

Chapter 1 - The Echoes of Tragedy

Rachel's life was a mess. Her love life stank. She had her last boyfriend when she was 16. It lasted a year. They split up when he went to university in Oklahoma. There had been nothing real since then.

Her savings were almost gone. Without another gig, begrudgingly, she'd have to give up her studio apartment and find a place to lay her head. Not that she liked it so much, but it was the only place she could afford.

Raindrops tapping on her small apartment window brought back memories of her parents. Rachel turned over in her bed. Her long jet-black hair, passed on by her mother, stuck to her face. The sheets were wet and clung to her like an octopus trying to suffocate her. Desperation was getting the best of her. She had turned off the A/C to save money. But Austin's summer can be brutal, reaching the high nineties and even the hundreds.

It wasn't just the heat; the humidity was the worst. She moaned and wished for months to pass quickly so she could enjoy some of the cooler months of September and October again.

Rachel did not feel like getting up. She turned and thought of her mom; she missed her terribly.

Rachel's mother, Maria, had died in a car accident. Rachel was only 10. They had gone shopping around the corner from their apartment for just a few essentials. As they left

the store, a vehicle approached them. The driver slowed down, made a U in the middle of the street, and drove directly into them.

The hit was brutal; it put her mother into a coma. Rachel visited her daily, holding her hand, talking, and sometimes reading to her. But the injuries turned out to be too severe. Maria never came out of her coma. A couple of months later, she passed away in the night.

Rachel dreamt again of the accident. It was as if it was all happening again. She heard her mother scream as she saw the incoming car and felt the sensation of being pushed away as the car sped toward them. Maria took the full force in the hit. Maria had pushed her hard and far enough that the car had missed her.

Both the police and her father looked all over for the guy. He had disappeared. They couldn't fathom the motive as her mother was well-liked in the neighborhood. They had the make and color of the vehicle but no license plate number or driver's description.

It was a long time ago, but Rachel still remembered it. It still haunted her dreams.

Bill, her father, seemed like he would never recover. Her death broke his spirit. Like in the movies, he started a special wall where he pinned pictures of potential murderers. The police detective, with whom he was on good terms, provided him with videos of the scene and whatever prints had been captured from the surveillance cameras of nearby shops.

Bill drew maps of the events and plastered them on his

special wall. And in the middle of it all, he taped her mother's portrait. He had taken a snapshot of her a week before the accident when they had gone walking downtown. It was a splendid picture.

Sometimes, he would find a small news article of similar incidents with potential leads. He would cut them out and tape them next to the rest of his discovery wall. That was his wall. He had a sign stapled that read: "Do Not Touch. That means YOU!"

She remembered the sleepless nights when he would not come home until very early in the morning. She did not know where he would disappear. But one thing was for sure, she smelled no alcohol on his breath when he tiptoed into her room to kiss her goodnight and then retired. When she grew up, she figured that he may have been going to a grief management meeting or just wandered the street aimlessly.

Growing up without a mother was difficult. No one to sit with her to do homework or talk. Her father was always working, even on weekends.

On holidays and weekends, he would drop her off at his mother's house in Dripping Springs and return to pick her up at the end of the holiday or weekend.

During these visits, he was never talkative, even though Grandma always tried.

Rachel went to Kealing Middle School. She made some friends, but she especially enjoyed Martha Bardot, who lived nearby. They would get together after school and play in the small, abandoned lots next door to their

houses. Many times, they would sit and try to do their homework together. These were the fun times. Elsa was also a good friend, but she was more reserved.

Yes, she was good. She remembered her teachers complimenting her on her reading and math abilities. Her mother had taught her how to read when she was just a young child. Mom always told her that reading and math would make her life better.

She taught her arithmetic every time they went shopping. Guessing the change that the cashier would have to return was like a game.

As she continued to grow up, she enjoyed her youth, even though her father was not always present.

After her mother's death, he became secluded and even hardly talked to Rachel. She spent a lot of time doing homework and reading. She had inherited her smartness and love of reading from her mother. After her mother's death, she especially enjoyed the long, quiet evenings when she could get engrossed in books and forget about her life and what had happened to her mother.

After Rachel graduated from high school, she told her father flat out that she wanted to be a detective like him. He always knew she would be a good one, as her inquisitive mind and perseverance in everything she tackled were good signs. He welcomed her as an apprentice and encouraged her in these endeavors.

With her father's help, she studied hard, and it wasn't long before she passed her exams and got her private investigator license. Her father specialized in investigating

financial fraud and family affairs, and Rachel wanted to follow in his footsteps and do general investigative work.

Her reminiscence brought her back to those warm nights when her father would be next to her, quizzing her and teasing her. It had taken her 3 years of working hard during the day and studying at night.

When she got her license, she and her father celebrated well into the night. It was the highlight of her youth.

As a graduation gift, he gave her a Fieldmaster Swiss Army knife. He told her it had all the basic tools she would need as a detective. He said, "Sweetheart. I know it is not much, but it is a necessary tool you need to have. It is small enough to hide in the side of your boots. In our business, you never know when you may need extra help." He made her promise always to carry it when she was working, which she did.

Bill had a couple of trusted detective friends working for him when he would tackle bigger jobs. But on smaller ones, he only used Rachel.

She would go sleuthing around, taking pictures, following suspects, and reporting to him everything that she had found. She even helped solve a few petty larceny cases for him. Yet, she never felt confident enough to take an entire case alone. Her father tried to push her, but somehow, the ridicule she had endured from the more successful schoolmates always seemed to be a putdown. They would laugh at her and ridicule her. And all that just because she didn't have the latest fashionable clothes. Since her mom died, she had never wanted to shine.

The more these divas would laugh at her and make fun of her, the more she shied away and never responded. She would just turn and leave. It was her way of dealing with her problems. As she grew up and joined her father in his business, she had become a little more self-assured. But not always. Maybe that is why she didn't date so much. She preferred to keep just a few girlfriends. She felt comfortable among them.

Yet, she was a very curious person. Her indomitable resolve to solve any kind of mystery made her good and her father's perfect partner. He hoped that one day, she would take over the detective agency they were building together, and he told her so. It made her so proud.

In her and her father's mind, they knew they would find her mother's murderer. They just had to keep looking. Her father never rested. He continued to add and tape articles or pictures on the wall in his bedroom. To the day someone killed him, her father was always looking at posters of wanted people, hoping one day to find his wife's murderer. But there were never real clues. Sometimes, her father would become so engrossed in his detective practice and hunting for her mother's murderer that he had little time for Rachel.

But then, a fresh case would come up where he needed her help. Their relationship would then smooth out. After all, she was now his employee, and one day, she hoped she would be his work partner. They always paid the bills. Actually, they were doing well.

Rachel and her father collaborated on a case involving embezzlement four years ago. A real shithead. His name

was Joe Nelson. She would never forget him or forgive him.

She shook her head and tried not to delve into the past, but the haunting would always come back to torment her. She fell into a slumber and relived the circumstances that led to her father's death.

Joe Nelson was one of those rich, arrogant people who talked a lot about themselves. He owned a small accounting firm. She remembered how he flaunted his position and wealth to anybody who would listen.

Several of his clients became suspicious when funds in their accounts seemed to be missing. Rachel thought Joe was shifty, but she wouldn't put it past him to be a crook.

She recalled the case. It involved Joe Nelson and was more complicated than their usual petty larceny, home breaking, surveillance of unfaithful husbands, and sometimes unfaithful wives.

Rachel tossed the sheets off. It was getting too hot, but she didn't feel like getting up. She wanted so badly to forget about life, but she knew her father would not like it. She still mourned his death.

She fell back into a slumber and dreamt of the events that led to her father's death. Who had killed him?

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Rachel tossed around as she continued to relive her and her father's last case.

Their client, Jerome Butler, was a self-made man. He was

in his forties, the same age as her dad. Both Jerome and her dad had gone to the same schools and had been buddies ever since. Rachel had met him. He was an impressive man at 6' 2", muscular, with bushy red hair that flowed down to his shoulders.

Jerome's family had money, but he had started his furniture business on his own. His pride and joy was his first furniture store in downtown Austin. He catered to high-end clientele. Jerome's storefronts were always nicely displayed, with everything in vogue. His store had furniture, paintings, rugs, and accessories for all tastes. Rachel always enjoyed looking at the window displays and dreaming of, maybe one day, being able to afford a nice couch set with an imported Chinese coffee table. But then, she and her father would have to do better.

Jerome and her dad had kept in touch, and they would meet once a month at the CRU Food & Wine Bar on Second Street for a few glasses of rich red wine, some appetizers, or a plate of charcuterie. There, they would chitchat about their lives, their high school football days, and their early flings. Reminiscing about their younger days had always been a lift for her father since he had lost Rachel's mother.

In their last meeting, Jerome confided that he felt something was fishy about his accounts. He suspected that his accountant, Joe Nelson, was stealing his money.

"I cannot understand why the store in the last few months has been losing money when our sales have been doing about the same as before. We have had no losses, thefts, or merchandise damages. I asked Joe what had happened,

and Joe told me that the problem seemed to be because the sales were down, and higher taxes had eaten the margin.”

Jerome took a breath and said, “I told him I had discussed the sales situation with my employees, and they did not think sales had slowed down. Online sales have been growing for the last year. Joe then told me that there were big losses because of the stock market.”

Jerome continued: “I still do not understand because I have never invested in stocks. It has always been bonds and the like. And these have not depreciated or lost value.

“I asked Joe about it, and he told me that maybe I had not remembered but that I had asked him to get better returns on my money.

“I didn’t remember ever asking him that. Anyway, I requested a financial review, but he has been avoiding me ever since. I have not been able to reach him for over a week. I tried, but he never returned my calls. I even went by his office only to be told he was not in.

“Seems like something is fishy. Another friend who deals with Joe has experienced the same thing. Could he have made poor investments, or is he stealing? Anyway, could you look into this for me?”

Bill said, “Sure, no problem.”

When he got home that night, Bill had a hard time sleeping. His mind was on overdrive, thinking of how to tackle this new assignment. He got up early. He couldn’t wait any longer to discuss the new assignment with Rachel. Thirty minutes later, she got on it. After browsing

the internet, Facebook, and Nelson Accounting's website, Rachel found out that there was not much about Joe Nelson's life or his past. It was like he had never existed before five years ago. She discussed it with her father and offered to investigate more of Nelson's past and potentially his business. He agreed that this would be a good place to start.

Joe had bought and refurbished an older office building on Exposition Blvd. He kept his office in a private area of that building. Rachel decided that this was where she might find more of his potential shady dealings and paperwork. But that would be dangerous. She would have to sneak inside the office undetected.

Rachel stopped for a while, trying to think of a way to solve her dilemma. How could she get hold of these files? Joe Nelson was a smart individual. It would not be easy, but she knew in her heart that she could do it—if not for herself, but to prove to her father that she could.

After researching the website, she found out that Elsa, an old friend from high school, worked as an executive secretary at Nelson's office. Could she get her to help?

The next day, Rachel located the building and strolled up and down the street, waiting for Elsa to exit. It was lunchtime. She hoped Elsa would recognize her. She needed some quiet time with her.

A five-foot-two svelte woman, blond hair tied in a ponytail, came out of the building with another friend. Rachel immediately recognized Elsa, even though she had