

THROUGH

BARBARA

THE

FISTER

CRACKS



MINOTAUR BOOKS  NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

THROUGH THE CRACKS. Copyright © 2010 by Barbara Fister. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. For information, address St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

Lyrics from "Anthem" by Leonard Cohen © 1992 Sony/ATV Music Publishing.
All rights reserved. Used by permission.

www.minotaurbooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fister, Barbara.

Through the cracks / Barbara Fister.—1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN: 978-0-312-37492-1

1. Women detectives—Fiction. 2. Rapists—Fiction. 3. Rape—Investigation—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3556.I81466T48 2010

813'.54—dc22

2009047479

First Edition: May 2010

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Rosemary and Tim,

Tim and Rosemary

This page intentionally left blank

A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

This story was inspired in part by the work of the Center on Wrongful Convictions at Northwestern University and Adalberto United Methodist Church in Chicago, where immigration rights activists facing deportation have been given sanctuary. Books that I found particularly useful (and well worth reading) are *Surviving Justice: America's Wrongfully Convicted and Exonerated* compiled by Dave Eggers, James M. Doyle's *True Witness: Cops, Courts, Science, and the Battle Against Misidentification*, Susan J. Brison's *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, and Kevin Davis's *Defending the Damned: Inside Chicago's Cook County Public Defender's Office*. Thanks are due also to Dan Mandel, and to Gina Scarpa for her intuitive grasp of how stories work. I also owe a special debt to Maddy, DJ, Nicole, Sherry, and the community of readers they have fostered.

This page intentionally left blank

There is a crack, a crack in everything.
That's how the light gets in.

—*Leonard Cohen*, “Anthem”

This page intentionally left blank

This page intentionally left blank

O N E

I knew I couldn't run much farther. Blood pounded behind my ears. The sinews of my legs sang with a fine pain like high tension wires humming in the wind. I was past the point of rational thought when I noticed motion at the far edge of my peripheral vision. A car was approaching from behind. As it closed in, I checked my mental map of the area. There was a vacant lot ahead that I could cut through. But before I could reach it the car accelerated sharply, swinging around the corner to block my path. I could barely stop before careening into it, my palms smacking against the hood as I tried to keep my balance. Only then did I see who was inside, leaning over to throw open the passenger door of his Jeep. "Jesus, Dugan. Trying to run me over?"

"Get in." It was a sharp command.

"Why?"

He had his jacket pushed back to clear his holster as his eyes scanned the street, on full alert. "Who's chasing you?"

"Nobody." Breathing hard, I wiped sweat out of my eyes with the heel of my hand. "Just getting some exercise."

He stared at me. "Looked like the hounds of hell were after you."

I leaned on the open door, a little dizzy from the sudden stop, and massaged a calf muscle that had tightened painfully. "Not unless you're talking about that obnoxious dachshund down the street, but he's tied up."

“Sit down a minute, anyway, catch your breath.” I hesitated, then climbed in. He turned to rummage in a duffel bag on the backseat and handed me a bottle of water. I cracked it open and drank half of it in thirsty gulps.

“When I see people running like that in this neighborhood, it’s usually not for exercise,” Dugan said.

“So I should drive over to the lakeshore and use the jogging path like normal people?” I said. “This is where I live.”

“I know.” His affable response felt like a rebuke. Of course he knew where I lived. He’d spent hours all summer helping me transform the neglected scrap of land behind my West Side two-flat into a real garden with a brick terrace and raised flower beds overflowing with color. “You look tired,” he said. “Still having trouble sleeping?”

I drank the rest of the water and set the empty bottle on the floor. “I just ran three miles.”

“As if the dachshunds of hell were after you. Haven’t seen you in a while. How’s it going?”

“The garden’s a mess. Everything’s dying.”

“Guess I should have warned you. That happens in the fall.”

“All that work, then you get one lousy frost and all that’s left is a bunch of dead stalks. What’s the point?”

“You get to do it all over again in the spring.”

The sun had gone down and the October air was crisp. I rubbed my arms, feeling chilled. My fingers unconsciously found the places on my upper arm where a bullet had passed through, leaving a dimple on the front, a welt of scar tissue where it exited. It had been a minor injury, quickly healed. My closest friend hadn’t been so lucky. Though over a year had passed since Jim Tilquist had died, it hadn’t gotten any easier to deal with.

I realized Dugan was watching me. Like most cops, he was good at taking things in without giving anything away. Still, I felt exposed, so I untied the hooded jacket I had knotted around my waist and

slipped it on. It hid the scars from view, but I could tell Dugan knew what made it hard for me to sleep, what made me run until my thoughts shut down.

Though our careers with the Chicago Police Department had overlapped, Dugan's path hadn't crossed mine until after I'd resigned and took out a private investigator's license. He had taken advantage of the opening at Harrison Area Violent Crimes to transfer from an administrative post at headquarters to a position where he could spend more time on the street. He was a good detective, and unusually free of cynicism given he'd been on the job for seventeen years. Though he was dedicated and hardworking, his true passion was growing things. The moment he first saw the neglected wasteland that was my excuse for a backyard he started imagining the possibilities.

Six months earlier, we had bumped into each other at a Division Street café. Though it was a wintery day, with snowflakes squalling out of a leaden sky, he pulled out an envelope and started sketching out what I could do with my small patch of weeds and dirt. A few days later, in the midst of a sloppy thaw, he showed up at my place with tools and a six-pack of Leinenkugel's, putting me to work until I had blisters on my hands, dirt wedged under my fingernails, and a close acquaintance with back muscles I hadn't even known were there. He came by most Saturdays, but once the growing season came to an end, our get-togethers grew less frequent. We hadn't seen each other for almost a month.

"What brings you up here on a Wednesday evening?" I asked. "One of my neighbors misbehaving?"

"No doubt, but nobody's reported it yet. I had an errand to run. Stopped by your place to see if you had time to grab some dinner. You weren't home, so I figured you must be busy with one of your kids."

"My kids? What a horrible thought."

“Figure of speech. The wayward youth you specialize in.”

“I was never convinced I was cut out to be a parent. Now I know for sure I’m not.”

“That bad?”

“Not really. They’re good kids, just messed up. We only had two crises this month. One of them is in the hospital. The other one’s in rehab. Again.”

“The one in the hospital—it’s not Jim’s kid, is it?”

“No. Sophie’s been doing fine lately.”

By chance, I had found a strange niche in my new profession. After helping the Tilquists find their daughter, who had bipolar disorder and tended to disappear from home during manic episodes, word of mouth led to my working for a handful of North Shore families with troubled teenagers. Whenever they lost track of their offspring they’d give me a call. I wasn’t always able to find the kids before they did something stupid or got themselves hurt, but it gave their desperate parents the sense they were doing something. There was no shortage of potential clients. It wouldn’t be hard to make it a full-time specialty, but it was emotionally taxing work, so I balanced it with more routine investigative jobs, most of them for Thea Adelman, a lawyer who specialized in civil rights cases. We didn’t get along very well, but her dry irascibility was a refreshing contrast to parental anguish.

“I might have a new client,” I told Dugan. “This woman e-mailed me out of the blue a couple of days ago asking if I was free to work on something.”

“Another wayward youth?”

“I don’t think so. But she didn’t tell me what it was about and hasn’t responded since. Maybe the rates scared her off.” Which was disappointing. I wasn’t sure my aging furnace would last through another Chicago winter, and replacing it wouldn’t be cheap.

“What about dinner? There’s a new Puerto Rican place not far

from here that—” His cell phone rang as he spoke and he grimaced. “Shit.” He had a cryptic conversation, mostly grunts, before punching it off. “Great timing. Sorry, I—”

“No problem. I know how it goes.”

“A guy who’s given me decent information before just got picked up on a drug beef. Says he used to run with Diggy Salazar, wants to deal. He probably doesn’t know anything, but . . .” He shrugged.

“You’re working on the Miller case?”

“Everyone is. Highest priority, according to the chief of detectives.”

It wasn’t surprising, given that the controversial case was getting national attention. Kathy Miller, a young woman living on the North Side, had disappeared six months ago. Though her body had never been found, the police were treating the case as a homicide; the blood, bone fragments, and brain matter found in an alleyway near the bar where she’d last been seen made it unlikely that she had survived the attack. That didn’t stop her family and friends from holding out hope. Her face had become an icon of innocence: blond hair ruffled by a breeze, a wide smile, eyes squinting against the sun in a family video that ran over and over on the television news. The search for Kathy Miller gripped the city. In September, an undocumented Mexican immigrant was arrested and charged with her murder.

Digoberto Salazar had been caught on a surveillance camera as he left the scene of a liquor store holdup only blocks from where Miller had been attacked. Police believed he’d jacked Miller’s car and bludgeoned her to death when she resisted. He’d hidden her body, then abandoned her car in a vacant lot in Cicero, where it was stripped almost to the chassis before the police spotted it.

That was the theory, anyway, but it wouldn’t be easy to prove without the body. Still, the arrest of an illegal immigrant for the murder, after months of speculation and agonized appeals from the girl’s family,

had caused a furious outcry. The Cook County state's attorney, Peter Vogel, was prosecuting the case himself and making the most of the media attention, assuring the public the case against Salazar was solid and that justice would be served. He had plenty to gain from the publicity, given he was rumored to be a hot pick for the next gubernatorial race.

"Area Three detectives are running the show," Dugan added, "but Salazar's from our turf, so we're working all his connections. The SA's going to need every piece of evidence we can find to make this case stick. Not that we don't have other things going on. I got four unsolved homicides on my desk, but they're just kids shooting each other; business as usual. No overtime for that." There was a hint of jaded sarcasm in his tone, unusual for him.

"I warned you what it was like to work at Harrison."

"It's good to get back to the streets, but sometimes . . . like, I got this call just before I left work. This woman's son was killed in a drive-by eight months ago. No leads, no wits, nothing. She checks in every week. I never have any news for her."

"She just needs to know you haven't forgotten."

"I suppose. I better get going. Can I drop you off at home?"

"No, I need to finish my run. Thanks for the water."

"Anni—" He looked at me, searching for the right words. The ones he came up with were like him, straightforward and direct. "You doing okay?"

I missed Jim. His loss was a wound that wouldn't heal, and I ached with a feeling of guilt I could never explain. "I'll be all right," I said, answering as honestly as I could. Dugan nodded, understanding what I meant. It would never be okay again, not really, but I would find a way to get by.

We made vague promises to get together soon. He drove off to interview his potential source and I jogged the eight blocks back to my house, unlocked the side gate, and went through the gangway

to the back garden, where I found not everything was dying. Three pots were grouped near my Adirondack chair, bronze and gold chrysanthemums hardy enough to take a little frost. That must have been the errand Dugan was running before he rescued me from imaginary pursuers.

There was a folded piece of paper tucked in among some of the flowers. I reached for the note, feeling apprehensive. I liked Dugan. I liked the easy way things were between us, but there was just enough attraction there that things might get complicated. It was a relief to see it was just a few words scrawled on a sheet of notebook paper: "I opened your gate with a paper clip. Get yourself a decent lock, Koskinen."

I smiled to myself, picturing Dugan with his crooked nose and cockeyed smile, carrying the pots from his car and arranging them around my chair. I stuffed the note in my pocket, then sat for a moment under the walnut tree, looking up at the sky, a pure, deep blue through the lattice of the nearly leafless branches, a few stars showing like pinpricks in the darkness overhead. The three-legged stray cat, who lived in the alley and liked to pretend he belonged to nobody but himself, yet expected his food bowl to be filled on a regular basis, peered through a tangle of dried vines, annoyed that he had to share his night garden with an interloper.

The chill finally drove me inside. I switched on my phone and found a message waiting. I returned the call. The conversation was brief, but promising. A woman named Jill McKenzie had something confidential she wanted to discuss with me. She was willing to pay me for my time and travel, even though she lived some four hours from Chicago, just across the Iowa border. I agreed to drive over to see her the next day; I figured I could be there around noon. As soon as she finished giving me directions to her house, she hung up so abruptly it was almost rude.

I had no idea what she wanted me to do, but it would cost her a lot

to bring me to Iowa to talk about it. Maybe if our meeting went well I would be able to afford a new furnace after all.

Toward midnight, I set my alarm clock and went to bed. Of late, I had grown used to jerking into an alert state just as I started to drift off, or being roused within a few hours by dreams that made me reluctant to go back to sleep.

But this time it was screaming that woke me up.

T W O

In my befuddled state it took a moment to realize it wasn't part of a nightmare. That high-pitched wail had to come from Daniel, the toddler who lived in the apartment downstairs, but I'd never heard him sound so terrified, so frantic. Sirens in the distance were howling along with him. I blinked at the bedside clock: 4:23. As I disentangled myself from the sheets, I heard feet pounding up my back steps. "Federal agents! Open the door!" A fist hammered on it. "*Abre la puerta!*"

I was wearing nothing but a faded Chicago marathon T-shirt from five years ago, so I groped in the dark for a pair of sweats. As I slipped them on, my door shuddered under blows from a fist. "Hang on, I'm coming!" I called out. I sidled to the window. There was enough light from a streetlamp to see three shapes in bulletproof vests and blue windbreakers clustered on my porch. One man had turned to guard their rear; there were large white letters on his jacket spelling out POLICE, and under that, ICE. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

"I'm opening the door, okay?" I called out. I switched on a light and worked the bolts, my hands clumsy with tension. As soon as the last bolt was unfastened, the door flew open, banging hard against the wall, and a man pushed past me into the room, his eyes scanning from side to side. I reached for his arm. "Hey, what're you—"

It was a mistake to touch him. He reacted automatically, knotting the back of my shirt in his fist and shoving me hard against the wall,

twisting my arm up behind me in a practiced move. The other two men who followed him in had their weapons drawn. “What the hell’s going on?”

“José Guerrero. Where is he?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

“He’s on our list. He lives here.”

“Nobody named . . . wait, are you talking about Joey? He used to live downstairs. He moved out over a year ago.”

I didn’t like the pleading tone that I heard in my voice. With the man’s weight braced against me I felt trapped and had to draw on everything I had to resist an impulse to struggle. There was a trembling eagerness traveling like a current through the hand that gripped my wrist; he was just waiting for an excuse to hurt someone.

One of the men checked the closet, another kicked my bathroom door open, his gun held up in both hands beside his cheek like a character in an action movie.

“Where’d he go?” The breath of the man holding me was hot on my neck.

“I want to see your warrant.”

“We don’t need a warrant. Just answer the fucking question.”

“You damned well need a warrant to enter my house.” The angle of my arm was notched up, pain shooting across my shoulders, making sparks go off behind my eyes. “I was a cop for ten years,” I said between my teeth. “I know what I’m talking about. You’re breaking the law.”

“Just calm down and answer the question. Where’d Guerrero go?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t tell me.” My skin crawled from his touch, my muscles spasming with an almost overwhelming urge to fight free.

“Check her for weapons,” the man who held me said over his shoulder. I saw a blue latex glove move toward my ribs. I closed my eyes as hands felt around my hips, down my legs to the ankles, then up

toward my crotch. I clamped my teeth down on my lower lip. *Don't struggle. Don't resist. . . .*

The hands went away and my arm was released. I turned around to face the agent, blinking away tears of pain and rage.

"So you're not gonna help us?" he said.

I swallowed my anger and spoke calmly. "I told you, I don't know where he went. He didn't leave a forwarding address."

Another agent jabbed his finger at my face. "We find out you're lying, that he's still hanging around here? We'll be back."

The floor shook as the three men headed for the door. I caught a glimpse through the window of their heads bobbing past as they tromped down the stairs. I leaned back against the wall and slid into a crouch, trembling.

I focused on taking deep and steady breaths until the tremors subsided. Then I pulled on shoes and a jacket and stepped out onto my porch. The dead hour before 5:00 A.M. was usually the quietest time of the night, when the clock ran slower for officers working the first watch. But not this night. There was palpable tension in the air. I heard frightened voices raised somewhere down the blocks. Sirens called to each other from every direction in the dark. I went down the stairs and tapped my knuckles on the back door of the apartment downstairs. "It's me, Anni."

A bolt turned, the door opened. My tenant, Adam Tate, stared at me, his eyes wide with shock. He was holding his fourteen-month-old son, Daniel. The baby had handfuls of his dad's T-shirt bunched in his fists and his legs were clamped tightly around his father's waist, clinging so hard, I had the impression that if Adam let go, he would still hang on, like a determined crab. "You guys okay?" I asked.

Adam nodded, as Daniel looked at me suspiciously. The skin under his eyes was stained a fierce pink from crying; even his forehead was flushed. He breathed a heavy, shuddering sigh, then buried his face against his dad's chest with a little whimper. Adam patted his back distractedly. "Come in out of the cold. That was freakin' weird. Never had police bust in like that before. Can they do that?"

"They're the ones with guns." I followed him inside. For a moment I thought the agents had trashed the place, but then remembered it always looked like this. Toys, papers, empty Red Bull cans, and clothing were scattered everywhere, and the kitchen counters were cluttered with dirty dishes and crusted carryout containers. Adam was able to write elegant computer code and played both chess and classical guitar with professional skill, but he was strangely oblivious to basic domestic tasks. His apartment always looked like a frat house for geeky toddlers.

"Isn't it, like, illegal?" he asked.

"Yup. They don't need warrants to stop and search non-citizens, but suspecting an illegal immigrant is in someone's home doesn't cancel out the fourth amendment." I rubbed my shoulder, still aching from having my arm twisted behind me. "They were pretty pumped up. I think they'd kind of lost track of the legalities."

Adam tried to shift his son to one hip, but that only made the little boy cling tighter. "I don't think Daniel is going to let me put him down anytime soon."

"Poor little guy. He must have been terrified."

"We were asleep when they started banging on the door. Soon as I opened it, they ran in, waving guns and shit, like in the movies. They asked who else lived in the building, and three of them went up to your place. Sorry, I didn't—"

"It's not your fault. Best thing to do with guys like that is to cooperate."

"They told me they were looking for some dude with a Hispanic

name, that they're rounding up gang members all over the city. Guess they got the wrong house."

"Sort of. There was a guy who was born in Mexico living in your apartment last year. He wasn't in a gang, but apparently his name and this address was on some kind of list." Joey's parents had brought him across the border without papers when he was not much older than Daniel, so he had grown up under constant threat of deportation to a country he didn't remember, where they spoke a language he barely knew. I only found out he was undocumented after police and FBI agents had flooded the neighborhood the previous year, looking for a fugitive and, fearing deportation, he abruptly packed up and moved out.

"Soon as they realized we were, you know, white, they backed off and apologized," Adam said. "But man, it's weird to see guns pointed at your baby."

"No kidding. Well, I just wanted to make sure you guys were okay."

"We're fine," Adam said, but as I let myself out, he was rubbing his little boy's back as if to reassure himself that they really were.

There was no chance I'd get back to sleep; my nerves were fizzing with adrenaline. Back in my flat I started a pot of coffee, then picked up my cell phone and scrolled through my contacts until I found Azad Abkerian's number.

Az was the senior reporter on the courts and cops beat at the *Chicago Tribune*. I'd first met the portly legend, dressed as usual in a ketchup-stained tie and rumpled suit, at a crime scene during my first year on the job. Over the next ten years, we'd helped each other out from time to time. Even though I was no longer with the police, he checked in regularly for tips or comments. I wasn't sure if he'd thank me for waking him up, but if this really was a citywide operation, he wouldn't want his counterpart at the *Sun-Times* to get it first. "Hey, Az. Sorry to call so early, but—"

“I’m up anyway. Whatcha want?”

“My house was just raided by ICE agents.”

He laughed. “No shit? That’s what you get for living in a Hispanic neighborhood. They been sweeping places from Logan Square to Back of the Yards. Right now, I’m in Little Village. Feels like the place is under siege.” From his tone, you’d think it was the best entertainment he’d had in years.

“What’s this all about?”

“Part of a nationwide operation, in the works for months, according to Homeland Security. They’re supposedly arresting dangerous criminals in six cities. Far as I can tell, all the people they picked up haven’t committed any crimes apart from being undocumented. The CPD was involved because of the gang angle, but now the superintendent is denying any responsibility for this mess. The feds apparently failed to update their lists of targets even when CPD gang specialists told them it was way out of date. A narcotics detective I talked to told me one of these cowboys actually drew a weapon on *him*. He was disgusted, said they were totally unprofessional. And this is a Chicago cop talking, not Miss Manners.”

“The agents who came to my house were really aggressive. One of them actually told me in my own living room that he didn’t need a warrant.”

“They must have some of those Washington lawyers busy making up new definitions for ‘search and seizure.’ I called D.C. Ever try getting through to anybody there outside office hours? What a joke.” I heard a rustle of paper. “Finally got a quote from some assistant to an assistant to the special agent in charge of the raids . . . where is that? Oh, yeah. ‘These people move around a lot. We may have to go to six places before we find them.’ Like, it’s okay to raid homes without warrants because one of these times we’ll actually find the guy we’re looking for. So, what were they doing at your place?”

“I rented the apartment downstairs to a man who, it turned out,

was undocumented. He moved out over a year ago, though. They practically tore the door off its hinges when they came in.”

“How you feel about that? Gimme a juicy quote.”

“I would, but I don’t think you’re allowed to use those words in the paper.”

“So, translate.”

“This isn’t how a democracy is supposed to work.”

“Gee, thanks. A civics lesson. I already got the ACLU for that. This is putting the mayor in a hell of a tight spot. The city doesn’t do immigration enforcement; that’s been the policy since Harold Washington’s day, and Hizzoner doesn’t want to change it, not when almost a third of the city’s Hispanic. But he’s got to pay attention to the other two-thirds, and given how people are responding to Diggy Salazar’s arrest, he’s between a rock and a hard place. The fact Salazar’s an illegal—” He broke off abruptly. “Whoa, hear that? Could be gunfire. I gotta go.”

So long as I was wide awake, I decided to head out for my meeting, even though it wasn’t much past 5:00 A.M. I would be early, but at least I would avoid the worst of rush hour traffic. I showered, dressed, poured coffee into a travel mug, and filled the cat’s bowl with Little Friskies. The neighborhood was still crackling with tension as I walked to my car, people huddled together on porches talking nervously.

Once in the car, I switched on the local NPR station. In between news from the Middle East and financial reports, there was state and national coverage of the raids. The DHS secretary was already calling the operation a success, with over a thousand lawbreakers detained across the country. An unnamed Chicago police officer disagreed, describing a chaotic operation, poorly coordinated and dangerous, netting few if any serious criminals.

“Man on the street” reactions were mixed. Some said it was wrong, others said it was about time. “Illegals have no reason to expect the

same rights as citizens,” one man sputtered. “They’re illegal, period.” Another voiced a more pointed criticism: “Look at what they’re doing to the crime rate. If the authorities had cracked down earlier, Diggy Salazar would have been in jail, or back in Mexico, instead of here in Chicago killing innocent women.”

I kept the radio on at a low mutter as I headed west, turning it up when, shortly after 6:00 A.M., Peter Vogel, the Cook County state’s attorney, issued a statement that sounded like a campaign speech. He congratulated Homeland Security on the success of its efforts and urged local law enforcement to cooperate with all federal agencies as a matter of policy. It was time for Chicago and Cook County to drop outdated practices that protected illegal immigrants and made the city a sanctuary for criminal gang members.

The mayor, too, held a brief press conference, typically pugnacious and uninformative. They were looking into it, they’d get to the bottom of it, and the media was blowing it all out of proportion. It sounded word for word like previous mayoral responses to law enforcement bumbles.

The radio started to crackle as I reached the limits of the reception area. I switched it off and watched farm fields roll past as the sun rose behind me.

T H R E E

When I reached Jill McKenzie's sleepy college town, nestled against the bluffs of the Mississippi River, I stopped at a café and killed time reading the local weekly paper cover to cover. The sparse police reports included a vandalized mailbox and the theft of a pumpkin off someone's front porch. It made me more curious than ever why a woman who lived in a place like this wanted to hire a Chicago investigator.

All I knew about Jill McKenzie were the few tidbits I had found on-line: she was forty-three years old and had no criminal record. She owned a modest two-story home, built in 1912, according to the county assessor's records. She was an associate professor of sociology at St. Vincent's College and had published several academic papers and a well-received book on ethnic change in rural Iowa. She served on several college committees and was a tough grader, but fair, according to ratemyprofessor.com. None of it gave me any hint about what we would be discussing.

Though it was still well before our appointed time, I left the café and drove to the address she had given me over the phone, a few miles out into the countryside, so remote that my cell phone could barely pick up a signal when I tried to phone ahead. I bumped over some railroad tracks, passed a grain elevator, and followed a washboarded gravel road to the top of the bluff overlooking the town. Her home

was a weathered frame farmhouse surrounded by open pastureland. The setting would have been bleak if it weren't for its spectacular view of the river valley, brilliant with fall colors.

When I knocked on the front door there was no answer. I could hear the whine of a power tool coming from an outbuilding behind the house, but as I started around to the back, the noise ceased. I called out a greeting and stepped through the wide-open doors of what looked like converted stables. A pickup truck was parked on one side. The rest of the space was taken up with carpentry equipment: tools hung neatly on a Peg-Board, a workbench holding planers, sanders, and chisels, shelves filled with cans of stain and finish. A plank of wood lay on a table saw, fresh sawdust spilled around it, the air scented with resin. The room was perfectly still, except for motes of dust that swam lazily in the sunlight that slanted through the open door. There was something eerie about the dead silence in the room, as if whoever had been working there mere moments ago had been swept through some cosmic vortex, leaving behind nothing but spinning flecks of light.

I turned to peer into the shadows on the other side of the room and my throat seized up. Two brindled mastiffs the size of Shetland ponies were standing, still as statues, behind the pickup truck. They watched me with lowered heads, eyes unblinking, identical ruffs of fur bristling across muscular shoulders, not making a sound. As we stared at each other, the silence was broken by the familiar *snick* of a hammer being drawn back. I glanced toward the sound and saw a .38 Detective's Special trained on my chest. The woman holding it moved out from the shelter of the truck's cab. She was as silent as the dogs and had the same aura of lethal competence.

"You're early," she said, turning the barrel to one side and easing the hammer down with a practiced move before holstering the gun. Apparently that was an all-clear signal to the dogs. One nuzzled her hand as she came around from behind the truck; the other came up

to sniff my crotch with interest. “Leo, don’t be rude. Just push him away.”

I let Leo have his sniff, feeling the aftereffects of adrenaline wash through me until even my fingertips tingled. The dog seemed friendly now, but those jaws were big enough to take my hand off at the wrist. I wasn’t any less nervous about Jill McKenzie. She was graceful and slim, with an attractive fine-boned face and strawberry blond hair cropped short as a boy’s, but there was nothing delicate about her. In spite of her slight build, she was fit and muscular, and she studied me with the same cold, unreadable expression of a street-hardened cop.

“Do you usually wear a gun when you do carpentry?” I asked her.

“Always.” She held out a hand. Her grip was firm. My fingers were shaking, a difference she noted by raising an ironic eyebrow. “Let’s go inside.”

Leo followed us into the old-fashioned kitchen, his nails clicking on the hardwood floor, while his twin settled on the back porch, as if they had divvied up the guard duties in advance. Jill McKenzie pointed me toward a seat at the kitchen table, then slipped off the down vest she had been wearing in the chilly stable, unclipped her holster from her belt, and set the holstered gun on the counter.

“I wasn’t expecting you for another hour,” she said, her words as clipped and controlled as her actions.

“I wasn’t expecting to have a gun drawn on me. For the second time today,” I said as I realized it was true. “There was a big immigration sweep in Chicago early this morning,” I explained. “Some agents showed up at my house looking for a guy who’d moved out a long time ago.”

“I heard about it on the news. What a mess. They actually had their weapons drawn?”

“They were a little overheated.”

“We had a big raid last spring on a meatpacking plant in Postville, one of the communities where I’ve done my research. It caused a lot of hardship for hundreds of families.”

“Sounds as if most of the people who were detained this morning weren’t the gangbangers they were supposedly looking for, just undocumented. But there’s a lot of anti-immigrant feeling in Chicago right now because the guy arrested for murdering Kathy Miller is Mexican.”

“I haven’t been able to stop thinking about that case. They still haven’t found her body?”

“No, and that’s making it tougher for the police. They’re under a lot of pressure to make a conviction. There’s been so much press coverage.”

“Naturally. She was young and white and pretty. Her family threw themselves into keeping her in the public eye. High-profile crimes like this one become big stories because they tend to focus and amplify the fears people have about race and class.” She made a face. “Sorry. You can tell I’m a sociologist.”

“It sounds familiar. My grandfather taught sociology.” Leo came to sit beside me, after sniffing around the perimeters of the room, checking for intruders, bombs, or stray crumbs. It was time to get down to business. “The gun you’re carrying, does that have something to do with this job you want to talk about?”

She opened the refrigerator and peered inside. “I guess you could say that.”

“Look, I’m not a bodyguard. If you’re looking for someone who can provide personal protection—”

“I’m not. Coffee?”

“Thanks.” Leo rested his big head in my lap as she shook beans into a grinder and filled a carafe at the sink. I tentatively scratched behind the dog’s ears and he sighed happily.

She punched the coffeemaker on and sat across the table from me. Leo immediately switched allegiances, padding over and slumping to the floor beside her chair. “The reason I carry a gun goes back more than twenty years,” she said. “When I was an undergraduate I was raped. For months I was totally disabled by fear. I realized I had to do something to recover some sense of control, so I bought a gun and learned to use it. I took self-defense classes and still work out every day. I started wearing my hair short so that nobody can grab it and drag me into the bushes. When I moved into this house, I rooted out the lilacs planted around the porch so now I can see for half a mile in every direction. All of these precautions are superstitions, really, like touching wood, but they give me the illusion of safety.”

“Leo probably helps, too,” I said, and his tail thumped against the floor, hearing his name.

“He and his brother look impressive, but they’re not trained as attack dogs.” She reached down to scratch his ears and he drooled happily.

“What’s happened recently that has you on edge?” I asked. She gave me a puzzled look. “You looked prepared to shoot me out there.”

“That’s how I respond when someone sneaks up on me.” She narrowed her eyes, reading something in my expression. “I have a right to defend myself.”

“Look, I don’t want to get into a debate over the second amendment, but—”

“You just happen to think civilians shouldn’t be armed. But I have a permit, and I practice at a shooting range regularly. I haven’t shot anyone yet.”

There’s always a first time, I thought, but I’d already pushed the boundaries with a potential client. “Must be tough, living on constant alert all these years.”

“It’s better than constant fear. You wore a gun every day when you

were a police officer; it's just as automatic with me, part of getting dressed to go out."

"Even to go into your own backyard?"

"I like living out here in the country, but it's isolated. Building furniture is my hobby. I wouldn't be able to do it if I didn't feel safe."

"Do you wear your gun to work?" I asked, curious.

"I take it with me, but lock it in my car. College regulations."

"What made you contact me? There are a lot of investigators to choose from."

"Nancy Tilquist told me about your work. We know each other professionally. I respect her opinion." I nodded, having already guessed that might be the connection; Jim Tilquist's wife, Nancy, taught anthropology at a small college on the North Shore, and academia is a small, tightly knit world. "I was sorry to hear about her husband's death. I understand you were with him when he was shot."

"Yes. We were close friends."

Her eyes were not blue as I had originally thought, but gray, almost smoky in color, the only thing about her that wasn't sharply-defined and decisive. She studied me for a moment, and I waited for the usual platitudes, already feeling the prickly irritation that came when people who didn't know me offered sympathy. But she simply nodded and moved on. "You work for Thea and Harvey Adelman, that was another factor. They wouldn't hire anyone who wasn't well-qualified. But it really came down to the fact that your grandfather talked about you all the time."

"You knew my grandfather?"

She allowed herself a brief but genuine smile. "He's the reason I'm still a sociologist. He introduced himself after I gave my first paper at a national conference. I was a nervous wreck, and the audience threw me some tough questions that made me want to scrap my dissertation and drop out of grad school. He sensed how shattered I was, and took me to a diner nearby for a cup of coffee. We talked for hours, and after

that I didn't feel so stupid and useless. He became my mentor and friend. He talked about you a lot, you and your brother. He was proud of everything you'd accomplished. So when Nancy told me you were working as a private investigator, it made sense to call you. I need someone I can trust."

"Okay. Let's talk about what you want me to do."

Her lips tightened before she spoke again. "This is confidential, right?"

"Confidential, yes. Privileged, no. If I were served with a subpoena—"

"I'm not worried about that. I just don't want to lose my privacy." She stared out the back window, her hands folded, one thumb rubbing a knuckle on the other hand. For the first time she appeared uncertain, even fragile.

"I'll be discreet," I said. "Of course, if you need more time to think about it—"

She took a breath and squared her shoulders. "No, I'm ready to go ahead with this. I want you to find the man who raped me."