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“On two counts of murder in the first degree, we find the defendant not guilty.”

Meg Cooper clutched the defense table, closed her eyes, and savored the rush. It sped through her veins and poured into her heart. Victory. Again.

Holly Davidson—the twenty-one-year-old daughter of a now dead shipping magnate—threw her silver-and-gold-sequined arms around Meg. The New York State Supreme Court, Manhattan Criminal Branch, room 33, erupted in cheers.

“We did it!” Holly shouted above the noise. “Son of a bitch, we did it!”

No, Meg wanted to reply, we didn't do anything. I did it. I defended you, and now you are free.

“The jury is discharged with the state's thanks,” the judge declared.

“Champagne at Neon City!” Holly squealed to the crowd of friends who had shoved their way toward the defense table. Through the chaos Holly's heavily mascaraed eyes met Meg's. “You'll be there, won't you, Meg?”

Meg slipped her yellow pad into her briefcase and snapped the lid shut. “I'm

afraid not,” she answered. She’d done her job. Her only hope now was that she’d never lay eyes on Holly Davidson again.

She took her briefcase and pushed her way through the mass, dodging the flashing bulbs and television cameras and microphones thrust into her face, as she headed for the back of the courtroom.

Outside the room another bevy of reporters stood poised for the attack.

“Congratulations, counselor!” came the shouts.

“How does it feel to win again?”

“Do you think you’ll get a judgeship?”

Meg buttoned the jacket of her slender Armani suit and tucked a shock of her copper-colored hair behind one ear. The rush of victory was already

fading, daunted, as always, by cold reality.

“No comment,” she said.

“Ms. Cooper. Please ...”

Meg shook her head and ducked past the zealous ranks of the nation’s media. Such underpaid people with so much passion, she thought. *So much passion, and so much power.*

The group clung to her as she opened the outer door. More people crowded on the stairs. Gawkers. Supporters. Fans. Protestors. Clinging together in the posttrial side show she never got used to.

She hurried down the steps, shutting out the questions, knowing the media would punish her for her aloofness with tomorrow’s headlines, but not caring. For Meg Cooper had stopped letting the media push her around long ago.

The firm's limo waited among a string of tinted-window stretches by the curb, but Meg waved off her driver. She felt like walking.

She heard a voice call out, "Here's Holly!" The crowd surged *en masse* toward the victorious Holly Davidson, who had enough money and fame to get away with anything, even murder.

Meg quickly headed up Fifth Avenue, away from the clamor, toward her Upper East Side brownstone. She had done it. She had won. She had set a murderer free.

"No jury in its right mind will convict a twenty-one-year-old girl on a defense that her father sexually abused her," had been the words of the firm's senior partner, Avery Larson. "Not in this day and age."

"She's not a 'girl,' Avery," Meg had protested. "She's a shrewd, conniving

brat who used her father's money to finance her career, then killed him and her mother, too.”

“She claims her mother knew of the abuse.”

“Maybe she did, *if* it ever happened. But is that enough to justify murder?”

“Counselor ...”

“Dammit, Avery, the girl killed her own parents!”

“So did the Menendez brothers,” Avery had said, then scowled. “Are you worried about your client, or are you afraid that you'll lose?”

Meg stood rock still. She stared at Avery. He stared back. “I'm not going to lose,” she said.

He leaned back and put his feet on his desk. “Then make the government do its job, counselor.”

Meg hated the way Avery referred to the prosecutors as “the government,” as

though they were the almighty threat to society, to justice.

“If they don’t do their job right,” he’d continued, “that’s not your fault. It’s their incompetence. I also don’t think I have to remind you that Holly Davidson has become a valued client.”

A valued client, Meg knew, meant a wealthy client. Now that Holly was acquitted, the girl would inherit over two billion dollars.

And the “government” had, once again, failed at its job, because Meg was smarter, Meg was better. And because Meg craved the rush—that elation that came from winning.

Case closed. Case dismissed.

Meg tilted her head up toward the warm spring sun, squinting her cinnamon-colored eyes, eyes that were well-trained to gaze squarely at juries as she said, “My client is telling the

truth.” She would be thirty-nine years old this year, at the peak of an explosive career. No one would have guessed that Meg had set out—once upon a time—to become a champion of women’s rights. But the world was changing, values were twisting. Fame and flash were what brought clients to the firm. Huge retainers kept her partners smiling. So Meg had become the savior of the scandalous rich, the queen of courtroom glitz, the sought-after maker of the tabloid headlines she had spent so many years trying to avoid. Now, by winning the Holly Davidson case, nothing was out of her reach. Well, almost nothing.

It had been three weeks since her relationship with Roger Barrett had ended. “I don’t love you,” she had announced. “I can’t go on sleeping with you.” They’d been together four short

months. Meg knew he loved her, but she couldn't bring herself to love him, to love anyone. And she couldn't pretend.

Meg stopped walking. Home was empty, except for Raggedy Man, her three-year-old Persian. Home was where nobody cared that she was brilliant and gorgeous and had just brought off the trial of the year. There was nothing at home for her. Nothing, and no one. No one but Raggedy Man.

She stared at the sidewalk, hesitated for less than a second, then turned and walked down East Fifty-fourth, in the direction of Park Avenue, toward the offices of Larson, Bascomb, Smith, Rheinhold, Paxton, and Cooper. Toward the next challenge, and the lure of the rush.

Meg's office was not unlike the offices of many other top criminal-defense attorneys in the city: mahogany and leather, brass and books. But where her partners displayed smiling photos of their spouses and children and children's children in neat golden frames atop their credenzas, Meg had chunky pots of tired philodendrons. Her view beyond the heavy green drapes, eight floors down to the avenue, was close enough to watch the endless parade of yellow cabs and anonymous faces flooding past, yet removed enough to feel sheltered from the grit of the street, the grime of the people.

She stood by the window, looking down. Holly Davidson was now free to walk Park Avenue, Fifth Avenue, or any other avenue in the world. Holly Davidson, who had used their live-in chef's fillet knife to quietly slit the throats of

her billionaire father and socialite mother while they slept. Meg knew that sexual abuse was becoming an all-too-popular defense in murder trials. It sickened her, mostly because it was so damned unfair for the ones who really suffered. *In another few years, Meg thought, these defenses won't hold up at all.* The judges, the juries, would have heard the arguments one too many times. Then, worse than guilty people getting off, innocent people would go to jail. It was the system. It was the American way. And they—the defenders—would be forced to create new tactics, new angles, to beat the government.

She moved from the window, sat at her desk, and tried to focus on her work. Though she almost always won, Meg was often let down after a trial. It

was, she reasoned, the downside of the high. The crash.

She folded her hands on her desk and studied her fingernails. They were perfectly trimmed and glossed. Neat, but colorless. Without personality, without passion. Neutral. Like her life. A long way from the glamorous, high-profile image alluded to by the press.

She balled her fingers into fists. There was only one solution to her depression. Meg needed another case. Another case to dig into, to get lost in. She needed another case, and she needed it now. Right now.

She sat up straight and pressed the button on her intercom. "Janine? Is Avery in?"

"Nope. But Danny Gordon just walked in. He'd like to see you."

Danny Gordon was one of the investigators retained by the firm. He often

worked alongside Meg on her most difficult cases: he had, in fact, worked on the Holly Davidson case. Danny was a few years older than Meg. He was slightly wild looking and slightly cocky. But unlike many of his counterparts, Danny was very bright and very tuned-in to his work. He was also, Meg knew, very gentle, vulnerable. They had almost slept together once, three years ago. But Meg had known what would happen. She would use him to curb her loneliness until he fell in love with her. Then she would leave him. So instead of being a lover, Danny became something Meg had never known: he became a friend.

“Send him in,” she said now.

He blew through the door as if he'd been shot from behind. “Counselor! My congratulations on seeing justice served once more!”

“Can it, Danny.” Though Danny knew the system—was *part* of the system—he always became a disgusted cynic whenever the guilty went free.

He flopped his compact, yet muscular, body onto a leather chair and brushed a hunk of flyaway dirty-blond hair from his forehead. His brown eyes sparkled. They always did, for even in his posttrial disgust, Danny’s underlying strength was never jarred. He simply did not take it personally. He was, Meg knew, one of that rare breed of happy, self-contented human beings, the kind of man who exuded such confidence in himself that even his daily dressed-down attire of denim shirts and faded jeans was never challenged, not even by Avery.

“You split from the courthouse pretty fast,” he said.

Meg didn’t answer.

“You won the case, my dear. It should be the *Post* headline in the morning. ‘Cooper Frees Holly.’” He stretched his hands to mimic the type.

She shrugged. “Jurisprudence.”

“Touché.” Danny leaned forward on the chair. “Maybe now you’ll be able to afford a new plant,” he said, motioning to a wilting philodendron.

Meg glanced behind her. “Not everyone has your talents, Danny.”

“Orchids don’t take talent, babe. They take love. Nurturing.”

Meg had seen Danny’s fabulous garden of orchids that flourished under the skylight of his rooftop apartment, where the gentle hiss of humidifiers spritzed the blossoms at timed intervals. It was more than love, she suspected. Orchids were Danny’s obsession. Lavender. White. Pink. Yellow. He once told her that he grew them for their

erotic vision, their soft, supple petals, their sensuous female folds and curves. It had made Meg feel naked. Exposed.

She turned back to Danny. "I know," she responded. "And I kill my plants."

"You don't kill them, Meg. Your plants commit suicide."

"Very funny. But you didn't come here to talk about my horticultural deficiencies."

He rested his elbows on the desk and folded his hands under his chin. His eyes stared into hers. Meg shifted on her chair.

"Avery is going to be pissed that you skipped out on the interviews," he said.

"He knows I like to be alone after a verdict." More than once Avery had expressed his displeasure over Meg's aversion to publicity.

"This was no ordinary verdict, Meg."

“Then I guess I’m no ordinary attorney.”

He smiled, a slightly mischievous, knowing smile. “And I won’t even mention the fact that you didn’t have the graciousness to attend your client’s victory celebration. One that will most probably make every trash tabloid and trash-tabloid TV show this side of planet Jupiter.”

Meg found herself smiling, too. “I guess that makes me the fool, doesn’t it?”

“Not if you agree to have dinner with me instead.”

Meg frowned.

“An early dinner,” Danny continued. “Nothing more. Unless, of course, you already have a date.”

Meg shook her head. She hadn’t told Danny about her breakup with Roger

Barrett; she'd been too embarrassed that she'd "done it again."

"Then we're on. Our own celebration. Even though this case pisses me off, I'm happy for you. I'm glad you won."

"Really?"

"Really. Now let's drown my sorrows and toast your victory with a giant bowl of spaghetti."

As the maître d' escorted them to a table in the back, Danny whispered from behind, "I hate it when you're taller than me. It's a macho thing, you know?"

He was, Meg knew, referring to the three-inch heels added to her five-foot-seven-inch frame. Danny stood only about five nine. In his boots. Meg smiled. She never knew quite how to respond to his directness. But she knew that Danny would be good medicine for

her tonight. He would help ease the loneliness of the crash.

They sat down and Danny smoothed the tablecloth. “Red-and-white-checked,” he said. “My favorite.”

Meg laughed. “You’re such a sweetheart, Danny.”

“Whoa! Is that an endearment coming from the Ice Maiden?”

Meg winced. “Ice Maiden” was a label the press had given her when she’d defended a Wall Street financier accused of raping the daughter of a Mideast diplomat. The sixteen-year-old girl with the huge dark eyes had sobbed in the courtroom, effecting great sympathy. But Meg’s defense had implied that Daddy’s little girl was far from innocent. And she’d convinced the jury. Because “the government” hadn’t done its job. So now the press called

her the Ice Maiden. They didn't know how right they were.

Meg lowered her eyes. "Please don't call me that."

"Sorry," Danny said quietly. "I really am an asshole."

Meg forced a grin. "Yes," she said. "You are."

They ordered a bottle of Chianti and sat silently for a few moments. Meg stared into the candle, trying to relax.

"So what's next on the docket?" Danny asked.

Meg shook her head. "Don't know. We really didn't expect this trial to go so quickly."

"Are the partners disappointed that their fees will be less than anticipated?"

She placed a hand across his. "Let's not talk about it, okay?"

He looked down at her hand. "I'm sorry, Meg. But sometimes it bugs the

shit out of me. Watching the defense of guilty people.”

She pulled back her hand and took another sip. For some reason the wine burned her throat. “I’ve defended a lot of innocent people, too,” she said. “Like Donald Haggerty.” She was referring to the case of the crusty old man accused of killing his daughter-in-law because she was after the family fortune. Meg had argued that Haggerty’s son, who had been the most believable witness for the prosecution, was actually the murderer. The jury had agreed.

“No offense, babe,” Danny said, “but you defend anyone who’s willing to pay the firm’s outrageous fees.”

She gripped the stem of the wine-glass. Danny, of course, was right. But if Meg didn’t do it, someone else would. And someone else would reap the benefits. She had faced this issue years ago.

And she had made her decision. “Donald Haggerty was innocent,” she said, though her tone was oddly without authority.

“And he is rich. Not to mention that the case made headlines.”

Meg took another sip of wine. *Don't let him get to you*, she thought. *You did your job*. She set down her glass and stared into the shining red liquid. She knew Danny well enough to know he wasn't condemning her; he was only coming to terms with today's verdict, blowing off steam. And easing the guilt of his part in the trial, of gathering the evidence that had helped Meg get Holly off.

“Face it, Meg,” Danny continued. “Do you honestly think there would have been an acquittal today if Holly wasn't so ...” He seemed to struggle for the right word.

“... so visible?” Meg asked.

“So rich.”

“So sensation seeking?”

“So attention getting.”

She raised her eyebrows. “So what?”

Danny curled the edge of the tablecloth. “So nothing, I guess. You’re right. Let’s talk about something else. Let’s talk about sex.”

Meg laughed. “Let’s not. Let’s talk about something pleasant, instead.”

Danny let out a low whistle. “Sounds like you need a new man in your life.”

“I just got rid of one. I don’t need another.”

“Roger Rabbit?”

She smiled. “Barrett. Roger Barrett.”

Danny sat back in his chair. She felt his eyes studying her. “I don’t get it, Meg. You have everything going for you. You’re bright, you’re successful, and you’re absolutely beautiful.” He

leaned forward, smiled, and lowered his voice. "You do know how beautiful you are, don't you? With that thick auburn hair, that luscious Carly Simon smile, those long, long legs ..." He moaned softly, closed his eyes, and placed a hand over his heart. "Those incredibly long legs ..."

Meg laughed again. "Stop it, Danny."

He sat up. "But it's all true, dammit, and you know it. So I don't get it. Why can't you just let go, Meg? Let go and love someone? Let someone love you?"

She looked around the dimly lit room, at the cozy diners, smiling couples with intimate lives. How could she answer Danny's question when it was one she'd been unable to answer herself for so many years? She looked back at Danny. "I tried," she said. "I thought Roger was different. I thought this time things could be different."

Each time, with every man, Meg had thought it could be different. But none of them could penetrate the cocoon she'd wrapped tightly around herself and her feelings after she and Steven Riley had split up. None of them—not in over fifteen years—could compare with Steven. The first man she'd ever loved. The only one. And now she was capable of loving only her work, her career. She swallowed back the tears before they could form in her eyes. “We’re all different, Danny. You love having someone on your arm. In your bed. Someone. Anyone. As for me, I’m better off alone.”

“Maybe you just haven’t met the right guy.”

“This may surprise you, but there are other things in life important to women besides men.”

“So this is all you’ve wanted? Fame? Fortune?”

“What I wanted was to work hard. I hate the fame. You know that.”

“Sure. You hate the pictures, you hate the headlines. But the money? That’s what you want. Working for Larson, Bascomb has given it to you.”

Meg didn’t respond.

“Come on, babe. That brownstone of yours is your dream palace.”

She pictured Raggedy Man lying in the bay window, surveying East Eighty-second Street, waiting for her return. Loyal, loving Raggedy Man. Would he know the difference if she was rich or poor? Would he care? The image of her cat quickly vanished. In its place was one of a small, dingy room. The room in which she had grown up. She quickly blinked and sat upright in her chair.

“Money makes life easier, Danny.”

He raised his glass. "To money, then. Screw romance."

She cleared her throat and raised her glass to his. "To money," she echoed, and wondered in her heart exactly whom she was trying to convince.

Just then a figure appeared beside the table. "Ms. Cooper?" a voice asked.

Meg glanced up at a young man with thick dark hair and a Pentax slung around his neck.

"Jamie Holbrook. *New York Globe*. Any comment on today's verdict?"

Meg looked back at Danny. He shrugged. She shook her head. "Go away," she said. "Leave me alone."

It was after eight when Meg let herself into her brownstone. She had declined Danny's offer for a ride home. She was feeling a little too shaky, a little too vulnerable. If he asked to come inside,

Meg was afraid she wouldn't be able to say no. And she was fearful of what might happen after that.

She flipped a switch, flooding the marble foyer with eager light, making the room seem less empty, less alone. Raggedy Man did not greet her; he never did. It was, Meg suspected, his way of saying "You left me alone all day. Now come and find me." She found him in her study, sprawled across a pile of books on the floor. She tossed her briefcase onto the desk and bent to nuzzle the cat.

There was a time when Meg had loved living alone. When she'd first moved to New York, there was nothing more comforting than to curl up in her tiny apartment and hear nothing but quiet. She would often sit for hours, not reading, hardly thinking, just savoring the solitude. The distant sounds of

sirens wailing, horns honking, people rushing by, had provided a muted backdrop for the hint of life somewhere, outside, not there. Not in her world, her world that was finally peaceful, completely independent, totally free. Free from scandal, free from shame.

In a few years, however, her feelings had changed. As Meg had watched others around her—acquaintances, co-workers, even strangers walking hand in hand with other strangers—she had begun to wonder what was wrong with her ... why she couldn't fall in love again—this time, with the right man ... why she couldn't find someone to marry, to have children with, to share her life with. She'd watched, and she'd wondered, and slowly, what had once been blissful solitude had become a chronic ache of loneliness. Her infrequent, yet futile, attempts at

relationships had perhaps, she thought now, made things worse.

She stood and slipped off her jacket, just as the doorbell rang. Meg sighed. She wondered if Danny had followed her home.

It wasn't Danny. It was Avery.

"So," he said. "You're here."

Meg nodded. The white-haired, wide-shouldered man stepped past her and walked down the hall.

"Come in," she said, then closed the door and followed him into the study.

He removed his cashmere coat and sat, his six-foot-four-inch frame filling the sofa. Despite his sixty-plus years, Avery still exuded a commanding presence both in and out of the courtroom. "I won't bother to ask why you didn't show up at Holly's party," he said.

Meg rubbed the back of her neck and leaned against the desk. “Avery, you know I don’t do well at those things.”

He reached into his breast pocket, withdrew a long white envelope, and handed it to Meg without comment. She frowned. He folded his arms across his chest and nodded once. “Open it.”

She peeled back the flap and pulled out a brochure. Clipped to the top was a hand-scrawled note on shocking-pink stationery: *“I’ve made arrangements for you to have a vacation here. Set your own dates. They’re expecting your call.”* It was signed, *“Thanks, Holly.”* At the bottom of the page was an added note: *“P.S. My mother’s friends love it here.”*

Meg took off the clip and looked at the cover of the brochure. There was a full-page color photo of a castlelike building surrounded by lush green grounds. The title read: *“Golden Key*

Spa. Escape to Luxury in the Berkshires.”
Across the bottom was a subtle addition, *“For the Discerning Woman.”*

She laughed. “What the hell is this?”
Avery didn’t answer.

She opened the brochure. Scattered across the pages were hazy mood photographs of women being manicured, pedicured, facialed, and massaged. One shot showed two women nibbling on salads and sipping on something that looked like mineral water with a twist of lemon, thank you, darling, and a spritz of lime. Meg laughed again and pitched the brochure into her wastebasket.

“It’s not a joke,” Avery said quietly.

“What is it, then? A thank-you gift?”

“From a grateful client.”

“Well, it’s ridiculous. To begin with, if I was ever going to take a vacation,

the last place I would go would be to some snotty spa for the ultrarich.”

Avery unfolded his arms and poised his fingertips together in an A-frame configuration. Again he made no comment.

An unsettled feeling crept into her. She moved behind the desk and sat down. “Her ‘mother’s friends love it.’ Is that supposed to impress me?”

Avery stroked a cleanly shaven cheek—cleanly shaven, Meg suspected, especially for Holly Davidson’s victory party. Press photos always reproduced better without a five o’clock shadow. A small knot formed in her stomach.

“Avery,” she said, trying to soften her tone, “surely you understand I’d never fit in, in a place like that. Women who go to those places are pampered, snobby bitches.”

He hoisted himself from the sofa and walked to the window.

Meg tapped the edge of the desk. Dead air hung in the room. The pregnant pause of intimidation. The kind of silence that forced the other person to squirm. An effective trick, an attorney's masterful ploy. Meg studied Avery's back. She sighed. "I wouldn't fit in, Avery," she said.

"You'll fit in just fine." Avery chuckled that fatherly chuckle, the one that always made Meg feel inadequate, infantile. "After all, you are a woman. And a woman's got to do what a woman's got to do."

Meg's jaw tensed. "Look, Avery, I'm good at what I do and have a little money to show for it, but these women are from the big leagues. The ones who were either born with silver spoons dangling from their siliconed lips or

made damn sure they found husbands who treat them as though they were.”

“Precisely.”

“What do you mean?” She sensed that Avery was going to insist she go. A tight stiffness inched up the back of her neck.

“It doesn’t hurt to travel in the right circles, Meg. You made a huge name for yourself today. Now’s the time to capitalize on it. For your own sake, as well as for the firm’s.”

“Avery, I’m a working woman, not a spa-going lady. All I want to do now is get involved with another case. The sooner the better.”

He turned from the window and faced her. “This could be considered working. Call it public relations. It could only benefit the firm if you learned to mingle with the right people.”

Meg averted his stare. She fixed her gaze on the top of her desk, at a pile of papers brought home from the office. Work was her world. Not vacations. Not mingling. It was the way she wanted it. It was the way it was. *So this is all you've wanted?* Danny had asked. *Fame? Fortune?* She quickly moved her eyes from the desk, from the facts of her life.

“Think about it,” Avery said. “It would please the partners as well as me.”

The partners, she thought. It seemed that no matter what she did, they expected more. And because she was a woman—the only female attorney in the firm—Meg kept pushing herself, proving herself, justifying that she was worth keeping. But Avery was the senior man, the boss. And even though he might be upset with her for a few days,

Meg knew he'd forgive her. She was good at her job, and he respected that. If she refused to go, the partners would put a mental black mark beside her name, but they'd get over it. Eventually.

She looked back at Avery. "I've thought about it. The answer is no. Now, what about my next case?"

Avery smiled. "Nothing that one of the partners can't handle for a couple of weeks."

"Avery ..."

"You might enjoy the Golden Key Spa. It might do you some good to get away."

He wasn't backing down. Meg wondered if any of this would have happened if she'd gone to the damn party. Or spoken to the damn press.

"There's more to life than courtrooms and dockets, Meg."

“I doubt it.”

He returned to the sofa and picked up his coat. His expression turned serious. “You’re a maverick, Meg. That’s a fine quality in the courtroom, but it could end up hurting your career. If you socialized more, you might find it easier to handle the more human niceties of the business.”

Meg stood up. “Avery, I win your cases. Do me a favor and stay out of my personal life.”

“As a criminal lawyer, you have no personal life. But you do have social responsibilities. And the firm expects you to live up to those responsibilities both in and out of court.”

It was a blow she hadn’t expected. Meg had always presumed that if she spent her life working hard, success would be inevitable. Now Avery was throwing her a curve. An

uncomfortable curve. Her resolve weakened. "I'll hold a press conference tomorrow. I know the media wants comments."

"Meg," he said firmly. "Don't change the subject. I'd consider it a personal favor if you went to the spa."

Suddenly it all became clear. "You planned this, didn't you?"

He put on his coat and adjusted the silk scarf at his throat. "Holly asked if there was something special she could do for you. We talked."

"It was your idea."

"She wants to do something for you, Meg. The girl is genuinely appreciative."

"And she is worth thousands of dollars to the firm."

He nodded. "Many thousands."

You defend anyone who's willing to pay the firm's outrageous fees. Danny's words

again. Meg shuddered. Avery walked to the door. "I'll think about it," she said coldly.

"Don't take too long. I understand that spring is a lovely time in the Berkshires."

Meg sat in her study for over an hour, thinking one primary thought: Why was Avery trying to make her do this? Why couldn't he accept her the way she was? Why wasn't he just grateful to have a partner—junior though she was—who was good at what she did? But no. Avery was always thinking of the firm. How things looked for the firm. How the firm looked to the outside world. He'd called her a maverick. Maybe she was. But it couldn't really hurt her career. Could it?

Danny had once told Meg that Avery got to where he was by being an

intimidating ass-kisser. Danny, Meg knew, was right, although she wouldn't have admitted it to him. If nothing else, she knew the importance of loyalty. And now Avery was testing that loyalty.

She plucked the brochure from the basket. The shocking-pink note came with it. "My mother's friends love it here." Meg wondered what Holly's mother had been like. Had she really known about the alleged sexual abuse? Had she really done nothing about it? Meg thumbed through the photos of smiling women in the brochure. No matter how odd Mrs. Davidson might have been, there was one thing for certain: she had been nothing like Meg's mother. Nothing like Gladys Cooper. And Holly's dead father had been nothing like Meg's.

Meg set the brochure on the desk and closed her eyes. She envisioned Gladys Cooper, dressed in a stained housecoat, hair twisted around pink rollers. Surely there had never been a mother and daughter so unlike, so caustically different: Meg, quiet and sensitive; Gladys, boisterous and crass.

“You’re just like your goddamn father,” Gladys would bellow as she poured another cup of coffee, lit another cigarette.

But Meg didn’t know that for fact: she had never met her father, the over-the-road-truck-driving man who had patronized the diner in Bridgeport, Connecticut, where Gladys had served him ham and eggs and apparently other treats when he passed through town on Thursday nights. Meg didn’t even know his name: Gladys only referred to him as “your goddamn father.”

“Your goddamn father was married,” Gladys told her one night when Meg was around seven or eight and had finally found the courage to ask about him. “He’d have left his wife and married me, though, but I got knocked up with you and he took off like a scared rabbit.” Then Gladys narrowed her eyes and looked at her daughter and said, “If it wasn’t for you, I’d have been happy.”

Later that night Meg had been awakened by a disturbing, mournful sound that seeped through the thin wall of her bedroom. It was a sound she’d never heard before, but after a moment Meg realized what it was: it was the sound of her mother softly weeping. Meg slid down in her bed, pulled the covers over her head, and vowed she would never again ask about her goddamn father.

She rubbed the back of her neck now, trying to erase the growing-up images. She'd spent her early years as "the kid with no father" in an era when that was a rarity, even in Bridgeport. She was too timid to make friends, too afraid they would uncover her secret that the reason her mother wasn't married, and wasn't happy, was all her fault. Then there had been only one escape. It had come through books. Each night Meg had retreated to her dingy, small room and read and read and read, until the grating bells and whistles and cheers of her mother's TV game shows finally ceased, until she was sure her mother was finally asleep, until she was certain there would be no more talk that day of her "goddamn father." Or no talk at all, which in some ways was even worse.

When Meg was in high school, she took a job in the library. It was there

she discovered the world, as seen through grainy photographs in *Life* magazine. It was there that Meg knew there had to be more to her world than Bridgeport, Connecticut. More than a dingy, small room and a stale-smelling house that always needed something repaired.

With the help of a compassionate guidance counselor, Meg applied to college. She became the valedictorian of her class and was accepted to Wellesley on a full scholarship. Four years and magna cum laude later, Meg Cooper was at the Bridgeport laundromat one night, getting ready to pack for Harvard Law School. She paid little attention to the screaming sirens that wailed past. When the dryer finished its tumbling, Meg slowly folded her clothes, placed them in the wood wicker basket, and began to walk the five blocks home. By

the time she arrived, the small clapboard house was a pile of smoldering rubble. Gladys Cooper had never known that her cigarette had fallen between the cushions of the sofa.

The only similarity, Meg thought now, between Holly Davidson's mother and Gladys Cooper was that they were both dead.

She picked up the brochure again. "The Golden Key Spa. For the Discerning Woman." Was that what Meg had become? She looked around her study, at the rich appointments, the leather-bound books, the silk damask draperies. The problem was definitely the money. She had believed that money could insulate her from pain.

Meg was still sitting at her desk at eleven-fifteen when the phone rang. She looked at the answering machine

and let it connect. There was no one to whom Meg wanted to speak.

“Meg? This is Roger,” she heard. She put her face in her hands. “I wanted to congratulate you on today’s verdict.” She reached over and turned down the volume. When the message stopped, she rewound the tape without listening.

The next morning Meg dressed in a beige linen suit. She walked the two blocks down to Park, then turned right toward the office. She blocked out the morning-street sounds, the hurrying-people sounds, and thought about the Golden Key Spa. It wasn’t fair. Aside from the fact that she didn’t want to be Avery’s token public-relations girl, Meg simply didn’t know what to do on vacation. She’d never had one, never wanted one. There would be too much time to think about too many things she’d spent too many years trying to

forget. She'd tell Avery today that she wasn't going to the spa. It wasn't as though he could fire her. She was, after all, a partner.

As she reached the corner on Sixty-third, Meg brushed against a wire rack at a newsstand. She grabbed the edge to keep it from falling. A squatty little man with brown teeth reached out to help, just as a stack of newspapers flopped to the pavement. Meg looked down at the mess. A bold black headline screamed from the front page: "ICE MAIDEN COOPER GETS ANOTHER ONE OFF."

Another damn headline, another assault by the press.

Beneath it was a picture of Meg coming down the courthouse steps, the crowd from Holly Davidson's trial in pursuit.

And there, tucked between today's headline and yesterday's picture, was a small, fuzzy photo from Meg's college days, the photo that had been frozen in her mind, returning to life over and over for so many years in her dreams. It was the photo that had started—and ended—it all.

It was of Meg ... together with *him*.