea of fun. You gave it a pass, right?"

My mind was adjusting to the careless flow of our conversation. "So I did," I responded. "I never liked funeral homes. But someone has to do it. Right?"

"I guess so. The only mummies I like are the ones in those old black-and-white movies. And your TV shows. Otherwise. Dead bodies are not for me."

We drove through a neighborhood full of expensive, but boring, clone houses and headed toward a more exclusive area surrounded by iron perimeter fencing. Terry made a quick right turn onto a narrow road, passing through an entrance gate framed by stone-capped, red-brick piers. "This is it...*Xanadu*."

Ahead, filling our view, at the end of a long narrow road bedded in red granite pavers and lined with regimented trees, stood my brother's house, an imposing white stucco Queen Anne complete with authentic leaded windows, fish scale shingled turrets, and deep wrap-around porches. "Looks like Otto's doing well. You're kidding about the name, right?"

"Oh...that's just my name for all these crazy giant houses. Anyway, you're looking at the original mansion. Renovated top to bottom. Otto and Kathy also put on a large addition in the back facing the river. Sweet crib, eh? Otto's a lucky man...a thriving funeral home business, a historic McMansion, and a beautiful wife. What else could anyone ask for?"

"Got me," I mumbled. "My kid-brother has it all. I'm looking forward to seeing him again."

"And Kathy?" Terry asked with a wry smile under this stash.

He had a point. My brother Otto has everything I dreamed about when I was younger: position, esteem, and money. But that was yesterday. Today, I have no use for mansions, a steady job, or Naperville. But Kathy was a different story; Terry correctly sensed that my feelings for her continued. Like a weak-kneed kid on his first date, something inside me twinged as we neared her house.