

Chapter 1

A vast library surrounded me, its stacks stretching to the horizon, and I searched for a book.

Why am I having trouble finding it? I wondered, becoming agitated. *It's something I see every day.*

"That book doesn't exist anymore," the librarian said.

"That's impossible!" I screamed, running from the Reference Desk and down an aisle between the stacks.

A book flew off a shelf, tripping me: Scott's *Adventures in the Antarctic*, the diary of his ill-fated expedition.

I crawled to the open book on the floor and read "...my feet are numb, and I can't hold out much longer. *For God's sake, take care of my child!*"

It was more a howl than a question. And it was directed at me.

I sat bolt-upright in bed and glanced at the clock on my nightstand. It was four in the morning. I fumbled for the computer beside the clock and recorded the nightmare in my dream-database.

The dream radiated pain, death, and inevitability. It was the books, I realized: One no longer existed, and the other had been published long ago. They implied tragedy that — if it hadn't already happened — might as well have.

I numbly eyed the reproduction of Picasso's *Night-Fishing at Antibes* on the opposite wall — with its misshapen, dreamlike fishermen using lights to summon creatures from the depths.

What did I summon tonight?

Then I slid into my black chenille robe and stumbled through the living room to the apartment's roof-garden, tripping over its threshold.

Reflected city-lights painted the overcast sky the color of bruised flesh. Millions of birds roosted on the city's alcoves and ledges, as on the storm-battered cliffs of Newfoundland, or the Orkneys. At this hour, New York was a city of birds, as though built for them.

The dream demanded something of me.

I leaned over the roof-garden wall into the abyss that was Central Park and the concrete walls surrounding it. Even at this hour, Central Park South and Fifth Avenue were languid rivers of light. By day, the view was magnificent. Perhaps that's why my grandfather, E. Rupert Fairchild III, purchased this mid-Manhattan jewel-box — the Park Place Hotel — and built this penthouse apartment.

I returned to bed.

After tossing and turning for two hours, I resigned myself to getting up and staggered into the study.

Darkly stained Circassian walnut bookcases lined the room, and a massive art-deco desk and chair stood by the window. Three strips of track-lighting lit the bookcases and the poster opposite the window. Grandfather had shown good taste in designing this room.

The desk faced the door, of course: Grandfather had *never* sat with his back to a door.

I gazed at the poster on the opposite wall: a beautiful Swiss landscape reminding me of my years in prep school. When I'd inherited from Grandfather, I'd replaced his enormous scowling portrait with it.

"Don't screw with me!" his portrait had bellowed. I'd wanted to destroy it, but the Horizon International Corporation's board called it "corporate history." After all, he'd founded the company to manage our family's business interests.

At the time, one could have counted our family on one hand — and, now, on one finger. I banished the portrait to the Horizon International reception area. There, it snarls at visitors and staff alike — our corporate gargoyle.

How Grandfather could live under his own malignant gaze mystified me. Perhaps he held meetings here and wanted to beam his scowl from two directions at once. Or perhaps he was a victim of the threat mothers make to children, and his face froze in that expression.

I knew little of the man, though — other than his having murdered at least two people. If he could live with that, I guess he could live with anything.

What did my dream mean?

Its phrase "the stacks stretched to the horizon" intrigued me. Could it refer to Horizon International?

What a bleary-eyed wreck I'd be today!

#

I changed into my powder-blue jogging outfit and took the elevator to the lobby. Last year, I'd discovered jogging and the wonderful way it made me feel.

Hotel staff had lowered the chandeliers to eye-level and were cleaning them. Others polished the marble walls and vacuumed the thickly-carpeted floor. The Hibiscus Court — my favorite of the hotel's four restaurants — was a quiet kaleidoscope of mirrors and foliage.

As smoothly as possible, I stole past the front desk and out the door. Nobody saw me.

A light fog shrouded the world, wafting the city's distinctive fragrance: rotting trash and burnt coffee. I crossed the Grand Army Plaza, entered Central Park, and jogged on the Bicycle Path. Jogging without bodyguards felt odd and liberating. Normally we were quite a spectacle — a curvaceous teenage girl accompanied by huge men, their bulk swelled by body-armor and god knows what armaments.

While I'd always huffed and puffed like an asthmatic steam iron, they'd effortlessly matched my pace — even having casual conversations with each other. It was slightly embarrassing. They were cute, too, but older than me and spoken for. Sometimes they even chatted on their headsets with their wives or girlfriends. They'd never quite explained why I needed so much more security when jogging than at other times.

Sweating bullets after twenty minutes, I was thoroughly finished. I returned to the hotel, where Mr. Tisch — the third-shift Desk Clerk — spotted me coming in. Alone.

“Good morning, Mr. Tisch”, I said.

“Morning, Miss Fairchild. You went jogging...?”

“I know, I know... I couldn't sleep and didn't want to wake ... those guys up.”

He raised his eyebrows, and I left for the elevator.

I showered and got dressed.

“Happy birthday, Miss Connie!” Tilda said.

Tilda — Matilda Appleby — was the middle-aged, regal Jamaican woman Grandfather hired to manage the apartment. She supervised hotel staff when they did repairs, cleaning, and food-service, and ensured that the apartment was never vacant for long.

I'd long ago given up trying to get her drop the 'Miss' from my name. She believed “the forms must be observed,” whatever that meant.

“Thank you!”

“How old are you today?”

“Eighteen.”

“Eighteen!” she exclaimed, her eyes misting over. “When I was eighteen, I'd just stepped off the plane from Kingston. I had the *whole world* in the palm of my hand. Those were the days, indeed! Those were the days...” She shook her head and said, “Will you be wanting breakfast?”

“No thanks, Tilda. I'll get something downstairs.”

“Well, give me a shout if you need anything,” she replied, sitting and opening one of her *Town and Country* magazines.

I threw my books and some corporate documents into a backpack and returned to the lobby.

#

It was 8 AM and the gift shop had just opened. I picked out a ladies' sports watch, guaranteed water-resistant to a hundred meters.

“It's my birthday present to myself,” I told the clerk.

“Happy birthday, Miss Fairchild!” she replied, with an accent I couldn't identify. French?

“Thank you!”

Then I descended the Hibiscus Court's steps to its recessed floor and picked out a table in the center, ordering a newspaper, Oolong tea, and toast. I threw my backpack onto the opposite chair.

All I could see from here was the skylight above, potted palms, topiary hedges, and a concert-harp with music stand. The lady who played it came on at noon. Mirrored panels hid the surrounding lobby, making the restaurant seem larger and more secluded than it was. I might have been in a cloistered medieval garden or a Florentine palazzo. Anywhere but Manhattan.

I set the time and date on my new watch — Monday, September 5, 2018 and put it on. It fit perfectly.

Then I sipped my tea and glanced at the newspaper headlines: an economist saying the national debt would cause economic collapse, the Apostle Dunford on another big crusade, more indictments in the Saudi Oil scandal. Colorado Senator Norbert introduced a bill slashing NASA's budget if they didn't fire Jack Szabo from the space program.

One item caught my eye: the so-called "big lead" in last year's Shroud of Turin theft turned out to be bogus.



Big deal.

I'd finish my homework assignment. When I'd signed up for The Classical Egyptian Language, I'd felt drawn to ancient Egypt.

Did I live a past life there? I wondered. The one past life I clearly remembered had ended in New York City, some nineteen years ago.

I opened my Ancient Egyptian reader and tried to decipher part of *The Eloquent Peasant's Plea*:

"O — if you go to the Lake of Truth, you will sail in it with a sure wind!"

The beautiful phrase "Lake of Truth" appeared in the *Chronicle of Sanehat*, too, but was usually translated as "Sea of Truth" — even though spelled  rather than . A large lake could be an *inland* sea, I guess.

The Ancient Egyptians had poets' souls and angels' brains, I thought, yawning and rubbing my eyes, the hieroglyphs blurring into a parade of drunken cartoons...

"Excuse me, little lady," a Texas-accented voice said.

I looked up to see a trim, tanned middle-aged man with a handlebar mustache standing over me.

"Can you tell me how to get to Central Park?"

"It's right out the front door and across the street," I said, wondering how anyone could enter this place without *passing* Central Park.

"Thank you kindly!" he said. "You know the city pretty well?"

"I guess..."

"I could use someone to show me around."

"The front desk has information about tours."

"You don't understand, darling," he said, putting his hand on my shoulder and massaging it. "I want *you* to be my guide."

"No thanks," I frowned, glancing at his wedding ring. "I'm busy."

"I'm used to the best: the best hotels, the best restaurants, you name it. And I can't imagine a better tour guide than a bodacious gal like you."

"Bodacious?"

"You're built like a young Dolly Parton and not bad-looking. Gals don't get more bodacious than that! Maybe we can meet at the bar this afternoon and talk it over."

"No!"

"I'm a wealthy man. Back in Abilene, I got so much land I can drive for hours and never leave my own property."

"I had a car like that once."

"That's how I like em! Hot and sassy! Seriously, though, do you know who I am?"

"We have an emergency here! This poor man doesn't know who he is. If anyone can establish his identity, please step forward."

"J. P. Fondren," a female voice shouted from the lobby. "Get out here!"

"I'm just trying to..."

"I know what you're trying to do," the voice interrupted. Muttering something under his breath, the man left.

Not bad looking? I mused, checking myself with my compact mirror. With hair the color of sherry, sparkling brown eyes, and features as delicate as a porcelain doll's — I agreed. A little makeup would hide my freckles, and I could do more with my hair than tie it into a ponytail.

I could also dress in something more attractive than a baggy brown sweater and jeans.

Forget it. I'm bodacious enough.

I glanced at my watch and scooped up my books, exclaiming, "The trains better be running or I'm *dead*."

"Condor's moving," my main bodyguard, Thomas Fields, said into his lapel and followed me.

He was a large, nattily-dressed ex-Secret Service agent of few words. At first glance, one could mistake him for an executive or diplomat. His dead eyes and his grim, piercing gaze dispelled that illusion. It even intimidated me.

#

With Mr. Fields in tow, I ran from the hotel lobby to the subway at Sixth Avenue and 57th street. The surrounding skyscrapers so closed off the sky I barely felt I'd been outside.

As I descended the steps, an incoming train's gush of air swept past me, carrying odors of mold, earth, and hot cinnamon buns. People thronged the subway platform — we hadn't managed to avoid the rush hour.

This upset Mr. Fields.

The train left, the rising whine of its motors echoing in the cavernous station. We'd missed it.

Five minutes later, another train screeched into the station and its doors popped open. Like water washing trash into a sewer, torrents of people sucked me and Mr. Fields through the subway's open doors.

Passengers pressed against each other harder than lovers' most passionate embraces. The heat and humanity made me faint, although I couldn't possibly have fallen down. And the noise was deafening.

"You work hard all your life, and what do you get?" a middle-aged man groaned. "They transfer you to New York."

The squeal of steel on steel drowned out his friend's reply.

“Cut it out, pervert!” a woman shouted to a man standing behind her.

#

By the time we reached West 4th Street, the mob had thinned out.

Located in Greenwich Village, the subway station was in a quiet neighborhood of low buildings boasting bookstores and a fresh produce market. A light drizzle fell through the overcast sky, but I didn't mind. It was refreshing.

New York University and Shimkin Hall were a pleasant ten-minute walk away — passing restaurants, a devil-worshippers' shop, a flower shop, a Dunford Rapture Runway filled with singing people, and an art gallery.

#

My English class was in Shimkin Hall's basement. The room's aging fluorescent lights buzzed and flickered, casting a harsh glow that turned people into cadavers. I was early.

George Peterson slumped into the chair next to me, and greeted me with a, “Hi, Connie.” George was a gangly, pale, blond-haired boy a head taller than me and dressed in typical geek attire: a powder-blue shirt, jeans, and two pens in his shirt pocket. He also had acne — even worse than mine.

“Hi, George.”

George and I had known each other casually for almost a year, studying together in the classes we shared: English and Physics. I also helped him with his math.

“I'm metaphorically challenged,” I groaned.

“What?”

“This damned assignment. I don't know where to begin.”

“The essay?”

“Yeah, the one on ‘Jack London's Call of the Wild as Gay Manifesto.’ Maybe I should switch my major. To something that makes sense, like math or physics.”

Some time ago, I'd given up on him as a potential boyfriend. Once, I'd blurted out I had two tickets to a concert at Lincoln Center — and he'd nervously changed the subject. That had upset me but, the next time he asked to study with me, I agreed.

He liked being with me — that much was clear — but was afraid to go any further. And I'd accepted that. And I surely didn't lack opportunities to date men. Somehow, I wanted George the Unattainable.

“I saw this at Barnes and Noble,” he said, holding up a book — *Death in the Alps*, by Jane Grey.

“You said you wrote books as Jane Grey,” he mumbled. “It's really good!”

“Thank you! I'll sign it for you.”

I wrote

George, my dear study-hall friend
 Glad you liked the book I penned
 — virtually Jane Grey and actually Connie Fairchild

“Do you make a lot of money from these books?”

“I don’t know. The publisher sends it all to a charity. Something called Child Reach.”

“Cool!” he said, his eyes misting over with longing and despair. “You’re ... wonderful, Connie. I always knew that. Generous and wonderful. I wish...”

His voice trailed off, and he looked away.

“Oh, George... Yes, I am wonderful but not... It’s ... easy for me to be generous. I’ll give you a copy of my other book.”

“I’d rather buy it.”

Class started.

The look George had flashed me made the hairs on my scalp stand up. I couldn’t focus on class and frankly, didn’t want to. I wrote a poem:

Fly — fly — golden child of the wind
Glow pure and keen against the so-sullen night
Seed-carrier in our seedling season,
Informing with a twinkling might.

Arise, now, to dawn's dread thunder
To skies burning with barren refrains
To Earth, parched and split asunder,
That dies in wait of healing rains.

After, when all is still and bright,
And pensive stars pierce the lucid night,
Wrap yourself in enchanted light;
And fling your restless soul in flight.

Some people chew their nails when they're nervous; I write poems.

Hoping Professor Abrams didn’t notice, I put on my crystal music-headset, played Bach’s *Art of the Fugue*, and reviewed fifty pages of Horizon International Corporation’s “homework.”

Unlike homework my professors assigned me, my survival depended on this. Glowing yellow stick-on arrows pointed to places needing my signature.

Most of today’s documents concerned the Energy Division — building a plant in Nebraska to convert canola oil and cooking grease into diesel fuel by “de-gumming and de-acidifying” the oil.

Oil has acid in it?!

Another document combined several divisional Mergers and Acquisitions Departments into a single division-level Mergers and Acquisitions. Audits would also be done.

A scribbled note fell out, and I picked it up and read it. It was from someone named Hector Milner, and it threatened “disaster” if I signed the papers without meeting him first. He must’ve bribed a secretary to slip it into my packet.

I hate it when they do this! I’d never second-guess my “able commander!”

I wasn't even sure what these departments did, except that it probably involved mergers — and, I guess, acquisitions.

This wasn't the first time someone had tried to undercut my CEO. Despite his saying we needed ambitious people, I hated them — these “players” who'd murder their mothers to get ahead. Two years ago, several of them had plotted to murder me — and almost succeeded.

I signed *everything*.

#

After class, George and I went for a walk in Washington Square Park. The rain had stopped, and the clouds had parted to reveal a hydrangea-blue sky.

A gray-faced, ancient man in a black overcoat fed a gathering flock of pigeons, and a bag-lady slowly pushed a garbage-filled baby-carriage.

Passing the park's dormant fountain, we made our way toward the north end. In summer, kids my age frolicked in the fountain's jets, sipped jug-wine, and smoked marijuana, creating a pungent haze that always made my stomach do somersaults.

From the corner of my eye, I spotted Mr. Fields watching us from a distance.

“Autumn is a strange and powerful season,” I said. “Something's in the air. I just feel it.”

“Yeah,” he smiled. “I smell it too.”

“No, George!” I laughed. “It's ... it's as if time is rearranging itself, somehow. As if new futures are ... sliding into place. Centuries stream through every moment, and ... you can feel them sometimes.”

George took my hand — a first for him. I stroked his hand with my thumb and he blushed. We found a damp bench and sat. Shards of broken wine bottles littered the area around our bench.

“Sometimes you sound like a friend of my family, Connie,” he said. “He's sort of a shaman named Raven ... uh ... uh ... *Would you like to get together sometime?* I mean, would you mind having dinner with me? If it's convenient?”

For a moment, I wondered what exam was coming up that we'd have to study for. Then, it dawned on me he was asking me for a *date*.

“Sure, George. I'd *love* to! When?”

Before he could answer, my purse beeped. I was tempted to ignore it, but he'd ask what the sound was. I pulled out my phone — its red encryption light was lit. As I thought, it was my secretary, Angela, at Horizon International Corporation — they needed my approval for something.

I told her to wait until I came to the office later. She said it was an emergency and asked if I could come by one o'clock.

“Yeah, all right,” I muttered. They'd send a car for me.

“Who's that?”

“I'm sorry, George, I didn't mean to cut you off. It's my family business. They want me for something.”

The entire time I'd known him, I'd avoided discussing my family, steering conversation away from these topics. No doubt he regarded me as a Woman of Mystery.

"Your family makes you work there?"

"I'm the only one *in* my family, George. My parents died ... a couple years ago ... and then my aunt and grandfather. I live alone, now, and the business supports me."

"I wish I could afford to live alone!" he said. He lived in a dorm and always complained about his sloppy roommates and the lack of privacy.

"Actually, I don't really live alone. I have a housekeeper who supervises ... others." And then I realized George had been right: I was quite alone.

Like fetid muck from a pond-bottom, memories swirled through my mind. I shut my eyes, clenched my jaw, and clenched and unclenched my fists several times — determined not to cry. In spite of this, tears welled up in my eyes. I'd thought of my parents' death before without being overcome. Why did it affect me so, this time? Because it was my birthday?

George quietly observed all of this. We sat for several minutes, without speaking.

"I'm very sorry," he mumbled, looking at the ground.

"So am I."

Then, he looked into my eyes and came so close our noses almost touched. He kissed me lightly on my lips — more the suggestion of a kiss than the act. I peered into his eyes, wondering what to do next. Time slowed and became electric, making the hairs on my arms stand up. I stroked George's face with the fingertips of my open right hand. A light breeze blew an Autumn leaf into his hair, where it trembled like a trapped paper insect. Then, I gently pulled his head toward me and kissed him, trying to bury my face in his, trying to hide from the ghosts swirling about me now.

After a minute, our faces parted, flushed, eyes half-closed. I took a deep breath, and George put his books on his lap and hunched over.

We said nothing.

"There's something I've wanted to tell you," George finally whispered.

"What is it?"

After a moment of deafening silence, he whispered, "I love you, Connie. I wanted to tell you that since last Fall. When we started studying together ... I had to take summer classes and was going to ask you for a date then, but you weren't around. I was even afraid you weren't coming back." His voice trailed off into inaudibility, and he looked away.

I took a deep breath, wrapped my arm around his neck, and kissed him again.

"I would have loved to date you last summer, but I had to be out of town. My family business."

We left the bench, bought hot dogs from a vendor, and ate. When we'd finished, I glanced at my watch and noticed it was 12:30. I said, "I'm sorry, George. I've really got to go. The office said I had to be there by one."

“How about tomorrow at six? For dinner.”

“That's fine. Where should we meet?”

“How about the Student Union?”

“I'll be there, George. Until then...”

I ran back to the Student Union and ducked behind it. Then, I pushed the blue button on my phone — summoning my car. It picked up Mr. Fields and me five minutes later.

My main chauffeur, Napoleon Jones, drove. He was a middle-aged man chiseled from a black granite mountain.