

Falling Awake

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A funeral always made for a bad day. Knowing that it was probably his screwup that had put Katherine Ralston into the ground made things a whole lot worse for Ellis Cutler that afternoon.

He was supposed to be able to predict the actions of his quarry. Everyone who had ever worked with him said he was a major dream talent. Hell, he was a legend back at Frey-Salter, Inc., or at least he had been until a few months ago, when the rumors started up.

But in spite of his track record, the grim truth was that it had never even occurred to him that Vincent Scargill might kill Katherine.

"May God in his infinite mercy grant to Katherine's family and

friends the serenity and peace of mind that can only come from the sure and certain knowledge that their loved one is at last in a safe harbor. . . ."

Katherine had been murdered in her apartment in Raleigh, North Carolina, but her relatives had brought her body home to this small town in Indiana to bury. It was ten o'clock in the morning, but the muggy heat of a Midwestern summer day was building fast. The sky was heavy and leaden. Wind stirred the old oaks that stood sentinel in the cemetery. Ellis could hear thunder in the distance.

He kept apart from the crowd of mourners, occupying his own private space. The others were all strangers to him. He had met Katherine on only a handful of occasions. She had been hired after he officially resigned from his position at Frey-Salter to *pursue other interests*, as Jack Lawson put it. He still freelanced for Lawson, however, and he allowed himself to be dragged back half a dozen times a year to conduct seminars with the new recruits. Katherine had attended a couple of his workshops. He recalled her as an attractive, vivacious blonde.

Lawson had told him she was not only a Level Five dreamer, but also a whiz with computers. Lawson loved high-tech gadgets but had no aptitude for dealing with them. He had been delighted with Katherine's skill.

Ellis felt like a vulture standing at Katherine's graveside. The malevolent cloud cover made the wraparound, obsidian-tinted sunglasses he wore unnecessary, but he did not remove them. Force of habit. He had discovered a long time ago that dark

glasses were one more way of keeping a safe distance between himself and other people.

The solemn service did not last long. When the final prayers had been spoken, Ellis turned and started back toward his rental car. There was nothing more he could do here.

"Did you know her?"

The voice came from behind and a few yards off. Ellis halted and looked back over his shoulder. A young man who appeared to be in his early twenties was approaching swiftly across the wet grass. There was a churning intensity in the long, quick strides. He had Katherine's blue eyes and lean, dramatic features. Katherine's personnel file had mentioned a twin brother.

"We were colleagues," Ellis said. He searched for something that might sound appropriate and came up empty. "I'm sorry."

"Dave Ralston." Dave halted in front of him, bitter disappointment tightening his face and narrowing his eyes. "I thought maybe you were a cop."

"What made you think that?"

"You look like one." Dave shrugged, impatient and intense. "Also, you're not from around here. No one recognized you." He hesitated. "I've heard that the police often attend the funeral when there's been a murder. Some theory about the killer showing up in the crowd."

Ellis shook his head once. "I'm sorry," he said again.

"You said you worked with my sister?"

"I'm affiliated with Frey-Salter, the firm where she was employed in North Carolina. My name is Ellis Cutler."

Recognition and suspicion quickened in Dave's expression. "Katherine mentioned you. Said you used to work as some kind of special analyst at Frey-Salter but that you'd left to become an outside consultant. She said you were practically a legend."

"She exaggerated."

Dave stared hard at the cream-colored, generic-looking Ford parked under an oak. "That yours?"

"A rental. Picked it up at the airport."

Dave's mouth twisted in frustration. Ellis's intuition told him that the young man had been busily memorizing the license plate until he discovered the car was a rental.

"You probably heard that the cops think my sister was murdered because she interrupted a burglary in her apartment."

"Yes," Ellis said.

He hadn't just heard the theory, he'd read every word of the investigating officer's report, probing for anything that might give him a lead in his own quest. He'd also looked at the photos of the victim. He hoped Dave hadn't seen those. Katherine had been shot at close range.

"My parents and the others are buying that story." Dave glanced briefly over his shoulder at the small group of people walking slowly away from the grave. "But I'm not. Not for a minute."

Ellis nodded, saying nothing.

"Do you know what I think, Mr. Cutler?"

"No."

Dave's hands tightened into fists at his sides. "I'm almost pos-

itive that Katherine was killed because of her connection to Frey-Salter."

Lawson was not going to like this, Ellis thought. The last thing the director wanted was to draw attention to his private fiefdom. After all, Frey-Salter, Inc., was a carefully constructed corporate front for the highly classified government agency that Jack Lawson ruled.

"Why would anyone want to kill Katherine?" Ellis asked, keeping his voice as neutral as possible.

"I'm not sure," Dave admitted, his face stony. "But I think it might have been because she discovered something going on there that she wasn't supposed to know. She said that Frey-Salter was real big on confidentiality. Lot of secrecy involved. When she took the job she had to sign papers promising not to discuss sensitive information with anyone outside the firm."

Something about the way Dave's gaze shifted briefly and then quickly refocused in an intent stare told Ellis that he probably knew a lot more about his sister's work than he should have. But if there was a problem in that direction, it was Lawson's concern, he thought. He had his own issues.

"Signing a confidentiality statement is a common requirement in companies that conduct high-stakes research," Ellis said mildly. "Corporate espionage is a major problem."

"I know." Dave hunched his shoulders. Anger vibrated through him in visible waves. "I'm wondering if maybe Katherine uncovered something like that going on."

"Corporate espionage?"

"Right. Maybe someone killed her to keep her quiet."

Just what he needed, Ellis thought, a distraught brother who had come up with a conspiracy theory to explain his sister's murder.

"Frey-Salter does sleep and dream research," Ellis reminded him, trying to sound calm and authoritative. "There's not a lot of motive for murder in that field."

Dave took a step back, suspicion gathering in his eyes. "Why should I trust you to tell me the truth? You work for Frey-Salter."

"Outside consultant."

"What's the difference? You're still loyal to them. They're paying your salary."

"Only a portion of it," Ellis said. "I've got a day job now."

"If you hardly knew Katherine, why are you here?" Dave flexed his hands. "Maybe you're the one who killed her. Maybe that theory about the murderer showing up at the funeral is for real."

This was not going well.

"I didn't kill her, Dave."

"Someone did, and I don't think it was a random burglar. One of these days I'll find out who murdered my sister. When I do, I'm going to make sure he pays."

"Let the cops handle this. It's their job."

"Bullshit. They're useless." Dave whipped around and walked swiftly away across the cemetery.

Ellis exhaled slowly and crossed the grass to where he had parked the rental. He peeled off the hand-tailored charcoal gray jacket, sucking in a sharp breath when the casual movement sent

a jolt of pain through his right shoulder. One of these days he would learn, he thought. The wound had healed and he was getting stronger. The visits to the acupuncturist had helped, much to his surprise. But some things would never again be the same. It was lucky he hadn't been passionate about golf or tennis before Scargill almost succeeded in killing him because he sure wasn't going to play either sport in the future.

He put the jacket in the backseat and got behind the wheel. But he did not start the engine immediately. Instead, he sat for a long time, watching the last of the mourners disperse. You never knew. Maybe there was something to that old theory about the killer showing up at the funeral.

If Vincent Scargill had come to bear witness to his crime, however, he succeeded in keeping himself out of sight. Not an easy thing to do in a small town in Indiana.

When there was no one left except the two men with the shovels, Ellis fired up the engine and drove toward the road that would take him back to the airport in Indianapolis. The news of Katherine's death had caught up with him while he was engaged in a series of business meetings in the San Francisco Bay area. He had barely made it to the funeral.

The storm struck twenty minutes later. It unleashed a full barrage of the spectacular special effects that make storms in that part of the country famous. The torrential rain cut visibility down to a bare minimum. Ellis didn't mind the wall of water. He could have driven the complicated maze of roads and state highways that led back to Indianapolis blindfolded. He had driven them

once to get to the cemetery and once was all he needed when it came to learning a route. The part of him that intuitively picked up on patterns and registered them in his memory was equally adept at navigating.

Lightning lit up the ominous sky. Thunder cracked. The rain continued, deluging the fields of soybeans and corn that stretched for miles on either side of the highway. The rear wheels of passing cars sent up great plumes of water.

He felt the rush of adrenaline, wonder and awe that he always experienced when the elements went wild. He savored powerful storms the way he savored driving his Maserati, the way, once upon a time, he had savored roller coasters.

The raw, exhilarating passion of the thunderstorm made him think of Tango Dancer, the mysterious lady who sometimes walked through his dreams. He wondered what it would be like to have her sitting in the passenger seat beside him right now. Did she get a kick out of storms? His intuition, or maybe it was his overheated imagination, told him she did but he had no way of knowing for sure.

He wondered what she was doing at that moment out in sunny California. Although she had appeared in his fantasies more times than he could count during the past few months, he had never met her in person. That situation was supposed to have changed by now. He'd made plans. But Vincent Scargill had put those plans on hold.

Reluctantly he pulled his thoughts away from Tango Dancer and contemplated his next move in what his former boss and

sometimes client Jack Lawson referred to as his *obsession* with Vincent Scargill. He would go to Raleigh, he decided, and check out the apartment where Katherine's body had been found. Maybe the cops had overlooked some small clue that would point him in a direction that would lead to Scargill.

Unfortunately, there was one real big problem with his personal theory concerning the identity of the man who had murdered Katherine Ralston. It was the reason he had not told Dave Ralston that he thought he knew the name of his sister's killer.

Vincent Scargill was dead.

Dave Ralston sat in his car, parked out of sight on a side road, and watched Ellis Cutler drive away into the oncoming storm. Katherine's description of the Frey-Salter legend haunted him. *He's supposed to be the best agent Lawson ever had, but Cutler makes me nervous. You can't tell what he's thinking or feeling. It's as if he's always standing just outside the circle. He watches, but he doesn't join in the game, if you know what I mean. He's the walking definition of a loner.*

Loners were dangerous, Dave thought. They went their own way and played by their own rules. Maybe this one had committed murder. Or maybe Ellis Cutler was pursuing some secret agenda on behalf of the mysterious Jack Lawson. Either way, Cutler was a for-real, genuine lead, the first one he'd been able to find. He had a name and the number of the rental car. This evening after the crowd of mourners left his parents' house, he

would power up his computer and see what he could do with the information he possessed.

He was good with computers, just as Katherine had been good with them. It was one of the many talents they had had in common.

He put the car in gear and drove away from the cemetery without looking back at Katherine's grave. He knew he would not be able to return here to say farewell properly until he found the person who had ended his twin's life.

He had to get some justice for Katherine, he mused, not for her sake but for his own. They had shared that special closeness that only twins can know. She would be a part of him for the rest of his life. He would not be able to live with her memory if he failed to avenge her.

The shrinks had a word for it. *Closure*.

The following morning Ellis flashed his Mapstone Investigations ID at the manager of the apartment house on the outskirts of Raleigh where Katherine had lived and asked to borrow the key.

"Place hasn't been cleaned yet," the manager warned.

"No problem," Ellis said.

He let himself into the apartment, closed the door and took a moment to steep himself in the gloomy shadows. He was intensely conscious, as he always was on such occasions, of the respect owed to the memory of the dead.

After a moment, he walked slowly through the apartment, examining every detail closely, storing up the images to be examined later in his dreams.

The blood that had soaked the beige carpet had dried to a terrible, all-too-familiar shade of muddy brown. The killer had toppled the bookcase, emptied drawers and yanked pictures off the walls, no doubt in an attempt to create the impression of a wild, frantic burglary.

When he finished the unpleasant tour he returned to the living room and stood for a while near the patch of dried blood.

That was when he noticed the one object that did not look as if it belonged in the apartment. The crime scene tape had come down. The police had obviously not considered the item to be evidence. He picked it up and tucked it under his arm.

At the door he paused one last time, allowing the dark, haunting atmosphere to flow over and around him.

I'll find him, Katherine, he vowed.