

# FATAL INNOCENCE



David Berardelli



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In the course of an investigation, Private Detective Adam Brooks encounters an incredibly beautiful woman whose mysterious past points to serious intrigue.

Richard Warden, CEO and owner of WarCo, Inc., the Orlando-based software empire, meets a beautiful green-eyed young redhead in one of his favorite bars and is immediately taken by her beauty and sophistication. While he actively pursues her, tragedy strikes repeatedly in his personal life, and his empire crumbles.

Richard has no idea why all these terrible things are happening to him. His only clue is the beautiful mystery-woman who coincidentally entered his life at the same time his troubles started. Has she been hired by one of his enemies or one of his competitors, specifically to ruin him?

Adam suspects another reason – maybe she’s a long-suffering victim from Richard’s checkered past, who has vowed revenge and is determined to destroy him. But whoever she is, and whatever she’s up to, it’s a race to find out the truth before the CEO of WarCo goes down in flames. Or ... maybe that’s the best thing that could happen to him.

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*by*

**David Berardelli**

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*Colors*

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FATAL  
INNOCENCE



David Berardelli





# PART I

## *The Hunt*



## Chapter 1

### *Monday, the First Week*

The girl lounging out by the hotel pool was definitely trouble. The black strips of material barely covered her smooth, tanned flesh. To make the volatile situation even worse, she was fifteen years old.

Watching from a tinted window in the dark, air-conditioned hotel bar, Adam Brooks sipped his Manhattan. He knew this wouldn't take long. Yesterday, it took the girl less than half an hour to attract a victim. The day before, thirty-seven minutes. She was just a kid, but she was also a knockout, and obviously knew how to reel in a man.

Kids grew up much too quickly nowadays. Renee, his younger sister, started developing at about the same age and was a knockout at sixteen. But that was nearly two decades ago. Each generation made the transition a year or two quicker. Soon these kids would be walking into bars at twelve and being served without question.

Adam's job wasn't to criticize or judge. He was a private eye – he wasn't qualified to provide professional criticism or analysis. He found people and brought them home as requested. He also caught people in compromising positions. Sometimes he was paid to take incriminating pictures. Sometimes he was paid just to warn someone from doing something stupid. He left criticizing, evaluating, and all that other mumbo-

jumbo to the guys in tailored suits making hundreds of bucks an hour.

The tall, slender waitress made her second trip to his table to see if he wanted a refill. Once again, he smiled and shook his head. She smiled back, but he could tell she was a little peeved. Bars didn't make their money on customers who sat at their tables and bought just one drink. But it didn't matter. He couldn't get soused on the job. He needed to stay sharp and alert. Once he got back to his apartment, he could do as he pleased. But right now, he was earning his two-fifty a day.

Five minutes later, he realized the action was about to start. He glanced at his watch. Twenty-four minutes this time. The girl was getting better. By this time next week, she wouldn't even have to bother looking for a lounge chair. She could just wander out to the pool, push her hand through her hair, and lead the way back to her hotel room.

The girl's new companion looked like money – designer shirt and slacks, imported shoes that probably went for a couple of bills, top-of-the-line visor, and red-tinted sunglasses. The Rolex on one wrist and gold bracelet on the other conveyed the true image of the rich businessman on the prowl. He was around forty and fairly slender, but with a slight expansion around the midsection – probably from too many martinis and porterhouse steaks. His lack of tan told Adam that the man was probably here to attend a convention or a series of business meetings.

He stood beside the girl's lounge chair, smiling down at her, but his leering was obvious even behind the shades. The girl sat up, stretched, and reached up to arrange her dark brown hair more provocatively over her shoulders. Then she grabbed her towel and spent some time blotting the perspiration from her cheeks, shoulders, and arms before draping it over one shoulder. Her companion watched every move. Adam felt sorry for the poor guy. *He's toast. If he only knew... He will. Shortly...*

They crossed the pool area, making their way across the lush garden leading to the wing of rooms. Adam left some bills on the table, got up, and hurried out of the cool, dark bar.

Although he didn't particularly like this sort of work, it paid the bills. As a private eye, he did other people's dirty laundry – no more, no less. He talked to people his clients didn't want to talk to, dealt with people he wouldn't be caught dead associating with otherwise, listened to lies, both from his clients and the people he was being paid to deal with, and collected money when the job was finished. Sometimes he actually got paid. Other times he didn't. If the check cleared, he celebrated with a little booze, paid a bill or two, and got back in the saddle. If it bounced, he chalked it up to experience and promised himself he'd be more careful the next time, even though he knew that sort of thinking was useless. Being careful only helped

in a perfect world.

The two walked quickly toward one of the rooms on the other side of the pool. The man already had his arm around her tiny waist. He'd only met her five minutes ago, but had already gotten physical. The bottoms of her feet probably wouldn't see much of the carpet once they went inside.

They stopped in front of Room 12. The girl reached into the bottom piece of her bikini for her key card. The man had already begun groping her. She had to push him away so she could open the door. He bent, burying his face in her hair at the base of her neck. She pushed him away again, then reached for the door. As soon as it opened, he shoved her inside.

Adam decided not to wait very long. It wouldn't take the man any time at all to rip off her bikini scraps and send them flying. This had to be done as quickly and as cleanly as possible.

He knocked on the door. Nothing. He knocked again, this time harder.

"No one here!" the man announced gruffly.

Adam pounded this time.

The door clicked open. The man's red, angry face appeared in the six-inch gap. "What the hell do you—"

"Sir, I don't know who you are." Adam kept his voice calm. "Quite frankly, I don't want to know, but—"

"Whatever you're selling, I'm not—"

"I'm not selling anything. I'm giving it away."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I'm offering you your freedom. You want it or not?"

The door opened a few more inches. The man gripped the doorknob with his right hand. With his left, he held his shirt in front of him to hide his nakedness. "Listen to me, whoever you are." His voice was a harsh whisper. "I'm about to get laid, and I don't like interruptions. I'll give you just ten seconds to tell me why the fuck you're—"

"Sir, I don't know if you're aware of this, but you're about to have sex with an underage girl."

The man's face paled.

"The girl is fifteen. She won't be sixteen for nearly a year, and her father has instructed me to have the police here in fifteen minutes if you don't comply with his wishes and just walk away while you still can."

The door slammed shut.

Adam stepped aside and waited.

Seconds later, the door was yanked open. Shirt wide open, the man charged out of the room, fastening his belt as he ran.

\* \* \* \* \*

Perched on a barstool, Richard Warden sipped his double vodka martini while the late-afternoon Orlando sun pierced the cloudless sky beyond the big tinted windows.

Gino's was nearly packed. Local businessmen and vendors rubbed elbows with sloppy-dressed tourists taking a break from their street-prowling. The bar maintained a cool seventy-two degrees – a welcomed respite from the approaching summer brightness already filling the late March sky.

Richard Warden was tired. Following a long afternoon of back-to-back board meetings, he could feel the vodka gently nudging the tension away. The tension was a by-product of frustration. And anger. Years of listening to nonsense, of supervising a room filled with well-dressed idiots, was taking its toll. Once again he considered firing them all and starting from scratch.

Richard had known long ago that his company, WarCo SoftSystems, Inc., would have to make harsh decisions if they wanted to stay ahead of the pack. People would have to be laid off. Departments would need to be absorbed. Products would have to be cut or improved. It was the American way. Profit was always the bottom line. WarCo would have to grit its teeth and take no prisoners.

But he couldn't just sit back on his haunches and let Lou Berchfeld run things *his* way, could he? Even though the two men went back more years than either cared to remember, this was serious business. If Berchfeld couldn't take the initiative and start kicking some high-powered corporate ass, Richard would have to jump in and start slamming butts himself. Even if it meant opening the door and tossing the bunch into the street.

Jack Koslo was a prime example. The jerk was a computer wiz and had graduated from MIT before he was twenty. With an IQ of 160, Koslo came to WarCo with glowing reports, a brilliant portfolio, and contacts up the ass. Berchfeld did some serious scrambling to get Koslo behind the helm of the WarCo subsidiary, RKW ChipTics. And as a result, Koslo had done nothing but bring RKW stock steadily down.

Koslo's specialty was outsourcing. The man thought nothing of eliminating a department of high-salaried, well-trained technicians and transferring the work to a larger group of low-salaried incompetents, to manufacture products of considerably lower quality.

In one particular instance, Koslo's outsourcing scheme had resulted in so much lost work and cancelled contracts, Berchfeld was forced to step in and recall those who'd been dropped, making them consultants at a much higher rate of pay. A very expensive fiasco, indeed.

Koslo and Berchfeld were related – making the situation sensitive as well as tense. Regardless, Richard wanted Koslo to stop his reckless

shenanigans. It came to a boiling head just an hour ago in Richard's office, following the meeting in which RKW's questionable future was discussed.

"Bottom line, Jack. And don't give me any of those stupid stats that don't matter."

Despite Richard's firm request, Koslo consulted his figures. To Koslo, they meant everything. He'd resort to them even though his plan had just gone down the shitter. "The chip factory is a seven-twenty-four operation. Electricity alone is costing us—"

"I don't give a rat's ass about electricity," Richard snapped. "All I care about is the bottom line. Your figures don't mean a thing. You've got five good people – brilliant techs, every one of them – producing excellent products, and they're making upwards of seventy-five K, plus another fifteen K in health benefits. Their products are bringing in ten million in revenues per year – which comes out to two million a head.

"You pop into Walmart for groceries or McDonald's for a cheeseburger and fries, and you see these kids working their butts off for pennies. And you think – for whatever stupid reason – that you should run RKW in the same fashion. You fire all your accomplished techs and hire ten worthless incompetents who wouldn't know a good product if it bit them in the ass. But this is just fine, because these people are only making twenty K – which is all you care about. It doesn't matter that their products aren't selling or that the ten million the other crew was bringing in has dwindled down to less than three. So now we've got to fire the incompetents, squeak by the usual lawsuit bullshit, then hire back the original guys short-term for nearly twice what we were paying them before."

Richard loosened his collar and unbuttoned the single button of his fifteen-hundred-dollar Luciano Carrelì pinstripe. *Wiz kids. The bane of humanity.*

"Refill?" Frieda had come over. Her sweet perfume brushed against his skin.

Frieda was a good-looking chick, even though she was on the wrong side of forty and had brought three kids into the world. Her frosted hair was still thick and shiny.

"Sounds good."

Less than a minute later, she placed a new glass on a clean napkin in front of him and took the empty away.

He lifted his glass and got ready to drain it when he suddenly stopped. *Careful, now. Take it easy.*

Not too long ago when he could pull down half a dozen martinis in an hour. But since he'd turned fifty, many things had changed, forcing him to realize moderation might be the intelligent way to go. It had been more than

three years since the incident. Though he'd managed to overcome it, his attorney Bob Dalgren had ordered him to cut way down on his drinking. "The less you're seen in bars," Dalgren had said, "the better."

*Easy for him to say.*

Richard was paying Dalgren a shitload of cash for his personalized legal services. The least the little nerd could do was cut him some slack. Three years had passed, for Christ's sake. Richard had grown, had matured. He'd learned a few things along the way. Moderation turned out to be more reasonable than he'd initially thought. Binges at age fifty were ten times worse than when he was a kid. His body could no longer tolerate the abuse.

Anyway, Richard's drinking was no longer out of control. And he no longer reached the point where he couldn't quit when he wanted to. There hadn't been a time in his life when he didn't have the self-control to stop whatever he was doing whenever he damned well pleased. Except, of course, for sex.

And why shouldn't he enjoy himself? He was still young, strong, and vital. A sexual powerhouse at fifty. He'd spawned two kids and enjoyed hundreds of sexual encounters over the last twenty years – no small feat for a man who had, according to his smug, overpaid doctor, passed his prime. And what would the doc know about anyone else's prime? What would any of them know about anything?

He picked up his glass, drained it, and motioned to Frieda for another refill. Two down. He'd stop at three. *A man with no self-control couldn't stop at three, could he?*

He turned on his stool. Across the room, a gorgeous redhead sat by herself at a table in front of the window. She was smiling at him.

\* \* \* \* \*

"May I join you?"

She smiled. "Please." The blinking of those thick lashes sent his pulse pounding. Her heavy red hair cascaded in shiny swirls down to her shoulders. Her large glittering green eyes held him fast, taking in his suit as well as his tie, his smile, and his hair. Her high cheekbones tapered down to a firm jaw line. Her swollen, pouty lips made his heart sputter.

"I'm Richard. Richard Warden."

"I know."

"You ... know me?"

"You were pointed out to me."

He straightened in his seat. Being talked about always pumped up the old ego. As the owner of a software empire, this happened frequently to him.

Sometimes it was damned hard not to appear too smug – especially when such a lovely babe was involved.

“I take it you’ve seen me before, then?”

She shrugged. “Right here. You spend a lot of time in this place.”

So much for the old ego boost...

Her blank expression didn’t give him any additional information. Had she said it to criticize? The rehab program had ended two years ago, leaving him sensitive and self-conscious. And for good reason. A man of his caliber, reduced to swapping sob stories with tramps, drunks, and street scum? The experience had been humiliating. But at least it was over.

He found no reason to take offense. He didn’t know her, so he couldn’t be certain about her disapproval. She may have merely stated a fact. Besides, it was easy to overlook her comment. No man in his right mind could criticize this perfect package in her blue suit and white silk shirt with the top three buttons undone, exposing a deliciously tanned cleavage. Not to mention the shapely legs or the strong fragrance of lilacs in her hair. Although she was obviously close to thirty, which was a few years older than what he ideally preferred, he knew that with a little luck he’d eventually be able to snare her without too much difficulty.

“You have me at a disadvantage. You know my name—”

“Brittany. Brittany Weber.”

At least the awkward formalities were over. So far, everything was progressing nicely. The next step, logically, would be to clear the air. It wasn’t necessary, of course, but he decided to let her know why he spent so much time here. “Gino’s is my favorite, uh, watering hole. My offices are on the twentieth floor. And since this place is so convenient, I just pop down here for lunch, or when I need to get away from those irritating board meetings.” He gave her a relaxed smile. He wanted another drink but decided to hold off.

Instead of replying, she sipped her drink and studied his tie.

Was it his imagination, or were her eyes lowering? *Don’t jump the gun, sport. You’re fifty, not fifteen...*

“And where do you work, Brittany? Orlando?”

“I’ve got my own home business. I sometimes do seminars.”

“What do you sell?”

“Software programs. I’m a wholesaler.”

“Good and solid right now. I ought to know. I’m CEO of—”

“WarCo SoftSystems. Yes, I know. I’ve seen your stuff on the Net.”

He puffed up again.

She finished her drink. He signaled for Frieda.

“No, thanks. Gotta go.” She glanced at her watch. “It’s almost six, and

I've got to get back to my place and finish up some work."

"Why not have another drink with me?" He wanted to get to know her. It had been a while since he'd met such an attractive, interesting woman.

She smiled. "Thanks, but I've really got to go." She reached for her handbag and opened it. He waved her down, quickly producing two crisp twenties and dropping them on the table.

A wrinkled frown appeared on her face. "Mr. Warden, I'd much rather—"

"Richard."

"It's really not necessary to—"

"My pleasure."

"But—"

"I'll let *you* pay next time."

Her smile drifted back. "Perhaps."

He not only liked this woman for her looks, he admired her independence. She obviously liked paying her own way. She did exactly as she pleased. *His* kind of woman.

She snapped her handbag shut, looped the thick leather strap over her left shoulder, and stood.

He joined her, hoping she'd suggest getting together again. But she didn't. He decided to take the initiative. "Perhaps we could repeat this another time? Tomorrow? After lunch?"

She held out her hand. "It was nice meeting you, Richard." He took her hand in his, almost wincing at the coldness — probably from her drink.

"It was nice meeting you, too. I hope we can—"

"Maybe we'll see each other another time."

He opened his mouth to reply, but she'd already turned to leave the bar.

He crossed the room, moving to the tinted windows viewing the front lot. He wanted to see those gorgeous legs moving on the pavement ... the white heels bringing out the muscularity of her shapely calves ... the late afternoon sun playing on her bouncing red locks.

But there was no sign of her.

He hurried out through the lobby. The sun was hiding behind a swollen gray cloud. Heavy rush-hour traffic roared past. People marched up and down the aisles in the main lot, talking on cell phones.

He ran down the walk, turned the corner, and scanned another section of parking lot. Brittany Weber had disappeared.

\* \* \* \* \*



“How much is my old man paying you?”

Adam Brooks pulled out onto the main drag. Beth Ricci sat beside him in the seat, her hair a mess, her face streaked with mascara and tears. The tears were mostly from anger. Once again, Adam had ruined her fun afternoon. For the third day in a row, he'd interrupted her private sex party to send her partner packing. The first two times, she'd tried flirting her way out of it, flashing her breasts to get him to forget what he was supposed to be doing. But it didn't work. This time, she'd silently put her clothes back on while he waited patiently at the door.

“It's not the money,” Adam told her. He felt sorry for her father. An attorney, Domenic Ricci represented a big developer in the Central Florida area. In Adam's world, being an attorney and a developer were two out of three strikes. But as much as he detested both professions, he respected Ricci for at least making an effort to get his daughter back. Ricci was divorced and raising his kid on his own. He was away most of the time and rarely saw her. When he was home, he usually spent most of his time in his study, arranging deals on his phone. He loved his daughter, but like so many fathers, he had no idea how to show his love.

“What is it, then?” she asked. “You don't like to see people having fun?”

“You're a kid. You're too young to be—”

“Oh, fuck you. You're no better than him.”

“Despite what you think, he loves you.”

“My fucking ass.”

“Why else would he pay someone like me to follow you around and make sure no one hurts you?”

“News flash, asshole. He doesn't want me having any fun.”

“I've got a news flash for *you*. He doesn't want you ending up beaten half to death. Or dead.”

“The guys who pick me up are okay. They've got money and everything. Why d'ya think I always go to places like the Holiday Inn?”

“You don't even know them. How could you? You pick them up and you're having sex with them five minutes later.”

“How can I have sex with them when you're following us around, pulling them off me all the time?”

“I can either do that or bring in the cops. Then your party becomes a memory anyway. Your new boyfriend's brought up on statutory rape charges, and you're sent back to your dad.”

She groaned and crossed her arms. “I *really* luck out, don't I?”

“You don't even know how good you have it.”

“Yeah. I have it real fucking good. Half the time I can't stand it.”

“You have a father who cares about you.”

“He *so* doesn’t care about me. I never even see him half the time.”

“He’s a busy—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. He’s successful, works his fucking ass off. I got that – believe me.”

So did Adam. Her attitude said a lot. It also said that if she couldn’t spend time with her father, she’d have no trouble spending it with other men. It didn’t matter how she spent it. It only mattered that she felt wanted. Desired.

“What would it take for you to drop me off somewhere and tell him I slipped away while you were pumping gas or something?”

He sighed. He didn’t want to get into this. She’d already flashed her breasts and even tried putting her hand on his crotch.

“How ‘bout a blowjob? I’m good at it. I can do it right now, while you’re driving. Just don’t kill us. I’ll get you off, then you let *me* off. Deal?”

“I can’t do that.”

She huffed. “*Now* I get it. You’re gay.”

“Actually, I suffer from a strange condition you don’t see much anymore.”

“You mean, like, a disease?” She moved closer to the door.

He smirked. “Nothing so serious. Just an overabundance of principles. And I accept responsibility. When I agree to do a job, I do it.”

“What *are* you? Some jerk who thinks he’s a superhero?”

“Just an ordinary jerk doing his job.”

“What if I pay you to let me go? I’ve got money.” She opened her purse. “I’ve got—”

“It’s not about the money. Or sex. Especially not sex with an underage teen.”

“Hey, I was just talking about a *blowjob*. That’s not sex.”

“I hate to burst your bubble, but if it involves sex organs, it is considered sex. And just because one of our former presidents was too stupid to realize that doesn’t make it okay.”

She sat back and watched the road in silence. After about a minute she said, “I guess you never fucked around when you were a kid.”

“Sure I did. Got into trouble a lot, too.”

“Then why won’tcha give me a break?”

He felt uncomfortable about all this. He didn’t have kids, so he couldn’t easily relate. And he couldn’t take her side when her father was paying him. Even if he did, she was clearly in the wrong. She was fifteen – much too young to entice strange men into motel rooms. She had issues. But then, who didn’t? Still, he couldn’t help feeling sympathetic toward her.

Probably because of his sister. Their father had left home when Adam was fifteen and Renee fourteen. Their mother had done her best, but like most parents, she just couldn't handle both roles. Adam hated his father for years. The hatred eventually subsided, becoming a heavy dullness surrounding an ache he felt each time he allowed himself to think about the man. That hole in his life brought him closer to Renee and their mother, making the three of them a very tight-knit group. But even so, a day seldom passed when he didn't think of his dad, hoping he'd see him again. He'd looked for him during high school basketball and football games, hoping he'd see him sitting in the bleachers. High school graduation was not a pleasant memory because of their father's absence. He dreamed of the time his dad would return, and they could go fishing or hunting together, or even attend a Magic game.

But Adam never saw his dad again. Neither did Renee.

"Fathers are assholes." Beth stared straight ahead at the SUV in front of them. "I don't even know why they bother. My old man doesn't even—"

"At least you still see him," Adam said flatly.

Her eyes blazed. "And I'm supposed to think that's a *good* thing?"

"It *is* good," he said softly.

"How the hell can it possibly be good?"

"You wouldn't understand."

\* \* \* \* \*

Richard Warden sat picking at his food at the dinner table.

Renata, their housekeeper, had prepared one of his favorite dishes – a wonderful pot roast. Renata was a terrific cook. She could make a feast out of just about anything. But this evening, Renata's culinary skills were the least of his concerns. As was his wife's detailed account of how the renovation work on the guest house was coming along.

He hadn't been able to think of anything else but Brittany Weber since he left Gino's. The woman's unique essence filled his mind just as much now as it had at the bar.

"Well, are you?" Adrienne's smoldering black eyes focused on him.

"Am I what?" He was surprised at the testiness in his own voice. He put it down to resentment for having his thoughts interrupted – as well as the fact that his wife was sitting across from him at the table instead of Brittany.

"You're not paying one bit of attention to me, are you?"

He picked up his wine glass. "Guess I'm preoccupied."

"Don't tell me you and Louis are butting heads again."

His wife's distorted reflection came into view as he tilted his glass.

Adrienne was still a good-looking woman, but despite the grays popping up, the crow's feet slicing into the corners of her dark-brown eyes, the wattle pulling loose the once-firm chin, and the thickening of her hips, it was clear that what had survived their relationship was anything but physical. The years, the kids, and the problems that had come and gone, had turned them into two very different people sharing the same house. What had once been a solid relationship had transformed into a corporate merging, with each division head pursuing his – or her – own separate interests.

Richard knew Adrienne was painfully aware that he often strayed. But in spite of her suspicions, she lacked the evidence required to drain him of his fortune. In choosing his partners, he'd always been fortunate to find women who could keep their mouths shut. Usually, money proved to be the only requirement to ensure their necessary silence. A few in his past had posed a potential problem, requiring a considerably larger payoff, but they too had vanished quietly, once their financial desires had been sated.

Adrienne continued watching him. So did his daughter Katie, who sat on his right. "It must be something really serious," his wife said.

He stiffened. "What?"

"Whatever you and Lou are fighting about."

He sighed. *I need to be more careful.* "It's worrying me a little." To satisfy her curiosity, he gave her an encapsulated version of the Koslo problem.

"You think you'll have union problems?" she asked.

"Their union isn't very strong. Florida's right-to-work situation helps us. But since RKW is seventy-five percent management, their union representation doesn't matter much. Koslo has a history of using inexperienced workers to save money, and it always backfires."

"I remember now. Jack Koslo, outsource king extraordinaire."

"His experiences with IBM and AT&T should have taught him something, but he's so dead-set against paying benefits, he's liable to have them cranking out enough bad chips to cause the stockholders to panic and start pulling out."

"What does Lou say about all this?" Adrienne looked worried. And she had every right to be. Much of her own money was tied up in RKW.

He shrugged. "Koslo's kin. This means a lot to Lou."

"I understand that. But I can't see that man letting relatives screw up a company that does more than ten million in exports—"

"This has to be addressed, and quick. I let them both have it this afternoon, but it's up to them to fix it. I can't go behind Lou and pull something. He's the president, after all."

Renata scuttled by with another bottle of red wine. She picked up the empty and was gone in a flash.

"I'm gonna need more money for books," Katie interrupted, obviously waiting for a lull in the dinner conversation to spring her request on him. "Next semester, my psychiatric nursing books alone will cost a fortune."

His daughter never failed to bring a smile to his face. She had a special glow that brightened any room. "If it's for school, it's justified," he said. "Just let me know what you'll need."

Katie smiled. "You wouldn't consider getting me a new car, would you? I'll only use it for school. The one I'm driving is kind of funky and—"

"Nice try."

Katie shrugged. "Can't blame me, can ya?"

"That clunker you've been driving *is* two years old now, and your friends probably all have something fresh from the showroom – right?"

She reddened. "I guess that *was* kind of obvious."

Katie was a pretty girl. Not beautiful, but the kind who'd produce good-looking offspring. She'd always been serious about her education, but it wouldn't be too long before she'd be getting married. She'd brought over this Kevin character several times during the past few weeks. The boy seemed nice enough, but like all the others, there was something about him Richard just didn't like.

He knew it would only be a matter of time before he was forced to give his daughter away to some wild-eyed jerk that needed hosed down. But whatever happened, she'd always be his little girl and would have a special place forever etched in his heart.

"At least you're not as bad as your brother. Nick was turning my hair gray by the time he'd graduated high school. But now that he's running sales at Directron, the kid has finally settled down and taken on his share of responsibilities."

"Daddy, you know Nicky's just like you. Don't you remember those times you and Mom argued about why Nicky got into so much trouble?"

It was strange, her remembering that. She was only four or five when Nick was becoming a pain in the ass in high school.

Adrienne started on the guest house again. Getting the cable company out there to add an extra line was high up on her list of priorities. And the main bathroom was bugging her to death. The Roman tub was entirely too large for the room. She saw no reason why it should be so large when the shower already took up so much space.

He tuned her out. Brittany had drifted back into his consciousness.

Renata appeared five minutes later, wheeling in the dessert tray. When she reached across Richard to set down the engraved silver ice cream dish in front of him, he realized he'd developed an erection.

"Something wrong, Daddy?"

“What?” He shifted in his seat and repositioned the monogrammed towel in his lap.

“You’ve got this really worried look on your face.”

He smiled sheepishly. “I’m okay. Just a little tired.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Half an hour later, as Richard Warden sat in his den in front of the computer screen, he cursed himself for being so obsessed. Yet he found that he didn’t really care. He wanted to see Brittany again – it was that simple.

Finding her online quickly proved to be a fruitless venture. As far as he could ascertain, the only thing he knew about this beautiful woman was her name. She’d mentioned working at home, selling wholesale software programs. But her information had been vague at best. It made him wonder if she actually owned the software company or merely worked for one.

From his experience, he knew there could be five thousand such companies in Central Florida alone. Looking up the name Weber hadn’t led to anything promising.

Had she told him the truth? Or was her company called something else?

A search in the online phone book directory quickly produced several full columns of Weber’s in the metropolitan Orlando area. He dropped to B and carefully scanned the list. Two Bs, a B. A., a B. L., several Bobs, three Bills, a Bradford, and a Bradley.

He tried the first B. Not in service.

The second B was answered by an elderly man who said his name was Barclay and that he did not appreciate being interrupted during his dinner.

Richard apologized, then sat back and stared at the French doors leading out to the lit gardens in the back yard. This was going nowhere. If he really wanted to find her, it would probably be much better and less frustrating to let someone do it for him.

Ellen, his personal secretary, could save him time and aggravation. But that wouldn’t work. Ellen was a damned fine secretary, but much too interested in other people’s business. Besides, she and Adrienne were on friendly terms, so that would be a bad idea.

A professional would be safer and much more discreet. Last year he’d used ABC Investigations on East Robinson, when he was considering taking over Genesis, Inc., and needed some dirt to give him leverage. Thomas Cravell was a good man. He not only knew how to keep his mouth shut, but also had a healthy respect for big money. He’d been running ABC for ten years – a long time in an unpredictable place like Orlando.

He dialed the number from the card he'd kept in his wallet. When Thomas Cravell answered, Richard gave his name."

"Mr. Warden?" There was a slight pause, then Cravell said, "Genesis, right?"

"Good memory."

"How can I help you?"

"I'm trying to locate someone. A woman."

"All right..."

"But it won't be easy. The only thing I know about her is her name."

"And the hard part is...?"

"Not knowing anything else."

"That's why I'm in business, Mr. Warden."

"Then I take it you want the job?"

"Of course."

\* \* \* \* \*

Though Domenic Ricci was probably on the other side of fifty, he looked good and kept himself in shape with tennis and golf. The golf was probably what kept him away from the house so much, particularly when he was in the middle of closing a deal. Otherwise, he would've spent much more time with his daughter.

Adam Brooks knew better than to voice his opinion. The hardest part of the job was keeping his mouth shut, especially when supposedly intelligent people repeatedly made stupid mistakes that could be easily corrected.

Ricci was sitting behind his desk in his book-lined home study, writing a check when Adam entered. Adam welcomed the sight. He assumed the check was being made out to him. At least, he hoped so. If he was right, he promised himself to be especially pleasant during this particular visit. He didn't want to say anything to sour the deal.

"How'd you do with the latest boyfriend?" Ricci asked.

"He wasn't exactly what I'd call a boyfriend."

Ricci's pen stopped moving – which irritated Adam. "What *would* you call him?"

Adam sat uneasily in the armchair facing the desk. He knew he shouldn't have said anything. Now he had to squirm out of this gracefully. He shrugged. "Just some guy who happened to see your daughter sunning herself out by the pool."

"Older guy?"

"Thirties, I guess."

"He wasn't a sleazebag, was he?"

“Sleazebag?”

Ricci shrugged. “Tattoos? Nose rings? Leather?”

Adam couldn’t see what that had to do with anything. “Actually, he appeared pretty prosperous.”

“At least that’s *something*.” Ricci went back to writing the check, then ripped it out of the book. Adam knew better than to mention the pony-tailed biker he’d seen Ricci’s daughter with the other day.

Ricci stared at the check, then at Adam. “I work for some powerful people.”

“Developers.” Despite Adam’s willpower, he’d let that response come out flat.

“Anything wrong with developers?”

“You really want my opinion?”

He handed Adam the check. “I asked, didn’t I?”

Adam took it, glanced at it, then folded it carefully and pocketed it. “I’ll sum it up in three words. I love trees.”

Ricci grunted. “Progress, Brooks. People hear the word and get all bent out of shape and causey. They bitch about raping the environment, killing trees, and destroying the ozone. Then they turn around and complain that they have to drive ten miles to the closest Walmart or Dollar Store when someone should clear the vacant field two miles down the road. *People*.” Ricci shook his head.

“They’re assholes. I agree.”

“Everyone knows how messed up people are. But I’ve gotten off the subject.” Ricci sat back and rubbed his eyes. He suddenly looked tired. And defeated. “I’m just stalling, I guess. The real subject is kind of painful.”

“You want to know what’s happening with your daughter.” Adam got up from the chair. “I can’t tell you what to do here, Mr. Ricci. I don’t get involved in other people’s business.”

“I asked your opinion, dammit. You’ve got something to say? Say it.”

“Your daughter’s in her room now, crying her eyes out. She wants her father.”

“I’m right here.”

“Yeah.” Adam crossed the room and stopped a foot short of the door. “You’re right here. And she’s right there. Do I honestly have to say more?”

Ricci appeared genuinely confused. Adam felt sorry for him.

“Come right out with it, Brooks.”

“I just did, but you didn’t get it.” Then he left before he had a chance to say something that would *really* hurt.



## Chapter 2

### *Tuesday, the First Week*

At nine o'clock, Richard Warden left Conference Room A with the single-mindedness of a man leaping from a sinking ship.

The workday had started with another ChipTics crisis, this one concerning their New York plant. Koslo had apparently ruffled the union's feathers – which wasn't a wise thing to do. New Yorkers frequently turned radical and usually violent when someone threatened their bargained-for benefits. But Jack Koslo seemed unconcerned about the union or its seventy-five members. His rants about 'obscene wages' and 'ridiculous benefit demands,' followed by threats to close the New York plant and open a new one in Jacksonville, proved more than Richard could endure before lunch. Giving Berchfeld a simple, "Handle it now!" before bowing out of the picture was the best thing he could do.

Thomas Cravell, looking sharp in his dark suit, sat in the receptionist area, reading a copy of *Fortune* Magazine. He stood up and smiled. "Mr. Warden. Hope this is a good time."

Ellen was busy working on the monthly report. Richard gestured for Cravell to follow him into his office. "No calls, Ellen." The plump, middle-aged woman nodded slightly, not skipping a beat with her keyboard. "And when Stephanie is finished with the minutes, I want them copied, distributed, and faxed as quickly as possible to our West Coast offices."

In his office, Richard gestured for Cravell to sit. He closed the door behind him and circled the massive desk. Behind him, the bright Orlando skyline reflected the brilliant metallic skyscrapers in the huge tinted window.

Richard opened a drawer and produced a small cigar. It was a single green leaf made expressly for him by an independent Cuban grower, individually-wrapped and packaged at ten dollars apiece. Richard allowed himself five a day and had helped keep the little Cuban in business the last ten years. Richard got the leaf going and tossed the gold monogrammed lighter in the drawer. "What have you got?"

Cravell lit a cigarette and pocketed the hotel matchbook. "I'm afraid we're gonna need to work this from a different angle." Cravell sat forward and flicked a tiny gray ash into the glass ashtray on the small table beside the chair. "All we have to go on is a name. I've already tried the phone directory,

but came up empty.”

“I did the same thing last night. Unlisted maybe?”

Cravell shook his head. “My phone company contact couldn’t find anything. Either this woman doesn’t have a phone, or she gave you a fictitious name. And how many people these days operate without a phone?”

Richard sat back and considered the hopelessness of the situation.

Cravell blew a slim trail of cigarette smoke toward the ceiling fan. “How serious are you about finding this woman?”

“I’m paying you to find her. That’s all you need to know.”

“All right. We have no phone number, no car, and no address. Nothing from DMV. All we have is a name – no doubt fictitious – and a description. Where did you meet this woman?”

“Downstairs, in Gino’s.”

“She a regular?”

“Don’t think so. At least, I never saw her there before.”

“Tourist, maybe? She tanned?”

Richard recalled the delicious cleavage. “A little. But this is only March. Beach weather doesn’t start for another month or so.”

“Anything strange about her clothes?”

“They fit her extremely well.”

“Notice anything else? Labels? Logos? Brand names?”

“Nope.”

Cravell finished his smoke and stubbed it out. Then he leaned back and rubbed his palms. “Here’s my proposition. I follow you for the next few days. A simple tail, but you won’t see me. I’ll be in Gino’s whenever you’re there. If this woman comes in, let me know by some subtle gesture. Scratch the back of your head.”

“No good. I do that a lot.”

“What *don’t* you do a lot?”

Richard made an impressive smoke ring and watched it float lazily across the room. “I saw Bogart tug his earlobe in a movie once.”

“Think you can remember to do it?”

“I’m sure I can.”

“I’ll lay low, then tail her when she splits. If things go well, I should be able to find her car, where she lives – everything you need to know. How’s that?”

“Good, except for one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“What if she leaves with me?”

A curious expression touched Cravell’s fine features, and Richard realized he’d just revealed why he was so interested in finding out everything

he could about Brittany Weber.

\* \* \* \* \*

At six o'clock that evening, Richard Warden sat in the dark, air-conditioned room at a center table in Gino's, sipping a martini, his eyes glued to the entrance doors. He expected Brittany to appear at any moment.

Less than twenty minutes ago, a small group of stockholders tried to shanghai him into a conference room to grill him about something they'd heard on CNN about the War-Met contract with Singapore. Richard referred them to Ken Olson, President of War-Met Labs. Olson had all the answers. Besides, Olson loved getting together with stockholders. Bullshit was oftentimes the only way out of a sticky situation. But the details didn't matter. Since meeting Brittany here the previous day, Richard couldn't keep his mind on much of anything else. She was the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen, and he wanted – *needed* – to see her again.

As he looked around, hoping to see Brittany appear, Richard wondered where Cravell was. Gino's wasn't crowded, but there were several strangers among the regulars. Any one of them could've been Cravell in disguise.

Frieda came by to check on him. He ordered a refill. For the first time since he'd first met Frieda, her tight outfit didn't even register. He was only concerned about what Brittany would be wearing when she came in – *if* she came in.

The possibility of not seeing her shrouded his thoughts in a heavy blackness. Trudging back to his car and driving home after having three drinks alone would be too much to bear. Sitting at the dinner table, forcing himself to pay attention to Adrienne, would be torture. Listening to Katie and her latest adventures would undoubtedly cause his eyes to glaze over.

Brittany appeared at just a few minutes before seven. She wore an emerald-green suit, the skirt just an inch shy of the knee, the low-cut silk top revealing her smooth cleavage adorned with a necklace bearing three simple gold chains. She sauntered over to his table and stopped, looking down at him, her smile warming him even more effectively than his drink. "Didn't know if I'd see you here tonight," she said.

His fascination with watching her come in had switched off his brain. He practically smashed his kneecap against the table leg, scrambling to his feet to pull out a chair for her. He stared, tantalized, as she flicked a lock of hair from her shoulder and bathed him in her sweet perfume. Still watching her, he fell into his own chair and nearly missed the seat. When reality finally returned, he realized his mouth was open. "I-I've been w-waiting ... t-to see you since ... all d-day..." For the first time since grade school, he was

stuttering. He had to take a few deep breaths to calm down. *CEO, remember? Corporate tycoon?* “It’s really good, seeing you again,” he managed, his voice firm and in control again.

She smiled. “For a while, I didn’t think I could get away.”

“From where?” It escaped his lips before he even realized it.

“I had some errands in town, and barely made it to the bank before they closed.”

It was vital to find out where she worked and lived, what car she drove, what colors she liked. Favorite movies, music, flowers, sex positions—

Then it dawned on him. *Cravell. The signal...* As subtly as he could, Richard tugged his right earlobe.

Brittany suddenly smiled.

He swallowed. “Something ... funny?”

“Humphrey Bogart did that.”

“*What?*”

“That earlobe-pulling thing.”

He flushed, sitting up sharply. Now he felt like a child who’d been caught scratching something dirty into his desktop. “W-What made you think of *that?*”

“Saw one of his old movies the other day and remembered.”

Richard sat back and waited for his heart rate to return to normal. *Damn, that was close...*

Brittany tilted her head. Some heavy red tresses brushed down her arm. “Aren’t you gonna buy me a drink?”

“Shit. I mean – I’m awfully sorry...” He practically smacked his knee again, straightening. One of the waitresses came right over.

“Tom Collins,” she said.

He ordered a refill for himself, then sat back and resumed staring.

“Something wrong?” She pushed some heavy red locks away from her face. “It’s a little windy out there. Looks like it wants to rain.”

He grinned. “Everything’s ... just perfect.”

Brittany blinked. “You don’t mince words, do you?”

He’d intended to let Cravell earn his money. But right now, he wanted her to know just how he felt. “I ... want you to know something, Brittany.”

“What’s that?”

“You’re one of the most beautiful women I’ve ever seen.” He hadn’t wanted to sound so dramatic, but it came out automatically. He quickly found that he wasn’t even embarrassed for saying it.

She laughed. “I’ll bet you say that to all the girls.”

“No. I don’t. I really don’t. In fact, I don’t think I ever said that to anyone before.”

Her large green eyes focused on him. “That wouldn’t be a line, would it? To get me in the sack?”

He felt his cheeks reddening. This woman didn’t hedge around, either. “To answer your questions, no to the first and yes to the second.” Then he cursed himself for being so brazen.

When the drinks came, she picked up her slim frosted glass and sipped sparingly. Richard downed half of his and sighed.

She shrugged. “You don’t beat about the bush.”

“Life’s too short.”

“Yes. It is. *Very* short.”

“Brittany, are you married?”

“Divorced.”

“How long – if you don’t mind my asking?”

A shadow touched her face. “Not long enough.”

Her tense expression made him realize he’d said the wrong thing.

“Eric’s very ... obsessive.”

“How so?”

She drank more of her drink and set it back down. “He likes to ... follow me.”

“He’s stalking you?”

A nod.

“How long?”

“The last six months.”

“But the courts... Can’t you get them to—”

“I’ve already filed an injunction. It hasn’t worked. He’s come to my place three times since.”

“But can’t you—”

“I’d rather not talk about it, if you don’t mind.” She drank more Tom Collins. “It really upsets me.”

“I understand.”

“You’ve been stalked?”

“No, but—”

“Then you can’t possibly know what I’m going through.”

“Obviously not.” He pulled at his martini, furious at himself for upsetting her. “I’m sorry, Brittany. If I’d known—”

“Let’s not ruin our drink, okay?”

“What about dinner? Have you eaten?”

“I have to get home.”

“But we’ve got to have at least one more drink together.” The prospects of this gorgeous creature leaving so soon made his heart ache.

“Wish I could.” She shrugged. “But some things have to be done.”

“Let me take you home. Please.”

“Oh, no. That wouldn’t work.”

“Why not?”

“I couldn’t possibly bring someone else into this. Surely you can understand.”

“I want to make sure you get home safely. I could follow you, make sure—”

“I appreciate it. Really. I can take care of myself. I could never forgive myself if I involved you or anyone else with my problems.”

“Please...”

“Thanks anyway.” She patted his hand.” We’ll talk about it later, okay?” She gathered her shoulder bag and stood. “Right now, I have to make a stop.”

“Of course.” He watched her as she marched to the ladies’ room near the double glass doors. Then he sank back in his chair and smiled at the delicious thoughts of the beautiful redhead in the john, sliding her panties down those smooth, shapely thighs...

\* \* \* \* \*

At eight-thirty, Brittany still hadn’t come out of the ladies’ room.

The room had turned into a solid, disorganized crowd. Women flocked in front of the restroom, some disappearing inside, others coming out and returning to their tables, or leaving entirely. The waitress working with Frieda moved quickly, squeezing between tables, her cluttered tray delicately balanced on her raised palm.

Richard waited until she’d finished delivering a big order to the table next to him. He caught her by the crook of the arm. “A good-looking redhead was sitting here with me a while ago.”

She frowned. “Tom Collins?”

“That’s right. Do me a favor.” He handed her a ten. “Take a trip to the ladies’ room and make sure she’s okay? She’s been in there quite a while.”

She folded the bill and pushed it carefully into a pocket of her laced apron. “Back in a minute.” Then she hurried away.

Richard sat back and finished his drink.

One minute later, the waitress returned. “She’s gone, mister. No one’s in there.”

