



*The dress, white with irregular red blossoms on it, lies crumpled on the floor as if torn off heedlessly in the heat of passion or after an exhausting night of dancing. We are in a bedroom; it must be in a basement because there is only one small window, high up to the right of the bed, near the ceiling. The grey morning light passes between a few stiffly bent weeds, illuminating nothing. The bed is torn apart, a quilt lying bunched and twisted on the floor at its foot. Those black shadows on the creased sheet, on the pillows shoved furiously against the wall, on closer examination are not shadows at all, but more of the same wide red flowers that stain the once beautiful silk of the dress that, were it not for its deep neckline, might be a wedding gown.*



## Chapter One

**W**hen she finally noticed the brown envelope lying on the sensible grey mat just inside her front door, she was startled, and stared, frozen, as it seemed to grow in size and give off a faint glow, and she looked away quickly, thinking *I need a new mat; I hate being reminded of where I came from*. She glanced back and saw that in the second's interval the envelope had subsided to a commonplace nine by eleven inches, and dulled to the flat ochre of all such envelopes. She slowly let air out through her nose – had she been holding her breath? – and took a tentative step toward it, before halting again, suddenly, thinking, but when did it come? How long had it been lying there?

She noticed she had begun to tremble.

Years she had been waiting for just this moment, maybe as long as a decade. Ever since that casual barbecue at which a nondescript middle-aged former civil servant had said, after hearing the story that, in those days, she couldn't seem to stop herself from telling over and over again, "So now you just have to wait for the brown envelope under your door."

She remembered thinking, *What? Is that how things are*

*done?* She had meant, *in this netherworld that I have, in perfect innocence and belief in truth and justice and the integrity of others, entered.* Every day that she had worked on what she called “Zara’s death,” but others called off-handedly “the case” or “the file” – how the latter infuriated and disgusted her – she had learned some new, terrible thing about how the world really worked.

And yet, hadn’t she been the one to say to a particularly unhelpful police officer not long before she published her book and officially gave up the search, “So you’re telling me that now all we can do is wait for the deathbed confession?” She hadn’t even listened to his answer before she hung up the phone.

She was about to call, “Roman!” Then, remembering he was not here, not now, not ever again, she closed her mouth with a snap. Vonnie. She would call Vonnie. She backed away from the envelope, hurried to the phone and dialed the number she had memorized thirty or more years earlier, not forgetting that now it was a long distance call.

“Fiona! What’s up?”

“How did you know it’s me?” But what relieved pleasure flooded over her at the sound of her friend’s voice.

“Your name came up on my phone,” Vonnie told her. “Wake up, Fee, we’re into the two thousands now. No more barbed-wire telephones,” which made Fiona laugh, a gulping sound, her breath catching. She noticed that her hand holding the phone was still trembling, and sat down abruptly, as though someone had knocked the back of her knees. “Are you all right?”

“Of course, I’m fine, I’m okay. It’s just – I just...” She took a deep breath, imagining Vonnie gazing out her kitchen window, catching a glimpse through the trees that

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bordered her farmyard of the blue roof of what had been Fiona's house, a mile away across the wheat fields. She felt a pang, pushing it down as fast as it came. "You won't believe what just happened."

"What?"

"Somebody just pushed an envelope under my door."

There was a silence, then Vonnie said, puzzled, "An envelope?"

"Remember? I told you – years ago – that man who said that all I had to do was wait for the brown envelope under my door, and how surprised I was because..." She was suddenly afraid.

"You're kidding!"

"I'm not. It's right over there," and she lifted herself up enough to see the envelope lying on the worn doormat. She noticed she wasn't trembling anymore.

"Are you telling me you haven't opened it yet?"

"Haven't even picked it up off the floor." They laughed together; Fiona in embarrassment, Vonnie in disbelief.

"Go get it right now," she said, as Fiona must have known she would.

"Okay, hold on." She pulled herself up out of the armchair, set down the phone and went with suddenly purposeful strides to the foyer. She picked up the envelope, surprised by how cool it felt in her fingers, then went back and sat again, letting the envelope lie on her lap. "I can't believe it," she said. "I mean, isn't this supposed to go under some big-wheel reporter's door? Or some private detective's? Or aren't I supposed to go into some big-city parkade and...umm... Jason Robards wearing a balaclava will hand it to me?"

"Quit stalling."

“Easy for you to be brave,” Fiona answered. For once, Vonnie was silent. Fiona understood that Vonnie was giving her room, showing her a little respect in the face of her situation, which was that Roman had died nearly a year ago and she had sold the farmhouse they had shared for more than forty years of marriage and now lived alone in a big city condo. *That I’ve become a cliché.*

She could hear a rustling sound down the line: Vonnie rearranging herself, making a small cough, maybe to let Fiona know she was still there, waiting. Fiona wanted to speak, but she was struggling to make her tumbling emotions slide into place. She had thought this was over when her book was published; it had *seemed* over – where else was there to go? – and now, this.

“All I ever wanted to do was to tell people what happened to Zara that night. I was never trying to solve her murder, no matter what the police thought.” The police, who in the midst of all this, would answer none of her questions and treated her as if she were their enemy, following her in a marked car so as to warn and/or frighten her off, or making apparently pointless slow drives past their farm with lights flashing to attract her and Roman’s attention to their puzzling but also menacing presence.

“I know that, Fee,” Vonnie told her. “And you did do what you said. You found out what happened, you told people that Zara Stanley was a decent young woman, not just a pretty face.” She made that clicking sound with her tongue, a habit of hers when she was thinking hard. “It was a damn good book, Fee, never doubt that.” Best friend stuff, Fiona thought, but was grateful.

She thought of how it had taken her years to write her book, and how during that time Zara’s story went from an

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interesting incident in their mutual pasts to a tale that grew ever weightier and darker. Once in a long while, alone in her stylish Calgary condo, she would pause in whatever she was doing, and ask herself how she could live knowing what she now knew about evil.

She laughed, though, as she looked for the first time at the address on the envelope, one loud half-snort, half-peal.

Vonnie said, "What?"

"My name and address is made up of letters cut from newspapers. Can you believe it?"

"Somebody else who doesn't know what year it is," Vonnie answered in an amused tone. Then, impatiently, "For God sake Fiona, open the damn thing!"

Her heart was tapping at the bottom of her throat, but before Vonnie could insist again, she slid a finger under the gummed flap and tore through the heavy paper. As she shook the envelope a single sheet floated onto her lap, and she realized she'd been half-expecting a key to fall out, or a flash drive or a CD or a DVD, maybe even a chip. But no, only this single sheet of paper with nothing on it. *Oh, wait.*

"It's a number, Vonnie. That's all, just a number. A long one, with a capital 'F' at the beginning. And below it, in tiny letters, there's a name: Evan Kirby." Or was it Ewan? The print was so small she reached for her reading glasses on top of the novel she had set by the phone.

"I'd say this has to be from some old guy because a young one would have sent a computerized file," Vonnie said crisply, as if this were a normal everyday problem, such as who would take out the garbage or what she would cook for dinner.

"Or a woman? Why not?" Fiona answered. "It's the old women, the secretaries, the personal assistants, the clerks:

they're the ones who knew where the bodies were buried. There was nobody more loyal than those women." Fiona was aware that, once again, she was stalling.

"It's just embarrassing to think of it. Loyal for no rewards, either. Loyal because they were raised to be."

"So, maybe..." Fiona launched the idea slowly, "The cut-out letters and numbers are a joke, aimed at me. Just a sort of sly, in-joke. Della Street, Jane Money Penny, and all that. Or a message in themselves! Couldn't they be?"

"Saying what?"

"Saying, look to the old guys!"

Again Vonnie was making the clicking sound with her tongue. Fiona went on. "But that's not worth a thing, because everybody who has ever been directly involved in the case is an old guy now." A pause. "Including you and me."

"All old *men*, not old women," Vonnie said. It was a conversation they had had a dozen times over the years: surely it was because only men had been involved in the investigation and in whatever actual formal processes – the coroner's inquest, for instance – had taken place that the case wasn't solved. And Zara's background weighed against her. She came from some backwater, her family were nobodies, the men in charge would have taken it for granted that she was going nowhere but to marriage and babies. Although Fiona had always suspected that some thought Zara had been headed for prostitution or maybe, given her beauty, to call girl status. It infuriated her to think of it. Men desired her; if they couldn't have her, they denigrated her. At least, the bad ones did.

"They probably thought she asked for what had happened to her!" Fiona hadn't meant to speak aloud.

"What?" Vonnie could put a thousand twists on that one

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word. This time it was exasperated.

“Or are we being bitches?” Fiona asked. “Most men in Ripley thirty years ago felt as bad about what happened as we women did.” She studied the number. “It could be a file number, maybe. But belonging to whom? The police? The Mounties? Some lawyer who’d been in business a long time? It’s nearly ten units long.

“I think that somebody is telling me that, somewhere, there is a file with this man’s name on it or in it, and that I should find it.” Suddenly she could feel her so-called mind ratcheting into gear again, a good feeling that surprised her. “I think somebody is telling me that I should find it because it will finally show the way to the answers.”

“Maybe it belongs to a government office: the justice department, for instance, or the attorney general’s office; or even the Premier’s office,” Vonnie said.

Fiona’s brain was whipping fast through a new set of ideas. She said, tentatively, “Could it be that somewhere in the bowels of the provincial legislative building there is a secret room full of secret files?”

“What?” Vonnie said; this time the tone was disbelief. “Why would anybody be dumb enough to keep files they never wanted anybody to see?”

“Or maybe over the years what had started as small deposit by some official who then left, or died, grew, and governments changed and changed again until the current government no longer knew it was there...” No, she thought. That theory is full of holes, and she would have bent her mind to making it work better but instead, drew back from her increasingly fantastical thoughts.

Vonnie said, “But what about that name? Say it again.”

“Evan Kirby,” she read aloud, carefully.

“Did we go to high school with somebody with that name? Or some name like it?”

“I don’t recognize it,” Fiona said. “It has a kind of lawyer sound to it, doesn’t it?”

“These days everybody’s a lawyer,” Vonnie said, as if she were thinking of something else. “Even Rudy Kovalenko.” They both made slight disparaging sounds. He hadn’t been the greatest student when they were all kids together, and now he was this big legal success. Vonnie and Jack, when they were still a couple, occasionally ran into him at exclusive events in Ripley. *Remember him?* Vonnie had asked, sighing, and Fiona had answered, *who could forget him?* A dreamboat, whom they had both dated before Vonnie met the too-hand-some Jack, and Rudy had dumped Fiona, politely, after a few pleasant enough dates, just not calling again. Ever.

But Vonnie was moving on, as if the mention of their old classmate was enough to shift her thinking.

“Just turn it over to the police, Fiona.” A certain resignation in her voice.

“Never!” Fiona said. “So it can disappear forever? Not a chance.” She took a deep breath. “I’ll just hang onto it and see if I can come up with some clever idea. About what I should do, I mean.”

“Look what happened before,” Vonnie said, in a low voice. “Do you want to go through all that again? Being watched at every turn? Come on, Fee.”

But she was roused again, as she had been when she set out to write her book and ran into opposition at every turn and, instead of drawing back, grew bolder. She said in a louder, firmer voice, “And anyway, who else will stand by Zara? Who else will be her advocate when she can’t speak for herself? I have to follow this!”

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She sat for a long time after they hung up, not looking at the sheet of paper resting on her lap, thinking of Zara. The high cheekbones, the perfect patrician nose neither too long nor too short, the light, almost transparent, blue of her eyes; how she'd made their teacher laugh in one of the classes they'd taken together, made the whole class laugh in fact, Fiona too, with some silly remark that took everybody off-guard. How, when Zara had heard the laughter, she had turned her head almost shyly, in surprise, and her eyes had met Fiona's, just two high school girls surviving another boring history lesson. It was the first time Fiona had realized that the prettiest girl in the school was a real person, maybe even a half-way nice one.

The poignancy of that moment shook her again as it had ever since Zara's terrible death only a couple of years later: savagely raped and bludgeoned nearly to death and then – oh, most horrifyingly banal detail of all – because she wouldn't die, smothered. Or smothered just to make absolutely sure she would never get up again.

“All I want,” she said out loud for the thousandth time, “is *justice for Zara.*” The words seemed to echo around the room.

Then she shook her head and set the paper aside. She would not think of it anymore, would go to bed instead, and get some sleep so she would be in shape to tackle things tomorrow.

But lying in bed, she found herself rehearsing it all again: her own efforts, forty years later, to dig out some truth from what material she could find: to identify the apparent mistakes in the newspaper coverage, to dissect as minutely as possible the statements of the ranking investigating officers,

official or otherwise – in those days it seemed the higher-ups in the police force could be casual if they felt like it – looking for errors, misinformation, places where they disagreed with each other or with what was reported in the media. She thought of all the information she was refused. On one occasion even, two different people showed her what should have been identical copies of the same document and in a critical place it had said two different things. So somebody had been altering documents. Not that she could prove it.

For the millionth time she repeated to herself: it was either a murderous drifter who had then moved on as anonymously as he had arrived – that was why he was impossible to catch – or else it was somebody Zara knew, most likely one of the many men who, mesmerized by her beauty, chased her so relentlessly.

But who was Evan Kirby? She could recall no one by that name, although it might have been one of the seemingly endless number of people she'd interviewed over the years, those who had known Zara as a friend, or dated her, or known someone who knew her, or knew about the case. Maybe he was one of those. He wasn't a police officer – that she would have remembered. Could he be a government official? Some lowly clerk who knew a few secrets and could no longer live with them?

She might have gone on this way all night, but the phone suddenly pealed, startling her out of the reverie. Both exasperated and slightly afraid – she could see by her bedside clock that it was 2:00 a.m. – she fumbled for the phone, dropping it as a voice mumbled against the bedclothes, finally getting the receiver lopsidedly against her ear. It took her a second to recognize her brother-in-law's voice.

“Please, Fiona, you have to come right away.”