

## DIRTY DEEDS

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### CHAPTER 1

"Meg? Meg! Hellooooo! Meg! Earth to Meg!"

I punched off my CD player, Joan Jett's raspy voice dying in my earphones. Controlling a growl, I glared up at Steph from the glowing lines of code that marched across the monitor. "We're already behind schedule," I snapped. "You wanted this fixed by tomorrow. You've got to stop interrupting--"

"The Reverend wants to speak to you."

I turned my attention back to the computer screen, scowling. I closed my eyes and willed this entire mess away. When I opened my eyes the code still resembled alphabet soup and Stephanie Jones, erstwhile Website designer and ISP co-owner, was still lurking expectantly over my right shoulder.

"What," I said quietly, "does he want?"

"I don't know. But he's the boss," Stephanie said.

Your boss, I thought. Not mine. I was merely subcontracting on this deal, helping a friend. Stephanie, in this case. Head of WebSpinners, Inc., a Website design company. Co-owner of Chavez Technologies, Inc., a small Internet Service Provider. When Chavez Tech's servers crashed and burned I was the one asked to resurrect the corpse from the ashes. And of primary concern was the data that had been lost from the Missionary Church of Jesus Christ Evangelical's Website. Almost everything else had been on tape backup, ready for Henry Chavez to restore. But not the database of contributions that had been made between Saturday's backup and Sunday afternoon's crash.

"Where is he," I asked, checking to make sure I was semi-presentable. Semi was about it. Faded jeans and a Mickey Mouse T-shirt, high-tops on my feet. My hair was washed and combed, I wore no makeup--rarely did--but I wasn't dressed for client contact. I told Stephanie this and she, acting like her panties were on fire, told me that I had to go in and talk to him right now, right now, RIGHT NOW, he was her biggest client...

Stephanie, who was wearing navy blue slacks and a cream silk blouse, said, "Oh, thank you. He's in my office."

Glancing around the server room, no bigger than an average mausoleum, I went through a mental checklist to see if I could leave at this moment. The keyboard and monitor were on top of a large

desk similar to a drafting table, beneath which were half-a-dozen Dell servers, each one in matte black about the size of an overstuffed gym bag. More important, off to one side, were six APC power protectors that would kick in if we had a brownout, or God forbid, a blackout. Along the side wall was a stack of shelves containing the routers that looked like small VCRs except for the telephone lines that came in, literally hundreds of them, looking like tangles of long gray earthworms. The room was quiet and industrial-looking, the walls unadorned, the temperature kept at a nearly chilly 65 degrees. Henry had panic attacks if the temp approached 72.

I left the room, past Henry's office. Henry, short and stocky with dark hair shorn nearly to the scalp, looked up and rolled his eyes as I went by. This was Steph's seventh visit to me today, mostly to "Just see how you're doing." I wanted to kill her. I don't know how he did business with Steph.

With Stephanie right behind me, I left the small quarters that were Chavez Technologies--really an office, a bathroom, a kitchenette and the server room--and passed through the entryway overlooking the stairs to the main floor, and pushed through the glass doors of WebSpinners, Inc. WebSpinners was a cubicle farm, a large open space with bright fluorescent lights, thick tan shag carpeting, walls of windows and pens made up of gray panel-board dividers. Whenever I saw a cubicle farm I thought: veal. Stephanie's office was in the back, and it wasn't a cubicle, it was a large corner office. She was the head veal chop.

The Reverend James Walker was pacing around Steph's office, looking far more agitated than he did during his televised church services. After Stephanie introduced us he politely steered her out the door and shut it behind her, but not before I could see anger and dismay twist her face. I wasn't quite sure how he managed to do that as smoothly as he did, but he was just as gracious as could be as he assured her he'd only be in here for a while.

This was the first time I had met him face-to-face. He was much taller than my five-four, probably six-one or two. Broad-shouldered, he had a profile that belonged on a coin and thick, luxuriously white hair that looked natural. His dark suit fit him so well it had to be tailored, as was his snowy-white shirt; the blue and white silk tie was off-the-rack, but if he picked it out himself he had taste. He turned to face me and I saw his blazing blue eyes were red-lined and puffy, with dark smudges beneath the lids.

"Megan Malloy," he said, his voice deep and carefully modulated. A professional public speaker, a preacher, a persuader, an expert at conversion and verbal manipulation.

I nodded.

He proffered a soft, well-manicured hand. Hesitantly I took it. "Stephanie said you wanted to see me," I said.

"Yes, yes." He seemed agitated, nervous. "Please, have a seat."

I sat across from Steph's big cherry wood desk in a comfortable leather chair. A client chair, no high back, but it definitely was comfortable and definitely sent a message to the person sitting in

front of the desk. It was a power desk, no doubt about it. Steph had gone from home office to the big time. Dressing for success with an office and attitude to match.

The Reverend Walker closed his eyes momentarily, as if in prayer. I tried to wait patiently, but it's not my strong suit. Finally he opened his gas flame eyes and said, "I understand your ex-husband is a private investigator."

A moth fluttered in my stomach. My left eye twitched like it usually does when my ex comes up in conversation. To my credit I didn't burst out laughing or rip out my tongue. "Did Stephanie tell you that?" I asked.

"Yes, she did. She told me quite a bit about your background when she informed me she was going with an outside contractor. I wanted assurances about your discretion; if news of our crash got out the congregation might lose faith in our fund-raising. I was very pleased to hear about your ex--"

I snorted. "Reverend, my ex-husband is an ex-private investigator. He's an ex-computer programmer, an ex-teacher, an ex-systems analyst...." I sighed. "An ex-computer salesman, an ex-Website designer, an ex-efficiency expert. My ex-husband--the only ex he's ever been good at--had his mid-life crisis at the age of twenty-three and followed the big bang with ten careers in about seven years. Last I heard he's in Hollywood trying to be an actor. Before that he was trying to be a scriptwriter. Mitch has a short attention span."

Reverend Walker looked devastated, as if I'd just delivered the diagnosis of some terminal disease. Perhaps I had just answered his prayer, only the answer was, "This number has been disconnected." I took a deep breath and found myself feeling sorry for the man.

"Reverend, let me assure you, I'm very good at what I do, and I not only will be able to complete the forensic data recover quickly, I'll be totally discreet--"

When he looked up from his crossed hands I flinched and stopped talking. The look in his eyes was tormented. The look of a man who has seen hell firsthand. I paused, then said, "This isn't about the Website, is it?"

He shook his head.

Hmmm. I took a deep breath, ready to plunge off the high board. "Maybe I can help you. During the period Mitch was a P.I. I was sort of his partner--" Meaning I did all the work and Mitch slouched around his office pretending to be Bogart, sipping from a bottle of whiskey the walking cliché kept in his desk drawer. "--and I certainly know my way around information and computers."

Don't follow up, my little voice said. Let it go. He's doubting you because you have ovaries. Screw him. Don't get involved. You do not need this.

"Really, Reverend," I heard myself say. "I can help. What's the problem?"

I made sure the door to Stephanie's office was locked, opened the polished cherry cabinet where Steph hid a Sony TV set and VCR and DVD, and popped in the tape the Reverend silently handed me. No explanation. Just handing me a tape he pulled from a briefcase and a, "You'd better watch this," in a flat, inflectionless voice, as if computer generated. I pushed PLAY and sat down on a maroon leather couch to watch. After a few seconds of blank tape it suddenly started. There was a queen-sized brass bed with white silk sheets. Tied with lengths of rope so she was splayed to the four corners was a young woman. She had long dark hair, large eyes and high cheekbones. Beautiful, really. She wore only a pair of black panties.

I shot a glance at Reverend Walker. I have never seen such a look of horror on any man's face before. He was looking away from the TV screen, staring at a bookcase jammed full of manuals and textbooks on various programming languages. Without looking at me or the TV he said, "My daughter Barbara."

I turned my attention back to the television. A man entered the room. He wore tight jeans and a white T-shirt and a ski mask. In one hand he carried a knife. He slowly approached Barbara Walker on the bed, every move filled with purpose and menace.

"No," she said. "No! Don't hurt me!"

The man in the ski mask laughed. His laugh was oily, low and dirty. Goosebumps crawled across my arms and I hugged myself, forcing myself to continue watching. He pressed the knife to her leg, slowly drawing it upward, not cutting her.

She began to sob. "No! Don't hurt me! I'll do anything! Anything you want!"

"Yes," the man said. "You will." He slid the knife under her panties and sliced them off her body. With one gloved hand he tore away the nylon, leaving Barbara completely naked.

She screamed, writhing against her bonds.

The man threw the knife aside, dropped his jeans and climbed on Barbara. While she yelled and tried to arch away from him, he raped her.

Abruptly the tape ended.

It took a moment for my stomach to stop churning. Something...something in the back of my mind was calling out to me, but I didn't quite hear it. I stared at the blank screen thoughtfully.

Silence. The air felt electric, charged. The tape clicked, and kept on playing. I could hear the murmur of voices outside Stephanie's office. I wasn't sure what to say, then my tongue began to wag, my brain moving through the shock to the heart of the problem.

"When did you get this?"

"This morning. Tuesday. It was in my mailbox at the church."

"In Rochester Hills?"

"Yes." He licked his lips, his voice trembling like earthquake aftershocks.

"Do you still have the envelope it came in?"

"It was...wrapped in brown paper. The label was...computer printed."

"Do you still have it?"

He nodded and plucked it from his briefcase. There was no postage on it. I put it aside.

"How old's your daughter?"

"She just turned eighteen. August 18<sup>th</sup>."

"She in school?"

He shook his head. "She wanted a year off. She graduated from Rochester- Adams in June. She probably should have gone to Cranbrook. But I thought it would be better for her to go to public schools. We were hoping she would go to Harvard...she has the grades and we can afford it, but she...she wanted to take time off." I thought he might break down in tears, but he didn't. Instead he focused his gaze on me and I noticed again how blue his eyes were, like the sky on a hot, hazy summer day.

"Will you help me?"

"You should take this to the police if you think she's been kidnapped and...raped."

"But the publicity....the risk to Barbara..."

"The publicity might help. Has there been any type of ransom demand, any contact at all?"

"No! Not at all. What does that mean?"

Something was niggling at the back of my brain, something about the tape, but I couldn't quite snag it. It kept moving away like a nervous sunfish, nibbling at the bait but afraid to take a bite. "I'd like to keep the tape and the wrapping," I said, realizing I was making a commitment that I should probably avoid.

"You have to keep this quiet! No publicity. This kind of thing would destroy the church!"

I had no response to that. What was more important? The church or his daughter? It seemed odd, but then again, he was an odd man with an odd profession. "I'll have to show it to some people, but I won't tell who it is and the people I'll be dealing with can keep this to themselves."

"That means you'll help me. It means you...can help me?"

Shit. "I guess that's what it means," I said. "I'll try."

"How much do you want for this? Do you have a fee?"

A good question. When Mitch ran Freeman Investigations he had charged three hundred a day. When I started CyberConduits, Inc. I had charged by the job, though it had become something like a thousand bucks a day until I sold the company for several million in cash and even more in stock over a year ago. I was working for Steph for a hundred an hour--she was getting a bargain.

I said, "Reverend, I prefer to work by the job. If I can find your daughter, you can pay me ten thousand dollars."

He momentarily blanched at the price. But I knew how much he was worth, and he only paused for a moment. His long-fingered hands pressed down on the cherry desk, his shoulders tensing. Lines etched into his forehead, then disappeared. He spun in Stephanie's high-backed maroon leather chair, a beautiful piece of furniture that went well with the rich cherry desk. He stared out the window. In the distance was a gray and blue-glass office building silhouetted against an azure sky only slightly marred by white wisps of cottony clouds. He spun back to me, his face and square jaw set in resolution. It felt vaguely like a performance, as if he were so used to being observed that he was always conscious of his reactions. After another moment's silence, almost a theatrical beat, he said, "You can really help?"

"I can try," I said. "I'll need more information, but if I can't find anything in twenty-four hours, I'll be able to recommend somebody to you. Possibly the police."

He closed his eyes a moment, probably praying on it. I tried not to make a face. He looked up. "Perhaps you're the answer to prayers."

I tried not to look skeptical. I'd grown up hearing that God worked in mysterious ways. If God worked at all, I'd observed, she definitely wasn't sharing the plan.