

## CHAPTER ONE

David Reid would never forgive himself. Never. He had made one wrong move, and now his mother was in that awful place.

Huge waves tumbled furiously before crashing into the jagged rocks at the base of the cliff. The wind was vicious that night, so angry it tried to tear everything apart. The tall, slender young pines at the top of the bluff bent over, clinging to the earth, trying their hardest to avoid being uprooted.

Frightened birds, skirting the gale-force winds, settled on the sturdy branches of the ancient white pines, their talons closing tightly upon contact, their tiny bodies swaying on the creaking perches.

A path led away from the edge of the cliff and wound its way toward a massive structure. On both sides of the trail were large, stately trees, some with trunks the size of barrels. These were the one-hundred-year-old red oaks that surrounded Haven, a nineteenth-century Neo-Gothic-style building.

At that moment Haven's green-capped towers, turrets, and pointed windows were nearly obliterated by the relentless blast of sideways rain. Most of the windows were dark. Only a few spots of amber light appeared here and there. One of those lights came from a small lamp inside the room of an elderly woman who was cowering in her bed.

Zelda Reid could not remember where she was. Or how she had gotten there.

"Mary," she called out. "Mary, help me!"

The howling wind rushed past her window. Rain pelted the glass. It was night, but she could still see the blurry images of trees in the distance, noble sentries rooted to the ground, their black limbs trembling as they fought the strong gusts of wind. Flashes of lightning lit up her face, the spears of flickering light leaping about the room. Then thunder exploded overhead, shaking the room so violently Zelda felt her bed lurch. She grabbed the faded blue bedspread and yanked it up to her chin. Her teeth chattered as she shivered with fear.

"Please God," she whispered. "I want to go home." A tear rolled down her pale cheek. She groped around for the call button, found it, and clicked the red button several times. "Where is that aide?" she groaned. "Help me. I have to peel!"

Staring at the gnarled, withered hand holding the call button, she found it hard to believe it was hers. In the dim light, she inspected the bulging blue veins snaking their way up the back of the hand like interstate freeways on a road map.

A tapping noise at the window caught her attention. Dark, spindly branches were striking the rain-splattered glass. The branches looked like long, crooked fingers.

Zelda pulled the bedspread up to her eyes. She noticed the shadow of the twisted branches dancing on the wall across from her bed. As she watched the delicate, lacy patterns move back and forth, another shadowy form merged with the sinuous branches. The strange new shape glided up and over the edge of a framed painting. The frame quivered, then slid down the wall and crashed to the floor.

Zelda gasped. And then frowned as she felt warm urine gush into her pants.

The frightening shape increased in size and then vanished, leaving behind an icy chill that frosted the window panes.

“Mary,” Zelda called out, a cloud of cold air floating up from her lips. “Help me, Mary. Help!”

A dark figure appeared in the doorway.

Zelda heard a click, and blinding light filled the room. The temperature returned to normal as if the light bulbs had the power to warm up the room like the rays of a hot summer sun.

Taylor Hanson, a pretty but slovenly nurses’ aide, charged over to the bed. “What’s wrong now?”

“I had to pee.”

“Had to? Don’t tell me you pissed your pants again.”

“I couldn’t help it. You kept me waiting for an hour—”

Taylor seized Zelda by the arms and jerked her up into a sitting position.

“Ow—you’re hurting my arms!”

“This is the third outburst you’ve had tonight. I’m sick of your shit.”

The aide scowled at Zelda and shoved her back onto the mattress to check her briefs.

“I’ve got eighteen other residents I have to take care of,” she said, brushing away a strand of straggly blonde hair from her forehead. “I can only be in one place at a time.”

Taylor ripped open the tabs on Zelda’s disposable underwear and inspected the padded lining.

“Your diaper’s sopping wet.”

Zelda looked up at the ceiling, eyes brimming with tears, hands shaking. She had never been so humiliated.

“Your sheets are wet too. Who’s the moron who forgot to put a bed pad on your—”

“I don’t wear diapers.”

“What?”

“I said I don’t wear diapers.”

“Really?” Taylor held up the wet briefs and pointed to them. “What do you call this?”

“Disposable underpants,” Zelda said with a sob.

“Bullshit. It’s a diaper.”

“No, it’s not,” Zelda cried out. “Babies wear diapers. I’m not a baby.”

“Keep your voice down.”

“I don’t wear diapers!” Zelda screamed.

Taylor grabbed Zelda’s arms and shook her. “I am so sick of you I could puke!”

Like a scolded child, Zelda began to wail hysterically.

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Rain pounded the studio’s skylight. Thunder rumbled overhead, interrupting the classical music of “Barcarolle” by Roberto Occhipinti.

David Reid scrunched up his eyes as he studied the large oil painting on his easel. After a moment, he knew what his final step should be. He dipped a well-worn bristle brush into a mound of cadmium yellow paint and mixed it into a pile of cadmium red. Adding a little burnt

sienna, he transformed the mixture into a bright, luscious gold—a color that looked stunning on the dark, shiny patina of his decades-old palette.

Like a dashing pirate, David held out his loaded brush as if it were a sword and made his move—several quick, confident dashes of gold to a patch of fallen leaves. He stepped back to survey the painting. Now sunlit, the leaves sparkled.

He smiled at the result.

This man loved to paint. Lived to paint. And this painting reflected that devotion. It was a masterpiece.

Satisfied that the work was finished, David wiped his hands with a paper towel and walked over to the sink to wash up. He felt elated. He had just completed the best piece he had ever done. But unfortunately, the buyers weren't there. Wall Street traders had sent the entire global economy into a tailspin and crippled the markets for high-ticket items like fine art. But David had faith. Faith that the buyers would soon be back. So until then, he decided he would keep painting.

The running water felt nice and warm as he lathered up with a green bar of artist's soap, the refreshing scent of mint and lanolin filling the air. He noticed a scratch on the side of the stainless-steel sink. He tried to rub it out with his thumb, but it was no use. It was now a part of the sink.

While he was drying his hands, he spotted a small puddle on the floor. He looked up and saw water leaking from the skylight's framing.

“Oh, not again,” he said, looking up with weary eyes. He was exhausted and didn't want to deal with the problem. He opened a closet door, pulled out a gray plastic bucket, and placed it beneath the site of the leak. As he watched water droplets fall and splatter against the bottom of the bucket, the gentle sound of a harp caught his attention.

He crossed over to his tabouret and picked up his iPhone. The caller was Haven. He tapped the green accept button and raised the phone to his ear. “This is David Reid.” He listened for a moment and then said, “Sure. I can hold.”

Turning to face a picture on the wall, he studied it while he waited. It was a magnificent painting with a sky so incredibly beautiful it put all other skies to shame. Storm clouds seemed to drip from the upper atmosphere to the horizon, clouds that were dark gray and creamy white with streaks of violet and pink running through them. And then the sky itself: dark blue overhead and a lighter blue near the horizon. A desert was in the foreground, with a path leading to a dusky blue-violet mountain range somewhere in New Mexico or Arizona.

David valued this piece more than any other in his collection. It was painted by his mentor, Yuri Zykov, a contemporary Russian master. He had taken a workshop with Zykov, a man with the weather-beaten face of an old sea captain who smoked a pipe and wore a black Gavroche artist cap. Half-way through the first day of the workshop, David knew he had to continue to study with this brilliant painter.

As his eyes followed the bold strokes and directional movement of the big shapes in the painting, he was reminded of how his mother had also studied with a great master. Emile Gruppe, a New England landscape painter who established The Gloucester School of Painting in 1940 with his mentor, John Fabian Carlson. Gruppe was a legend in his own time, and David's mother beamed with pride whenever she spoke of the man who taught her how to paint.

Crossing his arms, David stepped back from Zykov's painting and examined it from a different vantage point. The piece was so powerful it made him question his own painting skills.

Who am I kidding? I'll never be as good as this guy. Having a one-man show in a major art museum is a pipe dream. A goal I'll probably never achieve.

A voice brought David out of his reverie.

"Yes, I'm still here." He walked around his studio, listening to the person on the other end of the line.

"Agitated? Why is she agitated?"

Overwhelmed by what he was hearing, he began rubbing the back of his neck.

"Inject her with what kind of drug?"

He frowned when he got his answer. "Just something to calm her down." He rolled his eyes. "Can't you be a little more specific?"

He grew annoyed when the caller didn't answer his question. "Listen to me, can't you give her a pill? Another dose of her Ativan?"

Running his hand through his thick dark hair, he let out a long, deep audible breath. "No," he said. "Absolutely not. You do not have permission to inject my mother with any drugs."

The more he heard, the more frustrated he became. He seized a ballpoint pen and clicked it repeatedly.

"No, I don't care how safe it is. And I've never seen my mother in an agitated state. Are you sure you're talking about Zelda Reid?"

Thunder roared overhead.

He strained to hear the caller. "She did what? Can you please repeat that?" He shook his head as he heard the words.

"Spit in an aide's face?"

He tossed the pen towards his desk. It landed with a smack, right on top of the pristine lid of his Macbook Pro. He threw up his hands in an "I give up" gesture.

"Yes. Yes, I'll be there as soon as I can."

David whipped off his artist's apron, flicked a switch that turned off the music and lights, and rushed out of his studio.

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Wipers frantically thumped back and forth as they attacked the wall of water on the windshield. David leaned over the steering wheel, struggling to see the pavement in front of him. At intersections, he stopped and squinted, trying to make out the names on the street signs.

Not that street.

Not that one either.

There it is. Sea Pines Drive.

He turned onto the slick blacktop road. His silver Lexus SUV rolled along, sending waves of water into the air as it approached its destination. After passing what seemed like an endless stretch of ornate iron fence with stacked stone columns, he spotted the elegant sign next to the front gate that read "Haven at Stone Cliff - Nursing and Rehabilitation Center".

Driving through the open gate, David steered his car up a gently sloping hill. Halfway to the top, he stepped on the brake. He peered through the windshield, listening to the steady, rhythmic strumming sound his wipers made as they cleared away the water.

Through a weakening shield of rain, Haven slowly emerged. Perched atop the seaside village of Stone Cliff, Maine, the gothic building loomed above him. And as the rain tapered off, silent flashes of lightning against the night sky gave the enormous stone structure a sinister appearance. One that made his skin crawl.

No wonder she's agitated, he thought. I'd be agitated too if I were stuck inside that place.

David nudged the gas pedal, and the Lexus finished its ascent to the top of the hill.

After parking, he grabbed his umbrella and climbed out into the storm. The wind was howling, an ominous bay so loud and frightening it could send an African lion running for the deepest, darkest part of the jungle. He knew his umbrella would be ripped to shreds, so he tucked it under his arm and ran through the rain toward the front entrance.

Once inside, he stood there shaking the water from his hair, eyeing the colossal solid oak double doors he had just come through. He brushed the drops of rain from his face and from the sleeves of his leather bomber jacket, and then turned toward the lobby.

Last renovated in the 1950s, the atmosphere inside Haven was dark and somber. A classic red leather Chesterfield sofa with high arms and a studded back was flanked by tall drape-covered windows that towered above the black-and-white checkered marble floor. The couch, its red leather worn and cracked, shared a mahogany coffee table with two matching Chesterfield armchairs.

The only light in the dreary room came from a French brass floor lamp with a cream-colored shade and an identical table lamp at one end of the sofa; the brass on both pieces tarnished to a deep brown with a few golden tones peeking out. In the dark corners of the room, the shapes of vintage chairs, tables, and lamps sat quietly, undisturbed—inanimate objects that seemed as if they were sleeping the big sleep.

Musty air filled his nose as he made his way across the lobby. He passed a grand sweeping staircase, an antique metal cage elevator, and a deserted reception station. Then he turned a corner and headed down a gloomy corridor. Hearing a scream, he quickened his pace.

"Let me go! Mary, help me!"

David raced down the hallway and darted into his mother's room.

Zelda was thrashing about, swinging her arms at three nurses' aides. She was biting them. Kicking them. Scratching them. Screaming. Crying.

"You're evil," Zelda said. "Evil! I hate you all."

David stared in disbelief. "Mother, stop it!"

Zelda looked up. The instant David's face registered, her scowl disappeared.

"David!"

Delighted that her son had arrived, Zelda calmed down. She smiled at the aides as if she were just playing a game with them.

"My son is here," she said. "He's come to take me home."

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David sat beside his mother on her bed, his arm wrapped around her. She was exhausted, crying softly.

“David, please get me out of here.”

“Once you finish your therapy, I’ll take you home.”

“No, I want to go home now.”

“The doctor has to release you,” he said, taking her hand in his. “He won’t do that until you finish your therapy.”

“But I’m afraid.”

“There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“Yes, there is. There’s spooks in here.” Her eyes searched his face for a reaction.

He grinned and shook his head. “There are no spooks in here.”

“I saw one,” she whispered.

“It was a dream. Or your imagination.” He stood up and helped her get underneath the covers. “Now lie down and go to sleep.”

“Don’t leave me,” she said, clutching his shirt-sleeve.

“I’ll stay a little while longer. We can watch TV together.”

“Okay,” she said happily, settling back into her pillow.

David sat on a chair next to the bed, pointed a remote at the television and a picture leapt out of nowhere and onto the screen.

Zelda gave him a sweet smile, then turned her attention to the program on the TV.

A little girl was standing next to a Christmas tree with her father. “Do you believe in angels?” she asked, reaching out to touch a strand of silver tinsel.

David watched the scene unfold. It was from the movie *The Christmas Box* based on the novel by Richard Paul Evans.

A few minutes later, he glanced at his mother. Her eyes were closed, already fast asleep. As he rose from his chair, Dawn Mitchell, a black nurses’ aide, entered the room carrying a neatly folded stack of clean clothes.

“Thanks for coming to our rescue,” Dawn said, a cheerful smile on her face.

“Sorry for what she put you through. She’s always been the most loving, gentle person. That kind of behavior is totally out of character for her.”

“Well, it is typical behavior for most people with dementia,” she said.

“That is so sad.”

“It sure is. By the way, your mother keeps calling out for someone by the name of Mary. Who’s Mary?”

He thought about it for a few seconds. “I have no idea.”

Dawn opened a closet door and began hanging Zelda’s clean clothes on the wooden rod.

David removed his brown leather jacket from the back of the chair and slipped it on. As he bent down to pick up his umbrella, a pain shot through him. He grabbed his lower back, wincing in agony, and squeezed his eyes shut. An instant later he opened his eyes, and it was then that he spied the painting on the floor, partially hidden by a nightstand.

He straightened his body and shuffled over to it. This time he crouched instead of bending. He picked up the picture and examined the frame. Frowning at what he saw, he stood up.

“How did this fall off its hook?” he asked.

Dawn turned away from the closet, her gaze traveling to the painting he held. “The rooms on this floor were painted a few days ago. One of the painters must have taken it off the wall.”

“It hit the floor hard,” he said, pointing to a deep groove in the gold-leaf frame. “See here. Big dent.”

Dawn scrutinized the damaged frame. “Hmm. Clumsy painter? Maybe dropped it?”

Edgar Fitzgerald peeked into the room. When he saw Dawn, he entered. A listless, burly Irishman in his mid-forties, he looked as if he had already grown weary of life.

“Dawn, me da’s sheets smell horrible,” Edgar said. “Could you please change them for him?”

“Sure. I’ll take care of it right now.” Dawn smiled at Edgar and left the room.

Edgar looked at the painting in David’s hands. “That’s a gorgeous picture. If I didn’t know better, I’d say it was an original by John Singer Sargent.”

“Good eye. It’s a copy of a painting by Sargent.” David gestured toward his mother’s bed. “My mother painted it years ago. Are you an artist?”

“Na. I dabbled around in oils a few years ago. Got frustrated and gave up. But I still love great art.”

David returned the painting to its place on the wall. A sudden boom of thunder roared overhead, and the frame rattled.

“Is your ma in here for keeps?” Edgar asked.

“No. For therapy.”

“What happened to her?”

“Well, this idiot heard his cell phone ringing when he was helping her walk to the bathroom. He left her side to grab his phone, and she fell and broke her hip.”

Edgar shook his head. “What’d you do to that idiot? I would’ve strangled him.”

“Oh, I torture him every day.”

Edgar was puzzled. “How do you manage that?”

With a disheartened look, David said, “That idiot was me.”