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Written by Harlan Coben

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Just One Look

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**This book is for Jack Armstrong,
because he's one of the good guys**

**'Babe, give me your best memory,
But it don't equal pale ink.'**

**— Chinese proverb adapted for lyrics in song 'Pale Ink'
by the Jimmy X Band (written by James Xavier Farmington,
All rights reserved)**

Scott Duncan sat across from the killer.

The windowless room of thundercloud gray was awkward and still, stuck in that lull when the music first starts and neither stranger is sure how to begin the dance. Scott tried a noncommittal nod. The killer, decked out in prison-issue orange, simply stared. Scott folded his hands and put them on the metal table. The killer – his file said he was Monte Scanlon, but there was no way that was his real name – might have done likewise had his hands not been cuffed.

Why, Scott wondered yet again, am I here?

His specialty was prosecuting corrupt politicians – something of a vigorous cottage industry in his home state of New Jersey – but three hours ago, Monte Scanlon, a mass executioner by any standards, had finally broken his silence to make a demand.

That demand?

A private meeting with Assistant U.S. Attorney Scott Duncan.

This was strange for a large variety of reasons, but here were two: one, a killer should not be in a position to make demands; two, Scott had never met or even heard of Monte Scanlon.

Scott broke the silence. ‘You asked to see me?’

‘Yes.’

Scott nodded, waited for him to say more. He didn’t. ‘So what can I do for you?’

Monte Scanlon maintained the stare. ‘Do you know why I’m here?’

Scott glanced around the room. Besides Scanlon and

himself, four people were present. Linda Morgan, the United States attorney, leaned against the back wall trying to give off the ease of Sinatra against a lamppost. Standing behind the prisoner were two beefy, nearly identical prison guards with tree-stump arms and chests like antique armoires. Scott had met the two cocky agents before, had seen them go about their task with the serenity of yoga instructors. But today, with this well-shackled prisoner, even these guys were on edge. Scanlon's lawyer, a ferret reeking of checkout-counter cologne, rounded out the group. All eyes were on Scott.

'You killed people,' Scott answered. 'Lots of them.'

'I was what is commonly called a hit man. I was' – Scanlon paused – 'an assassin for hire.'

'On cases that don't involve me.'

'True.'

Scott's morning had started off normal enough. He'd been drafting a subpoena on a waste-disposal executive who was paying off a small-town mayor. Routine matter. Everyday graft in the Garden State of New Jersey. That had been, what, an hour, an hour and a half ago? Now he sat across the bolted-down table from a man who had murdered – according to Linda Morgan's rough estimate – one hundred people.

'So why did you ask for me?'

Scanlon looked like an aging playboy who might have squired a Gabor sister in the fifties. He was small, wizened even. His graying hair was slicked back, his teeth cigarette-yellow, his skin leathery from midday sun and too many long nights in too many dark clubs. No one in the room knew his real name. When captured, his passport read Monte Scanlon, an Argentinean national, age fifty-one. The age seemed about right, but that would be about it. His fingerprints had not popped up in the NCIC computer banks. Facial recognition software had come up with a big goose egg.

'We need to speak alone.'

'This is not my case,' Scott said again. 'There's a U.S. attorney assigned to you.'

'This has nothing to do with her.'

'And it does with me?'

Scanlon leaned forward. 'What I'm about to tell you,' he said, 'will change your entire life.'

Part of Scott wanted to wiggle his fingers in Scanlon's face and say, 'Ooooo.' He was used to the captured criminal mindset – their serpentine maneuverings, their quest for an edge, their search for a way out, their overblown sense of importance. Linda Morgan, perhaps sensing his thoughts, shot a warning glare across his bow. Monte Scanlon, she'd told him, had worked for various connected families for the better part of thirty years. RICO hungered for his cooperation in a starving-man-near-a-buffet way. Since his capture, Scanlon had refused to talk. Until this morning.

So here Scott was.

'Your boss,' Scanlon said, gesturing with his chin at Linda Morgan, 'she hopes for my cooperation.'

'You're going to get the needle,' Morgan responded, still trying to give off the scent of nonchalance. 'Nothing you say or do will change that.'

Scanlon smiled. 'Please. You fear losing what I have to say much greater than I fear death.'

'Right. Another tough guy who doesn't fear death.' She peeled herself off the wall. 'Know what, Monte? The tough guys are always the ones who soil their pants when we strap them to the gurney.'

Again Scott fought off the desire to wiggle his fingers, this time at his boss. Scanlon kept smiling. His eyes never left Scott's. Scott didn't like what he saw. They were, as one would expect, black and shiny and cruel. But – and Scott might have been imagining things – maybe he saw something else there. Something beyond the standard

vacancy. There seemed to be a pleading in the eyes; Scott couldn't turn away from them. There was regret there maybe.

Remorse even.

Scott looked up at Linda and nodded. She frowned, but Scanlon had called her bluff. She touched one of the beefy guards on the shoulder and gestured for them to leave. Rising from his seat, Scanlon's lawyer spoke for the first time. 'Anything he says is off the record.'

'Stay with them,' Scanlon ordered. 'I want you to make sure that they don't listen in.'

The lawyer picked up his briefcase and followed Linda Morgan to the door. Soon Scott and Scanlon were alone. In the movies, killers are omnipotent. In real life, they are not. They don't escape from handcuffs in the middle of a high-security federal penitentiary. The Beef Brothers, Scott knew, would be behind the one-way glass. The intercom, per Scanlon's instructions, would be off. But they'd all be watching.

Scott shrugged a *well?* at him.

'I am not your typical assassin for hire.'

'Uh huh.'

'I have rules.'

Scott waited.

'For example, I only kill men.'

'Wow,' Scott said. 'You're a prince.'

Scanlon ignored the sarcasm. 'That is my first rule. I kill only men. No women.'

'Right. Tell me, does rule two have anything to do with not putting out until the third date?'

'You think I'm a monster?'

Scott shrugged as if the answer was obvious.

'You don't respect my rules?'

'What rules? You kill people. You make up these so-called rules because you need the illusion of being human.'

Scanlon seemed to consider that. 'Perhaps,' he allowed,

'but the men I've killed were scum. I was hired by scum to kill scum. I am no more than a weapon.'

'A weapon?' Scott repeated.

'Yes.'

'A weapon doesn't care who it kills, Monte. Men, women, grannies, little kids. A weapon doesn't differentiate.'

Scanlon smiled. 'Touché.'

Scott rubbed his palms on his pant legs. 'You didn't call me here for an ethics class. What do you want?'

'You're divorced, aren't you, Scott?'

He said nothing.

'No children, amicable split, still friendly with the ex.'

'What do you want?'

'To explain.'

'To explain what?'

He lowered his eyes but only for a moment. 'What I did to you.'

'I don't even know you.'

'But I know you. I've known you for a long time.'

Scott let the silence in. He glanced at the mirror. Linda Morgan would be behind the glass, wondering what they were talking about. She wanted information. He wondered if they had the room bugged. Probably. Either way, it would pay to keep Scanlon talking.

'You are Scott Duncan. Thirty-nine years old. You graduated from Columbia Law School. You could be making a great deal more money in private practice, but that bores you. You've been with the U.S. attorney's office six months. Your mother and father moved to Miami last year. You had a sister, but she died in college.'

Scott shifted in his seat. Scanlon studied him.

'You finished?'

'Do you know how my business operates?'

Change of subject. Scott waited a beat. Scanlon was playing a head game, trying to keep him off balance or

some such nonsense. Scott was not about to fall for it. Nothing he had 'revealed' about Scott's family was surprising. A person could pick up most of that info with a few well-placed keystrokes and phone calls.

'Why don't you tell me,' Scott said.

'Let's pretend,' Scanlon began, 'that you wanted someone dead.'

'Okay.'

'You would contact a friend, who knows a friend, who knows a friend, who can reach me.'

'And only that last friend would know you?'

'Something like that. I had only one go-between man, but I was careful even with him. We never met face to face. We used code names. The payments always went to off-shore accounts. I would open a new account for every, shall we say, transaction, and I closed it as soon as the transaction was completed. You still with me?'

'It's not that complicated,' Scott said.

'No, I guess not. But you see, nowadays we communicate by e-mail. I'll set up a temporary e-mail account with Hotmail or Yahoo! or whatever, with fake names. Nothing that can be traced back. But even if it could, even if you could find out who sent it, where would it lead you? All e-mails were sent and read at libraries or public places. We were totally covered.'

Scott was about to mention that this total coverage had eventually landed Scanlon's ass in jail, but he decided to save it. 'What does this have to do with me?'

'I'm getting to that.' Scott could see that Scanlon was warming up to his own tale. 'In the old days – when I say old days, I mean, eight, ten years ago – we did it mostly with pay phones. I'd never see the name written. The guy would just tell me over the phone.'

Scanlon stopped and made sure that he had Scott's full attention. His tone softened a bit, became less matter-of-fact. 'That's the key, Scott. It was by phone. I'd only hear

the name on the phone, not see it.'

He looked at Scott expectantly. Scott had no idea what he was trying to say, so he went, 'Uh huh.'

'Do you understand why I'm stressing that it was done by phone?'

'No.'

'Because a person like me, a person with rules, could make a mistake with the phone.'

Scott thought about that. 'I still don't get it.'

'I never kill women. That was rule number one.'

'So you said.'

'So if you wanted to put a hit on someone named Billy Smith, I'd figure Billy was a man. You know, with a y. I'd never think Billy would be a woman. With an ie at the end. You understand?'

Scott went very still. Scanlon saw it. He dropped the smile. His voice was very soft.

'We talked before about your sister, didn't we, Scott?'

Scott did not respond.

'Her name was Geri, am I right?'

Silence.

'You see the problem, Scott? Geri is one of those names. If you heard it on the phone, you'd assume it would be with a J in the front and a y at the end. So fifteen years ago, I got a phone call. From that go-between man I told you about. . . .'

Scott shook his head.

'I was given an address. I was told exactly what time "Jerry" – Scanlon made quote marks with his fingers – 'would be home.'

Scott's own voice seemed to come from very far away. 'It was ruled an accident.'

'Most arsons are, if you know what you're doing.'

'I don't believe you.'

But Scott looked at the eyes again and felt his world teeter. The images flooded in: Geri's contagious smile, the

unruly hair, the braces, the way she stuck her tongue out at him during family gatherings. He remembered her first real boyfriend (a dork named Brad), her not getting a date to the junior prom, the gung-ho speech she made when she ran for student council treasurer, her first rock band (they were awful), her college acceptance letter.

Scott felt his eyes well up. 'She was only twenty-one.'

No response.

'Why?'

'I don't get into the whys, Scott. I'm just a hired hand –'

'No, not that.' Scott looked up. 'Why are you telling me this now?'

Scanlon studied his reflection in the mirror. His voice was very quiet. 'Maybe you were right.'

'Right about what?'

'What you said before.' He turned back toward Scott. 'Maybe after all is said and done, I need the illusion of being human.'

three months later

There are sudden rips. There are tears in your life, deep knife wounds that slash through your flesh. Your life is one thing, then it is shredded into another. It comes apart as though gutted in a belly slit. And then there are those moments when your life simply unravels. A loose thread pulled. A seam gives way. The change is slow at first, nearly imperceptible.

For Grace Lawson, the unraveling began at the Photomat.

She was about to enter the photo developing shop when she heard a somewhat familiar voice. 'Why don't you get a digital camera, Grace?'

Grace turned toward the woman. 'I'm not good with that techno stuff.'

'Oh, come now. Digital technology is a snap.' The woman raised her hand and actually snapped, just in case Grace didn't know what the word meant. 'And digital cameras are sooo much more convenient than conventional cameras. You just erase the photos you don't want. Like computer files. For our Christmas card? Barry, well, he must have taken a zillion pictures of the kids, you know, snapping away because Blake blinked or Kyle was looking the wrong way, whatever, but when you shoot that many, well, like Barry says, you're going to get one that's pretty decent, am I right?'

Grace nodded. She was trying to unearth the woman's name, but it wouldn't surface. The woman's daughter – Blake, was it? – was in Grace's son's class in first grade. Or maybe it was last year in kindergarten. Hard to keep track. Grace kept the smile frozen to her face. The woman

was nice enough, but she blended in with the others. Grace wondered, not for the first time, if she was blending in too, if her once great individuality had joined the unpleasant swirl of suburban uniformity.

The thought was not a comforting one.

The woman kept describing the wonders of the digital age. Grace's frozen smile began to ache. She glanced at her watch, hoping Tech Mom would pick up the hint. Two-forty-five. Almost time to pick up Max at school. Emma had swim team practice, but another mom was driving the carpool today. A *carpool* to the *pool*, as the too-jolly mother had reminded Grace with a little tee-hee. Yeah, funny stuff.

'We have to get together,' the woman said, winding down. 'With Jack and Barry. I think they'd get along.'

'Definitely.'

Grace took advantage of the pause to wave good-bye, pull open the door, and disappear inside the Photomat. The glass door closed with a snap, ringing a little bell. The chemical smell, not unlike model glue, hit her first. She wondered about the long-term effects of working in such an environment and decided the short-term ones were annoying enough.

The kid working – Grace's use of the term *working* being overly generous here – behind the counter had a white fuzz pellet under his chin, hair dyed a color that'd intimidate Crayola, and enough piercings to double as a wind instrument. One of those wrap-around-low headphones snaked around the back of his neck. The music was so loud that Grace could feel it in her chest. He had tattoos, lots of them. One read STONE. Another read KILLJOY. Grace thought that a third should read SLACKER.

'Excuse me?'

He did not look up.

'Excuse me?' she said a little louder.

Still nothing.

'Yah, like, dude?'

That got his attention. He snarled up, narrowed his eyes, offended by the interruption. He removed the headphones but grudgingly. 'Stub.'

'Pardon me?'

'Stub.'

Ah. Grace handed him the receipt. Fuzz Pellet then asked her for her name. This reminded Grace of those damn customer service phones that ask you to dial in your home phone, and then as soon as you get a real live person, they ask you for the same phone number. Like the first request was just for practice.

Fuzz Pellet – Grace was warming up to this nickname – flipped through a file of photo packets before extracting one. He ripped off the tag and told her an exorbitant price. She handed him a Val-Pak coupon, one dug out of her purse in an excavation that rivaled the search for the Dead Sea Scrolls, and watched the price drop to something closer to reasonable.

He handed her the packet of photographs. Grace thanked him, but he already had the music plugged back into his cerebrum. She waved in his direction. 'I come not for the pictures,' Grace said, 'but for the sparkling repartee.'

Fuzz Pellet yawned and picked up his magazine. The latest issue of *Modern Slacker*.

Grace hit the sidewalk. The weather was brisk. Autumn had shoved summer aside with a patented gust. The leaves hadn't really started turning yet, but the air had that apple-cider quality to it. The shop windows had started up with the Halloween decorations. Emma, her third grader, had convinced Jack to buy an eight-foot blowup Homer-Simpson-as-Frankenstein balloon. It looked, she had to admit, terrific. Her children liked *The Simpsons*, which meant that maybe, despite their best efforts, she and Jack were raising them right.

Grace wanted to slit open the envelope now. There was always an excitement with a newly developed roll of film, an opening-a-gift expectation, a hurry-to-the-mailbox-even-though-it's-always-bills rush that digital photography, for all its conveniences, could never duplicate. But there wasn't time before school let out.

As her Saab climbed up Heights Road, she took a small detour so that she could pass the town's lookout. From here, the skyline of Manhattan, especially at night, lay spread out like diamonds on black velvet. The longing tugged at her. She loved New York City. Until four years ago, that wonderful island had been their home. They'd had a loft on Charles Street down in the Village. Jack worked on the medical research for a large pharmaceutical company. She painted in her home studio while scoffing at her suburban counterparts and their SUVs and corduroy pants and toddler-referenced dialogues. Now she was one of them.

Grace parked behind the school with the other mothers. She turned the engine off, picked up the Photomat envelope, and ripped it open. The roll was from last week's annual trip to Chester for apple picking. Jack had snapped away. He liked being the family photographer. He considered it paternal manly work, taking the photos, as if this was a sacrifice a father was supposed to make for his family.

The first image was of Emma, their eight-year-old daughter, and Max, their six-year-old son, on the hayride, shoulders hunched, their cheeks reddened by wind. Grace stopped and stared for a moment. Feelings of, yes, maternal warmth, both primitive and evolutionary, rocked her back. That was the thing with kids. It was the little things that got to you. She'd remembered that it had been cold that day. The orchard, she knew, would be too crowded. She had not wanted to go. Now, looking at this photograph, she wondered about the idiocy of her priorities.

The other mothers were gathering by the school fence, making small talk and planning play-dates. It was, of course, the modern era, post-feminist America, and yet, of the roughly eighty parents waiting for their charges, only two were male. One, she knew, was a father who'd been laid off for more than a year. You could see it in his eyes, his slow shuffle, the missed spots when he shaved. The other guy was a stay-at-home journalist who always seemed a little too anxious to chat up the moms. Lonely maybe. Or something else.

Someone knocked on the car window. Grace looked up. Cora Lindley, her best friend in town, signaled for her to unlock the door. Grace did. Cora slid into the passenger seat next to her.

'So how did the date go last night?' Grace asked.

'Poorly.'

'Sorry.'

'Fifth-date syndrome.'

Cora was a divorcee, a little too sexy for the nervous, ever-protective 'ladies who lunch.' Clad in a low-cut, leopard-print blouse with spandex pants and pink pumps, Cora most assuredly did not fit in with the stream of khakis and loose sweaters. The other mothers eyed her with suspicion. Adult suburbia can be a lot like high school.

'What's fifth-date syndrome?' Grace asked.

'You're not dating much, are you?'

'Well, no,' Grace said. 'The husband and two kids have really cramped my style.'

'Pity. See – and don't ask me why – but on the fifth date, the guys always raise the subject . . . how should I word this delicately? . . . of a *ménage à trois*.'

'Please tell me you're joking.'

'I joke with you not. Fifth date. At the latest. The guy asks me, on a purely theoretical basis, what my opinion is on *ménage à trois*. Like it's peace in the Middle East.'

‘What do you say?’

‘That I usually enjoy them, especially when the two men start French-kissing.’

Grace laughed and they both got out of the car. Grace’s bad leg ached. After more than a decade, she shouldn’t be self-conscious about it anymore, but Grace still hated for people to see the limp. She stayed by the car and watched Cora walk away. When the bell rang, the kids burst out as if they’d been fired from a cannon. Like every other parent, Grace only had eyes for her own. The rest of the pack, uncharitable as this might sound, was scenery.

Max emerged in the second exodus. When Grace saw her son – one sneaker lace untied, his Yu-Gi-Oh! backpack looking four sizes too big, his New York Rangers knit hat tilted to the side like a tourist’s beret – the warmth rushed over anew. Max made his way down the stairs, adjusting the backpack up his shoulders. She smiled. Max spotted her and smiled back.

He hopped in the back of the Saab. Grace strapped him into the booster seat and asked him how his day was. Max answered that he didn’t know. She asked him what he did in school that day. Max answered that he didn’t know. Did he learn math, English, science, arts and crafts? Answer: Shrug and dunno. Grace nodded. A classic case of the epidemic known as Elementary-School Alzheimer’s. Were the kids drugged to forget or sworn to secrecy? One of life’s mysteries.

It was not until after she got home and gave Max his Go-GURT snack – think yogurt in a toothpaste-like squeeze tube – that Grace had the chance to take a look at the rest of the photographs.

The message light on the answering machine was blinking. One message. She checked the Caller ID and saw that the number was blocked. She pressed play and was surprised. The voice belonged to an old . . . friend, she guessed. Acquaintance was too casual. Father-figure was

probably more accurate, but only in the most bizarre sense.

‘Hi, Grace. It’s Carl Vespa.’

He did not have to say his name. It had been years, but she’d always know the voice.

‘Could you give me a call when you have the chance? I need to talk to you about something.’

The message beeped again. Grace did not move, but she felt an old fluttering in her belly. Vespa. Carl Vespa had called. This could not be good. Carl Vespa, for all his kindnesses to her, was not one for idle chitchat. She debated calling him back and decided for the time being against it.

Grace moved into the spare bedroom that had become her makeshift studio. When she was painting well – when she was, like any artist or athlete, ‘in the zone’ – she saw the world as if preparing to put it on canvas. She would look at the streets, the trees, the people and imagine the type of brush she would use, the stroke, the mix of colors, the differing lights and casts of shadows. Her work should reflect what she wanted, not reality. That was how she looked at art. We all see the world through our own prism, of course. The best art tweaked reality to show the artist’s world, what she saw or, more precisely, what she wanted others to see. It was not always a more beautiful reality. It was often more provocative, uglier maybe, more gripping and magnetic. Grace wanted a reaction. You might enjoy a beautiful setting sun – but Grace wanted you immersed in her sunset, afraid to turn away from it, afraid not to.

Grace had spent the extra dollar and ordered a second set of prints. Her fingers dipped into the envelope and plucked out the photographs. The first two were the ones of Emma and Max on the hayride. Next came Max with his arm stretched up to pick a Gala apple. There was the compulsory blurry shot of flesh, the one where Jack’s hand had slipped too close to the lens. She smiled and shook her head. Her big doofus. There were several more shots of

Grace and the children with a variety of apples, trees, baskets. Her eyes grew moist, the way they always did when she looked at photographs of her children.

Grace's own parents had died young. Her mother was killed when a semi crossed the divide on Route 46 in Tootowa. Grace, an only child, was eleven at the time. The police did not come to the door like in the movies. Her father had learned what happened from a phone call. Grace still remembered the way her father, wearing blue slacks and a gray sweater-vest, had answered the phone with his customary musical hello, how his face had drained of color, how he suddenly collapsed to the floor, his sobs first strangled and then silent, as if he could not gather enough air to express his anguish.

Grace's father raised her until his heart, weakened from a childhood bout with rheumatic fever, gave out during Grace's freshman year of college. An uncle out in Los Angeles volunteered to take her in, but Grace was of age by now. She decided to stay east and make her own way.

The deaths of her parents had been devastating, of course, but they had also given Grace's life a strange sense of urgency. There is a left-behind poignancy for the living. Those deaths added amplification to the mundane. She wanted to jam in the memories, get her fill of the life moments and – morbid as it sounds – make sure her kids had plenty to remember her by when she too was no more.

It was at that moment – thinking about her own parents, thinking about how much older Emma and Max looked now than in last year's apple-picking photo shoot – when she stumbled across the bizarre photograph.

Grace frowned.

The picture was near the middle of the pack. Closer to the back maybe. It was the same size, fitting neatly in with the others, though the backing sheet was somewhat flimsier. Cheaper stock, she thought. Like a high-end office-supply photocopy maybe.

Grace checked the next picture. No duplicate this time. That was strange. Only one copy of this photograph. She thought about that. The picture must have fallen in somehow, mixed up with another roll.

Because this photograph did not belong to her.

It was a mistake. That was the obvious explanation. Think for a moment about the quality workmanship of, say, Fuzz Pellet. He was more than capable of screwing up, right? Of putting the wrong photograph in the middle of her pack?

That was probably what was going on here.

Someone else's photograph had gotten mixed in with hers.

Or maybe . . .

The photograph had an old look about it – not that it was black-and-white or antique sepia. Nothing like that. The print was in color, but the hues seemed . . . off somehow – saturated, sun-faded, lacking the vibrancy one would expect in this day and age. The people in it too. Their clothes, their hair, their makeup – all dated. From fifteen, maybe twenty years ago.

Grace put it down on the table to take a closer look.

The images in the photograph were all slightly blurred. There were four people – no, wait, one more in the corner – five people in the photograph. There were two men and three women, all in their late teens, early twenties maybe – at least, the ones she could see clearly enough appeared to be around that age.

College students, Grace thought.

They had the jeans, the sweatshirts, the unkempt hair, that attitude, the casual stance of budding independence. The picture looked as if it'd been snapped when the subjects were not quite ready, in mid-gather. Some of the heads were turned so you only saw a profile. One dark-haired girl, on the very right edge of the photo, you could only see the back of her head, really, and a denim jacket.

Next to her there was another girl, this one with flaming-red hair and eyes spaced wide apart.

Near the middle, one girl, a blonde, had – God, what the hell was that about? – her face had a giant X across it. Like someone had crossed her out.

How had this picture . . . ?

As Grace kept staring, she felt a small ping in the center of her chest. The three women – she didn't recognize them. The two men looked somewhat alike, same size, same hair, same attitude. The guy on the far left too was not someone she knew.

She was sure, however, that she recognized the other man. Or boy. He wasn't really old enough to call a man. Old enough to join the army? Sure. Old enough to be called a man? He was standing in the middle, next to the blonde with the X through her face . . .

But it couldn't be. His head was in mid-turn for one thing. That adolescent-thin beard covered too much of his face . . .

Was it her husband?

Grace bent closer. It was, at best, a profile shot. She hadn't known Jack when he was this young. They had met thirteen years ago on a beach in the Côte d'Azur on southern France. After more than a year of surgery and physical therapy, Grace was still not all the way back. The headaches and memory loss remained. She had the limp – still had it now – but with all the publicity and attention from that tragic night still suffocating her, Grace had just wanted to get away for a while. She matriculated at the University of Paris, studying art in earnest. It was while on break, lying in the sun on the Côte d'Azur, that she met Jack for the first time.

Was she sure it was Jack?

He looked different here, no doubt about it. His hair was a lot longer. He had this beard, though he was still too young and baby-faced for it to come in full. He wore

glasses. But there was something in the way he stood, the tilt of his head, the expression.

This was her husband.

She quickly sifted through the rest of the roll. There were more hayrides, more apples, more arms raised in mid-pick. She saw one that she'd taken of Jack, the one time he'd let her have the camera, control freak that he was. He was reaching so high, his shirt had moved up enough to show his belly. Emma had told him that it was *eeuw*, gross. That, of course, made Jack pull up the shirt more. Grace had laughed. 'Work it, baby!' she'd said, snapping the next photo. Jack, much to Emma's ultimate mortification, obliged and undulated.

'Mom?'

She turned. 'What's up, Max?'

'Can I have a granola bar?'

'Let's grab one for the car,' she said, rising. 'We need to take a ride.'

Fuzz Pellet was not at the Photomat.

Max checked out the various themed picture frames – 'Happy Birthday,' 'We Love You, Mom,' that kind of thing. The man behind the counter, resplendent in a polyester tie, pocket protector, and short-sleeve dress shirt flimsy enough to see the V-neck tee beneath it, wore a name tag that informed one and all that he, Bruce, was an assistant manager.

'May I help you?'

'I'm looking for the young man who was here a couple of hours ago,' Grace said.

'Josh is gone for the day. Something I can do for you?'

'I picked up a roll of film a little before three o'clock . . .'

'Yes?'

Grace had no idea how to put this. 'There was a photo in there that shouldn't have been.'

'I'm not sure I understand.'

'One of the pictures. I didn't take it.'

He gestured toward Max. 'I see you have young children.'

'Excuse me?'

Assistant Manager Bruce pushed his glasses up off the end of his nose. 'I was just pointing out that you have young children. Or at least, one young child.'

'What does that have to do with anything?'

'Sometimes a child picks up the camera. When the parent isn't looking. They snap a picture or two. Then they put the camera back.'

'No, it's not that. This picture had nothing to do with us.'

'I see. Well, I'm sorry for the inconvenience. Did you get all the photos you took?'

'I think so.'

'None were missing?'

'I really didn't check that closely, but I think we got them all.'

He opened a drawer. 'Here. This is a coupon. Your next roll will be developed for free. Three by fives. If you want the four by sixes, there is a small surcharge.'

Grace ignored his outstretched hand. 'The sign on the door says you develop all the pictures on site.'

'That's right.' He petted the large machine behind him. 'Old Betsy here does the job for us.'

'So my roll would have been developed here?'

'Of course.'

Grace handed him the Photomat envelope. 'Could you tell me who developed this roll?'

'I'm sure it was just an honest error.'

'I'm not saying it wasn't. I just want to know who developed my roll.'

He took a look at the envelope. 'May I ask why you want to know?'

'Was it Josh?'

'Yes, but -'

'Why did he leave?'

'Pardon me?'

'I picked up the photos a little before three o'clock. You close at six. It's nearly five now.'

'So?'

'It seems strange that a shift would end between three and six for a store that closes at six.'

Assistant Manager Bruce straightened up a bit. 'Josh had a family emergency.'

'What kind of emergency?'

'Look, Miss . . .' – he checked the envelope – 'Lawson, I'm sorry for the error and inconvenience. I'm sure a photograph from another set fell into your packet. I can't recall it happening before, but none of us are perfect. Oh, wait.'

'What?'

'May I see the photograph in question please?'

Grace was afraid he'd want to keep it. 'I didn't bring it,' she lied.

'What was it a picture of?'

'A group of people.'

He nodded. 'I see. And were these people naked?'

'What? No. Why would you ask that?'

'You seem upset. I assumed that the photograph was in some way offensive.'

'No, nothing like that. I just need to speak to Josh. Could you tell me his last name or give me a home phone number?'

'Out of the question. But he'll be in tomorrow first thing. You can talk to him then.'

Grace chose not to protest. She thanked the man and left. Might be better anyway, she thought. By driving here she had merely reacted. Check that. She had probably overreacted.

Jack would be home in a few hours. She would ask him about it then.