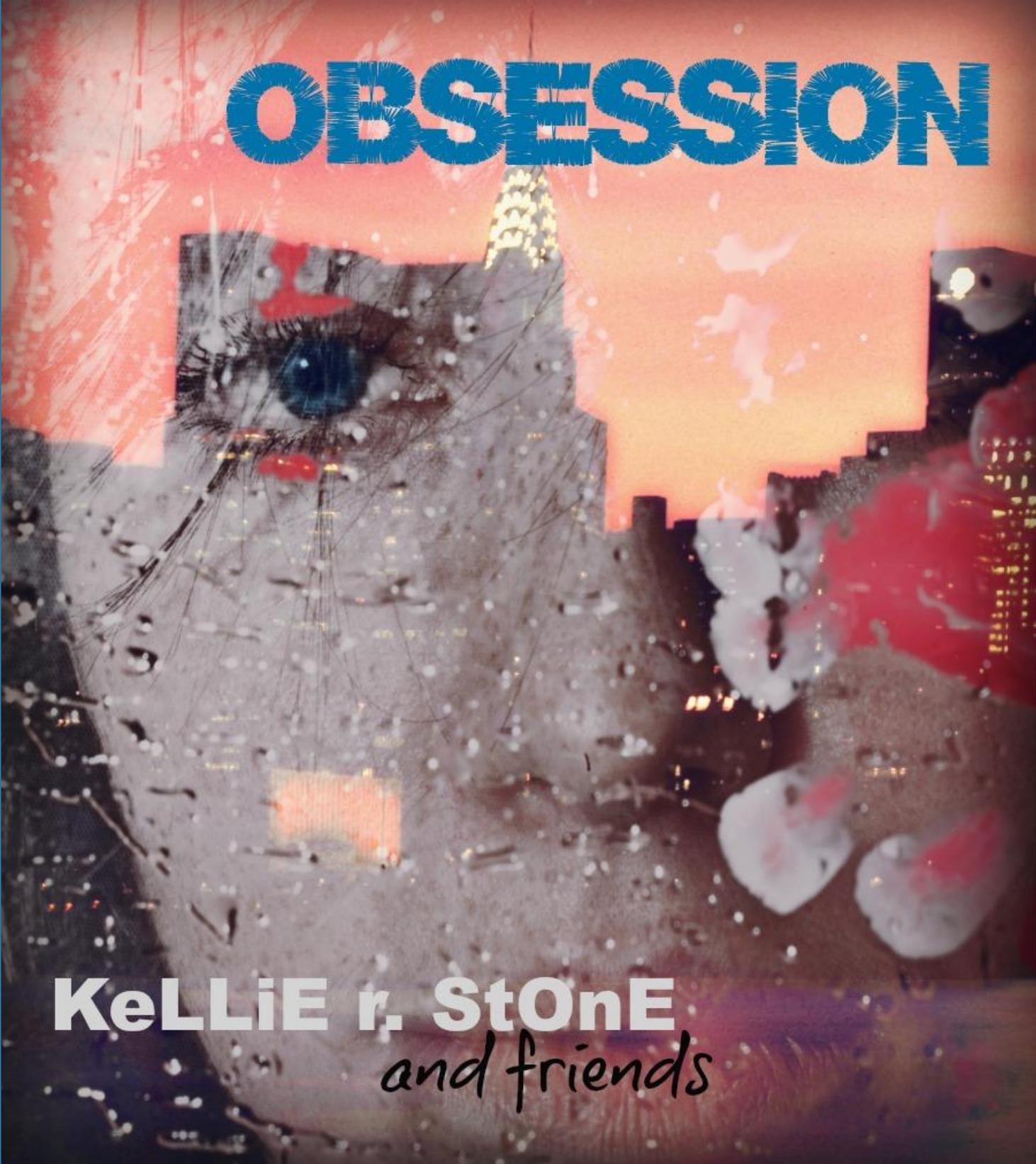


OBSSESSION



KeLLiE r. StOnE
and friends

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OBSSESSION

Chapter One: by Kellie R. Stone

Isabelle Crawford sluiced through four inches of dirty snow, returning from the cafe where the fight started. Her boyfriend Tom followed. She had met him for coffee, not the immature bickering that accompanied her mocha latte. A block up, her apartment building sat on an invisible borderline between affluent snobbery and violent gang activity. She loved the complexity of the city. Though, at the moment, the orchestra of sirens, humming traffic, and tooting horns annoyed her as they mixed with Tom's curt words. She hurried across the four-lane boulevard, purposely moving farther ahead of him.

"I don't understand why you have to spend so much time with him. He's just an old fucker with too much time and money! And, for God sake, he's my father! You don't think that's a little weird for me?" She heard him kick a large clod of snow at the curb behind her. "I don't trust his motives."

Isabelle dropped her head to avoid the brisk January wind. Sighed. "I don't know what the big deal is. You know he's funding my art show... I need to be nice to him. Why is this so hard for you to understand?" She stopped, let him catch up; felt the anger shoot from her blue eyes.

"I just can't do this anymore. You're not the same as when I met you. I... I need some time to think about things... about us." Tom looked away, breaking the emotional eye contact she demanded. "I think we need to take a break."

"Are you breaking up with me?" Her shaky voice shattered the question she never thought she would ask him. If anything, she saw herself moving on first. She pulled on the cold air with a breath that didn't satisfy as much as she thought it would. Instead, it just stung her nose and throat.

"I guess I am," Tom said, turning his face away from the wind, away from her.

"God, you've been so clingy, not to mention moody, since my career has taken off! You never supported me." She turned, tried to walk away. Tom grabbed her upper arm. "What the hell? Let me go!"

"I don't want—"

"What? You don't want to hurt me! It's a little late for that." Isabelle yanked her arm away and left him standing alone in the cold.

Her cell phone rang. She pulled off one glove and rummaged through her oversized bag to see who was calling. Marcus Acosta—the topic of the fight... and the break up. *I can't talk to him right now.* “Dammit!” she conceded and hit the answer button. “Hello, Marcus.”

“Hey, there, Izzy! I have some wonderful news for you.”

“Oh, yeah? I’m just getting in from... a walk. Would you mind if I called you back?” She trotted up the stairs, unlocked her front door and looked around her apartment before entering, as usual.

“How about you come down to the gallery, so I can tell you in person?”

Isabelle dropped her bag on an antique camel back sofa, pulled her pink knit scarf and coat off, and internally sighed, not wanting him to sense she was upset. “Uh, well...sure. I guess I could do that.”

“Great! Can I expect you in about an hour?”

“Yeah, that’s fine. I have something to show you, too.”

“I can’t wait! See you soon,” he said with enthusiasm that intrigued her.

The painting stood on her easel in the corner of her dining room-turned-artist studio. It seemed to stare back at her, gave the same eerie feeling that it had when she found it there upon awakening at 6:00 AM this morning. Though she didn’t remember painting it, she knew the work was hers. There in the right lower corner was her signature: *Izzy Crawford* with an overzealous “I” that looped and turned in such a way that made forgery extremely difficult.

She hadn’t told Tom, or anyone, that she had been having black outs and nightmares. He was right, she wasn’t the same person. A rogue tear surprised her. She wasn’t the type to get emotional over anything, let alone a man. A quick backhanded swipe of her eyes erased the evidence of her momentary grief, bringing her back to the mystery at hand. “How am I going to explain this painting to Marcus? It’s so different.” Her self-inquiry troubled her enough that she decided to hold onto her little secret for a bit longer... at least until she had the chance to see her doctor. “Sleep painting... mmm, maybe I should do it more often. You, my lovely, are one of my best.” She wrapped the 30 X 40 canvas in cloth for the trip to the art gallery.

Izzy found the warm splash of water on her face refreshing. She stared at her reflection for a minute before drying her face. “Who are you, Izzy Crawford?” A quick make-up job and hair brushing renewed her for the day that she hoped went better than the morning had. She added a blazer and colorful scarf to her long-sleeved t-shirt and grabbed the painting on her way out the door.

After a 5-mile trip, the cab pulled up to the curb at Marcus's pride and joy, OBSESSÃO Art Gallery. She loved being there, usually. However, with the break up and her health obscuring her emotions, the place seemed cold and foreign.

Marcus Acosta met her at the door with a broad smile, kissed her on the cheek. "My dear, Izzy, I'm happy you could come so quickly." His slight Portuguese accent echoed through the lofty space.

"Hi. I can't stay long, but I wanted to show you my latest piece."

"Is this it?"

"Yes." Isabelle started to unwrap the canvas.

Marcus stopped her with his large, tanned hands on her arm. "Let's go to the studio upstairs, so we won't be disturbed." He smiled.

"OK." She returned the painting to its home under her arm and followed him up the steps to a room just beyond a balcony that overlooked the entire gallery.

"Oh, put it over here on the easel... let's get a good look at it. By the way, you look lovely."

"Uh... thank you." She couldn't deny the attraction she had for him, hoped that he felt the same. The guilt was still there, though... he was Tom's father. "I hope you like it."

"I'm sure I will love it. You have never disappointed me." His intense gaze lingered on her a long few seconds. "You are very special, Izzy."

She wanted him to kiss her so badly, even though she didn't completely understand her desire for an older man. "I'm glad you think so. Tom doesn't share your opinion of me. He broke up with me this morning."

"I'm so sorry for my son's ignorance. He touched her cheek gently. "You deserve better than that."

"I'll be fine. But, thanks for being here for me." The tender moment evaporated like a cloud, leaving her wonder what the man wanted from her. Did he want her romantically? Did he see her as a daughter? The painting waited.

"This is an unusual subject for me. I don't normally paint women or in such a dark emotion."

"Let's see this masterpiece."

She unwrapped the canvas, moved to the side, and noticed Marcus's face go pale. His eyes widened. "What is it? You don't like it."

He cleared his throat, moved closer. "No, no, it's lovely. I... I am just a little surprised. The woman... she resembles my late wife, Rebecca. It's remarkable, actually. Did Tom show you a photo of her?"

"You're kidding, right?" The eerie feeling from this morning returned. "No. Tom has never said anything about her... only that she died when he was a boy."

"Yes, she had an accident while we were on a trip. I had a quick business meeting and told her to go see some sights while I was gone. They found her at the bottom of a ravine."

Izzy swallowed hard, turned slightly away, trying to hide her shock. "Oh, my God. That's horrible. Did they find out what happened to her?"

"They presumed that she fell over the edge of the embankment. That was it."

"Wow... uh... no wonder Tom never said anything." Her heart thundered in her chest.

"That's no surprise, he was lost for a while. I tried to be there for him, but he blamed me for her death. He said that if I hadn't had so much work, she would still be alive. He still hates me."

And, here she was giving Tom an even greater reason to hate his father. Isabelle put her hand on his shoulder. "He doesn't hate you. He's just hurt," she comforted.

He placed his hand on hers. "Now, how could you have painted this, Izzy? What does it mean?"

She didn't pull her hand away. "I don't know. It's just a painting. I'm sure lots of women look like that," She said but felt that it meant more. Her thoughts drifted to a second painting she could not show him.

"I suppose you're right. Just a coincidence."

"So, you like it?"

"Izzy, I adore it... and, I adore you," he said and pulled her closer. An even longer gaze into her eyes. The kiss was more electrifying than any that she had experienced with Tom.

They followed the moment into a deeper passion than she had imagined could exist between them. It scared her. "What is that news you have for me?" she asked, attempting to

cool things down a bit. Her head started to spin, balance wavered. "I think I need to go, Marcus."

"What is it, Izzy?"

"I just need to go. Will you call me a cab?"

"Of course."

Chapter Two: by Jess Haney

Izzy sat on a small stool in her art studio, thankful that the vertigo spell had passed. She thought about the kiss, staring at the companion painting to the one she revealed to Marcus. A piece that excited and terrified her all the same. This one was of the woman from the first but she wasn't alone. She looked at the painting some more, she knew she felt like she peered into the eyes of pure evil... a murderer.

There was a knock at the door. Izzy precariously threw a white sheet over the painting. The knocking continued. "Hold your horses. I'm coming already!" Izzy opened the door and, to her surprise, Marcus was on the other side with a bouquet of daisies. *How did he know they were my favorite? Thomas.*

She knew it was wrong but Izzy wanted nothing more than to feel his strong hands on her body. She wanted to taste his lips pressed against her own. "Thank you for the flowers Marcus, but what are you doing here? What if someone sees you... and by someone, I mean your son?"

"Don't you worry about that darling. He is pre-occupied at the moment."

Thomas told her that Marcus had cheated during his marriage and even fathered another child. He questioned his character. It didn't matter to her; there was just something about him that made her melt inside. She wasn't sure if it was his corny jokes or how he noticed little details about her, like how she never let the different foods on her plate touch each other. What she did know is that she wanted him. Izzy grabbed the flowers from Marcus and thanked him before heading into the kitchen to retrieve a vase.

Marcus watched her walk back into the room.

"What?"

"You're so beautiful, Izzy." He wrapped his arms around her hips. Izzy moved into him, and he planted a soft, sensual kiss on her lips.

It was official: she was hooked.

Chapter Three: by Teresa Ochs

Izzy slipped further into the moment, overwhelmed by the sensation of his mouth on her neck, his fingers tracing down her back. She knew it was wrong, but she didn't care.

"Holy Shit!" Marcus gasped.

"What is it?" Izzy felt him go rigid. His hands no longer gentle, he held her in a vice grip. She couldn't move. "Marcus! Stop, you're hurting me," Izzy begged, but Marcus didn't comply. "MARCUS! Let me go!"

She pushed away from him with everything she had. "Marcus!" Her yell broke the trance Marcus seemed to be in. He let her go abruptly; the force of her pulling away sent Izzy into a table full of paint brushes and unused canvases. She and the art supplies hit the floor with a crash. "What the hell?"

"Izzy, I am so sorry. I didn't mean... I.. I'm so... Are you okay?" he stammered.

"Yes... I'm fine." Izzy pushed his hand away when he reached out to help her up. "*DON'T touch me!*" Izzy glared and realized her girly crush had just transformed into fear.

Marcus pulled his hand back, turned away and paced. Izzy lifted herself off the floor, watching his every move. His face was pale, sweat beading on his forehead, not the confident man she had grown fond of. *Has he lost his damn mind?* His lips pulled tight. She noticed his intent stare into the corner of her studio. *The painting.* The cloth drape had fallen.

"Izzy...how could you know of them both? This is impossible. I...I need to know who you talked to?" Marcus demanded, now staring at her.

Izzy took a couple of steps back. "I don't know what you are talking about. Talked to who? I haven't seen anyone since I left your studio yesterday." Marcus took a step closer, backing Izzy against the wall. "Marcus, I need you to leave now."

Marcus backed away from her, "Izzy, we need to talk about this. What is going on? Why didn't you show me this other painting?"

"Leave...please. I can't talk to you right now."

He turned to the door. Izzy could hear him run down the steps from her apartment. Looking out her third story window, she watched him get into his car that was parked on the street. He had acted so strangely. As he drove away, she noticed someone across the street, looking up at her. A long, dark overcoat, a hat and sunglasses made identifying him or her impossible, but whoever it was scared her.

Chapter Four: by ES Tilton

Thomas rushed up the driveway that had not been shoveled; sickened by the horrendous neighborhood she lived in. He stared a little too long at the neighbor's dilapidated house and noticed a man flipping him off through a window. Thomas didn't care. He had more important things on his mind. He rushed in the front door— without knocking— and caught Sarah jumping up and down in front of some exercise video.

He kicked the snow off his boots at the mat in front of the door. "It's all gone to hell Sarah! She's dead. He's killed her, before we could get the information."

"What?" Red in the face, she bent over and panted while she caught her breath. "So."

"God damn it! I liked her... a lot. This wasn't supposed to happen. The police called me... said they found my name listed as an emergency contact in her phone. They also said that it looked like she may have jumped off the balcony, but I don't believe it." He grabbed her arm and twisted it. "You promised this plan would get me the truth."

"Owww, you're hurting me."

He let go, face flushed with shame. "Sorry."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Whatever. Like father like son."

Thomas sat on the edge of a dilapidated brown couch, avoiding the new gaping gash on her arm. She always blamed her injuries on accidents. He didn't believe her. He knew she'd gone into another one of her manic rages and cut herself. He pressed the palms of his hands against his eyes. "How could he?"

The couch bounced. Sarah wrapped her arm around his back. "I assume you're referring to our dear old dad... it's who he is, Thomas. Mean son-of-a-bitch!"

He wiped his face. "So, what now?"

"Sounds like he might be going to jail...even better than what we hoped for. Even if he didn't do it, we can get the cops moving in that direction."

"No."

"What do you mean, no?" Her voice cracked. She jumped up and began pacing. "This has to happen. We have to get him put away for good. The money... remember?"

"I can't do this anymore. For God's sake, Izzy is dead! If we get involved in this more now, that makes us as guilty as him. I won't go to jail for you. I don't care about the stupid money! I just want to know the truth about my mother. This shit is on you."

She laughed. "Why don't you just ask him?"

"What? You know he won't tell me anything."

"You need to leave... now. I've had enough of your pansy ass pandering to him."

Thomas walked to the door. "Fine, if that's what you think of me. You just better watch your ass with this. Something doesn't feel right." He stepped out onto the front porch and squinted into the setting sun, pulling the door shut.

The sound of breaking glass startled him. "Crazy bitch."

Sarah threw a palm-full of pills into her mouth and pressed Marcus Acosta on the cell. It went to voicemail. She stared at the screen with rage before putting it back to her ear. "Dad. Pick up! This is an emergency."

Debra Singer fluffed her hair and peered into the mirror again. 49 years on the planet hadn't been kind, but maybe she could still seduce him. She checked her phone to make sure Marcus hadn't cancelled, lit the candles on the table and dimmed the light. He hadn't phoned her in a couple of years. Maybe he had decided to take her seriously after all. Sure, he had a mean streak a mile long, but he'd cared for her with style. He'd taken her to the best restaurants and showered her with gifts. It was his wife who had made things impossible for her. "Damn perfect bitch... you got what you deserved." She still didn't understand why Marcus stopped seeing her after Rebecca's death. Even the pregnancy didn't sway him. It all came crashing down, leaving her with Sarah to raise on her own and no one to fill her bed. Yes, he paid her off, but that wasn't enough. Hopefully, he'd stay for longer than a week or two this time. Maybe even forever.

The doorbell chimed. Startled, she jumped, and then looked at her phone again. "Too early. He never shows up early."

The doorknob rattled.

Debra picked up one of two large brass candlesticks on the coffee table and walked sideways to the door. She peered through the tiny pane at the top and sighed with relief before opening the door. "Sarah. You can't be here."

"Hi, *Mom*! Glad to see you, too." Sarah walked in and past her. She stopped at the dining room door.

Debra stared at her daughter's back and pushed at her bangs nervously. "Sarah, I..."

"So, who's the lucky guy this time? Plumber that you owe a buck to? How about that carpenter across the street? He's not too portly, and I'm sure his wife will never know he's doing the neighborhood whore. Or... Oh, I get it... you finally decided you needed a new car."

"Stop it!" Debra gritted her teeth. "It's not like that."

"So what's it like then, Mom?"

"It's..."

"Oh, come on, I grew up with this bullshit." Sarah rummaged around in her bag, pulled out a prescription bottle, and shook it. "Why do you think I need these damn things? You broke me with your... insatiable appetite for men and what they could give you."

"That's not fair. I did the best I could."

Sarah twisted open the cap and tipped up the bottle, swallowing. She threw the empty container across the room. "The best you could? Is that what you call it? Do you know—"

"You had a roof over your head, clothes on your back, and food in your stomach. That's a hell of a lot better than some kids."

Sarah shrugged. "You heard, right? Thomas's girl is dead. Fell or jumped... kind of like dad's wife did."

Debra looked away. "Yes... I heard."

"Maybe she was pushed."

"It wasn't me. If that's what you mean."

"No, of course not. You could never do that to dear old dad. Or my love-struck half-brother."

"He's not family Sarah. How many times have I told you that? After he found out his dad was seeing me again a few years back, he came here."

“And?”

Debra wet her lips. “He threatened to kill me.”

“Oh, no! He didn’t?” Sarah threw a hand over her mouth in mock shock, then laughed.

“I can’t imagine why he’d do that.”

Debra grabbed her daughter’s arm and pulled her to the door. “You have to go.”

Sarah shook her arm free. “No. I think I’ll stay and watch the show. Should I go hide in the bedroom and wait until you pass out and he comes to visit me?”

“Stop it!” Debra slapped her daughter. “I’ve had enough of the lies. You ran him off. You know that?”

“Ran *him* off? Which one?”

“You know who I’m talking about. Your dad.”

“Is that what you think? Fine, I’m leaving.” She opened the door. Marcus stood on the porch.

“She’s all yours,” Sarah shoved past him.

“Wait, Sarah... you called me,” Marcus yelled to her. She didn’t answer or stop her incessant rush to the street.

“I see she is still the drama queen.” Marcus said to Debra and mopped at his forehead.

Debra stared at him, shocked at the transformation since the last time she’d seen him. He still wore the meticulous designer clothing, but his eyes were bloodshot, and his wrinkled forehead hosted beads of sweat. “Are you ok? Take your coat off, you’re sweatin’ up a storm.”

Marcus grappled at his left arm. “I just need some water.” He walked into the dining room, and, like his daughter, stopped at the doorway. “I... I think you misunderstand the purpose of this visit... unless you’re expecting someone else.”

Debra felt her cheeks go hot.

Marcus swayed on his feet and staggered further into the room.

Alarmed, Debra rushed to his side. Marcus was leaning against the table, panting heavily.

“Marcus. Are you ill?”

He shook his head and collapsed into a chair. "I... I uh... I need to talk to you about... that day..."

"What day?" She watch the love of her life slide off the chair to the ground in slow motion. She threw herself down next to him and felt his neck. "Oh, Marcus, no. Don't do this." She fumbled with her phone and pressed 911. "Help! He's dead! I think he's dead!"

Thomas rushed through the hospital corridor and into his father's room without acknowledging the woman hovering over the bed. "Dad! Are you ok?"

Marcus gave his son a tentative smile. "I'm surprised you came."

"Of course I did."

"It's just... we've never been the same since..."

"What are you doing here?" he asked Debra

"He was..." She hesitated, seemed to draw in courage, and straightened. "I brought him in."

Thomas's jaw flexed, and he looked away. He turned back to his father. "I need to tell you something... privately."

His father held out a hand. "Give me a minute, son."

With no tolerance to his father's brush off or her being there, Thomas stormed out of the room and pressed a button on his phone as he walked away. "Fredrick. Did you get the information?"

"Yeah, I got the pictures. Coulda warned me someone was gonna off the bitch."

"She wasn't a bitch."

The voice on the line laughed harshly. "I'll wait to see what you call her after you see the pictures. One thing to know what's goin' on, another to see it. Hell, I'd think *you* killed her, if you had seen these before it happened. You didn't, *did you?*"

Thomas coughed nervously. "Of course not, but these pictures stay between us. No sense in slandering her after she's dead. Right?"

"Course. Meet me in an hour. You know the spot."

The phone buzzed and went silent.

Detective Richards dropped his cigarette on the sidewalk and stared up at a third story balcony. "You say she fell from there?"

"Yeah, from what we can tell." Brandon said. "Quite the mess. Landed behind that dumpster. Looks like she was there most of the night. Rats got ahold of her left eye."

Richards stuck a piece of gum in his mouth and chewed. "Who called it in?"

"Anonymous."

"Figures. Male or female?"

"Hard telling. Amateur disguise... probably some punk who didn't want to get involved."

"Maybe. Well, let's see her place then."

They ducked past the police tape, crisscrossing her doorway and stepped into the artist studio/apartment. Richards rubbed the small of his back, still sore from three hours of sitting in a cramped seat on an over-packed jet. "It's been photographed, right?"

"Team did the final shots an hour ago."

"So why call me? Suicide isn't exactly my specialty, and I retired a year ago."

"Well, you heard about the mass killings last week?"

"Yeah, heard one of your guys went bad."

"Not one of ours. Officer from the next town over bought himself a sniper rifle and set up inside the mall. He obviously knew our guys would be there. It was a top secret op to capture a ring of drug traffickers plaguing this area for years. Someone on the inside ratted us out. Took out our best officers before we realized he was a blue. A lot of things have been leaked lately. So, when this came up... well, to be frank, we're having a hard time trusting anyone right now."

"Fair enough, but still, that was a hell of a long plane ride, why me?"

"There were a few things that didn't gel. First off, take a look at this." He led the detective to a painting.

The detective turned his head sideways. "So, she painted her suicide before she did it. So what. It happens."

"Notice the dress? Not really modern fashion. More like the nineties or earlier. We don't think it's her."

The detective chewed his gum. He used a gloved hand to cautiously tilt the painting forward. Behind it was another painting that had been smeared with black paint, wiping out the central figure. All that remained was the suggestion of a dead woman with bright blue eyes at the bottom of the painting and a hand clutching something white.

"Guess she didn't like that one," Brandon said.

Richard's brow rose and he glanced around the apartment, taking in the peaceful scenes in the other paintings. "Curious. So what else."

Brandon nodded at two men standing nearby with evidence bags.

Richards held up his hand. "Hold up with that a moment. You can gather it up after I'm done."

Brandon pointed at the two glasses on the coffee table and a half empty bottle of wine.

"They check the body for foul play yet?" Richards asked.

"It's in the works. She was fully clothed. The only thing that seemed out of place was a torn piece of white cloth on her chest. Kind of looked like one of those old-time doilies. Not sure if it was put there or was something she had in her hand before the fall."

"I still don't see why I'm here."

Brandon pointed at a table top.

Richards rubbed his chin, finally understanding. "Well, now, that sure as hell don't look like a suicide note to me."

"That's what we thought."

"Any idea who sent it?"

"Unmarked envelope. They dusted but got nothing. Soon as you're done we'll bag it and send it off for further tests."

Richards nodded. "So, we've got a dead girl, who had company and has a death threat and a painting of a scene that looks suspiciously like a murder."

"That about sums it up."

Chapter Five: by Brittney Mulliner

Debra stared down at Marcus, snoring as usual. He'd suffered a minor heart attack, but, to her, that wasn't a good enough reason for him to keep her waiting. There had to be a good reason for him to contact her after years of silence.

She paced the perimeter of the small hospital room, her eyes darting from the clock to Marcus and back. When he'd been asleep for twenty minutes her patience crumbled. She sauntered to his bedside and roughly bumped it with her hip once, twice, finally after the third hit Marcus opened his eyes.

"You're still here."

"Of course I am. You needed to talk to me, so talk."

She watched while he struggled to sit up, not bothering to help him. He'd embarrassed her earlier. It wasn't her fault she'd assumed he would want something more from her. That's all he'd ever wanted in the past.

"Something terrible happened last night."

She waited for him to continue. She'd learned long ago to never give anything away.

"Thomas's girlfriend-well ex-girlfriend was found dead."

She brought her hand to her mouth in mock remorse. "That's horrible. Do you know what happened?"

"No. I haven't heard anything from the investigators yet, but something else transpired in all of this. I saw a painting that Izzy had done recently. There was a woman in the painting that looked like Rebecca."

She eyed him carefully trying to guess where this conversation was going. "And?"

He dropped his gaze and cleared his throat. "I've been getting calls lately. I thought it was just her wanting attention in one of her...depressive states, so I ignored them. I fear that I caused this. If only I'd picked up maybe I could have prevented it."

"What are you talking about?"

"Sarah. She's been calling me at all hours of the day. When she does leave a message she claims it's an emergency, but I know better. She's always been one to cause trouble for attention."

Debra shook her head in confusion. “What does Sarah have to do with last night... with Rebecca?”

“I think she acted out again. This time, though, she took it too far.”

“Why would Sarah kill Isabelle?” she asked and blew her nose into a lace handkerchief she had balled into her hand.

Marcus looked at her strangely, contorted his brow. “To get back at me or at Thomas. She knows how much Isabelle meant to us. I think she wanted to hurt me like she claims I hurt her.”

Debra looked down at the man she’d known for over two decades and suddenly felt like he was with a stranger.

“How could you accuse our own daughter of this? She has her problems, but she would never... I thought it was a suicide, anyway. Just keep your ridiculous theories to yourself!”

She stormed out of the room.

“Wait, there’s more.”

Chapter Six: by Addison Kline

Marcus threw his head back against his pillow as a deep sigh flooded from his mouth. Staring at the ceiling with a charged expression permeating from his eyes, Marcus's heart raced with turmoil, thoughts of Rebecca, Debra, and Izzy tumbled in his brain. His heart hammered painfully. The heart monitor beeped loudly. How could he lose two women that he loved in one lifetime to such tragedy? He always believed that Rebecca's death was an accident, but after seeing Izzy's painting, he questioned it all. "What if they got it all wrong? Izzy, I am so sorry...this was about me."

How could this happen? She was special. She was supposed to be mine. Her artistic eye... Her soul that was so striking and beautiful that it made me believe that I could be an artist, too. She was my finest piece. Thomas did not appreciate her, but Isabelle would be my most glorious work. She was a diamond in the rough. Her heart so raw with passion and emotion. She needed a man... A real man to expose her beauty at its most finite. To make her feel things she never thought possible. I know she felt how I felt. I could read her eyes like a book.

"How could she have done this to you! And, my ungrateful son, Thomas. He couldn't see you for the pearl that you were. You were a rare, exquisite gem that deserved to be cherished not cast aside," he whispered gently to the dead.

Marcus's memories flooded with pictures of Isabelle. The gentle sway of her hand as she created her art. Her paintbrush transforming the emotions and the turmoil in her heart into something beautiful. Something majestic. Something undeniably her. The soft flutter of her eyelashes as she looked up at him, wondering if he felt the same as she did. "I wanted to tell you how I felt." His soul seared with rage. How dare any of them hurt you.

Rubbing his face, Marcus's emotions got the best of him. While he was a tenacious and strong-willed business man, in this moment, he succumbed to his overwhelming sense of grief. "I have to go to the police, or... I'll take care of it myself." Marcus slowly got up from the bed, pulled out his IV catheter, intention set to avenge Izzy's death. "Rebecca," he spoke to his other lost love, "I can't help but think you somehow showed Izzy the truth. That painting was of you. Rest in peace, my dear. We shall have our revenge.