

THE BLACK DOG

A MARCIE AND AMANDA
MYSTERY



GLEN
EBISCH

The Black Dog

(A Marcie and Amanda Mystery)

by

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Dedication: For my wife

Chapter 1

Jerome Kronberg stood at the top of West Peak and looked around him. In the distance to his left he could see the city of Meriden; to his right were the more open spaces of rural western Connecticut. He shivered a little and zipped up his jacket. It was a blustery day in April and the wind was quickly drying the sweat that was on his body from the two-hour climb, which, although not technically difficult, was challenging enough for someone who'd only recently given up an investment adviser's desk for hiking.

As he stood on the peak, he had a sense of being alone and free. He felt his heart sing as he considered the word "freedom." The odds were good that his days of freedom were numbered. Even now the federal prosecutor's office was compiling evidence that would soon result in his arrest for fraud. His attorney had warned him that the only way to avoid significant jail time would be to cooperate with the authorities. He was giving serious consideration to just that, although there was one person who urged him to remain steady. Loyalty, he thought with a smile. Who could expect that from a man who had happily and with a pleasant smile swindled his friends out of millions? Why should there be honor among thieves when there was none among friends?

He took one last survey of the area, watching the gray clouds scudding across the sky to the west and wondering what sort of view he would have from a prison cell. He knew that he wasn't a strong man, and that the fear of incarceration would soon push him in the direction of telling all he knew. He only hoped it was enough. But even being free wouldn't protect him from his victims; they would sue for damages. But there was more danger than that. One of those whom he'd swindled had already openly threatened him. He knew that others who kept their hatred within themselves might eventually prove more dangerous. Was someone out there even now plotting his demise, smiling at revenge about to be fulfilled?

As he started to turn to go back the way he had come, he saw a small black figure run out from the trees and head towards him. A black dog. He knew the story. He should have he'd already seen the dog twice. The first time nothing bad had happened. The second time he'd returned home to find that his partner, Jeffrey Hunter, had committed suicide. The third time you saw the dog, legend said, it meant your own death. His heart pounding in terror, he quickly backed away from the creature that was eagerly running up the slope towards him as if happy to see him, its mouth open but not emitting a sound. Its feet seeming not to touch the ground. A ghostly dog, a sepulchral dog.

His back slammed into an outcropping of rock. To his right was the dog and to the left was the edge of the cliff. He prepared himself to turn, go around the rock, and run back down the mountain. Perhaps you can't outrun death, he thought desperately, but what choice did he have?

As he readied himself to turn and run as he'd never run before, a powerful force struck his right side, propelling him toward the cliff. Before he realized it, he was off the

mountain and falling into space.

Chapter 2

Marcie Ducasse sat at her desk at *Roaming New England Magazine*, staring out the window at the cars passing by on Route 1 in Wells, Maine. The Friday morning traffic was relatively light, confined to local commuters. April was too early for much in the way of tourists. In another month it would be pleasant to walk on the beach, Marcie thought. April was generally still too windy and cold, especially in the morning, her favorite time to walk. Although there were days in the winter when she would bundle up and go out on the beach, even in January when the frozen wet sand would crackle underfoot.

She was pondering all these things because, to be honest, she was bored. There were still a number of editing chores to be done on the next issue of the magazine, but she wanted more in the way of action. She had spent the entire winter cooped up in the office, never once having the opportunity to go out in the field and investigate a story. There had been plenty of articles about New England history and travel for her to accept and edit, but there had been no tales of the supernatural, at least none that involved recent sightings. So she'd been reduced to summarizing bizarre historical events for the *Weird Happenings* column, which usually made for good reading, but didn't leave any room for out of office research. Marcie was so desperate for action that she'd even spent several hours at home last night poring through all the letters and e-mails she'd received at the magazine in the past six months, hoping for some story of the supernatural that might be suitable for her column and that, more importantly, would require some hands-on reporting.

The phone rang. She muttered under her breath. Since they had no funds for a receptionist or a switchboard, the telephone number printed in the magazine for the staff rang on her desk. There was a separate number for advertisements that went through their one-person business office. But it was Marcie's job to field all the non-marketing calls and decide which had to be forwarded to Amanda Vickers, the managing editor whose office was down the hall.

"Hello," a woman's voice said when she answered the phone, "I'm trying to reach Marcie Ducasse."

People almost never called for her by name. She felt a momentary rush of apprehension at having such direct contact with the public, almost enough to cause her to say Marcie wasn't in and could she take a message. But she decided that was silly.

"This is Marcie," she said.

"Wonderful, my name is Sheila Little, and I'm a big fan of yours. Or I guess I should say that I'm a fan of your column."

"*Weird Happenings*?"

She never got calls from people who claimed to be fans. Occasionally someone would send a letter or e-mail commenting favorably on an article or offering their own

interpretation of a supernatural event. But people never seemed to feel motivated enough to make such direct contact.

“That’s right. I love the column. I like the whole magazine, but that column really makes it for me.”

“Well, thank you, that’s good to hear.” Marcie paused, wondering if that was Sheila’s only purpose in calling.

“Actually, I wanted to talk to you because an event has happened down here in Comford, Connecticut, that might be of interest to you.”

“Where is Comford?”

“About five miles north of Meriden.”

Marcie pulled her notebook closer and took out a pen.

“What’s the story?”

“Have you heard of Jerome Kronberg?”

Marcie still thought of herself as primarily a journalist; therefore, she made a point of reading the *Boston Globe* and *The New York Times*. So she’d heard the name.

“Wasn’t he involved in some kind of financial swindle?”

“Exactly. It’s a big thing down here. He got a lot of his rich friends to invest in what turned out to be a Ponzi scheme.”

Marcie waited for Sheila to continue, but there was a long pause. Finally she decided to fill the gap.

“I’m sure that’s an interesting financial story, but I don’t see how it fits in with the *Weird Happenings* column.”

“He’s dead.”

“Kronberg is dead,” Marcie said, sitting up straighter in her chair. “When did that happen?”

“Yesterday. He was hiking and fell off a mountain. West Peak, it’s right near Meriden.”

“Okay, but I still don’t see—”

“He saw the black dog,” Sheila said in a somber voice.

Marcie stopped for a minute, trying to figure out the significance of that comment.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what that means.”

“There’s a local legend down here that if you see this mysterious black dog three times while you’re on the mountain, you die.”

“And did Kronberg see the dog three times?”

“He saw it twice, according to his wife. Of course, we don’t know if he saw it three times because he was alone on the mountain when he died.”

“You mean he might have seen it a third time and that’s when he fell off the mountain?”

“Exactly.”

“Well, I could do some research on the black dog and then write an account of what happened. It would be good to have his wife’s story in her own words. Maybe I could

come down for a quick visit and talk to her.”

Sheila cleared her throat, indicating that there was something more. “I know from reading your column that sometimes you find that what appeared to be a supernatural event was actually carried out by flesh and blood people. That might be the case here.”

“What are you getting at?”

“As you can imagine, Jerome had a lot of enemies in the area after his scheme was revealed. I’m just wondering if someone murdered him and hoped that the black dog would get the blame.”

“Would anyone seriously think that?” asked Marcie, tapping her pen on her notebook.

“Some might. More would probably think it was a suicide.”

“Are there any people he swindled who would be angry enough to murder him?”

“Several of them are pretty angry.”

“Would they be willing to talk with me?”

Sheila laughed. “One thing these people are more than willing to do is talk about what happened to them. They feel aggrieved and want everyone to know what Kronberg has done to them. A lot of these people are my friends, so if I vouch for you, they’ll be happy to answer your questions.”

“I’ll need to get permission from my managing editor, but if she says it’s okay, I’ll give you a call and set up the trip.”

“Great. I’ll look forward to meeting you in person.”

Marcie hung up the phone and smiled. *Who said the universe wouldn’t provide?* she thought to herself; just when things seemed to be heading in the direction of more of the same, a nugget like this was dropped in her lap. A mysterious black dog and unexplained death. A mixture of excitement and fear went through her at the thought of another adventure.

Chapter 3

Amanda's computer screen was filled with the manuscript of an article she was editing, but she was ignoring it, and instead staring out the window at the distant ocean. Marcie stood in the doorway for a moment. Amanda was usually very focused. It was unlike her to be daydreaming in the middle of work, but lately she'd seemed preoccupied. Marcie knocked gently on the door frame. Amanda swung around in her chair as though startled from a deep reverie.

"Hi, Marcie." She smiled and waved her toward the chair in front of the desk.

Marcie took a seat. "Is everything okay?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Just that you seemed to be staring into space."

Amanda shrugged. "I've got a few things on my mind, and to be honest, this article isn't all that fascinating. Another piece about Boston right before the revolution. I'll be honest, I've read a hundred of them. But our readers seem to like the topic. What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to go out in the field to investigate a story."

"What's it about?"

Amanda's right hand went up to twist the pearls around her neck. Marcie knew that Amanda always got nervous at the thought of her being out in the field all alone. Both of them, however, were aware that given the short staffing, there was no alternative.

Marcie filled her in on the situation that Sheila Little had described.

When Marcie finished, Amanda steepled her fingers and sat back in her chair.

"Sounds promising. I've heard of this Jerome Kronberg, too. I didn't know he'd died."

"It only happened yesterday."

"Are you sure there's enough here for a story? I mean people die in hiking accidents all the time."

"Not after they've seen the black dog twice. You've got to admit that sounds like genuinely weird happening."

"Could be," Amanda admitted, "especially if his wife backs up the story."

"And I'd also like to follow up on the murder angle. There are lots of people down there who won't be sorry to see him dead."

"So the supernatural is possibly not the criminal."

"Just like most of these cases."

Amanda sighed. "That means you'll be heading into dangerous territory again."

"You know I'll be careful."

"There's something I have to tell you. I've been putting it off because you haven't gone out in the field in quite a while. But after your last adventure, when you ended up almost being killed, Sam made a policy change."

Marcie groaned. Sam Peabody, the older man who was owner of the publishing

company that put out the magazine, always seemed to be interfering in what Marcie saw as her right to do her job as she thought fit.

“What is it now? Last time he wanted me to stay in cheap motels to save a few bucks that’s how I almost ended up dead. What brilliant new idea does he have now?”

“He doesn’t want you travelling alone. He thinks these investigations are too dangerous for you to take on by yourself.”

“Fine. So let him hire a third editor, then you and I can go together.”

Amanda shook her head. “That’s not going to happen.”

“So what then?”

“Sam has found someone to travel with you and help with the investigations.”

“Who?”

“A man Sam went to college with.”

“You want me to travel with some old guy?”

“He’s only in his early sixties. He’s not decrepit. He’s a college teacher who took early retirement.”

“What did he teach?”

“English.”

“Oh great; not only do I have to travel with him, but he’ll probably want to write the story for me.”

“I made it very clear to him that he was just a traveling companion and assistant investigator. You are in charge, and all the writing duties are yours. If you want to take advantage of his expertise, that’s up to you.”

“Have you met this guy?”

“No. But I had a long conversation with him on the phone. He seems nice. He has a good sense of humor and sounds pretty easygoing. There’s no reason why you shouldn’t get along fine.”

Marcie gave her a skeptical glance.

“What’s his name?”

“Simon Bannister.”

Marcie grunted. “Sounds like an English teacher.”

“Don’t judge him before you’ve met,” Amanda said. “And remember, Sam is only doing this for your own protection. He likes your column; it brings in readers. But he also wants you to be safe.”

“I guess I don’t have much choice. But it’s only going to work as long as this Simon person knows that I’m the boss.”

“Exactly. He’s just a part-time consultant.” Amanda studied the calendar on her desk. “When did you want to take this trip?”

“I have a couple of things to finish up here today, and I’ll bring some articles to edit on my laptop. So I think I could leave on Monday if that’s all right with you.”

“That should be fine. I’ll give Simon a call to make sure he’s available.”

Marcie opened her mouth, about to say something about going alone if he wasn't free, but Amanda held up her hand.

"Let's not anticipate problems. Okay."

Marcie nodded, acting more agreeable than she felt, and left the room.

She went back to her office and slumped down in the chair. It wasn't like she usually worked alone. In the first year or so she'd traveled with Amanda. That had been a good partnership. And she'd worked other times with people—generally journalists—those she'd met while in the field. But to be saddled with an English teacher and someone old enough to be her father? Her father. She certainly hoped he wasn't anything like him. That would put a quick end to their relationship.

A few minutes later, Amanda appeared in the doorway and gave her a thumbs up.

"Simon will drive here from where he lives on the North Shore. He'll arrive by nine o'clock on Monday."

"I wanted to leave earlier."

"You have to be reasonable. He has a two-hour drive to get up here. So we can't expect him any earlier than that, can we?"

"No, I guess not," Marcie conceded.

Amanda turned away, then paused and turned back.

"Don't worry. If this set-up really doesn't work out, I'll give Sam a call and tell him that he has to find someone else. I don't care if Simon is an old friend."

Marcie nodded and smiled. "Thanks Amanda; I know I can count on you."

And you'd better get ready to make that call, Marcie said to herself.

Chapter 4

Marcie was sitting in her office on Monday when she heard heavy footsteps on the stairs. At the sound of the creaking floorboards, she looked up and saw a man walking down the hall toward her open office door. He looked to be a bit over six feet tall, solidly built, and bald. She was pleased to see that he was casually dressed in a sweater and slacks rather than wearing a suit and tie. His round face was smiling as he entered her office and stuck out his hand.

“I’ll bet you’re Marcie Ducasse,” he said. “I’m Simon Bannister.”

“Yes, I’m Marcie,” she said, taking his large hand. His grip was firm but gentle, not an attempt to prove anything, a point in his favor. Marcie was always put off by men who tried to crush your hand to prove their masculinity.

Marcie pulled her coat off its hook behind the door.

“Are you ready to go?” She knew that sounded a bit abrupt, so she tried to soften it. “Do you need to make a rest stop before we head out?”

“I’m all set.”

Marcie led the way down the stairs and out into the parking lot.

“Shall we use my car or yours?” Simon asked.

“Mine,” Marcie said louder than she intended. She knew that whoever’s car was used would probably drive, and she wanted to get this whole thing started correctly, with her in charge.

“Okay.” The man went over to a late model sedan and opened the trunk. He took out a suitcase and carried it over to Marcie’s hatchback. As he stowed it inside, he glanced at her bag.

“You travel light,” he said.

For a girl, Marcie guessed was the implied comment. But she decided not to make anything of it.

“I’ve been doing this for a while. I’ve got my own system.”

Marcie secured the hatch, and they got in the car. She pulled out of the driveway and headed south on Route 1.

“Have you been up this way before?” Marcie asked when they’d been on the road for a few minutes.

“I’ve been to Portland and did a little touring in Kennebunkport once, but otherwise no. I tend to go out to the Cape when I want the ocean.”

Marcie wondered if that was an implied criticism of Maine, but decided to let it slide.

“Amanda told me that you used to teach college. Where was that?”

“A small place up in Vermont, Ravensmont College. They had to close a couple of years after I left because of finances. But it was a nice school. There were small classes and good colleagues.”

“But you retired early.”

She thought for a moment that he wasn't going to take the bait and answer.

"There was a good financial package. Plus I saw the handwriting on the wall for the place and knew it was time to bail."

"What do you do now?" Marcie asked.

"Occasionally I do part time teaching at colleges in the Boston area, but basically I'm retired. That's why I agreed when Sam asked if I'd be interested in this job. In fact I've been eagerly waiting for us to have a chance to work together. I've read your column and really enjoyed it."

Marcie glanced over at him to see if he was sincere. He appeared to be, but how could she be sure. Maybe he was only being polite, wanting to keep his job.

"Thank you," she said. Then trying to sound more gracious she added, "Coming from an English professor that really means something. I'll bet you've written a lot yourself."

"Professional articles, that sort of stuff, mostly. I wrote one book."

"What about?"

"*Tristram Shandy*. Have you ever heard of it?"

"Sure, it's a novel by Laurence Sterne. I was an English major in college. I'm pretty sure I read part of it for class."

"Good for you. Most of my students tried to avoid the novel. Too difficult."

"What's the title of your book? Maybe I can get it out of the library some time."

He didn't answer for a moment and when Marcie glanced over he was looking a bit uncomfortable.

"I doubt you'll find it outside of a university library. The title is *A Meta-Critical Analysis of Tristram Shandy*."

Marcie smiled. "Kind of a mouthful."

"To the handful of scholars interested in the topic, the title said it all. I'm afraid it was never destined to be a best seller."

"Limited audience?"

Simon nodded and blushed slightly. "Let's just say it sold in the hundreds rather than the thousands."

"Popularity isn't always a sign that a book is good," said Marcie.

"I suppose not," Simon said, then he smiled. "All the same, a few more readers would have been nice."

Marcie returned the smile.

"Since you were an English major, were you ever interested in writing a novel?" Simon asked.

"No. I double majored in journalism, and that's where my primary interest lies."

"How does journalism fit in with working at *Roaming New England*?"

Marcie paused for a moment to think. "I guess I consider myself to be an investigative reporter, but instead of probing into politics or corruption, I focus on so-called supernatural events."

“So you don’t believe that there really are supernatural events. I was wondering whether you really believed in these so-called phenomena or not. I have to tell you right up front that I’m a doubter, so I’m glad to hear that you are, too.”

Marcie shook her head.

“My position is a lot more complicated than that. Sure, I think a lot of supernatural events are really done by humans, but I’ve seen enough stuff that I can’t explain to make me at least keep an open mind about the whole thing.”

“Really?”

Marcie nodded. “That’s also the best way to approach each case if you want to get a good story. Keep an open mind, and follow the evidence.”

“I’ll remember that.”

Marcie swung off of Route 1 and took the overpass over and down to Route 95. They went along for several miles in silence.

“There’s something I wanted to say to you right up front, so that we’ll have a good working relationship,” Simon began.

“What’s that?”

“Well, I know that I’m old enough to be your father, maybe your grandfather, but I wanted you to know that I’m not going to try to take charge. You’re the boss here.”

“Good, that’s the way I see it, too,” Marcie said firmly. “And if you don’t mind, I’d like to think of you as a colleague rather than a father.”

“Yes, a father daughter relationship is a little too close.”

“Not in my case.”

“You don’t get along with your father when you see him?” asked Simon.

“I don’t see him,” Marcie replied in a tone that discouraged any further questions.

Forty-five minutes later, Marcie got off of 95 and went onto 495 South toward Worcester. Just south of the city, she got on the Massachusetts Turnpike getting off on Route 84. She followed 84 down into Hartford where she navigated the intersection of highways to pick up 91 down to Meriden.

Conversation had been sporadic along the way. When they’d stopped for lunch, Simon had talked a bit about what he liked and didn’t like about college teaching.

“Are we going to go into Meriden?” Simon asked as they headed down Route 91.

“No, we’re going to swing off north of the city and jog over to catch Route 15. That should bring us right into Comford. That’s where Kronberg lived and where our contact Sheila Little, has her house.”

“Where are we staying?”

“In an inn on Route 15 right in Comford. It should be a pretty nice place. Sam is letting us pick better places now because he thinks they’re safer.”

“Safer or not, I’d rather stay in a nice place,” Simon said.

Marcie wondered if he was going to be a difficult traveler, one of those people who never found things to be satisfactory.

Twenty minutes later, they pulled into the parking lot of the Comford Inn. There was a central building with a semi-circular porch extending out toward the parking lot. What looked to be two later additions, by the style of the siding, extended back at a ninety-degree angle from the main building.

Simon gave a low whistle. "Pretty impressive. It's large for an inn."

"Let's hope the service lives up to the looks," said Marcie.

They walked up onto the porch and through the double glass doors into the lobby. On the left was a large desk, behind which stood a young woman in a tailored blouse and black skirt who smiled at them.

"May I help you?" she asked.

Marcie gave her the pertinent information. While waiting for the processing to be complete, she glanced to her right and saw, through large floor to ceiling windows, that there was an indoor pool right off the lobby. The woman noticed the direction of her glance.

"The pool is open until eleven o'clock at night."

"Good. I'll probably take advantage of it. Do you also have an exercise room?"

"Yes, it's down the hall off the pool."

When their registration was completed the woman told them that their rooms were 33 and 34 which were in the north wing. They got in an elevator right off the lobby that took them to the third floor, then began walking in the direction of the sign on the wall that pointed toward the rooms in the thirties.

When they were standing in front of their rooms, Marcie said, "Why don't we take a moment to settle in? I'll give our contact person a call. Since it's only three o'clock, she might be willing to meet with us this afternoon."

Simon nodded. "Sounds fine."

Marcie used her key card to open the door. She went inside and swung her suitcase onto the bed, then dug her cell phone out of the pocket of her jacket and called Sheila Little. The woman sounded happy to hear that they were in town and suggested that they come over as soon as they got a chance. Marcie said they'd be there in half an hour. Then she carefully unpacked her suitcase and arranged things in the large dresser along one wall. She hung her blouses and slacks in the closet. When she was done, she went over to the window and stared outside at the parking lot below. Marcie could feel the excitement rising. It was great to know that the hunt was on.

Amanda Vicker sat at her desk and stared out at the ocean that filled the horizon line. She was finding it difficult to concentrate on the article in front of her. All her mind could focus on was Richard Canton, the man she'd been dating for the last year. She was angry with herself. It wasn't like her to allow her personal life to get in the way of work. She prided herself on being able to compartmentalize things. One compartment held her work and all that entailed, another held her mother and her brothers, and a third on

contained the rest of her out of work interests and relationships. This system had functioned well for her since she'd been an adult. But in the time that she'd known Richard, he'd repeatedly threatened to break out of his box and interfere in the rest of her life.

Amanda had to admit that in a way this was exciting, but it also frightened her. She'd seen too many of her friends travel down the road to heartbreak when they became obsessed with a man who either didn't feel the same way about them and broke off the relationship or who married them and then turned out not to be as compatible as they'd expected. Having a particular man constantly on your mind in the present was no guarantee that he would remain interesting in the long run, Amanda warned herself. People can change over time. Maybe she'd be such a different person in ten years that Richard would no longer love her, even if she continued to love him. Or he could change. The negative possibilities were intimidating. Amanda had to admit to herself that she didn't like to take chances, either professionally or personally. She wondered if that made her some kind of control freak.

She sighed and decided to call it quits early, since she wasn't doing anything productive. Amanda shut down her computer, but remained seated behind her desk. She knew why her relationship with Richard was so much on her mind. It was because she feared that he was as in love with her as she thought she might be with him. He was also taking her out to eat tonight at a very nice restaurant, and the rather solemn look on his face when he told her made her suspect that he was planning to take their relationship to the next level by proposing. If that did happen, how would she respond? She had no idea. Fascination and fear had so far battled to a draw.

Why can't he be happy with things just the way they are? she asked herself. People always want more than they have in the present, and a good part of the time the changes they make just end up costing them what they've already got.

Amanda put on her coat, went to the door and switched off the light. She walked down the hall, pausing briefly outside Marcie's office. She wished she could be more like Marcie, who went long periods of time without a boyfriend and didn't seem to find that disturbing. Whereas she would desperately look for an immediate replacement once a relationship had ended.

Maybe Richard wasn't planning to propose. He could have something completely different on his mind. The resort inn that he managed seemed to fill all of his time when he wasn't with her, and it was frequently their topic of conversation. It could be that he just wanted to inform her of some major renovation that he was planning to undertake. She tried unsuccessfully to convince herself of that, but her instincts told her it was something more.

Am I the only woman who doesn't want her boyfriend to propose to her? Amanda wondered with a grim smile as she opened the door and left the building.

Chapter 5

“What do you know about this Sheila Little?” Simon asked as they pulled out of the inn’s parking lot.

“All I know is that she reads our magazine and must have money because she’s friends with these people that Kronberg swindled.”

Marcie was tempted to tell Simon that Little particularly liked the *Weird Happening* column, but she thought that might sound too much like tooting her own horn. In her family you never bragged about your accomplishments. You just got the job done and then moved on to the next thing.

“Rich, that should be interesting.”

“Rich people give me hives,” Marcie said.

Simon looked at her and smiled. “Why is that?”

“Oh, I suppose it’s because I think they’re looking down on me.”

“All rich people have is a lot of money.”

“Isn’t that enough?”

“Maybe Sheila Little will look up to you because you write an important column in a well known regional magazine.”

“Do you think so?” Marcie said in a skeptical tone.

“One thing money can’t buy is talent.”

“I’ll try to keep that in mind.”

After a drive of several miles, they found themselves in a neighborhood of large houses set back from the road. Marcie saw the number eleven on one of the two stone posts that framed a driveway, and turned in. They went up a long road to the house which was made of brick and in the Georgian style. The main house had two attached wings. The one in front of them was a three-car garage, and on the other side of the house was a structure with a lot of windows that appeared to be a solarium. The house wasn’t new. It looked like a place built fifty years ago by someone with money.

They parked the car in front of one of the garage doors, and went up a wide sidewalk to the entrance. Marcie pressed the doorbell, and a few minutes later the front door opened wide. Sheila Little isn’t little, was Marcie’s first thought. She was almost as tall as Simon and had an athletic body that exuded good health.

“You must be Marcie Ducasse,” the woman said, sticking out her hand and giving Marcie’s arm a good pump. “And you are . . .?”

“This is Simon Bannister,” Marcie said. “He’s assisting me in the investigation.”

Sheila gave his hand the same vigorous treatment while her eyes gave him a thorough once over. Marcie guessed that Sheila was somewhere in her fifties, and wondered if she was on the lookout for a boyfriend.

“Follow me. We’ll talk in the plant room. My cleaning lady is doing the den and the living room today.”

She began walking briskly down a hall to their right that appeared to run the length of the house. Marcie managed a quick glance into a richly paneled room with walls filled with bookshelves. A woman was in there using a feather duster on the rows of books. After a long walk, they turned left into a room with floor to ceiling windows. Plants in large pots were arranged around the room to create a sitting area in the middle, which was filled with furniture having wrought iron frames and plush cushions. Sheila sat down and gestured to the two chairs across from her.

When everyone was settled, Marcie cleared her throat, took out her notebook and said, “Well, I guess we should start at the beginning. We know what Kronberg did from what we’ve read in the papers. Is there anything you can add to that?”

“Not really. He was a trusted investment counselor who steered his clients into a fund that he and two other people owned and ran called Three Star Investments. It turned out that there was no investing taking place at all and the entire thing was one big Ponzi scheme that enabled Kronberg and his two partners to get rich.”

“And the people who were defrauded lived around here?”

Sheila nodded. “Almost exclusively, and a number of members of the local country club were among them. As you can imagine, when this all came out, Jerry Kronberg wasn’t very popular on the links.”

“Do you know the people he swindled?”

“A number of them. And probably if you talk to one, he’ll give you the names of others. They’re a tight group brought together by shared misery. The one who was most angry is Ralph Berenson. He publicly threatened Kronberg, and used to follow him around town, virtually stalking him. Kronberg got a restraining order against him.”

“I wonder what the police make out of Kronberg’s death?” asked Marcie.

Sheila reached out to pluck a dead leaf from the plant beside her.

“I happen to be friends with the Chief of Police. They’re treating it as a suicide.”

“Jumping off a mountain seems an odd way to commit suicide. You might just cripple yourself and live,” Simon said.

Sheila shook her head. “Not from where Kronberg fell. It’s a sheer drop of over a hundred feet to the rocks below.”

“Did he leave a note or indicate to anyone that he was planning to commit suicide?” asked Marcie.

“No.”

“And what do you think?” Simon asked. “Are you a fan of the mysterious black dog?”

Sheila smiled. “I’m not superstitious, although there have been quite a few people over the years claiming to see the black dog. To my mind, he either jumped or was pushed.”

“Which do you think?” asked Marcie.

She shook her head. “I didn’t know Jerry well enough. And who really knows how anyone will react when they’re under the kind of pressure he was? Being hated by his former friends and facing a prison sentence could cause anyone to snap.”

“Losing all your money to a Ponzi scheme could also cause someone to snap and become a murderer,” Marcie said.

“The people I know who lost money don’t seem like murderers, but, you’re right, who knows what a person seriously wronged might do.”

“It sounds like this Ralph Berenson was already close to losing it,” said Marcie. “Maybe he took it one step further.”

“I suppose it’s possible. But he’s more the type who would get in a shoving match with Jerry and punch him in the nose on impulse, rather than someone who would plan to murder him on top of a mountain.”

“Who do you think we should begin by talking to first?” asked Marcie.

“I’d start with Jerry’s wife, Yolanda Kronberg. She can give you a good idea of what was going through Jerry’s mind right up to the time of his death. Let me give her a call to see what I can set up.” Sheila stood up and walked out of the room.

“So what do you think so far?” Simon asked Marcie.

“I think we’re lucky to have Sheila. These rich people normally wouldn’t give us the time of day. Sheila provides us with access to a world that would otherwise remain closed to us.”

“Maybe. Or maybe they’d talk to us anyway because they’d like nothing better than to see their grievances aired in a regional magazine.”

Marcie nodded. “And it looks to me as if there are three possibilities for how Kronberg died: he jumped, he was pushed, or in some strange way the black dog caused him to fall.”

Simon grinned. “My money is on one of the first two.”

“It’s too soon for me to tell,” Marcie said. That got her a raised eyebrow from Simon.

“You’ll have to forgive my manners,” Sheila said, walking back into the room. “I was so anxious to talk about the case that I forgot to ask if you’d like something to drink.”

Marcie and Simon both declined.

“Well, then, you’ll have to join me for dinner tonight.”

“We don’t want to inconvenience you,” Marcie began.

“Nonsense. I’d be delighted to have the company,” Sheila said, her eyes lingering for a moment on Simon.

“In that case, thank you,” Marcie said.

“I spoke to Yolanda, and she can see you right now. Her house is only ten minutes away.” Sheila handed a piece of paper to Simon. “I drew a map from here to her house.”

Simon took the map from her hand and thanked her. Marcie glared at him. He gave a helpless shrug as if to say that it wasn’t his fault that Sheila thought only a man could read directions.

Sheila escorted them to the front door.

“I hope you get useful information from Yolanda. I look forward to hearing about tonight.” She stared directly at Simon. “Shall we say around seven?”

Simon wisely waited until Marcie said that would be fine before nodding.

“Sorry she seemed so focused on me,” Simon said, after giving the first part of the directions to Marcie.

“Not your fault. I think she likes you. By the way, are you single?”

“Divorced.”

“That’s okay then, we wouldn’t want Sheila to be disappointed too soon.”

“Are you suggesting that I should lead her on, so she’ll keep helping us with the investigation?” Simon asked with a frown.

“I would never suggest that. I’m saying be nice to her, just like you’d be to anyone who was helping us. Can you do that?”

“Sure. I guess I can.”

Marcie glanced over at his troubled face and grinned to herself.

“Good,” she replied.

Chapter 6

When they got to the end of Sheila's map, they found themselves confronted by a large contemporary house: vast expanses of glass with different roof angles jutting toward the sky.

"This place looks more like a museum than a private home," Simon said.

Marcie pointed to double glass doors placed asymmetrically along the front façade.

"That might be the front door."

They followed a walk that seemed to ramble through several beds of plants and bushes before finally depositing them before the doors. Marcie pressed a button that set off what sounded like a Chinese gong within the house.

A few seconds later, the front door opened to reveal a woman in her midforties. Yolanda Kronberg was slender almost to the point of emaciation. She seemed jumpy, her eyes darting back and forth nervously between Marcie and Simon as they introduced themselves.

"We'd better go into the living room. My brother Charles is here."

They walked down a hallway that was paneled completely in wood with metal decorations hanging on the walls. The ceiling was all glass, giving a panoramic view of the sky. Marcie had seen skylights before, but never one that replaced the whole roof with glass. She wondered how it was kept so clean. They turned left and entered a room where the entire front wall was made of glass. A tall, slender man stood up from an oddly shaped sofa that had a chrome frame and what appeared to be extremely hard cushions.

The man came forward and stuck out his hand.

"I'm Charles Foster, Yolanda's brother and her lawyer."

After the greetings were concluded, Marcie and Simon settled into chairs across from the sofa, where Foster was slumped back comfortably while his sister remained perched on the edge of the cushion.

"What is it that you'd like to know?" Yolanda Kronberg asked.

Her brother held up his hand like a stop sign.

"Before we get into that," he said to Simon, smiling to take away the sting of his interruption, "I'd like to know what you plan to do with anything we might tell you."

Marcie cleared her throat. Reluctantly Foster's glance turned to her. "My intention is to write a story for the *Weird Happenings* column in *Roaming New England Magazine*. It would primarily be about the legend of the black dog, but would also discuss the circumstances leading up to Mr. Kronberg's death in the context of that legend."

"It sounds to me like you want to sensationalize my brother-in-law's death by using it to promote paranormal mumbo jumbo," Foster said. "I'm not sure we have anything to say to you."

"What do you think, Mrs. Kronberg?" Marcie asked, hoping she was more open to

being interviewed than her brother.

The woman twisted her hands in her lap and looked down for so long that Marcie thought she wasn't going to answer.

"You're going to look in to the circumstances surrounding his death?" she finally asked.

Marcie nodded. "As much as we can."

"Yolanda—" her brother began.

"No," she said turning towards him. "The police have stopped doing anything. They're convinced that Jerry committed suicide just because they can't figure out what happened. I don't care if these people think there are ghosts around every corner as long as they keep the investigation of Jerry's death alive. I won't have our sons believing their father committed suicide without a whole lot more evidence than I've seen so far."

Charles Foster looked like he was about to say more; instead, he gave a sort of helpless shrug.

Marcie took out a notebook and placed it in her lap.

"Could you tell me how your husband came to climb up West Peak on the day he died?"

"In the last two months or so, climbing West Peak had become something of an obsession for him. Jerry would get so restless just sitting around the house worrying about his legal problems that he had to find a way to escape. Climbing West Peak seemed to provide him with a brief period of relaxation. He would do it every three days. He kept to a regular schedule. I think he liked the structure it gave to his week."

"I'm afraid that I got him started on it. We hiked up the first time together," said Foster. "I never expected him to take to it so much."

"You should have," Yolanda said, giving him a sidelong glance. "You remember when he took up running, how compulsive he became about it, or the time he learned to play bridge. My husband developed passions for things that lasted until he got tired of them."

"When did he start seeing the black dog?" Marcie asked.

"About three weeks ago. It must have been on his third or fourth hike up to the peak," she replied.

"What did he say about it?"

"Just that he'd seen a funny little black dog running around up by the Peak. He wondered how a dog had gotten up there all by itself."

"Did he know about the legend?" Simon asked.

Yolanda shook her head. "Not at first. I told him about it." She looked a bit guilty even knowing about such a thing. "Some of the women at the club were talking about one day. That's how I knew."

"How did your husband react to the story?" asked Marcie, looking up briefly from writing down notes.

"He just laughed it off. Jerry wasn't superstitious."

“Did you talk about it with Jerry?” Marcie asked Foster.

Once again Foster’s eyes went back to Simon. “I think he did mention it to me in a sort of joking way. Neither one of us took the story seriously. Lots of people hike up to West Peak every year, and nobody gets hurt. There was no reason to believe some silly superstition.”

“But didn’t Mr. Kronberg see the dog again?” Marcie asked.

Yolanda Kronberg nodded. “About a week later. He saw the dog in the same spot right near the Peak.”

“Did that cause him to take the superstition more seriously?” asked Simon.

“No. He thought that it was just a wild dog that liked to hang around up there. But when Jeffrey Hunter was found dead the same day....”

“What do you mean?” asked Marcie.

“Well, the superstition of the black dog says that nothing bad happens to you the first time you see it. The second time you see the dog something bad happens in your life.” Yolanda Kronberg said, twisting her hands together nervously.

“Jeffrey Hunter was one of Jerry’s partners,” Foster said. “He couldn’t take the pressure of the police investigation, so he committed suicide.”

“How did he do it?” asked Simon.

“Sat behind the wheel of his car with the motor running in his closed up garage.” Foster explained.

“If you believe it was suicide,” Yolanda said.

“Is there any reason to doubt it?” Marcie asked.

Yolanda moved even further forward on the cushion. “Of course, there was no note and Jeffrey never said anything about taking his own life. Plus a number of the people living around here lost money by investing with Jerry and his partners. At least one of them publicly threatened Jerry. And I know that Jeffrey got threatening phone calls just like we did.”

“Do you know who was threatening your husband and Hunter?” asked Simon.

“We don’t know the identity of the callers, but Ralph Berenson was stalking Jerry. My husband even had to have a restraining order taken out against him. He could have known when Jerry went hiking and followed him up the path and killed him.”

Yolanda looked over at her brother for support. He nodded tentatively.

“Have the police looked into whether Berenson could have done it?” asked Simon.

Foster cleared his throat. “The police say Berenson claims to have been home alone at the time.”

“That isn’t much of an alibi,” said Marcie.

“No,” Foster continued. “But no one can place him anywhere near West Peak at the time of Jerry’s death either.”

“He was there or somebody just like him. Some lunatic who wanted to blame Jerry for everything,” Yolanda said.

“And you have no idea of the identity of the callers who threatened your husband?”
Marcie asked.

She shook her head. “Some of them were hang ups, but most of the time the person would say something like ‘you’re dead’ or ‘why do you go on living?’ I heard several of them myself until Jerry got our number changed and unlisted. It wasn’t always the same voice. Who knows how many people were planning to get revenge?”

“I guess it’s understandable that people would be angry,” Marcie ventured.

Yolanda Kronberg leaned so far forward on the couch that Marcie thought she was going to leap at her.

“But they shouldn’t blame Jerry. He was just the front man who went around convincing people to invest. He believed it was a good investment. He was as duped as his clients were. The whole scheme was developed by his partners. Jerry was a good man; he wouldn’t have purposely tried to cheat his friends.”

Marcie nodded, wondering how much of this was a wife’s love allowing her to deceive herself.

“Who were his partners other than this Jeffrey Hunter?” asked Simon.

“There was only one other, Stanley Wilkie.”

“You said that Hunter committed suicide. I assume Wilkie is still alive?” Simon asked.

“He’s alive,” Yolanda said, “but he doesn’t leave the house or answer his phone. I’m not even sure that he’ll open his front door. But he doesn’t know anything about Jerry’s death. The people you should talk to are the ones who were angry with Jerry because they were duped.”

“People like Berenson?” Marcie asked.

“And others. Ask around at the country club. You’ll get lots of names.”

“We’ll do that,” said Marcie starting to rise. Then she paused as she thought of another question. “Did your husband take the black dog legend more seriously after the death of his partner? After all, it would seem like the story was coming true.”

“He was shaken by Jeffery’s death,” Yolanda said, “but that’s only natural. They’ve been friends for several years. He did skip his hiking up the mountain for several days. Perhaps the superstition was on his mind, but then I think he decided to defy his fear. His last words to me were, ‘It’s bad enough that I may have to go to jail. I’m not going to imprison myself out of fear.’”

Tears began to run down her cheeks and she wiped at them with a tissue.

Foster stood. “I’ll see you out.”

“Thank you for your help,” Marcie said to the woman as she and Simon arose.

Mrs. Kronberg nodded her head. “Find out what really happened to my husband.”

“We’ll try,” Marcie said.

Charles Foster led them to the front door. He opened the door and stepped outside motioning for them to follow him.

“I don’t want Yolanda to hear this,” he said softly. “But Jerry was very anxious about

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