

Chapter 5

Her heart was beating like the telltale heart (Poe). She put a hand to her chest, to feel it, to still it, contain it, to confirm it beat as strongly as she felt it, (agreeing that her heart felt like a frightened bird, beating its wings to escape) to mollify concerns her heart was beating too hard, too fast, too much, to alleviate worries that heart failure was eminent. Her pulse boomed through her carotid arteries in her neck, (she clearly saw the diagram) humped through her temples, crashed into her brain, spun through her aorta and pulmonary artery, thumping in her fingertips. She held, a dam against a rage, she held, courageous against violent threats, she held against guilt, worry and anxiety, she *held*.

Don't touch yourself, she shouted in her mind with a loud gasp. Michael's blood spray stained everything. The Sig still smoked, or did she imagine that? She didn't imagine the smell, stronger than she recalled, dredging up life encrusted memories that she didn't plan to unearth.

She *held*. She held against puking, against crying, against passing out, she held, standing up, swaying like a tumbling top ending its spin, she stood and swayed, fixing directions to find – to find – the *bathroom*. Already walking with an uneven gait, she adjusted her course around furniture, shifting her story as she recognized, *this is taking too long*, awaiting the knock on the door. She held, reaching the bathroom, staggering into it, closing the door. She held, washing her hands, drying them off, glancing at her reflection in the mirror, fearful for admissions of guilt, but she was too drunk, too stoned, too –

Hold on, hold on, she cried, tossing the towel down, catching herself in a half spin, seizing the counter's edge as balance washed out and she fell forward, she *held* against hitting her head on the edge – but it was all out of control and not the elegant, clever moment envisioned, and she fell onto the toilet seat, bouncing off it onto the floor, whacking a temple against its cold black

porcelain. But this was good, this would work. *Holding*, she stayed on the floor, permitting her consciousness to ooze out as she did....

She awoke from not being asleep, not remembering, but re-experiencing the death, and studied her hand, curled like an eagle's talon. Rain drops tattooed the windows. They seemed large and numerous and seemed to come with vigorous energy, crashing off the walkways outside as though they strove to drill through the rock.

Light rock played. Of course it was *Adele*, ubiquitous on FM. Closing her eyes, she lipped synced the song and pretended she was on stage.

Poor Michael.

Never saw it coming but couldn't happen to a nicer guy. Not true. He was neither nice nor evil, a tanned gray man with graying hair, existing in the gray ether of modern moralities, another '*Fifty Shades of Gray*', minus the erotic overtures. Sex with him was 'fine', reduced from being better by his repetitious manner and, yes, frankly, selfishness oddly mixed with an obsequious hunger to please her, as though he knew his shortcomings and insecurities, and thought that continuous reassurances he was pleasuring her well would quell his fears.

Well. It was done. He was done. The song was done.

Stirring from her seat at the bay window and her attendant glass of white wine on the dark end table, she moved through the living area past the warm fireplace, now becoming too hot, even if it was pretty, to the small, heavy mirror left of the arched passage to the hall that led to the foyer. Turning her face, she regarded her left and right profiles, posting a thumb behind her earlobes to better display her earrings. Delicately worked silver with small natural pearls, she'd purchased them at Silverado in Bend, a celebration of her new life.

Centering her reflection, she regarded it for flaws. Other than aging, she looked well. Even given her aging, she looked well. Hell, she looked *great*, not great in the sense that she was once young and twenty and beautiful, with everything in the right proportions and oriented in the correct directions, flawless, *without a sag or wrinkle* anywhere. Oh, to be there again.

Her pulse and heart rate had recovered their normalcy. She smiled. She had not died. She had *held*. Nodding, she smiled encouragement at herself, feeding the comfort into her brown eyes. “Let go of the things that can no longer be fixed. They do not matter.” It was that Studs, her meeting with him had done it, had triggered this attack, it was an attack, she agreed, a panic or anxiety attack. But, she’d held. She’d fooled him. Thinking about the information she’d told him about Michael, she wondered what would happen next and how this should be managed, consulting her mental list of planned actions and follow ups. All was committed to her memory. She used her phone carefully, and her computer more carefully, and avoided paper altogether. She learned that before Michael but being with him consolidated and validated her practices. Although of a mildly criminal nature, he was far too loose with incriminating evidence, counting himself as, “Too small to matter,” delivered with a charming, white smile, the only thing about him that didn’t seem to be gray.

Sam Smith’s hit, ‘*Stay with Me*’, began. Turning up the music and picking up her wineglass, she sipped and danced around her living room, moving toward the mirror so as to see her face as she danced, smiling at her reflection, toasting herself, and then toasting Michael.

It had been such a short marriage. Short and tragic.

But she’d held.

Chapter 6

Refugees from the rain crowded Starbucks with their dripping odors and sniffles. Savanna grumbled about the packed situation, making sarcastic observations about, “How cozy this all is, how cozy,” before suggesting an early dinner may be better. “Aren’t you hungry yet? Didn’t that smell of grilled onions make you hungry?”

“No.” She knew Studs had eaten an excellent salad for lunch. Of course, Savanna didn’t approve of *salads*. Salads aren’t a meal. Studs squeezed through to a table as others left it, slipping in with drink and computer. *So crowded.*

“Cozy, right, Studs?” Savanna snickered. “Very cozy.”

He sighed. “It’s fine.”

Savanna scoffed through her nose. “You know what’s good on a day like this, Studs, a pouring down rain like this?”

“A quiet work environment,” he answered. Catching side glances, he reminded himself he was alone, ergo, he should not be speaking aloud, as that would mean he was talking to himself, which, for some reason, instilled worry, fear, even anxiety, in others. Odd, when contemplated. Some people talk to themselves all the time. Studs had seen recent study results that talking to yourself was actually healthy, helpful and productive. Ah, but people...people were unreasonable and would never understand. Old superstitions still haunted the modern world, even America.

Savanna snickered. “Talking out loud can also be a sign of schizophrenia.”

Studs dismissed that. “Yes, along with rehearsing conversations, but that’s one symptom among multiple signs.”

"Such as...?"

“I’m not going into that.”

“You’re doing it again, you know.”

Yes, he realized, he was. Thanks for the reminder. He needed to be more aware.

“Now back to our conversation in progress,” Savanna said. “No, on a day like this, it’s nice to sit in a pub and enjoy a beer and listen to music, you know, somewhere warm and dry and comfortable? Know what I’m saying, Studs?”

“I know. Later.” Studs tasted his coffee, a double tall non-fat mocha, which seemed exceedingly weak after the Beanery’s quad Mexican. Well, it would do. Barely. Shunning others’ presence and intrusions, he powered up and dipped into Jerry Loo’s email account. She was one of those interesting users who kept everything in their In and Sent folders. She never emptied her Trash. Finding her correspondence with Marnie wasn’t hard.

Marnie’s email address was MarnnGerald@gmail.com. Marn n Gerald. Marnie and Gerald. A couple’s account. Gmail was somewhat recent, launched to the general public in 2007, although still as beta then. Marnie had been married to Gerald for ten years, per her information, and died five years ago. She’d been a single mother for years before her marriage and he had been single, losing his wife to cancer, so both likely also had other, private accounts.

“What are you looking for?” Savanna asked.

“I don’t know. I want to fill in a mental picture of both.”

“So pictures?”

“Photographs are part of it, so I’ll search for their images, college records – “

Feeling eyes on him, Studs silenced himself. Easter was Marnie’s name from her first marriage, to Jason Easter. Multiple Jason Easters existed. He was on Facebook, was a licensed contractor, had MyLife accounts in Missouri and Ohio....

Most Marnie Easter returns were combinations of Easter and Marnie – a Marnie writing Easter poetry, Easter videos, a bird named Marnie. A Marbie Easter was thrown in. He would develop his picture of Marnie Easter first, and then follow up with Jason.

“Why are you trying to find Jason Easter?” Savanna asked.

“It’s not in my thoughts?”

“You’re not thinking about it.”

“Interesting. I already thought about it.”

“I guess I missed it. Tell me already.”

“So you can’t go back into my thoughts? They’re perishable?”

“Perishable?”

“Yes, like food, useful for a limited period before their value dissolves.”

“Studs?”

“Yes?”

“Voice.”

“What?”

“Look around, pay attention. You’re in a coffee shop, remember?”

“No, I forg – “

Studs pressed his mouth into a seal. I forgot. He shook his head in disapproval of himself and his conversation, and then recognizing how that contributed to others’ impressions, he stopped that as well. Maybe this wasn’t the place slash time for researching Marnie Easter and her life.

“I would suggest it isn’t,” Savanna answered, “while reminding you, do not answer me aloud. You know I would like to be at McMenamins enjoying a beer and burger right now but it’s your body.”

Thank you.

“I will say, however, that since it is your body and I’m sort of extension slash creation slash realization of a dead person remaining alive in your mind, the impulses I’m receiving are not my own.”

Studs tread through the assertion’s convolutions. “You’re – “ He stopped speaking, took a breath and said internally, You’re suggesting that I actually want a burger and beer?

“Yes.”

“I – “

Stop. Start again, silently, *silently*.

“Silently, silently,” Papaw whispered. “You’ll wake Mamaw, and we don’t want to do that.”

“Silently, silently,” another voice said. “Sotto voce.”

“Sotto voce isn’t the same as silently,” replied a different person.

“You’re right. Okay, what we’re trying to say is count to yourself.”

Studs held his gaze motionless, seeking identification of the voices.

“They came from behind a door,” Savanna said. “You want me to open it?”

No.

Papaw crowded forward. He and Studs were tiptoeing across the living room. Under its carpet were large swaths where the floor squeaked and groaned. “Be careful,” Papaw said.

“Pretend you’re a spy.”

“A spy,” Studs whispered.

“Go silently, silently. You’ll wake Mamaw, and we don’t want to do that, do we?”

Covering his behavior by taking a gulp of coffee, Studs shook his head. He realized Papaw couldn’t see him shaking his head in the dark. “No,” he said. He was speaking aloud in Starbucks again. People were alert to him and his behavior, watching like alert mental patient guards, trying to catch him acting strange. He huddled still over his computer. Focus, he wanted to say, restraining himself to thinking it.

Savanna.

“Yes.”

Please. Help me focus.

“I will if I can but I don’t know how I can.”

Stop talking.

“I thought you would say that but I don’t have control over that. I’m your creation, Studs. Your monster.”

Studs felt himself shriveling. Monster, yes, she was a monster.

“Hey.”

You said it first.

“Yes, but my nuance and tone were both different.”

The both is redundant.

“Are you trying to insult me into silence?”

Ah, good idea. An irritated Savanna typically retreated into a petty sulk.

“I did not.”

Studs smiled. Should we open the memory box?

“Shut up. I don’t sulk.”

You're being rude, telling me to shut up.

"You're being mean."

But it had worked. She'd shut up.

"I am not shutting up. You never answered my question of before."

Studs didn't want to backtrack through his conversation with her, which irritated him, because her presence and behavior was affecting his thinking.

"Excuse me?"

Which question?

"I'll remind you, again, that I'm your monster, Studs."

I know, I know.

Confusion swathed Studs. If she was his creation, why did she insist on having her question answered and wasn't able to know what he was thinking and planning from previously realized thoughts. "I don't think –"

Catching himself, he began again in silence, I don't think you're totally my creation, Savanna. You're more complex than an imaginary entity in my mind or an attempt to assuage or deflect guilt and grief by keeping a dead person alive.

Guilt, he asked himself. Why did he choose that word?

"Good question," Savanna said.

And he knew the other question she'd asked that went unanswered was why was he seeking information about Jason Easter? Jason was an ex-husband, not an ex-boyfriend. The ex-boyfriend suspected of stalking her was Mitchell Locke.

But this search was an exercise in vetting Marnie's truthfulness.

"We're back to that," Savanna said.

Yes, we are. You didn't think she was telling the truth. Didn't you tell me you thought she was dangerous? Yes, you said she reeks of threat and there's something else there.

"That's right."

And I agree. Her behavior changed very suddenly.

"Exactly. Like she was acting."

Yes, like she was acting. Studs held motionless in the coffee shop. Why would Marnie be acting?

"Because she's not who she said she is."

She's not Marnie?

"I don't know, that doesn't make sense. Why would Marnie write to Jerry Loo to ask for help and then meet with you and pretend she was herself if she was herself?"

Studs drew up Marnie's Facebook. Although her profile photo was still of herself with longer hair, she had other photo albums. She didn't share everything with the public. He would need to break into her account to see her other photographs. The marvelous and dangerous aspect of the web, something most people misunderstood or didn't consider, was how everything flowing across could be intercepted. Although many things were encrypted and protected, there were sites that like capturing and storing encrypted traffic, in case it could be later decrypted.

Steve and Kim set up multiple such sites. Several were dedicated to capturing and storing the US government's encrypted emails, "So we have it later," Steve said over a giddy laugh. "Just because, just because, just because." Russ Kick and his website, The Memory Hole, inspired Steve. Steve started with Earthlink, AOL, Hotmail and Yahoo emails, first by hacking into individual email accounts and then by hacking into their servers. Kim encouraged him to

add the government files. When Google announced Gmail, Steve added it, because he loved the challenge. But he didn't really save these things until encountering Russ Kick's site.

Setting up mills – Studs' term for a series of bot functions working together to produce specific results, including his password application – to find all email addresses, telephone numbers, street addresses, criminal records and financial accounts associated with the names Marnie Easter, Jason Easter, and Mitchell Locke (with both spellings of the last name), Studs went after more about Marnie's last husband, Gerald. This was a search for details to validate truthfulness. She'd given him a lot but they were broad details, mostly about when things happened, creating the situation and background for her current predicament. As more information came in about Marnie, he shifted his attention back to her Facebook account. Visiting a friendly site that liked to steal and sell Facebook details, he found Marnie's FB password and visited her page, logging in as her, bringing up her photographs and posts. Just as the mills reported more details about Marnie, Gerald's last name, Silvers, was presented. He'd been on Facebook, but with few posts and only six friends, including his wife. Apparently Facebook didn't appeal to him.

Major information about the players were soon displayed. Gerald was a retired oil company CFO with an MBA. Married twice, with his first wife preceding him in death, he'd never been arrested or fined for anything. He'd moved from San Diego, where he lived with his wife, to Oregon, after she died and after he'd retired. Studs couldn't learn why Oregon was his choice. Done twenty years before, he'd bought land in Ashton, Corvallis, Portland and Bend. Several had been turned into developments of ten to fifteen homes with green spaces, but he was also part owner of a Willamette Valley vineyard.

“McMansions,” Savanna muttered, dripping with disapproval.

Yes, Studs agreed, but they'd made Silvers many millions. Although wealthy, he didn't live ostensibly. He liked fine dining and wines, according to his Amex records and always paid his balance in full, and liked Mercedes, driving a 560SL roadster for over two decades after buying it new in 1985 (trading in a 1976 450SL), Cadillacs and Land Rovers. Databases verified Marnie's marriage to Silvers lasted nine years, five months and seven days, and ended in his passing from pancreatic cancer.

Studs paused to consider that Evan in Ashton was dying of pancreatic cancer when his grandson, Patrick, killed him. Interesting coincidence that he'd encountered two cases of pancreatic cases recently, although both were in the past.

"No such things as coincidences, right, Studs?" Savanna was gleeful. "But you don't believe in fate, either."

No, but Studs was starting to adhere to the concept that he couldn't see and understand all the inputs to his reality on a conscious basis but recognized and knew it on a subconscious basis, driving him toward destinies that seemed fated.

Savanna laughed. "Oh, my. Really?"

I am ignoring you, he answered her. Doing a search, he found cancer.org and reviewed statistics on pancreatic cancer. It wasn't that prevalent and the rate among the US population was stable, so it was a very interesting data point that he'd encountered a second such case.

Gerald was in many of Marnie's FB photos and albums. He'd liked traveling, loved cruises, and took her on at least two every year. The months before his death and after were reflected in a distinct drop in Facebook posts for Marnie. When he was alive and well, she posted multiple times a day from her phone and laptop, showing views, photos of him, meals they were eating,

bands they were hearing. The week of his death had no postings. After them for the next nine months, her posts were about twenty percent of what they had been when he was alive and well.

Savanna whistled. “That girl is loaded. Do you see that?”

Studs sought what she must see and realized it was information about Gerald’s stocks and bonds. Savanna was right. Gerald died after the great global financial crises of 2009 and his portfolio took a hit but it was still valued at about twenty-seven million at his passing. He wasn’t a speculator but preferred to buy and hold. Other than bequeathing some to nieces and nephews and an endowment, the bulk passed to Marnie.

“So why did she come to you?” Savanna ask. “Why didn’t she hire a professional investigator? Why did she ask her friends for help?”

It seemed strange. She had money...entering her bank accounts, Studs saw how little she spent. She wasn’t frugal but she spent little of her wealth, outside of supporting charities. She seemed apolitical until she married Gerald, a Republican all his life, friends with California and Oregon Republican politicians.

All this was of prurient interest. What was more interesting is what else Studs saw on Marnie’s FB page.

No Mitchell Locke.

There was, instead, Michael Lynch.