

Haunting Memories
from a
Troubled Past

Ellie DeFarr

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For Dennis H.,
who encouraged me to write

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CHAPTER ONE

Private Investigator Hera Hunter scrambled up the wooded hillside, her strong tall frame deftly maneuvering the steep rock outcroppings and the dry gullies. Her chestnut hair, hanging well below her shoulders, swung with the rhythm of her gait. She placed the soft soles of her boots with caution to avoid crushing the occasional tufts of wild grasses and rambling mats of blue violets. In this way she left behind no trace of her passing.

She climbed through tall red pines and white spruces, whose gently lowering branches trembled in the evening breeze. A brown squirrel, perched upon a pine's sturdy limb, froze at the snapping of a twig. The squirrel flattened itself against the trunk, almost invisible now against the pattern of the tree's bark. Then it inched around the back while Hera passed by.

At the edge of a small clearing, she stopped and surveyed the valley below. Before her stretched the city of Centreville's western section, with its large lots and big sprawling houses and narrow winding roads that were shaded by high canopies of mature maples and oaks. The homes were owned by men and women with exalted titles before their names, like Senator or Doctor or Chief Financial Officer. But the valley's floral tapestry,

woven by trees of various textures and shades of green and by lush flower gardens just coming into bloom, most drew Hera's attention.

She pushed her hair off her face and shoulders, so that it did not hinder her sight. Then she rested the barrel of her rifle upon a low branch and trained the scope at 731 Lookout Lane. The impeccable pale yellow house with white trim sat upon its grassy lot like a queen upon her throne. The neatly manicured lawn and abundant flower gardens, whose lush plants sparkled with blossoms of every hue, seemed like testimonies to the home's lofty station.

Hera moved the scope's view across the front windows of the house but saw no activity within. The time was just before six o'clock on a cool spring evening, and the master of the house would not arrive home from work for another ten minutes or so.

While she waited, she found it curious that no one on Lookout Lane emerged from their residence to retrieve the mail; or bicycled along the road for the sheer joy of fresh air and exercise; or backed out of a garage on the way to dinner at one of the city's overpriced restaurants that specialized in fussy foods like truffled sweet potato fries and foie gras prepared tableside. The area was as quiet as a deserted movie theater.

A red car appeared in the distance, low to the road and sleek in length. It negotiated the twists and turns of Lookout Lane through dense

stands of trees and rock outcroppings, moving in and out of Hera's view. The car slowed as it approached the yellow and white house. When it turned into the driveway, Hera readied her finger against the rifle's trigger and watched the car's progress through the scope.

The car stopped beneath the portico at the home's entrance, and Clyde Pettipher, a slender man of average height, emerged from the driver's side. He wore his graying hair combed back from a high forehead and tied in a ponytail at the nape. The evening light reflected off his gray suit with a sheen that suggested an expensive fabric.

The home's front door opened and out stepped Ruby Walker, a flawless beauty who was having a long and very public affair with Clyde. The young woman's blonde hair fell in thick ringlets upon her shoulders. Her bright red dress clung to her substantial breasts as only a knitted fabric can do. The dress followed the curve of her narrow waist and stretched across her wide hips, then stopped several inches above her knees, showing off a pair of shapely legs that even the Almighty couldn't improve upon.

Clyde greeted her with a wave of his hand. They exchanged a few words, which Hera couldn't make out, then Ruby retreated into the house, leaving the door wide open for her man to enter.

Clyde bent and grabbed a tan briefcase from behind the driver's seat. As he straightened, Hera's finger moved lightly against the rifle's trigger. The

weapon slammed into her shoulder as it recoiled, but she stood her ground and watched as the owner of every strip joint along Second Avenue within the city's red-light district slumped to the pavement.

She ejected the shell from the rifle's chamber. As she retrieved it from the ground, she felt no regret or guilt, since the facts had been clearly established during Clyde Pettipher's trial. He had murdered his wife to gain access to her fortune. He'd cut off her head with a saber, part of his treasured collection of antique weapons. But his bloodied clothing, the saber, and other items that linked him to the crime had disappeared from the police department's storeroom, and the case was thrown out of court for lack of credible evidence against him.

Clyde's release surprised no one, because the rich and influential rarely paid for their crimes. Not in Centreville. So Hera had decided some months ago that if the courts wouldn't impose justice on people proven guilty of murder, then she would.