

FULL MOON BOOGIE

The air was unusually dry for late August, even with the breezes off Lake Erie. It was a rare day that Cleveland got low seventies and even lower humidity before Labor Day. When my client called, I asked if she minded meeting on Pulaski Square. I'd spent the last week and a half running background checks for the insurance company, all computer work. Not a process to serve or skip to trace presented any opportunities to get out of the office.

Rebecca Charleston, a bulldog of a woman in her mid-forties, had flown into Cleveland specifically to meet with me. Not me personally, but her client's lawyer had recommended me.

"I've never met Kelly," said Charleston as we sat on a bench, watching the pigeons mill about the Square next to City Hall. To our left, across the Shoreway, loomed the Rock Hall, Science Center, and Browns Stadium, the crown jewels of Northcoast Harbor.

"How long have you been representing her?" I asked.

"I took on her first book four years ago. It was one of the most exquisite works I'd ever read, and yet it's just like Stephen King."

I flipped through a hard-back copy of *Antioch Hill*, Penfield's first novel. The back jacket flap showed a woman in her mid-twenties with black, curly hair and maybe fifteen extra pounds. "I've read this one. Groundbreaking stuff. Do you have a recent photo?"

Charleston shook her head. "That's all I've ever seen of her. She deals with me through her lawyer."

"That would be Zoloski. Right?"

"Yes. And even he hasn't seen her. She uses another lawyer as an intermediary."

"So how does Zoloski know she's missing?"

"Every time Kelly is about to finish a novel, she runs off somewhere and has no contact with the rest of the world. She'll spend three weeks, no more, no less, doing her final draft. Zoloski gets a sealed note every time with specific instructions what to do if she doesn't contact him after that time."

"So she left...?"

"The last week in July. She was to call last week. Zoloski gave her until last Friday to call. Saturday morning, he opened the sealed note."

"What did it say?"

"I've gone home to find someone. I may not return. Send someone to find me." Her gaze drifted out to the lake.

I followed her gaze, then focused on the small airport beyond the Ninth St. Pier. A small, single-engine plane took off toward the east and arched out over the water, probably headed for Canada. "I thought Cleveland was home."

"It is now," said Charleston. "I flew in last night as soon as Zoloski told me she was nowhere to be found in the city or county."

I wondered how well Zoloski had searched. Lawyers generally make great investigators, unless they spent their time doing mostly transactional work like wills and partnership agreements. Since Zoloski seldom saw a judge outside of Probate Court or the watering hole across from the Justice Center, I discounted his efforts to find Kelly Penfield. "So where is home, then?"

"The note came postmarked Logan, Ohio. Isn't that near Columbus? She went to Ohio University, after all."

I drew a deep breath and pulled a contract from my briefcase. "Ms. Charleston, I'm afraid you're thinking of Ohio *State*. Ohio U is in Athens, near West Virginia. And Logan is about as far from civilization as you can get. It'll cost you five hundred a day, plus expenses."

"No discount for Cleveland's most famous writer?"

I shrugged. "Sure. If Les Roberts wants to hire me, I'll charge him only thirty-five an hour instead of the usual fifty."

She signed the contract and handed me a check for twenty-five hundred. "That should buy you most of the week. If Logan's as small as you make it sound, you should be able to find her in a couple of days, though."

"You'd be surprised, Ms. Charleston. Hocking Hills is an easy place to vanish if you know what you're doing."

"Do you?"

I watched a pair of gulls wheel over the Square. "I'm paid to find people who want to disappear. The rules are different for me."

"You'll find that's true for Kelly, too."

"I'll bet."

Hocking County is mostly wilderness, lush, green forest with a few small towns scattered about to service the state parks and campgrounds. While the place crawled with tourists, a motel would still be too obvious. I opted for a cabin in the woods. I'd be just another tourist.

I had just settled into my cabin when I saw her. She had the cabin next to mine, and the only other one in the clearing. A tall, skinny red head, she came out of her cabin dressed in sandals, ripped and faded jeans, and a peasant shirt. She already had a campfire going.

She started by skipping around the flames, waving her hands in the air. I watched from my window, wondering how she got away with an open fire. The state had banned them that summer, due to drought. I stopped wondering when she kicked her sandals into the flames.

When her top came off, I came to full attention. Soon, she had all of her clothes in the fire. Naked as God had made her, she danced around, unashamed, muttering something under her breath. Suddenly, she stopped, screamed, and sank to her knees in a praying position. She sat there for several minutes, whispering to herself before throwing herself flat. She rolled around in the dirt, rubbing it all over herself.

When she stopped, she stood, looked straight at me, and smiled. She waved, laughed, and pranced back into her cabin.

I looked up at the sky. A full nearly-moon showed between the trees. That had to be what brought Kelly Penfield's agent to my door. It sure as hell explained the naked lady.

"So, you're looking for Kelly Penfield," said Sheriff John McCallum. "You're the only one around here who is."

"Cuts down on my competition," I said.

McCallum appeared unmoved by the joke. "The rest of the world knows her as the woman who blew off Oprah. Around here, she's the witch of Hocking County. Her daddy gave her that name."

"Do I want to know why?"

McCallum took off his broad-brimmed hat and scratched his head. He had a snow-white buzz cut and a heavy tan. Age had padded his face and frame, but he still looked hard as nails. "See, Penfield's not her birth name. It's her mother's maiden name. She was Kelly Siefert until she went to Ohio U."

"Explains the feminist slant in her books."

"It was more than that. About ten years ago, while she was at school, her sister disappeared. The two were close, and Kelly took it hard. She blamed her daddy, called him 'Satan' to anyone who would listen."

"Did they ever find the sister?"

"No."

"So she called her father 'Satan.' I know that's bad, but..."

"You don't call the pastor of Antioch Church of the Resurrection 'Satan,' not very lightly. That's when Kelly took her mother's maiden name."

"She rejected her father, then."

"She rejected everything about him, even his religion. The Reverend Siefert began referring to his remaining daughter as a witch."

That explained a lot of things. Penfield's books were horror stories from rural America, only without the ghosts and vampires and strange creatures from Hell. The monsters in Kelly Penfield's books were all too human. "I take it some of the locals became characters in her books."

"Yes, and there's more than a few who aren't happy about that." He grinned. "Of course, I claim no knowledge of who inspired the kindly, fatherly sheriff."

I felt a smile tug at my face. "I take it you were fond of her."

"Somewhat. We had become friends in the wake of her sister's disappearance."

"But you don't know where she is."

"I haven't seen her since she moved to Cleveland. I heard she stood outside her daddy's church and made a show of shaking the dust off her shoes."

"Is there anyone who can help me?"

"Well, Mr. Kepler, I hate to tell you this. The only one who can help you is the Reverend Siefert."

"Has he seen her?"

"Not since 1994."

Terrific.

Like a lot of counties in southeastern Ohio, Hocking had no shortage of dirt roads. I skidded my way on one up a long hill to Antioch Church of the Resurrection. The church, a huge, white frame building with a modest steeple, loomed over a collection of buildings I assumed was Antioch. Beside it, weathered tombstones poked out of the ground at various angles. I could see why Kelly Penfield's books were so dark. At night, under a bright moon, the church would scare even the meanest bounty hunters I knew. Come to think of it, the gnarled oak in the cemetery didn't help its daytime image much, either.

Just below the church, a long, one-story modular home served as the parsonage. The church shrieked of late-1800's, but the parsonage had a 1970's vintage, maybe early

1980's. I pulled into the house's gravel driveway and found two vehicles. One, an aging Cadillac Seville had a passable paint job, good tires, and a clean interior. Next to it sat a grey Dodge Ram pickup dating back to about 1990 or so. Various tools littered the battered unlined bed, and wrappers, discarded cups, crushed cans, and other debris littered the cab. I guessed the Caddie and the Ram had different owners.

A brown mongrel charged at me as soon as I rounded the Caddie. I froze as it stood and barked, its teeth bare. I stepped forward. The dog backed away. I muttered something at it and headed for the front door. The dog gave up and disappeared behind the Caddie.

"May I help you?"

The man at the door stood about five-ten, with thinning grey hair. His shoulders sagged beneath his cardigan sweater, which surprised me for late August. I was sweating in just a windbreaker, T-shirt, and khakis.

"I'm Reverend Siefert," said the man in a thin, reedy voice.

I took a card from my pocket and handed it to him. "Nick Kepler, sir. I'm a private investigator."

Siefert looked over the card and frowned, making curious noises to himself. "I see. I don't believe I've ever met a private investigator."

"It's not too terribly exciting. Some days, I never even leave the office."

The frown deepened, creasing his forehead. "Cleveland? What brings you all the way down here, Mr. Kepler?"

"I was hoping to talk to you about your daughter."

Siefert's eyes narrowed, his face now the very image of the stern Puritanical minister. "I can't help you, Mr. Kepler. Anna's been gone for ten years now."

"I was referring to Kelly."

"Good day, Mr. Kepler. Tell your client that woman is not here."

I had to drive into Logan to call Rebecca Charleston, cell service being a rumor in this part of the state. For an exorbitant roaming charge, I explained to her that the trail had gone cold. She reminded me that she had paid me for a week's work. Oh, well. If it turned out to be a dead-end, I needed a vacation anyway. At least the cabin was cheap.

I sat in my cabin that night, strumming my guitar, picking out blues scales once in awhile. Outside, light flickered from the fire, making odd shadows in the trees. My naked neighbor, no doubt, danced around the flames again. I guessed she prayed to the fattening moon when she muttered. I opted not to watch this time. Once was a novelty; twice was voyeurism.

Someone knocked on my door. I slid out of my guitar, opened the door, and....

"Oh, my."

The naked redhead stood in the doorway, smiling. "Hi. Hate to bother you so late, but do you have a pen?"

It took a minute to get past staring at her bare breasts, among other things, before I realized she'd said something. "I'm sorry?"

She looked down at herself. "Oh. Sorry about the clothes. I'm afraid I can't put any on until I finish my work."

"You need a pen?"

"I'm afraid I left my last one in my pants last night."

I took a pen from my laptop case. "What was that, anyway? Pagan ritual?"

She took the pen. "My ritual. See ya!" She bounded out the door like a deer.

I shook my head, looking up at the moon, only two days from being full.

I drove back to Logan the next morning, the library and Hall of Records on my agenda. Breakfast, however, came first. I pulled into a diner at the center of town. Within minutes, I had scrambled eggs, sausage, home fries, and toast spread before me. The coffee wasn't too shabby, but the only major paper available was *USA Today*.

The Dodge Ram I'd spotted the previous day rolled up in front of the diner. A tall guy, about my age, but looking closer to forty, got out and shuffled through the door. He had tan, leathery skin from years spent outdoors, and sun-bleached hair stuck out from under a greasy Cincinnati Reds cap. He stopped just inside the door, looked around, then came straight for my booth.

"I hear you're looking for Kelly Siefert," he said as he plunked down in my booth.

I looked up from my paper to see his yellow-toothed grin. "So you say."

His breath smelled of stale whiskey. "I hear the Reverend slammed the door on you. Kelly, she hurt him bad."

"That tells me he's a dead end, that I'll have to look elsewhere." I went back to my paper.

"I seen her. Seen her plain as day."

"That so? Do you want to introduce yourself?"

"My name's Ken. Ken Hormeir. I'm the church's handyman, groundskeeper, and gravedigger."

"Does Reverend Siefert know you drink Jack Daniels?"

Hormeir's hand went to his mouth. "Uh... No."

Uh-huh. And Nixon was not a crook. "What do you want, Mr. Hormeir?"

"How much it worth to you?"

"To me? Nothing. To my client, I'll have to ask."

"And who might your client be?"

"Mr. Horneir, do you understand why we're called 'private' investigators?"

"I'm just asking! I'm just asking! So, what's it worth to your client?"

I signaled the waitress for my check. "I don't know. Like I said, I'll have to ask."

"You do that, and I'll take you to her."

I took the check, and got up from the booth. "We'll see."

Hormier watched me all the way out the door.

Another call went to Rebecca Charleston, complete with excessive roaming charges.

"Whattaya mean how much is it worth to me? It's worth five hundred a day, plus expenses! Christ, Kepler, how long have you been doing this?"

"Counting my first security job in college and time as a cop, fourteen years. Look, even Sherlock Holmes couldn't sniff out your client without a trace to follow. I'm amazed I've gotten this far."

"Well, what's it going to cost me?"

After about five minutes, we settled on a hundred dollars. I thought it was a bit excessive, but I needed wiggle room.

The Hocking County Hall of Records revealed nothing. Kelly Siefert had vanished from the local bureaucracy's radar in 1993. That year, the probate court acknowledged her request to change her name to "Kelly Penfield." The request listed her as a resident of

Athens, Ohio. Kelly Siefert/Penfield would have started her senior year at Ohio U in 1993.

At the library, I went through back issues of all the local papers. My search began in the fall of 1991, when Anna Siefert disappeared. Oddly enough, Anna's father did not file a missing persons report. Kelly did. The sheriff at the time, Ed Palmer, conducted a routine investigation, bringing in police from neighboring Coshocton and Athens Counties. Anna's boyfriend, Aiden Barsfield of Athens, was questioned, but never charged. By late winter, the case had faded from public view. Nothing more about Anna appeared after that.

In June of 1992, the Athens paper reported the apparent suicide of Barsfield. He had fallen from a third story window at Ohio U. Local police thought he'd jumped, despondent over Anna's disappearance. Sheriff Palmer thought otherwise. When asked if the suicide meant that Barsfield might have killed Anna Siefert, Palmer said it was not a suicide.

Three weeks later, hikers found Palmer dead in the woods near Old Man's Cave, a gunshot wound to the head. Chief Deputy McCallum told reporters that his people thought deer poachers might have shot him accidentally, then fled. Somehow, I didn't think McCallum believed that for a second.

I picked up a tail on the way back to the campground. My new friend drove a battered white GMC built during the Reagan Administration. The truck sported West Virginia plates, though I couldn't make out the number. At first, I thought nothing of it. Half the campers in the area hailed from Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Still, their cars

tended to be newer and better maintained. This thing had to have been worth five hundred bucks Blue Book.

I turned onto the chip-and-gravel road that led to the campground. The GMC followed. About half-mile down the road, the driver closed in on my bumper.

There wasn't a lot of room, but I managed to pull to the right. The GMC made no move to pass. I slowed a little, only to have him ram my bumper.

"You sonofabitch!" I yelled. Of course, he heard me. I only had the windows rolled up and Kenny Wayne Shepherd cranking full blast. I waved him around.

As he came even with me, he eased over into my lane. I found myself on the shoulder. An ugly clone of Hank Williams, Jr., in a dirty Cat Diesel cap grinned at me. He slid over further. I went into the ditch.

As he sped off, I reached out and flipped him the bird. The nearest farmhouse was another half-mile up the road. My phone mocked me with its "No Service" message.

It took me two hours to get out of that ditch. Unlike in the city, response times in rural counties leave something to be desired. To be fair, the tow truck came from ten miles away, and McCallum wasn't kidding about limited resources. He came out himself. I gave him my statement. He had no idea who might have done it. The West Virginia plates ruled out a local. He promised to call.

I got back to my cabin just before seven, my neighbor nowhere in sight. Tacked on my door, a smiling full moon tarot card greeted me. From inside my cabin, I could hear someone strumming on my acoustic guitar. I didn't have my gun with me. With a deep breath, I turned the knob and lunged in anyway.

The naked redhead looked up and smiled. "Hi! What took you so long?" She had strapped into my Ovation Roundback and started picking out "Midnight Moonlight." She wasn't bad at all.

"May I ask what you're doing in my cabin?"

She looked up at me but kept playing. "You're looking for someone."

I held up the moon card. "This yours?"

"You're looking for someone. Someone elusive."

"Yes. I am. Now, if you could just take your naked ass back to... Why are you naked anyway?"

"I'm an artist of sorts. When I work, I'm clad only in soil."

"Soil?"

"It helps me to channel the Earth's energy. You're creative, aren't you? I gathered that about you from the cards. You're loyal, creative, curious, but cynical. Someone rewarded your sense of justice once by punishing you."

"All right, Miss Cleo, take a hike."

"Miss Cleo is a bad actress with a fake accent," she said in Miss Cleo's exaggerated Jamaican accent. She unstrapped my guitar and set it aside. "But then a man who's lost his faith might not believe in my ways, or even his own."

"Look, who are you, what are you doing here, and how do you know so much about me?"

"Your neighbor, getting to know you, and..." She gestured to the desk where she had tarot cards laid out in some elaborate design. "...the cards don't lie."

The arrangement looked like a Solitaire game, except that the Knight of Swords had been set aside. "You can tell from this?"

She stepped over and looked at the arrangement. "Oh, no. I got bored and started playing cards. Then I tried out your guitar. I love that guitar, by the way."

"Thanks. One of my band mates gave it to me. It's autographed by..."

"Peter Frampton. I saw it." She took the Knight of Swords and held it up for me.

"Do you know what this means?"

"I have no clue."

"It means we have a task together."

"Hey! Whoa! Wait a minute! I'm not quite single."

"Doesn't matter. I'm not here to sleep with you, anyway. The lovers card didn't come up at the right point. You're looking for that writer, aren't you?"

"You got that from the cards?"

"Word travels fast around here." She started for the door. "I'll need you to throw a bucket of cold water on me."

"Huh?"

"Relax. It's to interrupt my creative flow. I can only work in the nude, and I need to be rinsed before I can dress again."

"And what makes you think I want your help?"

She turned and faced me, a hand on her nice, round hip. "First, you need me. I know this county. I know the people. I even know the missing woman."

"You do? Where is she?"

"That's what I'm going to help you with. Second, Mr. Kepler... Or can I call you Nick? You've been talking to a naked woman who's broken into your cabin. You can't tell me that hasn't aroused more than just your curiosity."

I followed her out the door. "Okay, yes, it has. What's in it for you?"

She handed me a bucket. "I've got an old debt to repay." She pointed to a path that led down an embankment. "There's a cold stream down there. Fill this up, then throw it on me."

"Why am I doing this again?"

"The same reason you light that candle for that woman and go to Mass twice a year. Now go, before I get a creative spurt and can't help you."

I dunked her. She screamed and ran into her cabin. She emerged five minutes later, clad in a white T-shirt and baggy jeans. She really did look different with her clothes on, with a pair of large glasses and hair back in a ponytail.

"You're her, aren't you?" I asked.

She took a deep breath and looked to the sky, then back at me. "Isn't this great? The woods, I mean? You can really tell we're hours away from the nearest major city."

"You're her, aren't you?"

She shook her head. "You may call me Diana."

I glanced up at the moon, then back to her. "Is that your real name?"

"It's the name I choose for now. I have so many."

I looked at her now, fully clothed, standing in the moonlight. She was quite striking, if a little mousy at the same time. If anything, she looked more vulnerable now than she did naked. Somehow, she looked more natural naked. "Are you the writer from Cleveland I've been looking for?"

She stepped up to me and kissed me on the cheek. "You've been searching for me longer than you think, Nick Kepler." She turned and headed back for her cabin. "As for who I really am, you'll find out soon enough. Goodnight, Nick."

"Wait!"

She stopped in the doorway and turned. "Yes?"

"If you say you'll help me, how can I trust you?"

She stared at me for a moment, smiling, not saying a word. Finally, she said, "I came to you completely naked, didn't I? You didn't so much as make a lewd comment, let alone try to grab me."

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"I trusted you, and you earned that trust." She stepped back into the cabin.

"Besides, if I am the woman you're searching for, your job's just about finished. G'night."

I didn't sleep well that night. I kept dreaming of tarot cards and cemeteries and alcoholic gravediggers. Only when the sky turned grey with the dawn could I rest easy.

The next morning, I walked to the lodge for breakfast and to use the pay phone. I called Horneir and offered him fifty bucks to take me to Kelly Penfield. He said he had to think about it. I told him not to think too hard; my client's patience and her wallet had their limits. He told me to meet him at the diner around noon.

As I headed back to my cabin, Diana came barreling up the path in a white Neon. She stopped as she passed me.

"See you this afternoon," she said. She sported sunglasses now and dressed completely in black.

"I thought you were going to help me," I said.

"I am. I've got to see someone in town about that. See ya!" She drove off up the path and out of the campground.

My first stop in town was the ATM. I needed a hundred to negotiate with Horneir. Next, I checked in with McCallum. He hadn't found my buddy from West Virginia yet. He didn't say it, but we both knew it was someone with local ties. Had I not concentrated so hard on not wrecking my car, I'd have gotten his plate number. As it was, I could only describe half the white male population of West Virginia.

I decided to drive out to the high school where Kelly Penfield, *née* Siefert, had graduated. On my way out, I found my tail once again. The GMC sat at the side of the road, a thin trail of oil on the pavement behind it. Smoke poured from under the engine. Hank, Jr., stood staring at his open hood, looking like a little boy lost.

I pulled alongside and rolled down my window. "Hi, there. Remember me?" I turned the stereo down, since he didn't look like a fan of Nine Inch Nails.

"What do you want?" he said, his eyes darting about.

"Looks like you're having some trouble."

"Did you do this?"

I looked over the GMC. "I'd say old age did it. I'll make you a deal. I'll take you into town, and you tell me why you ran me off the road yesterday."

His eyes shifted between me and the truck. Finally, he nodded and went back to get his keys.

While his back was turned, I took my gun out of the glove box and stashed it under my seat.

Hank, Jr. hopped in. "Thanks a lot, man. I owe you. Ike Maynard, by the way."

"Kepler," I said, turning up the stereo.

"What do you listen to that fag music for, Kepler?"

"Because it beats the hell out of the fag music in *Deliverance*." I let him chew on that while we sat there in park.

"Aren't we going into town?"

"Sure, just as soon as you tell me about last night."

"Hey, I was just havin' fun..."

"Bullshit." I shoved the car into drive and floored it. My aging Accord was about to get a workout. "You followed me around yesterday. You rammed my bumper. Start talking, or I take you to the Sheriff."

"Okay, okay." He folded his arms and slouched in the seat. "I won't say anything."

"Wrong answer!" I had the car up to sixty now and whipped it around a semi. We just barely missed an oncoming van.

"Hey!" he said, gripping the dash for dear life. "You're gonna get us killed!"

"Talk."

Ike's eyes widened as I blew past a line of cars stuck behind an RV.

"You didn't seem to mind driving like this yesterday. Talk."

As we crested a hill, I slammed on the brakes. The Honda skidded sideways and came to a rest facing the opposite direction. I pulled onto the shoulder, took out the Browning, and held it in my lap. "Go ahead. I'm listening."

"I... I..." He stared at the gun. "I was supposed to scare you off, make you leave her alone."

"Leave who alone?"

"The girl."

"Which girl?"

"The preacher's girl. The one who's missing."

"Kelly?"

"I guess."

I waited for traffic to pass, then U-turned back toward town. "Fair enough, Maynard. A deal's a deal. Did you have a garage in mind? Or do you just want to go to town?"

Ike just stared ahead, still gripping the dash. "Just drop me off downtown."

"What's the matter, Ike? You act like you've never seen a gun before." I slipped the Browning back under the seat.

"One fifty," said Hormeir, stuffing fries in his mouth.

I laughed. "You've never done this before, have you?"

"You think I'm a stupid hick?" He shoveled a generous amount of scrambled eggs into his mouth and pointed the fork at me. "You ain't in Cleveland right now. It's different out here."

"Maybe not, but one fifty to find someone I could probably track down on the Internet in a couple of weeks is a bit steep. In fact, I don't know anyone in or out of Cleveland who'd pay that much."

"Yeah? Well, who else is going to show you to her?"

"I've had another offer. Says she grew up here."

Hormeir stopped chewing and gaped at me.

"Fifty," I said, "is what I usually pay an informant on a missing persons case. But I'm willing to go up to seventy."

He swallowed his mouthful. "Meet me at the church tonight around nine. Bring the money."

Great. I'd get to see the graveyard at night.

I'd used a belly holster exclusively since last February, when two thugs beat the crap out of me down in the Flats. While recovering in the hospital, I swore off the shoulder rig. I checked the Browning's clip and chamber, just to be safe. I probably wouldn't need the gun, but only an idiot would leave it behind for a meeting in a rural graveyard at night.

At 8:30 that evening, Diana still had not returned. I started out for Antioch Church. I had no clue what my newly-dressed helper was doing. She might have sabotaged Maynard's truck. I had no way of knowing.

I drove out the dusty back roads to Antioch. The cluster of buildings had already gone dark by then. I climbed the hill to the church, watching the full moon rise over the valley. I pulled into the church's gravel lot and got out.

As I walked toward the cemetery, my skin began to crawl. An owl screeched, making me jump. A cemetery under a full moon, especially with that gnarled, leafless oak towering over it, gave me an irrational fear no amount of logic could chase away. No lights burned in the parsonage. The church also stood dark and silent. I kept hearing "Sabbath, Bloody Sabbath" tolling in my head. The bats buzzing the steeple didn't help the image any.

A pair of headlights appeared at the bottom of the hill. Slowly, they grew in size. In the pale moonlight, I could just make out the shape of Hormeir's Ram. It rolled into the lot and stopped next to my car. He rolled down his window.

"Bring the money?" he asked.

"Show me Kelly Siefert," I said, "and the money's yours."

"She'll be here."

"You know a guy named Ike Maynard?"

Hormeir lit a cigarette. "Yeah. Why?"

"No reason."

Hormeir looked out into the graveyard and pointed. "Here she comes." He pointed into the graveyard.

My gaze shifted to where he pointed, near the gnarled oak. The tree seemed to have a life of its own in the evening gloom, its branches swaying in the breeze. "There's nobody there." I turned. "Where did...?"

Hormeir had a sawed-off shotgun trained on me. "You've created a serious problem for me, Mr. Kepler. A very serious problem. I can't very well have both Kelly and you looking for me, now can I?"

I raised my hands. "You haven't seen Kelly, have you?"

"Do you think that matters? I'll take care of her soon enough. I'll bet she had that agent send you after her, didn't she?"

"That's confidential. Still, what do you think my client will do when I turn up missing?"

"Don't you worry about that. Turn around. And don't try anything stupid."

God, I hate that cliché! I did as he told me, nonetheless. I could hear him get out of his truck.

"Don't move. I can shoot one-handed." He rummaged around in the bed. Moments later, a shovel landed just to my side. "Pick it up. Slowly. Then start walking toward that oak tree."

I grabbed the shovel and started into the graveyard. "Where are we going?"

"To dig your grave, Mr. Kepler. Keep going until we're in the woods. Don't stop until I tell you."

I heard Hormeir fumble with what sounded like a lighter. Something bright lit up behind me. He had a lantern.

I kept walking, the lantern and the moon lighting my way. As we passed the oak tree, I thought I saw something flash in the dark, like faint light on smooth metal. I heard a familiar sound of someone loading a round in a rifle.

"Drop it, Kenny," Diana said from behind me. "Do it now."

I turned to see Diana emerge from behind the oak tree, a Winchester rifle aimed at Hormeir's chest. She wore a long, dark trenchcoat.

He dropped the sawed-off. "Kelly, I was just..."

"Just what? Trying to kill off my backup?" She jerked the gun barrel in my general direction. "Get over there beside him. Now."

I couldn't help but grin. "I knew you were Kelly Penfield."

"Well, what can I say, Nick? I didn't want to blow the game while I was in the middle of working." As Hormeir stepped past me, she swung the barrel directly at my chest. "I hate to do this to you, but I know you have your gun on you. Let me have it."

Hormeir's sweaty forehead glimmered in the lantern light. "Kelly, please, I..."

She fired a shot over our heads. "Quiet! Nick, please. Take out the gun, pop the clip, and hand it to me. I'll let you have it when we're done."

I couldn't argue with her. I did as I was told, pocketing the clip. I went to hand the gun to her butt first.

"Hold it," she said. "I want that chamber empty. I looked last night. You keep a round in it at all times with the safety on. Clear the chamber, then hand it to me."

I cleared the chamber, then handed her the gun.

"Now, turn around. Both of you."

We turned around. Another shovel landed near us.

"Okay, boys, now we're going to dig someone else's grave. Care to guess whose, Kenny?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Hormeir whined. I could really smell the alcohol on his breath now. "Please, Kelly..."

"Has he always whined like this?" I asked, picking up my own shovel.

"Only when he realizes he's been caught at something. Isn't that right, Kenny?"

I turned to see she had the sawed-off cradled in her arm now.

"Give me the lantern, Kenny. Then take us to where you dug that hole."

Fifteen minutes later, we were in the graveyard near the oak tree, digging by lantern light as Kelly watched. She looked perfectly at ease cradling the sawed-off.

"Kelly, I don't know what you think you're doing," said Hormeir, breathless from the exertion. "You think your sister's here? She's run off! Gone!"

Kelly tapped his shoulder with the gun barrel. "Quiet. Dig."

We were about three feet down when my shovel hit something.

"Stop," she said. "Nick, you dig it out. Kenny, get out, sit down, and shut up."

Hormeir did as he was told. I moved the shovel around. The object began to appear in the lantern light. I got to my knees and began digging with my hands. Soon, I could make out the face of a skull, a large hole above one eye socket. I looked up at Kelly, a single tear streamed down her cheek.

"Anna?" I asked.

She nodded.

I looked to Hormeir, who looked like he'd seen a ghost.

"She didn't run away, did she?" I said.

Hormeir trembled. "It... It... was an accident! I swear!"

Kelly had the sawed-off on Hormeir now. "She called me at school. You raped her, didn't you?"

Hormeir started crawling backward. "No! I swear it! We were friends!"

"You raped her! Didn't you?"

I watched Hormeir cower before Kelly. "It's a lie! Her boyfriend did it!"

"And buried her here?" She pumped the shotgun once. "This is the gun you used. You shot Anna and Sheriff Palmer both to cover it up. Nick, do you know if they can trace shotgun bullets?"

"They can on sawed-offs," I said. "A cut barrel leaves marks in the slug."

"Kelly, please?" His voice cracked. "I'm begging you, please!"

"Don't beg me," she said. "Beg the court." She fired one round into his knee.

He screamed at the top of his lungs and clutched his leg.

Kelly turned to me and tossed me my Browning. "Let's go, Nick. Time to call an ambulance."

Two ambulances came. One took Hormeir to the hospital; the other stood by while the crime scene techs and a sleepy coroner extracted Anna Siefert's remains from the shallow grave. The slug that had killed Anna fell out in the process. Sure enough, it had marks on it.

"Idiot," I said. "If he'd have used shot or an unmodified gun, no one would ever know."

"I'd know," said Kelly, pulling her black robe around herself more tightly. We walked in the moonlight toward the parsonage, still empty. "Daddy should have known. Maybe he didn't want to face it." We stopped at Hormeir's truck. She leaned against it and studied me in the white light. "Tell me something, why didn't you just up and leave this morning?"

I shoved my hands in my pockets. "I had to be sure it was you. You never answered me when I asked you directly."

"I supposed that was a little subterfuge on my part. But you could have confirmed who I was with the office. I registered under my real name."

"Siefert? Or Penfield?"

"Does it matter now? You know them both. So why didn't you just confirm my identity and call Rebecca?"

I took a deep breath. "You pranced around naked in front of me, came into my cabin twice like that, and knew a lot more about me than those cards could have revealed. You researched my past before you came down, didn't you?"

"The lawyer I use to deal with Zoloski knows you. I asked about you from there."

"He or she?"

"You'll never know until I'm ready to tell you."

"So Zoloski had instructions to hire me specifically. Right?"

"Exactly."

"Why?"

"Because when I learned about you, I knew you wouldn't be able to resist seeing this through. As soon as you learned who I used to be and about Anna's death, your whole sense of purpose would compel you to see this through. Was I right?"

Was she? How many women's cases did I take on more out of outrage than for money? How had my police career ended? She had to know about my ex-partner's wife, about my little stalker friend the previous winter. And repeatedly, I took the cases, sometimes at a reduced rate. This one, however, had been a straight missing persons case. If anything, I charged extra for both the travel and Kelly's celebrity status. "You were right. But only after I made the connection."

"I knew you would. That was the plan."

"But how did you know I wouldn't react...aggressively to you being naked in my cabin?"

"Well, first, you live with a woman to whom everyone knows you're intensely devoted." She stepped forward and kissed me on the cheek. "And besides, I took it on faith. Maybe I can teach you something about finding it again."

"Will I have to dance naked around a campfire?"

She patted my cheek where she'd kissed it. "Maybe when you're single again. Not until then."

McCallum rolled up in his cruiser, lights flashing, but no sirens. Kelly started marching toward it.

"You coming?" she asked. "I'm going to need someone to post bail for shooting poor Kenny."

I watched her march toward McCallum's car. What the hell. I'd come this far. I might as well see the whole thing through. Somehow, I knew Kelly wouldn't need that bail.

I had faith in that. Not much else, but I had faith in that.