

KATE WILHELM



MIRROR,
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A BARBARA HOLLOWAY MYSTERY

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1

The Valducci's sign was obscured by rain and mist that cold February afternoon. Fronting River Road were parking spaces for a hundred cars close to the Valducci store, a large building with three overhead double garage doors. One of the doors was open. A few shoppers were picking up bare root trees and shrubs.

Glowing spots of light, some indeterminate distance away on the right and to the rear of the market building, seemed to be pulsing as mist and rain waxed and waned. That was the big Valducci house. To the left and rear of the customer area six greenhouses loomed, three of them lighted. Workers were preparing for the season, potting up early vegetables and ornamentals...

In the far-most greenhouse Gina Valducci was carefully cutting through a thin layer of gel with a newly-sprouted seedling centered in it. She cut a one inch square section from a shallow pan containing a layer of the same material. Moving with caution, she transferred the newly-cut square to a pot prepared with coarse sand and compost, sprinkled a bit of sand and compost over the square with the seedling, then drew back with a satisfied grin. She put the pot on the heat mat next to seven others just like it.

"Eight," she said.

At her side Jeff Cobbe was already making a note on a laptop. He was grinning as broadly as she was.

Heat mats on two long benches held tomatoes in every stage of growth from the newly sprouted seedlings to blooming plants, some with small green tomatoes, half a dozen with reddening tomatoes. Grow lights inches above the plants illuminated the greenhouse, along with overhead fluorescent lamps. It was as bright as mid-day in June.

Gina's glance over the thriving plants was automatic, swiftly done. If anything had been amiss among the many pots, she would have noticed and she

would have sprung into action to correct the problem. But all was well. Her glance at the big wall clock over the entrance to the greenhouse was more purposeful. It was five minutes to five.

“I have to go,” she said with a regretful look at the gel remaining in the pan. There were four seeds that had not sprouted, and she wanted to be on hand when and if they did.

“I’ll hang out here,” Jeff said. “But, hey,” he added, “eight out of twelve is proof enough. Go on.” His smile deepened, creasing his face, accentuating laugh lines at his eyes. He was twenty-nine and looked more like a happy sixteen-year old at the moment.

“I’ll drop in later,” she said, heading for the entrance. There, she pulled on a waterproof poncho that covered her head to toe and was ready to face the relentless rain. She turned to wave to Jeff who, engrossed with the computer, didn’t acknowledge it.

The rain was coming straight down, hard and icy, and she hurried over the paved bare area where rows and rows of benches bearing starts of just about everything they grew would fill the space in a few weeks. Here, behind the store and office there was space for aisles for shoppers, room for the big garden carts bearing produce on the way to the store, room enough for an occasional truck. Now the space was empty, and dimly lighted. Every dip in the paving concrete had become a miniature lake, reflecting lights set adance by the falling rain.

Gina had been called coltish as a teen; long-legged, thin, edgy, with energy left over no matter how active she was. Now, at twenty-six, she was a slender, strong, athletic, self-possessed young woman, or so she told herself from time to time. Her long black hair was in a thick braid. Like all the Valduccis, she had a nose bigger than she liked, a wide, generous mouth, and she had the deep-set dark Valducci eyes, heavily lashed. When she made the effort, people said she was very handsome or striking. Pretty seemed the wrong word for her.

As she approached the house, she was planning the dinner she would make for her grandmother. Lamb chops, thawing in the refrigerator, minestrone left from the day before, sure to be better today than yesterday. It always was after a day. Salad. Baked potato.

She reached the house and continued around to the porch that led to the kitchen. At the kitchen door she took off the poncho and hung it on a peg, then she opened the door before removing her boots. She left them on

newspapers on the kitchen floor and put on slippers.

“Gramma, I’m home,” she called out. She walked through the kitchen, through a hall, and stopped when she came to the living room doorway. Her grandmother, her leg in a cast, was in her recliner, and opposite her in an easy chair was Gina’s father.

“Gina,” he said, rising. “Good to see you. Mother tells me you’re her babysitter, nurse, companion, something. How are you?” He came across the room toward her with his arms outstretched.

Robert Valducci was tall, handsome, with a wide mouth, a high forehead, the big Valducci nose, dark eyes and enviable eyelashes. His smile reminded Gina of a politician’s smile: easy on, easy off. A little gray at the temples emphasized his thick black hair and gave him gravitas, he liked to say. He was dressed in what looked like an expensive gray suit, a sparkling white shirt, and a bright red tie.

When he embraced her, she could smell his familiar minty aftershave.

“This is a surprise,” she said, drawing back from him. “When did you get here?”

“This afternoon. I’m not staying for dinner. Mother says you’re also her cook these days. Good for you. But starting tomorrow I’ll take over the kitchen for a few days. Deal?”

“Deal,” she said. He was a marvelous cook. All the Valduccis were marvelous cooks, including Gina, when she had time and the inclination. “You’re welcome to have dinner with us,” she added.

He shook his head and returned to his chair near the fireplace where a brisk fire was blazing. “Not tonight. I have an engagement. A colleague is in town. I’ll take off in a few minutes and come back later tonight. Up to my old room. I already went up and opened a window to air it out.”

Her grandmother had not said a word, but she looked strained and maybe a little anxious. Gina wanted to reassure her that she would not start a fight with her father, but it didn’t seem appropriate to bring up the past when he was obviously going out of his way to be charming. He could be very charming when he chose, she had long known, and that charm was like his smile: easy on, easy off.

“Gramma, can I get you anything before I get started in the kitchen?” Gina asked, advancing a few steps into the room. It was spacious, the full width of the house, with French doors opening to the porch, and more French doors to a terrace at the other end. Big as it was, it was crowded with

furniture, two sofas facing each other across a coffee table, the easy chairs by the fireplace, the recliner, end tables, a game table at one end. Some of the furniture was out of place, having been moved to accommodate a wheelchair and the recliner, giving the room a disordered appearance. Two worn Sarouk rugs carpeted wide plank floors that gleamed with reflections of light from lamps throughout the room. The wheelchair was near the game table, and crutches were more readily at hand by her grandmother's recliner.

Magdalena Valducci was seventy-four, and stood at five feet seven when erect. She had decided years before that long hair was a nuisance that she no longer had to endure, and now wore it in a short, almost boyish cut. It was thick, salt and pepper. Normally she would have been dressed much as Gina was, but with the cast, jeans had become a problem and she had switched to long skirts. That evening she was wearing a deep-red velvet skirt with a gray sweater.

She shook her head at Gina's question, reached around to pick up a wine glass from the end table at her side, and held it up. "Robert brought gifts of wine," she said. "And very good it is. You must try it."

"I will later," Gina said. "I'll get started on dinner now." She turned to leave the room then stiffened at the door when she heard her father's voice. His words addressed to her grandmother were meant to be heard, she well understood.

"Over the next day or two let's talk her into taking that job I offered last year. It's time she began acting her age and get started up the ladder."

Magda watched her granddaughter stop in midstride, then walk again in her loose, easy way on into the hall and out of sight. She sighed. What Gina had said about Robert's offer of a job the previous year was very much on Magda's mind as she sipped her excellent pinot noir.

"Your company, Halsey Enterprises," Gina had said in a furious and cutting voice, "is worse than Sherman's march through Georgia. Your guys leave a trail of toxic destruction behind. Fire and ashes are pristine compared to the poisons you spread."

After that, a lot of yelling had started. Magda drank deeper of the good wine her son had brought.

2

Two days after her father's unexpected arrival, Gina was sitting cross-legged on one of the greenhouse benches. Opposite her was Daniel Ito in the same position. The third member of the group, Greg Pollock, had taken a place at the open door where he stood gazing out, and Jeff Cobbe paced back and forth from the door to the bench.

"What does he want?" Jeff muttered, drawing near Gina.

"I don't know," Gina said through gritted teeth. "For the tenth time, hundredth time, thousandth time: I don't know!"

"I wasn't asking," he said almost as sharply as she had spoken. He ran his hand over his hair, turned and started back toward the door. "Thinking out loud."

"Think quieter," Gina snapped.

"Hey, guys," Daniel said, "cool it. Gina's having dinner with her father tonight. Tomorrow we'll probably all know what's on his mind."

Gina flashed a quick, scowling look at Daniel. He shrugged. He was her age, twenty-six, had been her class mate for four years, and had gotten his master's degree when she got hers. For a short time she had been in love with him, a secret love never acted upon or even acknowledged. She had fallen in love with his sculpted face with its high cheek bones. Then she had grown used to him and love faded and changed to the kind of friendship that allowed them to criticize and scowl at each other with no offense meant or taken. When they formed a real company, he would be one of the founding fathers. She toyed with the idea of founding fathers and a mother, but it didn't work, and she let it go.

"Tilsen's leaving," Greg said. He was the youngest of the group, twen-

ty-two, although he looked like a teenager, and still retained an adolescent-like awkwardness and lightning-fast changes of mood. He was their computer guru. He had set up the program they used to keep track of everything they did, and what others around the world were doing with small farms. While he tried to take the same interest in the plants and seeds as the other three, his heart and mind lived in the world of electronics. Their records would be impeccable, they all felt confident. As far as the plants and seeds were concerned, he did exactly what he was told, did it well, and never went a step beyond his instructions. Where the computer was concerned no one questioned his expertise.

It made the biggest difference to Jeff, that their records be perfect. His doctoral dissertation depended on it.

Greg had looked up Donald Tilsen, a vice president in R&D at Halsey Enterprises, the same department where Robert Valducci worked as his assistant. Greg had assembled a long report about Tilsen, which he had read to them, but the important, maybe the only important item was Tilsen's position in the company. It had sent a message of icy foreboding throughout Gina. Two R&D guys had to be bad news.

"Your dad's heading this way," Greg said. His voice quavered and he ran from the door to the bench farthest from it, the one that held blooming and fruiting tomato plants. He pretended to be studying the labels. Gina's father, most men in expensive suits, terrified him.

Gina and Daniel scrambled down from the bench and hurried to the newest seeded pan. Nothing had yet sprouted in this one. Jeff joined them and they all waited for Robert Valducci as if they were on trial and he was a hanging judge, who had never doubted their guilt.

Robert walked a few feet into the greenhouse and stopped there.

"Hi, Dad," Gina said. "These are my friends. Associates," she corrected herself. She introduced them, and Robert looked them over coolly, nodded, and gave the rest of the greenhouse the same scrutiny.

"I can see that you're busy," he said. "I don't want to interfere. Dinner at seven," he said to Gina." He nodded again, turned and left.

What did he want? Gina knew he was after something, and could not dispel the sense of dread that had settled over her like a blanket.

When her grandmother was hit by a car in a parking lot, resulting in a broken leg and dislocated shoulder, Gina had left her apartment in town to move back to what she would always think of as her real home. She loved

her grandmother and it pleased her that after so many years she finally had something to give back after receiving so much from childhood on. With Robert's appearance, the peace and harmony the two women shared had been shattered, and Gina had returned to her apartment, taking with her only a few necessary items from her bathroom. It was a temporary move, she had assured her grandmother, who had nodded in understanding and probably in relief. Gina and Robert were seldom in the same room longer than a few minutes before one or the other started an argument. Their arguments tended to get loud and involve a lot of gestures and hand waving.

It was not going to happen this time, Gina told herself, as she had done several times already. No matter what he said, she would stay calm and cool. She wiped her sweaty hands on her jeans.

Dinner was excellent, as expected, but beyond the veal Marsala, which was her favorite of Robert's specialties, Gina would not have been able to name another dish ten minutes after consuming it. Robert told funny stories about being a corporation man, how snow in Chicago came down sideways, about getting lost in Tokyo, "not really lost, just confused for a while," about how long it took to get from the airport to his wife's hillside house in Sherman Oaks, California. Debra, he said, was more beautiful than ever and twice as busy as ever. He spoke of her exactly the same way he might have spoken about a movie star or popular singer whom he didn't know personally. Still married, they had not lived together for the past eight years. Gina had not seen her mother since her graduation, rarely talked on the phone to her, and more rarely had a card or a letter. Debra was busy with her real estate business. She was a consultant, a go-between for rich clients and those eager to sell or lease mansions they no longer could afford.

With the dishes in the dishwasher, the kitchen restored to a state of neatness and cleanliness, Robert ushered Gina and her grandmother out. "Help Mother get settled by the fire," he said. "I'll bring in coffee and a little treat."

His treat was a plate of tiny imported chocolates. He passed out coffee and put the chocolates on an end table between Gina and her grandmother before taking his own seat across from them, smiling.

"You all may wonder why I've gathered you together," he said, then laughed. "Actually, I do have something on my mind. Something really big." He leaned forward, fixing his intent gaze on Magda. "Mother, the company

wants to buy your land here, all of it. And they're offering a staggering figure. Four million." He raised his cup in a salute, took a sip, and put it down on his own end table. "And, Mother, I think I can talk them into increasing that by at least half a million."

Magda put her cup down and looked over the chocolates before taking one. "What in the world makes you think I'm interested in selling?" she asked. She popped the tiny candy into her mouth and closed her eyes for a moment after biting down on it. "Delicious," she murmured. When she looked at Robert again, she said, "I'm not, you know, interested in selling."

"Mother, look at you. You can hardly maneuver in this mausoleum of a house. You can't even go upstairs to your own bedroom. It's a mile from one room to another, and you're stuck inside, with cold, miserable rain nine months of the year. You should have retired ten years ago instead of sticking it out for God knows why. You've worked like a field hand as far back as I can remember. It's time for you to relax and live in the comfort you deserve. Hawaii, or Palm Springs, even Florida. Travel. Spend time in a villa in Italy or southern France. Take Gina with you, your companion, gofer. She can make all the arrangements so you won't have to do a thing. First class all the way, every day, the rest of your life."

She shook her head. "The answer is no, Robert. I have no desire to sell. I do exactly what I want, and if I want to go to Hawaii, I'll go. But when and if I want to."

"You'll never get another offer like this," he said. "You'll have to sell eventually and you'll get chicken shit, pennies on the dollar. I know what the market's like these days, what it's going to be in the foreseeable future. That offer is twice as much as this land is worth in the best of times, which isn't now."

"Robert," Magda said forcefully, "stop. I said no. That's enough."

"And I certainly won't let you assign me a role in your plans," Gina said. "Don't you even hear yourself telling us what we'll do? I have my own life, my own plans, and they don't include first-class travel as anyone's companion."

"You're content to sponge off an old woman, take over her property for some harebrained scheme you and your little playmates have cooked up."

"We have a business arrangement!" Gina said in a sharper voice. "It's settled between us and it's none of your business."

"It's my business. I see you taking advantage of my aging mother. I know

how much those greenhouses cost, how much it takes to heat and light them, how much the supplies cost, the water, fertilizers.”

“You don’t know anything about what we’re up to. We’re starting a new company, plants, seeds, produce, plus some innovations we’re experimenting with. And we work for the business to pay our expenses. I don’t sponge off anyone! And I don’t tell anyone else what they have to do.”

“A seed business! My God! I knew you were naive, but I didn’t think you were stupid! You’re like a guy dreaming of a better horseshoe when Henry Ford was starting his assembly line! I offered you a good job. Nepotism? Damn right! Starting you half way up the ladder instead of letting you grope for the bottom rung—”

Gina jumped to her feet, both hands balled into fists. “I don’t want your putrid job. I don’t want to poison plants, poison the gene pool of plants, poison the land, poison the animals and people who need your poisoned plants to survive, only to die younger and sicker than they would have done.”

“We’re feeding the world! Someone has to! Your produce and seed company! Bullshit! You’ll be lucky if you feed yourself and your puppy dogs!”

“You aren’t feeding the world! You’re poisoning the world! Turning farming back into serfdom, grabbing good land, destroying it...”

Gina’s hands were flying in all directions as she yelled, and Robert, on his feet, yelling over her, was pointing to her, then to Magda. Pointing to God alone knew where, Magda thought, struggling to her feet.

“Gina! Robert! Both of you, stop this!” she shouted over their voices. “I won’t have you screaming like children in my house! Stop it right now!” She was momentarily off balance and clutched the chair arm. Almost instantly Gina was at her side, supporting her, and Magda straightened and accepted the crutches Gina held for her.

“Robert,” Magda said then, “I told you no. End of discussion. Gina has my permission to use the greenhouse and whatever it takes to make it function. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll go to my room.”

“Look at you,” Robert said. “You can’t manage alone any longer and you know it. What, you’ll bring in a paid companion to help out?”

“In a week or so I’ll be out of this damn cast,” Magda said. “Then some physical therapy, and after that as good as new. That’s all I need to know.”

“I think you hit your head when you had that accident,” he said furiously. “I think you scrambled your brain. As good as new! You’re seventy-four years old! It’s unreasonable for you not even to consider my proposal, just reject it

out of hand. That's not how a rational person behaves."

Magda took a few steps, then stopped and looked at him over her shoulder. "What time are you leaving in the morning?"

"By nine," he said. "I'll come back on Friday. Give you time to think about all this." She shook her head, then turned slightly to say to Gina, "Why don't you run along now. And don't show up here until after nine in the morning. Good night, Robert, Gina."

Gina hurried to her side. "I'll walk you home," she said with a slight smile.

Magda smiled also. "In the morning come on in and I'll braid your hair."

"He's coming back tomorrow," Gina said to Sophia Mirano, Magda's neighbor. They were in the Valducci kitchen where Gina had started a pot roast. "I'll take off and stay in my apartment until he's gone again. I don't know how long he'll stay this time."

"I'll be around," Sophia said, patting Gina's arm. "I'll pop in several times a day and keep Magda company if he goes out at night. Don't you worry about it. I just wish she'd stop trying to do so much right now with that cast. Like going upstairs. I told her I'd get whatever she wanted, but no, you know her, she had to do something herself." She shook her head. "But, honey, something's on her mind. I've known that woman all my life and I know when something's eating at her." She gave Gina a searching look, as if debating adding to what she had said. She shook her head again, and pulled on her jacket.

"I know," Gina said. "I told her the same thing, that I'd fetch anything she wanted. Anyway, I practically ordered her to give a shout when she's ready to come down again. And she thinks I'm hard headed." They both laughed.

They were walking from the kitchen when Gina heard her grandmother cry out and heard a terrifying thumping noise on the staircase. With a cry she ran to the stairs in time to see her grandmother tumble down the last several steps.

"Call 911!" she screamed to Sophia. She was on her knees by her grandmother. "Gramma! Gramma!" she cried, afraid to try to move her, afraid to do anything except cradle her head.

Magda's eyelids fluttered. She moaned, closed her eyes, then opened them and focused on Gina's face. She moaned again and her eyes closed. She

was trying to say something. All Gina could make out was, “The Lorax. Remember the Lorax.”

Those were the last words Gina ever heard from her. Magdalena Valducci died two hours later in the emergency room at Riverbend Hospital.

Five endless days had passed. People had come and gone. There had been a funeral. Debra, Gina’s mother, had come and Robert was there. Debra and Robert didn’t talk to each other, and neither had anything to say to Gina beyond the obligatory good morning, good night, you should eat something, did you sleep? Debra had arranged everything in an efficient way and she had said firmly that she had no intention of staying in the house. She was perfectly comfortable with a room in the Hilton, downtown.

“Robert will be going through everything, and I’ll help him, of course,” Debra had said in a cool, remote voice. “We’ll have an estate sale, and there are decisions to make, but I don’t want to be around when he starts going through her personal things. That’s a family matter best left to the immediate family.”

Gina felt that she could not bear to see her father coldly appraising, putting dollar signs on her grandmother’s beautiful garden prints, the lovely blown glass from Italy that she had treasured, countless books she had loved. She shook her head at Robert’s invitation to stay in the house, and moved back into her apartment where she could grieve in private, where she didn’t have to respond to inane comments, answer impossible questions, be polite to the two strangers her own parents had become to her.

Debra was a large woman, overweight, broad through the shoulders, with heavy, full breasts, and thick, sturdy legs, big hands. Her hair that year was long and platinum blond, with a little wave. She wore stage-like makeup, kept her fingernails perfectly manicured, that year pale pink with white, and she used a lot of scent, so much that on entering a room, she announced her presence without any need for visual verification. Sometimes Gina found herself examining her own mother as she might examine a complete stranger, searching for the reality behind the façade.

That day Gina was carrying some of her belongings down from her upstairs bedroom, bit by bit erasing her presence from the house. On her way to the front door, she could hear Debra and Robert in the den as she passed the partly-open door. Debra was talking.

“Of course, we’ll sell as soon as possible. I’ll do some research about

land prices around here. Twenty, forty thousand an acre? I imagine it's something like that."

"It's going to take time," Robert said. "Probate, creditors, the plant stock."

"I'll take care of it," Debra said. "That's my field. I want half, Robert. I won't settle for less. My share will be something like four, five hundred thousand. That's my guess now, but it can change after I do a little research in county records. After that, the divorce. Not before."

"I thought you wanted it now, right now. That's all you could talk about this past month. I signed the papers and mailed them while I was in Chicago."

"I changed my mind."

He hadn't told her about the Halsey offer, Gina thought dully. She would find out, of course, and there would be a real fight. She shrugged. Let them fight. She walked on to the front door, out to her car parked under the portico. It was a Honda hatchback without a lot of room for boxes. She had made two trips already, slowly stripping one room, creating chaos in her apartment. Feeling little, thinking of nothing, numb with grief, it was as if she had slipped out of real time into some kind of personal void. She was hardly aware of how many days had passed since she had held her grandmother's head in her arms crying her name over and over.

She shoved the box she carried into the back of her car and only then became aware of Jeff standing under the portico watching her. She had refused his help earlier for no reason she could have named. It was better to maintain the distance she had established between them, a carefully measured privacy zone that neither of them was meant to enter. More than that, it just seemed to be her task to clean out her presence, to erase her past in her grandmother's house. Now she looked at him and, when he beckoned, she walked toward him.

"We have to talk," he said. "The guys are in the greenhouse. I said I'd bring you. Will you talk to us?"

She nodded and they walked across the empty space to the sixth greenhouse together, but not close enough to touch.

Greg Pollock and Daniel Ito were waiting. Greg looked embarrassed and shuffled his feet, but Daniel came to her and embraced her for a moment. He kissed her cheek before he backed away.

"Tilsen's back," Jeff said.

Gina nodded. She knew.

“We have to make some kind of plan,” Daniel said. “Is there anyplace else where we can set ourselves up?”

He lived with his girlfriend in an apartment. Greg lived with his parents, and both Jeff and Gina had apartments.

No one answered the question.

“Maybe we can get a loan, rent some space and put up our own greenhouse,” Daniel said, and again there was no response from any of them.

“I think Gramma left me a few thousand dollars,” Gina said, breaking the silence. “I won’t get it for weeks and weeks, maybe even months. Dad said there’s probate to get through.”

“If we can hold out,” Daniel said, “we can make it work. Gina, would you use your own money that way?”

“It’s my idea, remember,” she said. She felt with a new rush of despair that her idea, her dream was the only thing she had.

Suddenly Greg looked frightened and took a step backward, his eyes large and staring. Gina turned to see Robert entering the greenhouse. As before, he stopped when he had come inside ten or twelve feet.

He looked them over, glanced at the tomato plants, then focused on Gina and said, “Tomorrow around noon an appraiser is coming down from Portland. I want you on hand to pick out any items you might want to keep. And I want you all to clear out everything from the greenhouse within thirty days. It will take that long to get paperwork done, and everything has to be gone by then.” He turned and left.

Jeff was the first one to move. He picked up a clay pot and smashed it to the floor, then stalked out through the rear door.

When Gina entered the house the following day she found Donald Tilsen in the study with her father. She stopped at the doorway and involuntarily drew her jacket closer about her when she saw him. She had seen him making a tour of the property with her father, and talking to him a time or two, but always at a distance. He was a slender, sharp-featured man in his fifties, dressed in a pinstripe suit and button-down shirt with a maroon tie. With thinning hair, tanning-bed complexion, pale gray eyes that seemed to be open too wide, he looked like a well-paid accountant who had found an egregious entry in his books. He had a worried expression, as if in distress, on the verge of frowning. She knew it was unfair, but she couldn’t deny that

she had disliked him intensely on sight. He made a tentative movement with his hand toward her when Robert introduced them, but she simply nodded and he withdrew his hand and nodded in return.

The doorbell rang and Gina said, "I'll get it." Both Tilsen and her father followed her into the hall and to the door. A smiling woman was on the stoop. Robert stepped forward past Gina.

"Mrs. Chadwick? I'm Robert Valducci. My daughter, Gina, and this is Mr. Tilsen. Please, let me help you with that."

She was carrying a case, which she relinquished to him. She was about five feet five, trim, dressed in a navy pantsuit. Her hair was short and dun-colored, brushed back from her face in a careless way, and the only makeup she had on was a trace of pale pink lipstick. Her smile was wide and engaging. "Well," she said, "if I could have a glass of water, I'd appreciate it. The traffic was ferocious on I-5."

"This way," Robert said. "You might as well start in the kitchen as anywhere."

Mrs. Chadwick was eyeing the hallway, the walls, the carpet runner underfoot, and she was talking as they made their way to the kitchen. "What I'll do today is make a video of each room, the furnishings, paintings, art work, everything. Anything you can tell me in the way of provenance would be helpful, of course. Then I'll have to do a little research for some items. That's how it usually goes. As soon as I finish I'll send you an itemized list with my appraisal value."

Gina stopped listening as Mrs. Chadwick drank her water, opened her case and brought out a camcorder and proceeded to make her video, talking as she worked. This was going to be a long day, Gina thought, leaning against the doorframe, thinking about the new seedlings that Greg would be shifting to pots, wishing she were out there helping him instead of in here considering the worth of a twelve-year-old gas stove, or a fifteen-year-old refrigerator.

When they moved on to the dining room, to Gina's annoyance Tilsen tagged along. Mrs. Chadwick murmured that the cherry table and chairs were beautiful, not museum quality antiques, but lovely. When they got to the silverware, Gina said she would like to have it, and Robert made a note. They moved on to the living room and Mrs. Chadwick had to measure the Sarouk rugs and spend a good deal of time with them. Gina wanted them, too, but she had no place to put them and remained silent. The blown glass items from Italy got a lot of attention, and those Gina definitely wanted.

Especially one of a fantasy horse, pink and silver with a blue mane and tale. Gaudy, beautiful. Her grandmother had brought the four pieces back with her when she and Grandfather had taken a vacation, their delayed honeymoon, four years after their marriage. Gina blinked, remembering how misty-eyed Gramma had been when she talked about that trip.

Gramma's pineapple-four-poster bed kept Mrs. Chadwick's interest, but the monogrammed comb and brush didn't. Then she caught in her breath when she saw the mirror on the wall. It was an oval, beveled-glass mirror framed with intricately-carved ivory about four inches wide all around, with a fluting crest on top. Twenty-six inches high, eighteen wide, it was fine art to Gina's eye, and had been fine art to her grandmother's eye. Gina claimed it and Robert made a note.

"I wonder if we could take it down, examine the back," Mrs. Chadwick murmured. "It could have the artist's name or something else identifying the artist."

There was nothing on the back to indicate the artist. Mrs. Chadwick sighed. "I'm almost certain that I read something, saw something... I'll do a little research on it. Oh, well, shall we move on?"

It was ten past three when Mrs. Chadwick finished.

"When your report is finished," Robert said, "send it here, to this address. He handed her a Valducci's card." He walked to the door with her, and as soon as he closed it, he turned to Tilsen. "God, what a drag! It's time for a drink." He nodded to Gina. "Join us?"

She shook her head. "Back to work for me."

"Keep in mind that you have no more than thirty day to wrap things up out there," Robert said as she opened the door.

Several nights later Gina was staring at the calendar she had placed on her coffee table in her apartment. Twenty-six days left, she thought as she drew an X, marking off another day with no solution. Thirty days, ninety, two hundred. It didn't matter. There was no solution. No one, not a single one of them, could come up with an answer. No money, no acreage, no greenhouse, no company. Her eyes burned and she felt fatigue in every muscle, every fiber of her being. She had put in another twelve-to-thirteen-hour day of physical work, many hours more of useless mental work, trying to figure out how much she could make if she sold this or that. Her car. She could ride her bicycle. A couple of thousand dollars, plus what she would save on

gas. The mirror from her grandmother's estate. Maybe a thousand dollars. Wait for Mrs. Chadwick's estimate, she reminded herself. The blown glass. Again, wait for the estimate. She should have claimed the rugs. Maybe she still could claim them, sell them. Above all, keep working in the greenhouse, keep praying for a miracle. They were going through the motions, potting up starts, keeping records, pretending. Praying for a miracle.

She knew she should knock it off for the night, take a soaking bath, hope for sleep. Then face another day just like this day had been, like yesterday and the day before that. Pretending.

The phone rang, startling her. She found it under papers on the table, saw that it was Jeff Cobbe and mumbled hello.

"Gina," Jeff's voice was shaky, low-pitched. "Gina, something terrible has happened. Your father. Gina, he's dead. Your father's been shot. Your mother needs you out at the house."

End of Sample Pages