

Las Vegas, Nevada—August 2013

1

On the day I killed my husband, the scent of lilacs startled me awake. We lived in the desert south of Las Vegas, where no lilacs bloomed for a hundred miles. I might expect to smell bee brush or desert lavender in the fragrant air, but never lilacs.

I pulled a strand of coppery hair across my face. The tang of magic lingered on me from our show the night before: the sweet of stage makeup, the bitter of smoke powder.

Jeremy was fast asleep, one arm flung out, reaching for something invisible, which he often did in his waking, working life. Never a white rabbit, a paper bouquet. Sometimes he'd conjure a peacock when a dove would suffice for other magicians, a javelin instead of a knife. I nuzzled his golden head. My lovely husband smelled the same as I did, of the theater, of magic.

He reached for me with his long hands, pulled me close. "Good morning, love," he murmured, his voice thick with sleep. "Sniffing for contraband?"

My sense of smell has always been keen. I use it to discover the secrets our daughters carry. Years ago, our twins Grace and Fai stuffed their backpacks full of Halloween candy, meaning to eat up every last scrap on the playground at school. I caught the scent of Snickers on them, nixed that plan. On their first day of seventh grade I began sniffing for cigarettes or pot on their clothes like a German Shepherd. They had just marked their fifteenth smoke-free birthday. Ten-year-old Caleigh only needed to be

given the once-over for stray bits of cheese, her strange craving. She'd fill her pockets with cheese at school, come home reeking like a wheel of cheddar. At the theater, and at the barn where we kept our horses, I was always on the alert for any hint of smoke, of fire.

I curled my body into Jeremy's while he smoothed my tangled hair, his eyes still closed. He wasn't ready to leave his dreams yet.

"No, not contraband," I told him. "Lilacs. I woke up smelling lilacs."

His blue eyes sprang open. "I was dreaming of lilacs," he said. "Masses of them, growing by a white house. But no matter how many I cut, they always disappeared from my hands."

"Like magic," I said lightly, trying to shake the feeling of something impending, a shadow passing over us. The image made me shiver, and not with cold. "Imagine that."

He pulled me closer. "In the dream, I was trying to bring them back for you, Reve."

I searched his eyes for trouble, found none. I kissed his cheek, rubbed his face with mine, an old trick, older than our act together, older than our marriage. My way of claiming him.

By nighttime, he was dead. I had shot him, while the odor of lilacs still clung to us. Stronger than ever.

It haunted me all day, that purple, heady scent.

Jeremy rose first. He showered, then made us breakfast. Black coffee, fresh eggs scrambled with our housekeeper Marisol's green salsa, prosciutto pink as the Nevada dawn outside the window. Caleigh's version of green eggs and ham. It was a Saturday. The twins slept in, but Caleigh waited at the table for her food, weaving the supple white string she favored for her games. Caleigh, the prodigy of string. She fashioned intricate webs that seemed to foretell our future—patterns she named "Chuck E. Cheese Sunday," or "Listen to the Rain" when Marisol complained her plants needed a real soaking. Somehow we would end up at Chuck E. Cheese's most Sundays, which we all despised except Caleigh, and it always did rain after she'd been weaving her rainy string pattern.

She plied the string that morning. She didn't look up when she asked if we were going to the barn.

“I don’t think so. Grace and Fai need new sneakers.”

“We get to go to the mall!” Up she jumped, did a little dance in her penguin pajamas, and showed us the pattern I recognized as “The Mall,” an escalator she kept in motion with her busy hands. I poured coffee for myself, then grabbed a mug for Jeremy, the one that told him he was the World’s Best Dad. The lilac smell was beginning to annoy me. I checked the collar of my robe. Not there.

Jeremy leaned into me, reaching for his coffee, a casual hand on my waist. “If you think of it, stop at Madame Lee’s. We need more glow sticks for the fireworks illusion.”

“I thought we got three cases last time.”

“Went through them. Dan ordered more, but we need them tonight.”

With a cast of nearly a hundred, performing illusions and tricks six nights a week, we were always running out of something, something was forever breaking. Jeremy was resigned. I was impatient.

“What do those girls do with them all?”

“I’ll leave it to you to ask them, Revelation.” He used my full name only when I became stern, when it suited me better than my dreamy nickname.

“You’re afraid of them.”

“Big strapping American showgirls? I should think so. Any of them could land me in the hospital with one swift chorus-girl kick to the bu . . . behind.”

Caleigh twirled up to Jeremy. “Bum, bum, bum, you were going to say *bum!*” she sang. He swooped her up, smacked her cheek with a kiss.

“I can’t get away with anything in this house, can I? So I’m off to the theater, where I might get some respect.” He set Caleigh down, gave me a quick kiss, and there it was again. Lilacs. I pulled him to me, stuck my nose in his shirt collar. No. Only the scent of him. A nutmeg smell, and something indefinable, clean like freshly cut hay. I held him tighter, felt him breathe into me. He took my face in his hands and kissed me again, a deep kiss. Then he walked out into the Nevada sun, which was sharp as a knife that morning, the heat already settled into every crevice of the day.

Beyond that moment I’d never know what he thought, what he felt. He’d never tell me, after we’d gotten home and the girls were in bed. Not

that night or any night after. Instead, what happened at the theater haunts me, in the dark and in the daylight. Whenever I close my eyes, the images come rushing at me, as crystalline and sharply focused as a movie in 3-D.

This is the way *Defying the Bullets* works: The magician appears to prepare the gun before volunteer audience members who examine the bullets, testify that they are real. It appears that the magician loads the gun, but he or she palms the bullets, the gun having been previously loaded with blanks. No real shot is ever fired. Unless someone switches the blanks for bullets. That had happened to magicians before. It happened to Chung Ling Soo in 1918. Whether it was an accident or not was never discovered. But Chung Ling Soo was no less dead.