

# BRUTALITY

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G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS | NEW YORK

# 1.

“I can’t believe Haley is missing this,” Fina Ludlow said, crumpled in a ball in a snowbank. “You all right, buddy?” she asked her youngest nephew, Chandler, as he burrowed out from underneath her.

“That was awesome! Let’s go again!” He grabbed her hand as she struggled to her feet. A chunk of snow had wormed its way up her parka and into the small of her back. Fina looped the rope attached to the toboggan around her free wrist and struggled to fish the snow out. Some had already melted and was making a cold, wet trail down her butt. She was having fun, moving into the hot and cold sweaty phase that marked any good sledding excursion.

Back at the top of the hill, her brothers Scotty and Matthew were prepping for another run. Scotty had his middle son tucked between his legs. Matthew was lying chest-down on the sled, headfirst. Scotty’s eldest son was lying on top of him in the same position.

“You’re going to allow that?” Fina asked Scotty. “Patty would not approve.” Scotty’s wife had married into the Ludlow family, thereby rendering her the rare voice of reason. Patty had opted to stay home with their niece, Haley.

“She won’t know,” Scotty said.

“Not until you call her from the ER,” Fina commented. “Did you guys bring any business cards? There must be a market for sledding-related lawsuits.”

Her brothers grinned.

“Don’t spoil our fun,” Matthew said, pushing off, his nephew clinging to his back like a tortoise’s shell.

It was a rare day that the Ludlows had a couple of free hours together, when the demands of the family firm, Ludlow and Associates, didn’t take priority. Winter had been a bitch so far, dumping snow and caking ice on every surface, prompting the governor to close down government offices and delay court business for days. Fina’s father, Carl, had grumbled about the loss of billable hours, but his children and grandchildren were happy to have a brief reprieve from the daily grind.

Fina sat down behind Chandler and shoved off the icy surface and over the crest of the hill. Their ride was fast and bumpy, the boy hollering all the way down. As they approached the bottom of the hill, Fina tipped to the side; rather than let the ride peter out, they rolled over and off the sled in a dramatic wipeout. Chandler was elated.

Fina was cleaning snow out of her boot laces when her phone rang from the inner pocket of her parka. If she were in a different line of work she might ignore the call, but as a private investigator, she never knew who might be on the other end of the line. Fina had to welcome every potential job and every potential lead, even if nine times out of ten it was a telemarketer trying to sell her aluminum siding.

“Fina Ludlow,” she said, wiping at her runny nose. She listened to the caller for a few moments and made a few comments before hanging up. The reprieve was over.

**A**lthough most of Fina’s cases came through Ludlow and Associates, she didn’t have a dedicated space at the firm. She used conference rooms and empty offices on the premises as needed, but she preferred to meet clients—especially potential clients—on their own turf or at least a turf of their choosing. She learned a lot about people from their environments and how they interacted with them. That’s why she was happy to meet her caller from the day before at Mass General Hospital, despite her general dislike of hospitals.

At the ICU reception desk, she encountered an administrator who could have blocked for the Patriots, so advanced were her skills.

“Who are you here to see?” She peered at Fina.

“Liz Barone.” That wasn’t strictly the truth, but oh, well.

“Are you family?”

“I’m her cousin.”

The receptionist printed out an ID badge, which Fina affixed to her jacket. She gave Fina a stern lecture that cell phone use was not allowed and pointed her to a small waiting room.

The space overlooked an inner courtyard, and although the windows promised natural light, it was nearly impossible to see the sky given the size of the building. Across the courtyard, hallways and rooms were brightly illuminated, offering a montage of hospital life.

Fina took off her coat, stuffing her gloves and scarf into her pockets before taking a seat in a straight-backed chair. A woman of about forty was lying on a sofa wrapped in a thin blanket. She appeared to be sleeping, but every couple of minutes, she would toss and turn on the unfor-giving couch. A Japanese family occupied the chairs opposite Fina. They were deep in conversation, their voices low but insistent.

Rather than contemplate the personal disasters that had brought her roommates to this place, Fina scanned the landscape across the way. In one room, a man sat up in bed, eating off a tray, his eyes trained on the TV mounted on the wall. A woman sat in a chair next to him, flipping through a magazine. Another room held half a dozen people, their smiling faces amongst a sea of flowers and balloons. Fina pondered the vista offered by the waiting room. It seemed cruel to force devastated family members to gaze upon others’ more mundane or joyful recoveries.

Fifteen minutes later, Fina was thoroughly engrossed in a CNN story about National Tortilla Chip Day when a woman entered the room. She was dressed in street clothes rather than medical attire.

“Ms. Ludlow?”

Fina stood and offered her hand. “Yes. Are you Mrs. Barone?”

“Call me Bobbi.” Her handshake was firm, and her skin felt dry. “There’s a meeting room that we can use.”

Fina followed her down the hallway, trying not to stare at the occupants of the glass-fronted rooms. In some cases, it was difficult to even see the patients amidst the medical equipment. Machines and endless tubes and cords snaked around the beds that seemed as large and as complicated as luxury sedans. Each room boasted a dedicated nursing station right outside its door. The level of care and attention was extraordinary. If you had to be in critical condition, this was the place to do it. In the hallway, a uniformed Boston Police officer sat on a chair, flipping through the *Herald*.

Bobbi led her to a small nondescript room with a round table and four chairs. There was a poster on the wall about patients’ rights and another extolling the virtues of hand washing, but little attempt had been made to decorate or warm up the space. If you were sitting in this room meeting with doctors, the life of your loved one was in serious peril. No one was going to pretend otherwise.

“Do you want some coffee? Water?” Bobbi asked.

“No, thank you, but can I get you something?” Fina sat down across from her. “I should have offered to bring in some food. I know that hospital food can get old fast.”

“I haven’t felt like eating. This is the most successful diet I’ve ever been on.” She gave a wan smile. Bobbi Barone looked to be in her sixties, with short, dark brown hair, and a complexion that was more olive than fair. She was very attractive, with smooth skin and lovely teeth. Her face was round, but not chubby, and her features were delicate. Fina guessed she was about five feet five inches and carried a bit of extra weight evenly throughout her body. A modest diamond ring and wedding band encircled her left ring finger.

“Is Liz’s husband going to join us?” Fina asked.

“He’s getting some air, but we can start without him.” Bobbi squeezed her hands together as if trying to warm them. The ICU was chilly, which brought to Fina’s mind a morgue.

“So what can I do for you?” Fina asked, pulling a notebook out of her bag. She had a tablet computer with her, but she still liked pen and paper when conducting interviews.

Bobbi took a deep breath. “I don’t know if you’ve been reading the papers, but my daughter was attacked a couple of days ago.”

“I did see that.” Fina had only glanced at the item in Friday’s paper, but had gone back and read all the coverage after Bobbi called her. Liz Barone, a thirty-eight-year-old married mother of two, was attacked in her home in Hyde Park. She’d suffered a major head injury, and her prognosis was uncertain. “How is she?”

“She’s in bad shape. She suffered a subdural hematoma”—Bobbi gestured toward her head—“and there’s a lot of bleeding in the brain.”

“Is there anything they can do?”

“They’re considering surgery to relieve the pressure, but we’ll have to see.”

“I’m so sorry,” Fina said. “How can I help?”

“Well,” Bobbi said, “I want to know who did it.”

“Of course.” Fina paused. “I assume the police are investigating?”

Bobbi nodded.

“Which division is handling the case?” Fina asked.

“Major Crimes.”

Fina felt a mixture of relief and dread. Lieutenant Marcy Pitney was the head of Major Crimes and Fina’s sometime nemesis. Detective Cristian Menendez was also a member of the unit. He was Fina’s good friend and sometime date.

“Lieutenant Pitney?” Fina asked.

“Yes. Do you know her?” Bobbi looked searchingly at Fina. The woman was desperate for a shred of hope.

“I do, and she’s an excellent detective, as are her colleagues, particularly Detective Menendez. I’m not sure what I can do for you that they can’t.”

“I don’t mean to question their skills, but there are only so many hours in the day, and they have so many cases. I want someone who’s focused only on Liz.”

Fina had heard this before. Clients generally trusted the police, but they couldn't accept their limited resources in terms of manpower. Like most things, if you were willing to throw money at a problem, you got more—though not necessarily better—results.

“Okay. Well, tell me about your daughter.”

“She's married with two kids and works in a lab at New England University.”

“Has anything unusual happened in her life recently? Has anyone threatened her or has she been engaged in any conflict you can think of?”

Bobbi shook her head. “The only thing that's different is the lawsuit, but I can't imagine that has anything to do with it.”

“What lawsuit?” Fina asked just as the door swung open. A man in faded jeans and a black pullover sweater walked in and dropped down into a chair. He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands.

“This is Liz's husband,” Bobbi said. “Jamie Gottlieb.”

Fina extended her hand. “Sorry to meet under such difficult circumstances.”

“I was just telling Fina about the lawsuit,” Bobbi explained.

Jamie made a gesture indicating she should continue. Fina listened and studied him at the same time.

She'd done some preliminary research on Jamie in preparation for the meeting. He was a project manager at a local interactive firm, but most of the information Fina found online was related to his band. Jamie was the guitarist for the group, which had enjoyed modest success in the nineties, but seemed largely inactive these days. They were called Wells Missionary, a name that made no sense to Fina, but was probably an ironic reference to art and the capitalist machinery. Jamie was trim with longish brown hair that dipped down toward his eyes. He wasn't traditionally handsome, but with his square jaw and hazel eyes, he looked slightly tortured, which for some reason was often a draw to the opposite sex. Sitting across from him, Fina could imagine he attracted the ladies when armed with a guitar.

“Liz was working with an attorney,” Bobbi continued. “She was going to sue New England University.”

“Why?” Fina asked.

Jamie studied his fingernails.

“She played soccer there when she was a student, and she’s developed health problems. She thinks they’re related to her time on the team.”

“What kind of problems?” Fina thought she knew what was coming next, but she wanted to hear it from Bobbi.

“Cognitive health issues. MCI, to be exact.”

MCI was mild cognitive impairment, the diagnosis most often given to athletes who suffered sports-related concussions. It was the affliction that so many NFL players were contending with, and although *mild* was part of the name, the impairment could be devastating.

“I’m familiar with MCI. What sort of symptoms was she experiencing?”

“I don’t see how this is relevant,” Jamie interjected. He bared his teeth in a look between a smile and a grimace. “This has nothing to do with her current situation.”

“We don’t know that, Jamie,” his mother-in-law insisted.

“This is a waste of time, Bobbi. No offense,” he said to Fina.

“None taken. What do you think happened?”

“I have no idea, but the world is full of crazy people. Liz didn’t have any enemies. This had to have been random. She probably opened the door to the wrong person.”

“That doesn’t make any sense, Jamie,” Bobbi said.

“I know you want to do whatever you can, but I don’t see how hiring her”—he gestured at Fina—“is going to help.”

“I don’t expect you to pay for it,” Bobbi said, a touch of irritation creeping into her voice.

“That’s not what I meant,” Jamie said.

Fina knew that some people didn’t like the idea of an investigator snooping into their lives. Some people were more private than others,



and then there was the group that actually had something to hide. Fina wondered which category Jamie occupied.

“I want to get back to Liz.” He rose from his seat. “Do what you think is best,” he said to his mother-in-law before leaving the room.

The two women sat in silence for a moment.

“I’m sorry,” Bobbi said. “We’re under a lot of stress, and clearly, he doesn’t want to hire you.”

“Why is that, do you think?” Fina asked.

Bobbi tipped her head back and studied the ceiling. “Jamie tends to take the path of least resistance in life. Right now he doesn’t have the energy or the emotional resources to do more than sit by Liz’s bedside.”

“But you do? You still want me to investigate?”

She met Fina’s gaze. “Absolutely. She’s my child. I’d do anything for her.”

“What about Liz’s father? Is he in the picture?”

“My husband died five years ago. Thank God for small favors; this would have killed him.”

Fina stashed her notebook in her bag and pulled out her business card. “Do you have an e-mail address?” Bobbi nodded. “I’ll send you my rate information, and I’ll get started as soon as you say the word,” Fina said.

Bobbi folded her hand around the card as if it were a talisman.

“I’ll want to speak with you again—and Jamie. I’ll try not to irritate him too much.”

“Good luck with that,” Bobbi murmured.

“I’ll also need the contact info for the attorney Liz was working with. He’ll be a good place to start.”

“He’s in Natick. Thatcher Kinney.” She laced her hands together. “You don’t think I’m wrong about the lawsuit being an issue?”

Fina stood. “I don’t know, but it represents a change in your daughter’s routine and contacts. It would be foolish to dismiss it without taking a closer look.”

“Thank you.” Bobbi stood and gave Fina a hug. It wasn’t the usual way her meetings ended, but this was an unusual circumstance. Bobbi Barone needed a hug, and Fina was happy to oblige.

“Hang in there,” Fina said after pulling away.

“I am. By a thread.”

In the hallway, Fina headed for the exit, and Bobbi went in the opposite direction, presumably toward her daughter’s room. Fina hit the button that unsealed the hermetically sealed unit and took a deep breath once the doors closed behind her. That medical purgatory gave her the creeps.

While most of Fina’s caseload came directly from Ludlow and Associates, occasionally she tried to throw in a job independent of the firm. There were a few reasons she might seek out other work: a case was interesting on its own merits; a case offered a potential payoff for Ludlow and Associates down the road; Fina felt like pissing off her father and asserting her independence. Liz Barone’s case hit all three of these marks, though Fina would emphasize the potential payoff when selling it to her father.

Ludlow and Associates was located on the forty-eighth floor of the Prudential Tower. Carl had started the firm not long out of law school and built it into not only a family business, but one of the most successful personal injury firms in the country. All four of the Ludlow children had followed Carl’s footsteps to law school, with varying degrees of success. Rand, the eldest, was a successful lawyer whose recent bad behavior had landed him in a family-enforced exile in Miami. Her other brothers, Scott and Matthew, were partners in the family firm, but Fina hadn’t made it past the first semester of law school. Instead, she found her niche as the firm’s investigator. It was a competitive, lucrative, and sometimes distasteful line of work, but it was theirs, and they were good at it.

Fina breezed past the pretty receptionist at the front desk and wound through the hallways to her father’s office. Since it was Saturday, his

assistant wasn't in, and Fina strode directly into his office. It wasn't as much fun when she didn't have to evade his gatekeeper.

Her father was seated behind his desk, his brows knit together as he studied his computer screen.

"Look at these," he commanded his daughter.

"You know, Dad, other people say 'hello' and 'please.'"

"You're lecturing me on manners?"

Fina walked behind her father. She leaned over his shoulder and looked at the screen. It was odd being in such close physical proximity to him. Her parents weren't huggers. In fact, Fina couldn't remember the last time she and her father had embraced.

"What am I looking at?"

"Your mother's birthday gift."

"Don't you think you should ask Patty?" she said, referring to Scotty's wife. "She has a better eye for these sorts of things."

"I don't have time for that."

Fina scanned the bracelets on the Tiffany website. Her relationship with her mother was difficult, at best. In Fina's estimation, coal was always the perfect gift for Elaine.

"She likes blue," Fina noted, pointing at a delicate bracelet of diamonds and sapphires.

Carl grunted. "It's a little understated for your mother."

Fina reached for the mouse and scrolled down the page. She inhaled her father's cologne, crisp and faintly woody. Carl was a handsome man who put a lot of effort into his appearance. He was trim, with a muscular upper body and thick dark gray hair that was developing some flecks of white. Carl was also charismatic. He had a "take no prisoners" attitude people found immensely appealing. Most people wanted to believe that someone, somewhere, was in charge.

Fina bypassed all the tasteful, elegant options and clicked on a chunky diamond bracelet interspersed with gold Xs. "That looks like something she'd wear." She stood back and took in the astronomical price. "But doesn't she have a diamond bracelet already, Dad?"

Carl clicked on the purchase button and directed her back around the desk. “She has a few, but she can never have too many. So what’s going on?”

Fina sat down in the chair across from him. “I’ve got a potential case that I thought might be of interest to you.”

He frowned. “Not one of our clients?”

“No, but there may be something in it for us.”

“Go on.”

“Have you heard about the woman who was attacked in her Hyde Park home last Thursday?”

“It’s vaguely familiar.”

“Well, her name is Liz Barone, and I just met with her mom and husband at MGH. Liz is in the ICU.”

“That sounds like a criminal matter,” he said. “Nothing to do with us.”

“Just wait,” Fina said, rising and walking over to the small but well-stocked bar on the other side of the room. She pulled a diet soda from the fridge and returned to her seat. “She was working with an attorney before she was attacked. She was planning to sue New England University.”

“For what?” Carl’s eyes flicked from his phone to her, his curiosity piqued.

“She played on their soccer team twenty years ago and has since been diagnosed with MCI.”

“Concussions?”

“Bingo.”

Carl tapped his fingers on his leather blotter. “Who’s representing her now?”

“A guy named Thatcher Kinney in Natick, but I gather that her mom isn’t happy with the job he’s done.”

“Never heard of him,” her father said, indicating that Thatcher Kinney couldn’t possibly be important if he wasn’t on his radar screen.

“Does the mom think the attack is linked to the lawsuit?”

“She doesn’t know, but she wants someone to investigate, independent of the cops.”

“She doesn’t trust the cops?”

Fina shrugged. “She does, but she’s doing anything she can to help her daughter. I think she wants to feel useful.”

“Why’d they contact you?”

“Because I’m the best.” Fina pulled out her elastic and gathered her hair into a tidier ponytail.

Carl gave her a withering look.

“And because of all the press from the Reardon case,” she admitted. Fina’s most recent case had involved the murder of a prominent Boston businessman. The case generated a lot of press, and Fina and the firm got their share of ink.

“And why would I want you to spend time on this?” her father asked. Carl liked to do this. He liked to make you state your case and win the argument, even if the argument was obvious and he’d already been convinced.

“Because if I figure out who attacked Liz Barone, her family will be eternally grateful, thereby wanting us to represent them in the case against NEU. A case that has potential to be huge, given all the athletes who are reporting cognitive issues due to sports injuries.”

“What about the husband? You haven’t said much about him.”

“He seems reluctant to have me involved, which is peachy as far as I’m concerned. Maybe he did it, and I can wrap this thing up pronto.”

Carl considered her for a moment. “Fine. Take the case, but I still may need you for something else.”

Fina rose from her chair. “Of course, Father.”

“Smart-ass,” Carl murmured as she turned to leave.

She smiled. That was practically a term of endearment in the Ludlow family.

## 2.

Fina was feeling weary and sore, which could be partially attributed to the previous day's sledding excursion, but which she also chalked up to a general winter malaise. Everything was harder in winter, especially a snowy winter. You couldn't just walk down the sidewalk or pop out to the store for something. Every movement required more energy and attention, and it added up at the end of the day. Fina understood the wisdom of hibernation given the current conditions. Home was where she wanted to be.

For almost a year, Fina had been living in her late grandmother's condo overlooking Boston Harbor. Carl had originally purchased the condo to keep his mother and wife out of each other's hair, and Nanny had loved the prime location her perch provided for plane-spotting at Logan Airport. Before Carl could contemplate selling it after Nanny's death, Fina had moved in. She and Nanny had always been thick as thieves, and she knew her grandmother wouldn't mind. It had been suggested to Fina that she might want to update the décor, which smacked of old lady, but she couldn't be bothered. As long as she had a comfortable couch and a sizable TV, she was good. And the décor wasn't the first thing that visitors noticed, anyway; it was the view. And then the clothes, files, books, and magazines that Fina left strewn about the space.

She took a hot bath and pulled on sweats before checking her e-mail. Bobbi Barone had already responded to the e-mail Fina had sent from

Ludlow and Associates detailing her rates. Bobbi wanted to proceed, so Fina named a new folder on her desktop and opened a Word document. She contemplated the blank page for a moment, then wandered into the kitchen. A leftover container of pad thai appealed, as did a pint of Ben & Jerry's Karamel Sutra. Decisions, decisions. Fina grabbed the pad thai and a pair of chopsticks, feeling virtuous.

In the living room, she plopped down onto Nanny's overstuffed blue velvet couch and scooped up a mouthful of peanutty noodles. She chewed, then reached for her phone.

"Menendez," Cristian answered after the first ring.

"Hey. What are you up to?" Fina asked before taking another bite.

"I'm interviewing a man who believes that he can talk to God through his espresso machine."

"Huh. That's too bad."

"It is."

"I can barely get my coffeemaker to make a cup of coffee, let alone deliver a message from our Lord."

"If our Lord ever starts communicating through appliances," Cristian said, "I assure you, he won't start with yours."

"So cynical."

Fina could hear phones ringing in the background, and the rise and fall of conversations. She didn't know how Cristian ever got anything done in the squad room, which seemed more like a three-ring circus than a place of work.

"So I wanted to give you a heads-up." She plucked a shrimp from the container and dropped it into her mouth.

"I don't like the sound of that," Cristian said.

"I can't win with you."

"What are you up to?"

"Well, I don't think you're going to like it."

"Uh-huh."

"Bobbi Barone has hired me to investigate her daughter's attack."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "Why?"

“Not because she thinks you’re incompetent,” Fina rushed to explain, “but because she’s worried that you guys can’t devote the necessary time to the case. Why are you on the case, anyway? You usually do more high-profile stuff.”

“This is high profile. The mayor recently launched his Home Safe Initiative, and less than thirty days in, a woman gets clobbered in her kitchen—her kitchen in her family-friendly neighborhood.”

“Got it. I think Bobbi just wants to feel like she’s doing something, and hiring me fits the bill.”

“You should just join the BPD,” Cristian suggested. “Then you and I and Pitney could work together officially. Oh, wait. That’s right. They’d never let you in.”

Fina laughed. “That’s me, harboring a fantasy to work for the man.”

“So what do you want from me?” he asked.

“This really was a courtesy call, but now that you mention it, if you have anything to give me, I would be most appreciative.”

“I don’t.”

“I’m sure I could give you something in return,” Fina said.

They were quiet as they mulled over the options. Sexual favors were out given Cristian’s current interest in a speech pathologist named Cindy. Fina had recently suggested that Cristian find a hobby other than obsessing about his ex-wife’s love life. Bolstering his own love life, however, was not what she’d had in mind.

“How about Bruins tickets for you and Matteo?” she asked. The Ludlows had boxes at Fenway, Gillette Stadium, and the Boston Garden—she didn’t care what anyone said, it would always be the Boston Garden to her even if some new corporate sponsor bought it tomorrow—and distributed tickets as thank-you gifts and bribes.

“He’s three and a half. I don’t want to take him to a hockey game.” Cristian murmured thanks to someone.

“Well, how about *Disney on Ice*? That show is like a bad penny; it keeps turning up,” she said.

“Admit it. You loved it when we took him last summer.”



Fina had scored tickets months earlier and accompanied them to a show that was heavy on *Beauty and the Beast*. She spent most of the performance worrying about the physics related to the Beast's enormous head and those skinny blades.

"That show was beyond ridiculous, but I did like watching Teo have a good time," Fina said.

"Well, get on the horn to Goofy," he said, "and I'll let you know if anything comes up."

"And you'll soften the blow with Pitney?"

Cristian scoffed. "I'll do my best."

"That's all I can ask," Fina replied.

Fina sent an e-mail to Scotty's secretary—for some reason Carl's assistant wasn't very helpful, perhaps because Fina paid no attention to her—inquiring about Disney dates at the Garden.

She dropped the empty takeout container in the kitchen trash and grabbed a spoon and the Karamel Sutra. Back on the couch, she typed "Liz Barone" into a search engine. There was nothing revelatory in the results. The most recent links were related to the attack, and the handful of others referenced her work at an NEU lab or her involvement in soccer. Fina narrowed her focus; there was a lot you could find out online if you knew where to look. After an hour, Fina had determined that Liz had never been arrested nor had she ever been involved in a civil suit. Her driving record was clean, and she and her husband had purchased their Hyde Park house seven years earlier.

Fina had to wonder: If Liz Barone was such an upstanding citizen and a contributing member of society, why would someone shove her head into a kitchen counter?

**F**ina wanted to speak with Jamie and Bobbi again before diving into the case, but they were both unavailable on Sunday. Liz was undergoing a battery of tests, and her mother and husband wanted to stay close throughout the day. Bobbi promised to call Fina on Monday when

they had a free moment, and in the meantime gave her the contact information for Thatcher Kinney. Given that he was a small-town lawyer, Thatcher Kinney wasn't even answering his phone on Sunday, let alone scheduling meetings.

It was hard to get work done on a Sunday, and Fina supposed if the Lord was allowed to rest, then so was she. Perhaps she took it a little far by not showering, dressing, or leaving the condo, but by Monday morning, she was ready to jump into the case.

Savvy and powerful people often went out of their way to avoid speaking with a private investigator, which is why Fina was a fan of dropping by unannounced and planting herself in their waiting rooms. But if an interviewee didn't fall into the savvy and powerful category, it was often better to schedule an appointment. The effort of calling ahead would be misconstrued as respect, and the subject wouldn't know better than to agree to the meeting. It was a win-win as far as Fina was concerned, so she called Thatcher Kinney first thing on Monday and was told by his sunny secretary that he could see her at eleven A.M.

The appointment time left her with a couple of hours to burn, so she threw on some workout clothes and headed down to the building's fourth-floor gym. Fina didn't enjoy working out, and her fast metabolism deemed it unnecessary in order to maintain her weight, despite her unorthodox diet. However, with each passing year and physical skirmish, she was increasingly aware that being fit wouldn't always be a given, so she was trying to exercise more often. Her on-the-job pursuits weren't consistent enough to qualify as cardio training.

Fina logged a few miles on the treadmill, lifted some weights, and was back upstairs with enough time for a shower, breakfast, and a quick review of Thatcher Kinney's bio. He didn't have an online presence with the exception of a mention in the Roger Williams University School of Law alumni bulletin. Assuming he attended law school not long after graduating from college, he was probably in his midfifties. Thatcher Kinney didn't seem to generate many headlines, which was great when discretion was required, but it rarely was in personal injury lawsuits.

There was a backup on the Mass Pike, proving Fina's theory that rush hour no longer existed; traffic was a reality of urban living that followed no tidy schedule or predictable pattern. She spent forty-five minutes cursing her fellow drivers and scanning the dial for anything that approximated music. The Top 40 station was repetitive, and the hip-hop option featured lots of moaning and "slap it here, girl," "work that booty, baby." Who said romance was dead?

Natick Center, where Thatcher's office was located, was a hybrid of the past and the present. The main street featured mom-and-pop businesses fighting the good fight against bank branches and chain coffee shops, but the newest additions to the area were large municipal buildings constructed to look old. The railroad tracks bisected the area, a testimony to the town's role as a bedroom community for Boston's professional workforce.

Fina found a parking space next to the town common and fought to open her car door against a snowbank. She squeezed out of the car, only to have to climb the hillock of dirty snow that was blocking her path. With no time to spare, she dashed across the street to a Victorian-style house that was the home of Thatcher Kinney, Attorney at Law, as well as a dental practice and an independent insurance agency.

Inside the front door was a small separate foyer with a row of mailboxes built into the right-hand wall. Fina stamped the slush off her boots and turned the doorknob leading into the hallway. A steep flight of stairs carpeted in industrial-looking gray rose directly in front of her. The door to her left was ajar, with a discreet black-lettered sign identifying it as Thatcher Kinney's digs.

Fina knocked and pushed the door open to find a small waiting room dominated by a metal desk and a seating area with two chairs. A coffeemaker stood on a trestle table with a mini fridge next to it. There was a fireplace, but rather than crackling flames, a potted plant stood in its hearth. Some people found wood fires messy and too much work, but Fina loved them. There was something sad and bereft about an empty fireplace in the dead of winter.

An open door gave a view into another office where a man sat behind a large wooden desk. Fina tapped on that door before crossing the threshold.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but your secretary seems to be MIA.”

The man looked up at her, small glasses slipping down the bridge of his nose. “Shirley’s at the bank. Is there something I can help you with?”

“You can if you’re Thatcher Kinney.”

“I am.”

“I’m your eleven o’clock appointment. Fina Ludlow.”

She crossed the worn oriental carpet and extended her hand. Thatcher rose partway out of his chair to shake and then gestured for her to sit in one of the wooden chairs in front of his desk. The Roger Williams seal was emblazoned on the back of both. Fina appreciated the school spirit, but doubted there were less comfortable chairs in the world.

“Thatcher Kinney. Nice to meet you.”

Fina glanced around the room. The décor was typical single proprietor fare: framed diplomas, nicely matted prints of ducks and outdoor scenes, venetian blinds made homier with curtains. Thatcher’s desk was tidy, with just a couple of piles of folders at the corners. He had a desktop computer that looked like it dated from the late nineties. It spoke volumes about his technical prowess, but maybe some clients found it reassuring; Thatcher Kinney was old-school and wouldn’t be distracted by any newfangled technology.

“Can I offer you some coffee?” he asked, rising from his chair.

“Sure. Cream and sugar, please.”

Thatcher went to the waiting room and returned a minute later with two mugs, one of which he handed to Fina.

“Thanks.”

He took his seat and smoothed down his blue striped tie before resting his ankle atop the opposite knee. He was wearing khaki pants, a white shirt, and a blue blazer. He looked like he should be attending his private school graduation, not practicing law.

“How can I help you, Ms. Ludlow?”

“Call me Fina, first of all.” She smiled at him. “I’m a private investigator, and Bobbi Barone has hired me to investigate the attack on her daughter Liz. I was hoping you could provide some information.”

“What kind of information?” Thatcher asked. “You must know I’m bound by attorney-client privilege.”

“Of course. I’m not asking you to violate privilege, but if there is anything you can tell me about your work with Liz that might help my investigation, I would appreciate it.”

He sipped his coffee and seemed to contemplate her request. Fina’s calculations had been accurate; Thatcher was probably in his midfifties. He had strawberry blond hair that was cut short, with a hint of wave to it. His skin was freckled, and wrinkles were starting to assert themselves on his forehead and around his eyes.

“Why don’t you tell me what you know,” Thatcher said, “and I’ll fill in the broad strokes where I can.”

“Sure. Liz has been suffering from MCI, possibly a result of her soccer-playing days at NEU, and she wanted to sue the university. Bobbi wonders if the attack is related to the lawsuit.”

Thatcher took off his glasses and massaged the bridge of his nose. “I wish I had more to add to that, but I don’t.”

“Because of privilege?”

“Because there isn’t much to tell.”

“Well, have you filed a suit yet?” Fina knew the answer to the question already, but she was always interested in hearing things from the horse’s mouth.

“Not yet. I’d reached out to some people at NEU, put out some feelers, but that’s as far as we’ve gotten.”

“How long have you been working the case?”

“A month or so.” Thatcher put his glasses back on.

Fina couldn’t tell if he was dumb or just ignorant, but Bobbi Barone had been right to worry; this guy was completely out of his league.

She sipped her coffee. “If I may ask, what is your practice area?”

“A little of this, a little of that. I’ve had the practice—been in the same office—for twenty-seven years.”

“Imagine that. So does ‘a little of this’ include personal injury cases? Med mal?” Fina asked.

“I’ve had one or two.” Thatcher straightened up in his chair, perhaps deciding that offense should be taken. “My knowledge base is broad. I do some estate planning, real estate transactions, small claims. That sort of thing.”

“Any class action?”

Thatcher studied the space over Fina’s head. “Nope,” he said, shaking his head.

Fina shifted her weight in her seat. “I’m actually surprised you wanted to represent Liz. Her case seems like a departure from your usual work.”

He adjusted in his chair. “I’ve known Liz’s family for many years, and we have friends in common. They hired me because I’m not a faceless lawyer in some downtown high rise who’ll bankrupt them. They trust me.”

*Not anymore*, Fina thought.

There was a noise out in the waiting room, and a voice carried into the office.

“You would not believe the line at the bank, Thatcher, and then when I finally got to the counter, Rusty Atkins talked my ear off!” A woman stepped into the room. A surprised look crossed her face. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know you were in a meeting.”

“Not a problem, Shirley. Do you mind pulling the door closed behind you?”

“Of course.” She smiled before stepping out and closing the door.

“Where were we?” Thatcher asked. He took a long draw of his coffee.

“Is there anyone you can think of who wanted to harm Liz? Either related to the lawsuit or otherwise?”

“Not to my knowledge. It must have been random,” he said. “No one I know would do such a thing.”

Why did people always think that murderers, liars, and thieves were loners with no human contacts? We all knew terrible people; we just didn't necessarily *know* that they were terrible. This insistence that nobody in one's universe would do anything wrong belied a real lack of imagination, as well as woeful ignorance. Where do you think the bad people are? Marooned on some island in the middle of the ocean, occasionally furloughed to commit bad acts back on the mainland?

"So no one?" Fina asked. "There was no one with whom she had any conflicts?"

Thatcher leaned forward and folded his hands on the desktop. "I don't know what to tell you, Ms. Ludlow. Do you want me to make something up?" He smiled, but the expression fell short of his eyes.

"Of course not."

Nobody had *no* conflicts. If they did, they weren't breathing, which would make any lawsuit moot. A good lawyer ferreted out the conflicts early on, even if they seemed minor. Fina knew that her father and brothers could be ruthless, but when they represented a client, they did due diligence and then some. They didn't judge or particularly care about their clients' transgressions, but they understood the best way to represent someone was to make sure there were no secrets or surprises. Being an attorney with high-stakes cases meant you had to ask tough questions; if you didn't, you could be sure opposing counsel would in open court.

Fina put her coffee cup on the desk and grabbed her bag from the floor. She handed a business card to Thatcher Kinney, who gave her one in return.

"If you think of anything useful, let me know," she told him.

Thatcher rose and came around his desk. "Come to think of it, Liz did give me some materials that I'm happy to pass along. They're not of a sensitive nature."

"Terrific." Fina wasn't hopeful. There was nothing promising about Thatcher Kinney.

He opened a file cabinet next to his desk and thumbed through the

folders. “Here it is,” he said, pulling out a file folder about an inch thick.

“Do you want to make copies for me?” Fina asked, taking the folder from him.

“Nah. Why don’t you make them when you have a chance and send the originals back to me?”

“Great. Thanks.” A folder of original materials would never make it out of Ludlow and Associates without a comprehensive record of where it was going and with whom. Thatcher wasn’t just practicing law in another town, he was practicing in another decade.

In the waiting room she waved at Shirley, who was on the phone. Shirley smiled and waved back.

Gosh, they were nice.

Everybody knew how far nice got you in the world of personal injury lawsuits.

Fina pulled into a Dunkin’ Donuts drive-thru on Route 9 and ordered a hot chocolate and a glazed donut. She was tempted to pull back onto the road and make some calls on her speakerphone, but the prospect of spilling a hot liquid on her lady parts was enough of a deterrent. Instead, she pulled over into a space in the lot and took a sip. Placing the cup in the cup holder, Fina reached into the paper bag and broke off part of the donut. She chewed it slowly, allowing the glazed sugar coating to linger on her tongue for a moment. Man, she loved sugar and fat.

She washed the rest of the donut down with more hot chocolate, then replaced the cup and wiped her hands on a napkin. She made follow-up calls to Bobbi and Jamie, but neither answered, which Fina chalked up to the “no cell phone” rules in the ICU. When leaving messages for them, she tried not to sound too impatient, but she was anxious to conduct more in-depth interviews. Family members were always prime suspects and had the most information about a victim’s other relationships. Many times it was what family members failed to discuss that was most critical; unanswered questions or tactful evasions often pointed Fina in the right direction.



Rather than twiddle her thumbs, she reached into her bag and pulled out the folder that Thatcher Kinney had given her. The top document was a basic intake sheet that he probably gave to all of his clients, requesting personal data like the client's name, address, spouse, children, place of employment, and any other relevant contact information. Fina glanced over it and shuffled it to the back of the pile. Next was a stack of faded NEU student newspapers. They were all dated from 1994 to 1998. Fina did a cursory examination of each issue, but the only common thread was lengthy articles about the NEU women's soccer team and accompanying photos. Liz Barone was attributed in a few of the pictures and appeared in some of the group shots.

Beneath the newspapers, there was a sheaf of documents on NEU letterhead. They seemed to be fund-raising appeals, all of them signed by a development officer named Pamela Fordyce. The letters themselves were form letters, standard higher-ed missives begging for money, although a few of them mentioned the women's athletic program in particular. On the most recent one, someone had scribbled a large question mark and an exclamation point with black Sharpie.

A question mark alone could be translated as "Huh?" and an exclamation point might be interpreted as "OMG!"

But both?

To Fina, it screamed, "What the hell?"