

"IF YOU ARE A SUSAN ISAACS FAN, YOU WILL LOVE ... JOURNALIST-TURNED-SLEUTH, MAGGIE FIORI."
—JACQUELINE WINSPEAR, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE MAISIE DOBBS MYSTERIES

THE Devil's Interval



LINDA LEE PETERSON
AUTHOR OF EDITED TO DEATH

Advance Praise for *The Devil's Interval*

“Murder and music, discord and harmony, guilt and innocence, domesticity and passion, smooth talk and rough sex: In *The Devil's Interval*—Linda Lee Peterson's virtuoso second novel—journalist sleuth Maggie Fiori scores all the notes. Maggie, like the book, is smart, stylish, and surprisingly steamy.”

— JON JEFFERSON (Jefferson Bass)
New York Times bestselling crime writer

“Smart and sexy, with the schemes of high society on full display, *The Devil's Interval* takes readers on a tour of everyone's favorite city, San Francisco. As Maggie Fiori attempts to solve this intricate mystery, what will happen to her damaged marriage? You'll be turning pages to discover the answers.”

— NAOMI HIRAHARA
Edgar Award-winning author of the Mas Arai mystery series

“*The Devil's Interval* is an entertaining mystery, and shines with crisp prose, layered characters, and a gripping plot.”

— JONNIE JACOBSON
bestselling author of the
Kate Austen and Kali O'Brien mystery series

“An intelligent and gripping novel. Maggie Fiori is a witty, feisty protagonist, and Linda Lee Peterson deftly weaves a compelling tale of how far a mother will go to save her child. *The Devil's Interval* is a roller-coaster ride through the streets and alleys of San Francisco that will evoke Robert Parker and Spenser novels with a dash of Janet Evanovich. Get out the flashlight. You'll be up late.”

— ROBERT DUGO
New York Times bestselling author of *The Conviction*

Praise for *Edited to Death*

“Strong focus, admirable prose, and a nifty story line.”

—*Library Journal*

“Brave, if blithely arrogant, character Maggie Fiori [is] a thirtysomething something Oakland writer/know-it-all sleuth/Volvo-driving wife and mom who solves the murder of her boss, the urban editor of a chichi regional magazine.”

— *San Francisco Chronicle*

“If you are a Susan Isaacs fan, you will love Linda Lee Peterson’s journalist-turned-sleuth, Maggie Fiori. This is a San Francisco and Oakland story with sparks flying as wisecracking Fiori, with her razor-sharp wit and rampant curiosity, sets out to find out who killed her editor boss. I couldn’t put the book down. A very satisfying read for mystery lovers.”

— JACQUELINE WINSPEAR

New York Times bestselling author of the
award-winning Maisie Dobbs mystery series

Learn more about Linda Lee Peterson at
www.lindaleepeterson.com

THE DEVIL'S INTERVAL

By
Linda Lee Peterson



PROSPECT
· PARK ·
BOOKS

This book is a work of fiction. With the exception of a few musicians, names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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For Ken Peterson, my toughest and kindest critic

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PROLOGUE

A few minutes before Grace Plummer died, she remembered that someone other than the regulars at the Crimson Club had called her Amazing Gracie. She was drifting, conscious of the sweat-sticky leather upholstery underneath her, vaguely wondering about the faint dome of light overhead. What did it illumine, there in the back seat? Lumen, luminous, illumination.... Other disconnected thoughts floated in and out—who had sung the “Evening Benediction” in Hansel and Gretel at the opera last season? “When at night I go to sleep/Fourteen angels watch do keep.” And was it cinnamon or something else with a “c”—cloves, cardamom—on top of the tiny holiday pastries her grandmother made? She didn’t really struggle for the answers to these questions. She felt a pleasant little disconnect, like breathing deeply of nitrous oxide; feeling pain, but not really caring about what hurt or why. Or who was doing the hurting. But it was a surprise, wasn’t it? The one with the cruel hands. And then, she remembered—it was cardamom, for sure. With that memory came the image of her grandmother, tall, shoulders back, one beautiful white braid wound around her head teasing her, “Come, try one more, Amazing Gracie, just one more bite of the eplekake.” And then, she felt hands on her head, like her grandfather’s blessing at bedtime, and she was gone.

CHAPTER 1

Here's a piece of useful fashion advice: Don't wear a metal underwire bra if you're visiting San Quentin Prison. They'll turn you away at the jailhouse door, when the underwire sends the metal detector into overdrive. And you can't just take the bra off, because braless ladies are not allowed inside. Those are just a couple of the things I learned when I found myself in the middle of an attempt to spring an innocent man from Death Row.

It all began when I took a break from a bookshelf purge in our family room, slapped the dust and stray dog hair from my hands, poured a cup of coffee, and sat down with *The Wall Street Journal*. Love that paper. Their editorials suck, since they perversely take political sides in opposition to my own, but wow, what great writing. The WSJ goes in for stubbornly conservative editorials, whereas I am a journalistic giant myself as editor of San Francisco's trendy, superficial, but oh-so-readable city magazine, *Small Town*, am an unreconstructed, knee-jerk liberal. Sitting there, surrounded by bags and boxes of dusty hardbacks and paperbacks that were slated to go directly to the book drive at our son's school, I began reading a front-page story about publishers sending remaindered books to prisons. Inmates, with time on their hands and a less-than-great selection on the prison library shelves, regularly write to publishers and ask for their overstock to be donated. "Most grievously worn and hungry," read the *Journal*, "are the Death Row inmates with their segregated, pitifully stocked library."

I lowered the paper and surveyed the family room floor. Our German shepherd, Raider, apparently exhausted from watching me work, had fallen asleep in the midst of the mess. Books, books, and more books. Bags and boxes of books. "Hey, babies," I said softly. "You're going to jail."

Within a few minutes, I had a polite community affairs officer at San Quentin on the phone.

"Bags of books," he said patiently. "You want to bring me bags of books?"

"Right," I said. "For the Death Row Library."

He sighed. "*Wall Street Journal* article?"

"Right again," I said.

"Prison," my husband, Michael, corrected me that evening when I told him where our extra books were going. "Jail's where you go to wait, prison's where you end up. There's a technical explanation, but it's more than you need to know." We were dawdling over coffee, enjoying the half hour between post-dinner and hardcore homework nagging. Though our three-story, sixty-plus-year-old rambling house teetered on the edge of permanent disorder, the dining room somehow managed to rise above the detritus of sports paraphernalia, pieces of electronics, and Raider's innumerable chew toys everywhere else in the house. Maybe there just weren't enough surfaces to clutter. Deep, deep forest green walls seemed to take the noise down a notch, and my grandmother's chandelier sparkled so light onto the table. We ate there every evening, a family agreement to slow down and feel civilized at least once a day.

"Want to split that last brownie?" I asked Michael. "And what does a tax lawyer know about jail or prison anyway?"

He pushed the plate with the lonely brownie my way. "All yours," he said. "Where do you think tax evaders go?"

"Congress," I said. "Maybe the White House. Corner office in some Fortune 500 company."

“Very amusing, Maggie. Did those bleeding-heart criminal-defense Gasworks chicks put this idea in your head?”

“They did not,” I said indignantly. “I read an article in *The Wall Street Journal*. But Gasworks that’s a great idea. I’ll bet they can cut through some of this red tape for me.” The Gasworks Gang is an ad hoc group of stay-at-home mommy-lawyers who handle death-penalty appeals. Since the community affairs officer at San Quentin had been less than enthusiastic about my proposal, I personally stocked the shelves with my bags of books, I knew I’d need some insider help getting access.

“I know the Dewey Decimal System,” I’d bumbled over the phone. “My junior year I worked as a library aide at St. Agnes High School.”

“Well, now, Mrs. Fiori,” he began, “you have to understand that we have procedures,” which roughly translated into, “Okay, lady, drop your books at the gate, get on with your sweet suburban life and keep your friggin’ Dewey Decimal System to yourself.”

Oddly enough, Michael raised that very question.

“Maggie, why can’t you just drop the books at the guard gate? You don’t have to turn this into ‘Avon calling’ on Death Row, do you?”

I was silent.

“*Cara?*” prompted Michael, “what are you up to?” He used Italian endearments primarily when I felt I wasn’t listening to him.

“I’m just curious,” I said. “I’ve lived in the Bay Area almost twenty years and I’ve never been to San Quentin.”

“It’s not a tourist attraction,” he said. “That’s Alcatraz.”

“Well, I know.” I vacillated. “This whole thing about books and—”

“And felons. Killers,” Michael completed my sentence.

“Books and desperate people,” I said. “It interests me. Maybe there’s a story.”

Michael sighed. “Well, maybe. But they’re not going to let you take a little library cart around so you can interview these guys. Which is,” he muttered, “a big relief to me.”

I waited a moment. “Are you *telling* me not to deliver the books, Michael?”

His face went blank. “Certainly not,” he said. “Entirely your decision.”

“Thank you,” I said formally. “Just clarifying.” I stood and began clearing dinner plates. Time to leave the room before the chill in the air froze us both into familiar conflicts. Our marriage had been tested the last year or so, and it had been my fault. Entirely. Completely. And not a day went by that I didn’t regret a series of moral missteps, beginning with temporarily abandoning the whole “forsaking all others” thing, continuing through an inadvertent run at ruining Michael’s career, and ending with imperiling a few lives, including my own. I did, to be perfectly fair, unspool the murder of my brother (and former lover) at the magazine along the way.

Since that series of misadventures, I had become painfully aware that the life Michael and I had made together, which once seemed relatively easy to navigate, had become strewn with hidden ordnance. In what felt like an endless loop, I relived every dim-witted detour I had taken off the moral high road. Turns out there’s no page in the Dick Tracy Crimestoppers Notebook warning amateur sleuths about collateral damage to marriages caused by adultery or sleuthing or, worse yet, both. Which led me to remember that we’d decided to join the rest of the Bay Area’s middle-class, over-self-scrutinizing couples in marriage therapy. Our first session was coming up and, all in all, I would have preferred to have an encounter with the Brazilian wax specialist.

Still, before the all-too-familiar chill had hit our conversation, Michael had innocently planted the Gasworks Gang idea in my head, and it seemed like precisely the access I might need. I had

discovered the group via Edgar “the Invincible” Inskeep, a ruthless and very successful criminal attorney. We’d met when Michael introduced him to our friend, and my former managing editor Glen. It was the climax of my *annus horribilis* when Glen confessed to murdering our former boss Quentin Hart, the late, great—but not particularly nice—editor of *Small Town*. Edgar, in turn, had introduced me to his wife, also a criminal attorney. Unlike her money-grubbing husband, who defended drug dealers and society batterers for big bucks, Eleanor Inskeep was a public defender. Like many other women, when she became a mom, she looked for more flexible ways to run her professional life. She began doing death-penalty appeals and found it was satisfying but lonely work. To her surprise, she kept bumping into other new moms who were doing the same kind of work—and feeling the same way. Ninety percent of the time, they found themselves researching and writing, alone by the computer and the phone. No more offices full of gossipy colleagues willing to dish fellow members of the criminal bar or commiserate when the same clients showed up for one, two, and the third strikes. Even your clients don’t call—or at least, not often. And when they do, it’s collect.

In the process of thanking Edgar profusely for mitigating Glen’s troubles, I’d made one of those “anything I can do for you” offers we sometimes live to regret.

“Yeah,” he said, “take my wife out to lunch. She’s going stir-crazy at home with the new baby, and she’s taken up with a posse of other new moms, death-penalty types. I think they’re up to no good.”

Eleanor was delighted to go out for lunch, especially when I dispatched Anya, our live-in Norwegian art student/au pair, to babysit.

“Lunch?” she said. “And you’re sending a babysitter? You’re my new best friend.”

She explained Gasworks to me over sand dabs and chardonnay at Tadich’s. Tadich’s is a long wooden bar and booth, clubby-looking San Francisco fish house where they put mashed potatoes on the tartar sauce and the waiters are all old enough to have been honorably discharged after the War of 1812.

“Hope it’s not too noisy,” I said when we sat down.

Eleanor waved her hand at the room. “This is what I miss. The sound of adults eating and drinking.”

“So, tell me about Gasworks. What is it and why is it?”

“It’s a cross between a professional interest group and a new mom survivor society,” she said. “A whole bunch of us criminal-defense types became new moms all at once. You remember what that’s like, right?”

I nodded. “More or less. It fades or blurs or something. Or I guess the species would die out.”

“Right,” said Eleanor. “Exhaustion, isolation, days and nights on end when you can’t figure out how you’ll ever do a productive grownup thing again. And then you’re just brought to your knees by the helpless little tyrant you worship.”

“Been there,” I said.

“But then,” she continued, warming to her soapbox, “you’re a trained professional, you’re a criminal-defense lawyer. So you’re trying to hold on to your self-respect and bring some money in, so you agree to accept death-penalty appeals.” She buttered her sourdough bread with more vigor than necessary.

“More isolation?”

“No kidding. It takes months and years, and the only people you talk to have bad news and horrible stories. Investigators who keep turning up tales of hellish childhoods, social workers who want to know you know that your client’s mother just died and that her deathbed wish was that you ‘take care of her boy.’”

“Holy shit,” I said softly.

Eleanor’s eyes brimmed. “I was nursing Tyler when I got that particular call from the social worker.” She swallowed. “I looked down at my son and thought: Once upon a time, my awful, terribly pathetic, dumb ass violent client was somebody’s baby, just like Tyler. Once upon a time, he was innocent.” She took a gulp of wine. “Plus, you know, all that postpartum emotional stuff. I was falling apart. That’s when I got on the phone and started calling around to my old buddies in the Women Defenders.”

“Women Defenders? They sound like superheroes.”

She laughed. “Well, we think we are. It’s a bunch of lefty criminal-defense lawyers from all over the state. We’re the daughters of the women who did sit-ins at Berkeley and Columbia. Anyway, within a few days, I’d hauled together a few of us who were new moms and did death-penalty appeals. And that’s how the Gasworks Gang got its start.”

“And the name?”

“Come on, Maggie,” she said. “Surely it hasn’t been that long since you had babies. What did you obsess about?”

“Sleep. Getting back into a size eight. Flawless birth control.”

“No, I mean about the babies?”

“Oh, colic, poop, and naps.”

“Exactly,” she said. “So, at our first meeting, we realized that we were talking about gas, gas, and more gas. Who’s got it? Who hasn’t? What do you do about it? And then, before lethal injection came along, executions took place....”

“In the gas chamber,” I said. “I get it.”

“Right. And by the way, they still use the same puke-green room to do their dirty work. So, we decided we were the Gasworks Gang.”

After my lunch with Eleanor, I assigned a writer to research a feature on the gang for *Small Town*. I sent Calvin Bright, my favorite photographer and willing sidekick during my debut days as an amateur sleuth after Quentin’s death, to shoot one of their meetings.

He showed up, contact sheets in sweaty hand, and delivered nonstop commentary as Linda Quon, *Small Town*’s art director, and I looked through the shots.

“Those women are fine, fine, superfine,” he said.

“They do very good work,” I agreed. “It’s thankless, but somebody’s got to do it.”

“Oh, loosen up, Mags. I mean, that was one sexy group of broads.”

“They’re all new moms, Calvin. Have a little respect. Plus, didn’t they look awful? Circles under their eyes and everything?”

“I don’t care. All those hormones in one room, all that ‘fullness-of-womanhood’ shit, cooing over each other’s babies....”

“Unbuttoning to breastfeed,” Linda added dryly.

“Yeah,” said Calvin, “that too. Yummy icing on the cake. You know what? I think we ought to do a once-a-month follow-up for a while.”

Linda and I exchanged glances. “Get out, Calvin,” I said. “You’ve got the mind of a lecher and the maturity of a twelve-year-old.”

“And that,” said Calvin, on the way out the door, “is why you girls find me so irresistible. Plus, you know what they say, ‘once you’ve gone black....’”

“No one says that, Calvin. Not one single real human being. Dream on,” I said. It was too late. He was gone. And the pleasant distraction of bickering with a real person instead of staring at a screen

came to an end.

But the Gasworks piece was a big hit for the magazine, and Eleanor and I became friends. So now all these many months later, it was my turn to call for help. The Gasworks Gang, with their up-close-and-personal relationship with San Quentin, seemed like the perfect way to make sure my books got delivered to the Death Row Library.

When Eleanor answered the phone, I explained my request.

“Bring your books over,” she invited promptly. “We can have coffee and catch up. Besides, there’s somebody in our group who wants to meet you. I’ve been meaning to call.”

“Advice on criminals or colic?” I asked.

“Something weird has come up,” she said.

“Weird?”

“Isabella Fuentes is the member who wants to meet you. She’s got an innocent client on Death Row.”

I laughed. “Hey, Eleanor, isn’t that what they all claim?”

“I’m not kidding, Maggie. I don’t mean legally innocent; I mean *really* innocent.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah,” she said seriously. “It’s one of a kind. We could use some ink.”

Interval No. 1 with Dr. Mephisto

The night before we went to our first session with Jessie McQuist, MFT, PhD, and couple counselor to every other yuppie/buppie/guppie committed twosome in the East Bay, some miserable brew of guilt and dread gave me a killer case of insomnia. Beside me, Michael snored gently, deep in the untroubled sleep of not just the guiltless but also the noble and forgiving wronged spouse. At first he’d been furious, then cold and businesslike, and slowly he’d started to return to his normal, careless, affectionate self. But therapy! Yuck. That seemed likely to reignite the whole cycle of fire and ice. To distract myself, I focused on Dante’s second circle of hell, the one that was home to those who lusted. At least it was a cool club that would welcome me—Cleopatra was there, and Helen of Troy, and Guinevere. Beauties, queens, and me, a weak, slightly bored, and hassled dilettante writer-editor-mom. The irony, I realized, was that it hadn’t even been lust that had tempted me in the affair with my late boss. It was curiosity about someone who seemed so elegant and elusive. It was hero worship. It was a chance to see myself as something other than the mom on the Wednesday pickup for soccer practice. It was exciting to feel seductive, to make love in the middle of the afternoon, to have a secret. But of course it was also the secret that made me miserable. And the worst moment of my life rolled around, as I should have known it would, when Michael told me he knew. It was the morning after Quentin’s death, and we were jockeying for mirror and sink space in our bathroom, as we did every morning. I sniffled something about what a wonderful, irreplaceable editor and friend Quentin had been. And then Michael shut me up. “Was he a wonderful lover, too?” he asked. We were both facing the mirror, Michael shaving, his eyes cold and flat. “What do you mean?” I stammered. And then he told me. He knew. He’d known for a long time. He knew it was over, and he didn’t want to talk about it. Ever.

And here we were, more than a year later, about to go sit on the couch of shame in some touchy,

feely Berkeley shrink's office, and I thought, "That really will be the second circle of hell." And then my alarm went off.

Near the end of our first therapy session, I had two realizations: Michael, who could be one tough judgmental guy about people who did what he perceived as vague things for a living, had decided he liked, or at least trusted, Dr. McQuist. Go figure. The other insight was that I didn't like her much at all. And that it was going to be oh so easy to morph her name from Dr. McQuist into Dr. Mephistopheles. Easy. And fun.

Just looking at Jessie McQuist made my head hurt. Black, black, black hair tipped with golden highlights, an embroidered hot pink vest, purple Lycra pants. Blue fingernails. I don't care how many initials she had after her name, I had a hard time taking a therapist seriously who had such a promiscuous relationship with color. The Craftsman bungalow that housed her office, lime-green cupola and all, should have tipped me off. Of course, I was having a hard time taking therapy seriously. Which became obvious in the first few minutes of our conversation.

"Michael, Margaret," she said, sitting cross-legged in her big chair, in that annoying way show-offy limber people do. Okay, okay, I get it! You do yoga.

"How are you?"

"I'm fine," said Michael.

"Me too," I said.

Silence.

"Weird to say, 'fine,' if we're here for therapy," I offered.

"Nothing's weird," she said.

I wanted to say that a lime-green cupola and blue fingernails on someone past the training-beyond stage seemed pretty weird to me. Instead, I said, "Oh, you know, it's like the Garrison Keillor joke about the Lutheran farmer who goes to the therapist every week, and the therapist asks how he is, and the farmer always says, 'Can't complain.' And then they just sit there for fifty minutes."

More silence.

Michael sighed and not so surreptitiously sneaked a look at his watch.

"Are you Lutherans?" asked Dr. McQuist.

This was hopeless. "No," I tried to explain, "we're SO not Lutherans, but the joke is that if he's not going to complain or something, why is he there? He doesn't get the point of therapy."

"Is that why you're here?" asked Dr. McQuist. "To complain?" She took a sip from her big mug. At least it was black. Even from across the room, seated on her lavender, squishy couch, I could smell the tea. Musty, herbal, yuck. What's wrong with coffee, anyway?

"Maggie's here to complain," said Michael. "I'm here because we had some...problems last year and they keep whack-a-moling back up."

"Whack-a-mole?"

I could see we were going to need a UN simultaneous translator to talk to Dr. McQuist.

Michael gestured, as if he were mercilessly bringing a baseball bat on targets in front of him. "It's like a game. You try to hit the mole with a mallet, and he keeps disappearing into his burrow or whatever you call it. You whack him, and he keeps popping up again."

Dr. McQuist blinked. I could see the wheels turning. "Not that anyone does any hitting," I said, hoping to whack-a-mole down a misguided line of inquiry about domestic violence.

"I don't know," said Michael. "Josh popped Zach a pretty good one last night about whose turn it was to unload the dishwasher."

"Our sons," I explained. "They're eight and almost thirteen, and they don't usually hit each other."

I felt my fingers creeping toward my phone, in that irresistible maternal need to just see their faces. “They’re very handsome,” I said. “I have photos, if you’d like to see them.”

A tiny line appeared between Dr. McQuist’s eyes. “Another time, thanks.” No one spoke. “Okay,” she said. “Michael, why don’t you tell me what you meant about the—I think you called the ‘problems’—last year.”

Michael complied, providing a longish but very lawyerly summary of last year’s events: my affair with Quentin Hart, Quentin’s murder, my perseverance investigating the murder, the risks I’d created for our sons, and the *denouement*, which endangered my life.

Dr. McQuist listened. I thought I had explained all this on the phone, but oh well, I guess she can be expected to keep all her philandering-wife/murder-investigation couples sorted out.

“Endangered,” I offered brightly. “But I’m still here. All’s well that ends well. Plus, our au pair Anya, met a very nice doctor at the emergency room where I ended up, and they’re still dating.” I paused. “Off and on.”

Dr. McQuist blinked. “He’s Indian,” I offered. I touched my forehead and then put two fingers up in back of my head, as Dr. Singh had done when he met me at the ER. “You know, ‘dots, not feathers’ Subcontinent Indian.” Dr. McQuist waited.

“I wonder if that’s offensive,” I said. “Do you think it is, if an Indian person says it to you?”

Dr. McQuist blinked again, then turned to Michael.

“All’s well? Is that how you’d sum things up, Michael?” she asked.

Michael shifted on the couch, putting just a touch more distance between us. He shrugged. “No, from my perspective. But I may not have as finely developed a sense of happy endings as Maggie does. Otherwise...”

“Otherwise?” prompted Dr. McQuist.

“Otherwise we wouldn’t be here, spending time and money we don’t really have to spare,” Michael snapped. The ice man was back. I glanced over at Michael, but he stared resolutely ahead. The warm, relaxed man I had married kept disappearing into someone aloof and detached. Some days I felt as if our marriage had turned into a businesslike partnership of convenience. I wanted to wave my hand, asking Teach for permission to speak, but she was refusing to catch my eye.

“Michael,” she began again, “you mentioned that things keep coming back up from those issues last year. Why don’t you tell Maggie what those things are? Just forget I’m here.”

I could see Michael sizing up Dr. McQuist and the situation. This seemed gimmicky to him, I was willing to bet. On the other hand, this therapy had been his idea, he had scrupulously researched Dr. McQuist, and she had a number of very happy, unexpectedly effusive references among our own extended circle of pals. Straight, gay, happy, miserable, in transition, new relationships or old ones—*everyone* loved Dr. McQuist. That alone made me suspicious. But Michael was a careful consumer and he liked consensus. Plus, we were paying for the hour, so not giving her a chance felt like getting the plumber out to the house and then not inviting him to unclog the sink.

“Okay,” he said. “Just tell *her*?”

“Right,” said Dr. McQuist. “Talk to Maggie.”

He settled back into the arm of the couch and faced me.

“After your shenanigans last year, I thought we had an agreement.”

“We did,” I said. “We do.”

“No interruptions,” said Dr. McQuist. “Listen to what Michael is saying.”

“Okay, okay,” I said meekly. “Sorry.”

Michael turned to look at Dr. McQuist with something like wonder and admiration.

“Thank you,” he said politely.

“Our agreement was, first....” He raised a finger. “No more affairs. Not ever, ever. Ever. Second, you’ve taken on a full-time job, and you’re still—unless I missed something—a wife and mom, so no more investigating, no more poking your nose where it doesn’t belong. Just—oh, Christ—cut us some slack. Enjoy what you’ve got.”

He sat back.

“May I speak?” I asked Dr. McQuist.

“Please.”

“Michael, I don’t know how many ways to say it. The affair was a dumb, dumb, stupid mistake. You don’t have to worry it will ever happen again. Second, you’re jumping to conclusions about the Death Row story. You’re right, I’ve got a day job. And I like that job. I’m willing to go listen to the death-appeal mummies because I’ve done a story on them once, and maybe there’s a follow-up.”

“Liar, liar, liar,” said Michael.

“I’m sorry,” Dr. McQuist said, “we have to end now.”

CHAPTER 2

Aside from a childhood fascination with Susan Hayward's over-the-top performance in *I Was Born to Live!*, I'd never given much thought to the people who occupy Death Row. At the office before I left to meet Eleanor and her Gasworks pal with the "innocent" client, I Googled up a little info.

The condemned make up quite a crowd in our country. There are 3,565 of them in the United States: 3,517 men and forty-eight women. Many are mentally ill; some have IQs that would make great golf scores but are lousy intellectual equipment for life. Some are just plain wicked. Most are guilty—of one thing or another. But not every single one. Or at least that's what the movies would have you believe—and according to Eleanor, one of the innocent was represented by a Gasworks member.

I rang the doorbell at Eleanor's just before noon. The spring bulbs were already showing some promise of color in her front flowerbed. The sun was doing its best, but March in San Francisco is still coat-and-gloves weather, even in the warm neighborhoods. The Inskeeps lived in leafy Forest Hills, an elegant but chilly part of the city, where old money and newer tech fortunes existed side by side. The Inskeeps' elegance was somewhat compromised by the large bundle on the front steps awaiting a diaper-recycling pickup.

Eleanor flung the door open and pulled me inside. "Maggie! It's great you're here. Come in and warm up."

I followed her down the hall toward the living room, where I could hear sounds of chamber music drifting through the doors. Inside was a fire in the fireplace and a tray of coffee and *pain au chocolat* on the table.

Eleanor steered me to the couch, where a woman dressed in head-to-toe red raised a mug in greeting. Eleanor said, "Maggie Fiori, meet Isabella Fuentes." She gestured at the pot. "Help yourself to Peet's. Good and strong."

I poured, stirred, and settled in. No one spoke for a moment. "This is such a wonderful room," Eleanor said. "I love it."

She grinned. "This is it. The one room free of baby clutter, work papers, and Edgar's Oakland A's paraphernalia. I just need one room that feels like this."

"I know what you mean," I said. "It's the dining room in our house. Just one room..." I glanced at Isabella. Eleanor laughed. "Isabella can't participate in this conversation. She's so tidy, so perfect, and a single mom, so there's no pile of *Sports Illustrateds* or old sweatshirts hanging around." Isabella did, indeed, look perfect. Snug red T-shirt, red jeans, red tennies. Her dark hair was piled on top of her head and skewered with a red pencil. The red was dramatic against her golden skin, glowing like a ripe Comice pear. She had the long limbs of a track star and Eurasian features. And while both Eleanor and I both had on lipstick, Isabella had what Calvin calls "twenty-minute" lips, carefully outlined in a darker color. She held a file on her lap, with not one messy spare piece of paper peeking out.

"Okay," I said. "Isabella, Eleanor hasn't told me much. Why don't you tell me about your client?"

"How much do you know about death-penalty appeals?" she asked.

"Very little. Just what I read in the piece we did on you all for *Small Town*. And what I've seen in the movies. I'm sorry. I should know more."

“Don’t apologize. Most people know just what you know. And frankly, we don’t talk about our work all that much with outsiders.”

“How come?”

Isabella sighed. “Where do you think ‘three strikes’ legislation came from? Most people think our system coddles criminals.”

“In the Bay Area?”

“The Bay Area is more liberal,” said Eleanor. “But it’s a finite piece of territory. Let’s remember, she added, “what killed Rose Bird’s career on the California Supreme Court.”

“She was recalled, because...” I began.

“Because people knew she opposed the death penalty—and they didn’t like it.”

“That’s our reality,” said Isabella. “People don’t like lawyers in general, but they especially don’t like people like us. They think we’re conscienceless, amoral hired guns defending the scum of the earth, and we’re spending their money to do it.”

“Okay, that’s a basic question,” I said. “Is it all taxpayer money funding your work? Don’t private attorneys ever handle death-penalty appeals?”

“Maggie,” said Eleanor. “Get real. Death-penalty appeals take years and years. Virtually no one is rich enough to retain counsel in a capital case.”

“So it is taxpayer money funding what you do?”

“It is.”

“Because,” Isabella added, “if you’re sentenced to death, you’ve got an automatic right to appeal.”

“Because sometimes people are innocent?”

“Well, first it’s the law. And second, you’re right, sometimes people are innocent,” Eleanor said. “So it’s because of that, and also it’s because of the lousy counsel defendants sometimes get—they are a couple guys on Death Row in Texas whose attorneys slept through much of their trials. So there’s a small but persistent movement to reexamine the cases of people currently on Death Row.”

“Like those Northwestern journalism students who tracked down evidence that a guy on Illinois Death Row was innocent?” I asked.

“Exactly. That’s where the Center for Wrongful Convictions was founded. In fact, there are Innocence Projects all over the country now, but none are willing to take on this case. Joe Kotter, the guy who defended my client, is a more-than-competent attorney, which makes it even tougher to pursue the appeal. And that’s why Eleanor thought we should talk to you. We’ve got an innocent guy on our hands, really innocent, it’s not just that flimflam stuff you think we lawyers do.”

“*Small Town* is a city magazine,” I protested. “We’re not exactly home base for hard-hitting investigative reporters. The only things we’re tough on are bad movies and unsafe sushi.”

“We know that,” said Eleanor. “We just want to start by asking some advice. If we go to a—forgive me, Maggie—a real reporter, somebody on the crime beat, they’ve got to run with the story. This is a delicate situation.”

“Okay, what do we know so far? It’s delicate and I’m not a real reporter. As you guys would say, ‘I’ll stipulate to that.’ But I still don’t know exactly what it is you want my advice about.”

Eleanor looked at Isabella. “It’s your story to tell,” she said.

Isabella nodded. “My client’s name is Travis Gifford. He’s forty-one years old, retired from the military. Ran a couple of motor pools on big Army posts, made sure the brass got driven around. So when he got out of the service, he tried driving a taxi part-time, but he didn’t like it. His mom’s got a jazz club in the city, and he used to play there sometimes, but the club didn’t generate enough income

to support both of them. Anyway, he's a very smart, personable, presentable-looking guy, so he went to work for one of those upscale car companies. He'd do airport runs and longer-term assignments for executives. He had a license to carry a gun, so sometimes he'd do security-related driving."

"Wait a second," I said. "Travis Gifford. I remember this story. Your client's the Limousine Lothario?"

Isabella nodded. "That's what they called him. He's a handsome man, and before he went to prison, he did enjoy the company of women."

"In the limousine? Isn't that right? He used it for assignations?"

"Sometimes."

"And then he murdered a woman in the company's limousine?"

"That's what the jury concluded."

"But that's not what happened?"

Isabella pulled the pencil out of her topknot, opened her perfectly made-up lips, and began chewing on the end of the pencil.

"Isabella," prodded Eleanor, softly.

She took the pencil out of her mouth and said, "Absolutely not."

CHAPTER 3

I left Eleanor's house with two souvenirs: the leftover pastries and a thick file on Travis Gifford, the Limousine Lothario. The file included a number of society-page clips featuring Grace Plummer—a tall, ashy blond with a high cheekboned, sculpted face that either signaled great genes or extraordinary cosmetic surgery. There she was in a Rita Hayworth, put-the-blame-on-Mame black dress with a frothy white fishtail hem at the Black & White Ball, dancing cheek to cheek with Mr. Plummer; on a sailboat in the bay, leaning out over the water; barefoot at the beach, laughing directly into the camera with a live crab in each hand; making a runway twirl in tennis whites at the Junior League fashion show; holding an extravagant bouquet of roses at the San Francisco Garden Show. She was a breathtaking woman with what looked like a carefree, pleasure-filled life. Underneath the clips was a short stack of black and white, way too graphic police photos. Isabella warned me as I picked them up.

When she warned me, I'd looked at just one. Grace Plummer, the late Mrs. Frederick G. Plummer, lying face down, arms cinched tight, wrists bound with something that looked like a flowered chiffon scarf, on the back seat of a very spacious sedan. A limousine, in fact. Travis Gifford's limousine. I couldn't see her face, but I could see what three bullets had done to the back of her head. It was a awful a sight as I ever wanted to see.

"What happened?" I asked, turning the photograph face down, just like the once lovely Mrs. Plummer.

"We don't really know. But here's what the prosecution said happened," answered Isabella. She took a deep breath, hugged her knees to her chest, and rocked a bit, as if she hurt, deep in her gut. "Travis met Mrs. Plummer because her husband hired him to drive on a regular basis. To and from meetings out of San Francisco, to and from the airport, frequent trips up and down Silicon Valley. When Mr. Plummer didn't need Travis's services, Mrs. Plummer often did."

"This is Frederick Plummer, venture capitalist to the once and future dot-com stars?" I asked.

"None other," said Isabella. "Travis and Mrs. Plummer became friendly. Then they became even friendlier. They became lovers. And they both had...wide-ranging tastes. A little tasteful bondage, a little playful S&M."

"Is this the prosecution talking?"

Isabella sighed. "No, up to this point, it's the defense talking, too. But this is where we part company with the DA. Nobody argues with the fact that Travis and Grace Plummer got a little adventuresome in their love life. But the night she was killed, Travis claims they made love in the limo, parked out at Land's End, and then he delivered her safe and very much alive to the Plummer home, around 10 p.m. He drove the limo home, parked it in his garage, climbed two flights up to her apartment, and went to bed."

"And then?"

"The next morning, one of Travis's neighbors was leaving early. He parked next to Travis in the garage, and right away he saw that the limousine had been pulled in so crookedly that he was going to graze the side of it if he didn't back out really carefully. He wrote a note to leave on the windshield complaining to Travis. But he noticed the car was unlocked, so he opened the door to leave the note on the front seat, and the smell knocked him over. Then he saw—well, you saw what he saw."

"Travis shot her?" I asked.

Isabella shrugged. “Someone shot her. But she may have been dead already, from a broken neck. The DA argued that the gunshots were just to mislead the cops, that her neck was broken in some sex play that got out of hand.”

Isabella handed the file back to me. “It’s all in there. You can read it yourself.”

“This sounds ridiculous. Who’d be crazy enough to kill someone in their own car and then park it in the garage?”

“That’s what the defense argued. But there was too much evidence. Travis’s semen in Mrs. Plummer. Skin samples under her nails. No one who had seen Travis deliver her home, as he claimed.

“How about the husband? Isn’t the spouse the automatic best suspect?”

“Generally, yes. But Plummer had a dinner meeting that night, and a whole crowd of young gearhead entrepreneurs and their lawyers has given him an alibi until nearly 1 in the morning. Coronado says the time of death was between 11 p.m. and midnight.”

“Okay. But, going back to Gifford, why would he leave a dead body in his car, in his garage?”

Isabella shrugged. “The prosecution had an answer for that, too. The limousine had darkened windows, no one could see in. He didn’t know anyone would open the door—they claimed he planned to get rid of the body later that day.”

“And what about the gun? You said Travis was licensed to carry one. Did they find the gun used to shoot Mrs. Plummer? Was it Travis’s gun?”

“They did find it,” said Isabella, “and it wasn’t his. Different caliber. It was wrapped in a pretty disgusting mess of used kitty litter in a trash can next door to Travis’s apartment building. It was impossible to tell whose gun it was, because the serial numbers had been obliterated.”

“What does your client think really happened?”

“He doesn’t know. He figures—we all figure—that if she had something going with him, she might have had other extracurricular activities. Though he admits he didn’t think she did. And that didn’t much matter, because we couldn’t turn anything up before the trial.”

“And now?”

“Well, during the habeas process, we’ve got an investigator looking into everything. But frankly, people like the Plummers don’t have lives that open themselves easily to the kinds of investigators we can hire.”

Eleanor cleared her throat. “Which is where you come in, Maggie.”

I looked at her. She had that carefully neutral expression I was used to seeing on the faces of my children when I was trying to ascertain who had fed the dog underneath the dinner table.

“The Plummers and their friends are exactly the kinds of people *Small Town* covers. You’ve got access to a world and information we just don’t have.”

Moments like this were precisely when I realized I should have gone to journalism school instead of, as a literature and piano student, lying around on rump-sprung sofas, reading 18th-century novels or scouring the music building for hunky cellists to play chamber music with. I should know how to respond, but I didn’t have a clue.

I shook my head. “I don’t know. This doesn’t smell all that different to me than the cops coercing information out of media organizations.” I held up my hand. “I know, your cause is just and all that. But, if you do it for one side, you do it for the other.”

“Wait a second,” said Isabella. “We’re not asking you to turn over confidential interviews.”

“What are you asking, exactly?” I said, as I put the file back on Isabella’s lap.

Isabella put the file on the floor between us.

“Just this. I think there’s more to the story that we could understand if we had access to the

Plummers' lives. How does a woman like Grace Plummer spend her time? Who does she hang out with when she is doing all her socialite charity activities? Who's her hairdresser? What valet parker does she hire if she's having a party?" She unfolded her legs, stood up, and started wandering around the living room, patting her pockets in the unmistakable tic of a recently reformed smoker.

"Look, Maggie. It's not all that different from the journalism professor at Northwestern who sent his class out to uncover evidence to have that Death Row case reopened."

"It is different," I said. "Those kids weren't working journalists, with a responsibility to a publisher and to their readers. Plus, I'm not an investigative reporter. I'm an editor. I sit in front of a computer, harass writers about deadlines, and argue with the lawyers who never want us to say one single controversial thing to anybody about anything."

Isabella stood over me, and nudged the file back toward me with one, red-tenned toe. "How about this? Take the file home, read it through, look at the clips. Talk to some people at the magazine, see if the story appeals to anybody. Mrs. Plummer was a pretty high-profile player on the social scene—that's got to be of some interest to your readers. We're not asking for any favors with the information you find. We just think that if *Small Town* stirs the pot, something might happen. Right now, we're only asking you to spend an hour reading the file. Then, give me a call."

Eleanor cleared her throat. "Travis Gifford was somebody's baby boy once upon a time," she whispered.

"Such a cheap shot," I whispered back. I closed my eyes for a moment, willing that image of Grace to go away. Suppose it was one of my boys wrongly accused. Unthinkable. Too ridiculous to contemplate. I opened my eyes, picked up the file, and stood.

"Okay, I'll look at it and I'll call you."

Isabella smiled, and pulled the red pencil out of her dark hair.

"Here's one of my lucky pencils. Just put a little check mark next to anything that puzzles you."

I looked at the pencil. It was a soft No. 1, and down its length, it read:

"Antes que te cases, mira lo que haces."

"Before you get married, look what you're doing?" I asked, puzzled.

Isabella laughed, "It's the Spanish equivalent, of 'Look before you leap.' The mom of a guy I dated in law school always used to say that. For a long time, I thought she was worried her precious *hijo* was going to marry me. Then, I figured out it was great advice for anyone nuts enough to go into criminal law."

"What do you think now?" I asked, standing up, tucking the file under my arm.

"Now I'm convinced she was very worried he was going to marry me. But it's still good counsel."

Eleanor walked me to the door.

"Thanks for coming, Maggie. We really appreciate your help."

"I've only agreed to look at this stuff, Eleanor. I haven't said yes to anything else," I reminded her.

"I know," she said. She reached over and gave my cloche a little tug, straightening it for me. "Very between-the-wars look," she said. "I love your hats. They always make me feel as if I'm in a classic movie."

"Me, too," I said. "I feel that way almost every day—only I don't have a script and have to make up my own lines. Sometimes I'm not even sure I know what character I'm playing."

"Today," said Eleanor, "you've gotten a chance to play the good guy." She put her arms around me for a hug, and put her mouth close to my ear and said, "Just remember, the habeas clock is ticking."

As I drove home, a summary of how the death-penalty appeal process works rattled around in my head. Isabella and Eleanor had explained it in brief strokes, which, as Isabella pointed out, saved me

hours of boredom the rest of them had to endure in law school.

“Criminal law always looks so exciting in the movies,” I’d protested.

They both laughed at my naïveté.

“It looks good in the movies because appeals only take 125 minutes, tops, from opening titles to end credits, the guy lawyers are handsome and sensitive, even when they haven’t slept for several days on end, and the women get to wear great clothes,” Eleanor had pointed out. “That does not happen in our world. Except for Isabella, who apparently doesn’t even own sweats.”

Isabella ignored the jibe and moved onto Appeals 101 for me, explaining that there are two flavors, direct and habeas petition.

“And Gifford’s is?”

“Habeas,” said Isabella. “And that’s good. A direct appeal means that you’ve got to stick to issues you can identify from the trial transcript. But in habeas, you can go ‘extra-record,’ meaning, you can go outside the transcript and find evidence or issues that didn’t come up during the trial.”

“Such as?”

“Such as lots of things. Evidence the police suppressed or mishandled, a witness who wouldn’t come forward during the original trial.”

“Have you got any of those?”

“No,” said Isabella, “not yet. But we do have one mystery we haven’t been able to figure out. She’d leafed through the file again, and pulled out a few sheets fastened together with a red paper clip. “Take a look at this,” she said, “when you go through the file. The police canvassed the Plummer neighborhood during their investigation, and a neighbor insisted she hadn’t seen Travis drop Grace off—which would have been nice corroborating evidence, but she did say she’d noticed two other vehicles at Grace’s late that night.”

“Any details?”

Isabella shook her head. “We wish. She was unclear about whether it was two cars, a car and a truck, a van, an ice cream truck! Apparently this particular little old lady was the self-appointed neighborhood watch warden. Her husband went to bed early every night, and she was a night owl. So she was constantly peering out her window late at night.”

“Didn’t the fact that she’d seen two other vehicles, parked at Grace’s, whatever they were, support Travis’s theory that someone else could have come by—another sweetheart, or a burglar or something?”

“That would have been nice,” said Isabella. “But unfortunately this neighbor, Mrs. Herbert Orson Lomax—she referred to herself that way, all three names, every single time—was the quintessential elderly lady, with failing eyesight and slightly muddled recall. She was recovering from cataract surgery on the night Grace was murdered.”

“They pulled a *Twelve Angry Men* discredit on poor Mrs. Herbert Orson Lomax during the trial,” said Eleanor.

“Got it,” I said, thinking of the Henry Fonda classic in which the busybody neighbor who insisted she’d seen the wrongly accused young man neglected to mention that she’d spied the crime at the exact moment an El train rumbled past, obscuring her view.

“Still, I guess your investigator is going back to talk to her again.”

“Again, I wish,” said Isabella. “Mrs. Lomax has gone to her reward since the trial.”

“What about all the new DNA evidence?” I asked. “I heard Barry Scheck—the guy from the O’Jays criminal trial—on the news the other day, flogging his book about stuff like that.”

“That’s an exciting emerging area,” said Eleanor. “It’s one reason they reopened the Sar

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