

THE FAMILY



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THE FAMILY

Prologue

1990 - The dawn of the social media era.

They were parked on Mallorca Boulevard, two men in a black van with smoked glass windows. The driver, a tall man with white-blond hair swept back over his head, looked into the rear-view mirror as a pewter-colored Mazda 626 came around the corner. "Heads up."

The other man, stocky, balding, glanced into the side mirror and spoke into a microphone headset. "Unit two, engage."

On the other side of the street, a tan Lexus pulled out of a parking spot near a small Victorian apartment building.

Normally, Peter Jacobson had to circle the Marina twice before finding a parking space anywhere near his apartment. Tonight, on the first pass, a car pulled out of a spot just steps away from his apartment. In San Francisco, this borders on a supernatural event.

He eased into the spot, still listening to the cassette in the deck. He pulled a hand-held computer from a briefcase on the seat next to him and began to scribble notes across its opaque surface. The tape ended, and he hit the rewind button.

He glanced up at the apartment's windows. They were empty. Allison hadn't arrived yet. He picked up the cell phone and dialed a number.

"Thank you for calling the Peabody Herald. Our normal business hours are..."

Jacobson punched an extension number, left a message, and hung up.

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Chapter 1

Randall McLagan walked out of the Peabody News Shop, stuffing change into his wallet, the latest copy of PC Monthly tucked under his arm. He wasn't watching where he was going and almost walked into a young man who stood just outside the door.

"Excuse me, sir?"

Randall looked up and eyed him warily. The kid wore dark pants, a white shirt and a plain, pencil-thin tie. He looked like a contestant on a high school quiz show. Amway, Randall thought. Maybe Mormon. But he remembered that Mormons generally come in pairs, and he didn't think Amway sold on the street. He lowered an eyebrow. "Yes?"

The kid held out a colorful package. "Would you like to try out a new online service? It's free."

Randall snickered. Over the years, people on street corners had tried to sell him everything from television sets to "solid gold" watches. Nobody had ever tried to sell him software, especially not in Peabody, New Hampshire. Times were definitely changing. All right, he'd play along. "What's it called?"

"The Family, sir?" he said, his voice rising slightly as if he weren't sure himself.

"The Family." It had the sound of something a bunch of

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teenagers had cooked up in their garage. Randall took the package from the kid and looked it over. It was a bright, colorful design, emblazoned with promises of free access to the Internet, e-mail, and a host of other services. "What's the catch?"

"No catch, sir. We're just trying to introduce people to our service."

"How much?"

"It's free, sir. The introductory disk comes with all the software you need to connect to the Family. Even the phone call is free."

"You're kidding. How do you make any money at that rate?"

The boy shrugged. "You can make a donation if you'd like."

Randall nodded and pulled a dollar from his wallet, remembering P.T. Barnum's comment about the birth rate of suckers. "OK, I'll give it a shot."

As he handed the bill to the kid, the door to the news shop flew open. The owner, an old man with thinning white hair, emerged like an angry bear from a cave, waving his arms and yelling at the kid. "I thought I tol' you to get the hell outta here."

The kid mumbled a quick thanks to Randall and headed off down the street. The shop owner dismissed him with a wave of a liver-spotted hand. "Bunch a' nuts. Hanging around, bothering my customers."

"What's the problem?" Randall asked. "He was just..."

A telephone rang in the shop. The old man cast a suspicious eye at him and disappeared back inside.

Randall turned, shaking his head. Apparently, that kid "wasn't from around here," as the old joke went. In Peabody, you weren't considered a local until you had lived in town for twenty years. Randall had lived in the area for four years. It only felt like twenty years.

He had come to Peabody straight out of college, taking an entry-level job with the Peabody Herald—not the type of job a Dartmouth graduate dreamed about, but it was a job. He had planned to spend a couple of years at the Herald before moving up

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to a larger, daily paper like the Boston Globe or the Chicago Sun.

Four years later, Randall was still at the Herald, still writing about controversies over school budgets, the disturbing problem of teen loitering at the town park, and an endless stream of births, deaths, and basketball games.

Recently, the monotony had been broken somewhat by a new assignment, a weekly column of local news and gossip called "Around Town." He had been asked to write the column when its previous author passed away at the age of eighty-five.

"Dear God," Randall whispered as he leaned against the huge wooden door of the Peabody Herald building. "Don't let me be here till I'm eighty-five."

The door creaked open into a wooden-floored lobby where a chunky woman with hair like a blonde Brillo pad looked up from the reception desk. "Good morning, Randall."

"Morning, Linda."

As he passed the desk, the switchboard buzzed and the receptionist punched a button. "Good morning, Peabody Herald." She paused, punched another button and called after him.

"Randall?"

"Yes?"

"It's Mrs. Torelli," she said, clearly sorry to be the bearer of bad tidings.

He winced. Just what he needed first thing on a Monday morning.

Rita Torelli owned a piece of property that the old grange building sat on and was trying to sell the property to the Medi-Aid drugstore chain. She was the scourge of town fathers, zoning boards, and anyone else who dared criticize her plans, which Randall had done in his last column.

He lowered an eyebrow in Linda's direction. "Technically, I'm not in my office yet, am I?"

"That's right, you're not." She punched a button. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Torelli..."

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Randall retreated to his office, a converted storage closet with a single small window. He opened the window, which faced the newspaper's parking lot, allowing a faint breath of fresh air to flow into the office. He would have to close it before the end of the day, or the exhaust fumes from the cars leaving the lot would asphyxiate him.

The message light on his phone blinked insistently. He tossed his jacket over a chair and punched the button to retrieve his messages.

"You have eight messages," the system informed him. The first message had arrived at 5:10 PM on Friday afternoon.

"Mr. McLagan?" it began. "This is Rita Torelli. I just read your column and I'm..."

Rita hadn't wasted any time. The paper didn't even hit the stands until five o'clock. He jumped ahead to the next message.

"It's Rita Torelli again. I'd like you to call me as soon..."

He sighed and skipped ahead.

"Mr. McLagan, how is an honest woman supposed to..."

And the next message.

"Yes, I've already called several times..."

He hung up the phone. Knowing Rita Torelli, all eight messages were from her. She was a firm believer in the squeaky wheel theory, and would never rest until she had given him a piece of her mind. Maybe several pieces.

Right now, Randall had a more pressing problem than Rita Torelli. His column was due, and he hadn't started it yet. In fact, he didn't even know what he was going to write about. He had already covered all the latest controversies, and the old chestnuts—New Hampshire's arcane tax structure, problems with schools, the lack of parking in downtown Peabody—had all been done to death.

It wasn't exactly what he'd had in mind while studying journalism at Dartmouth. He had pictured a career at a large city newspaper or a national magazine, where he would expose government corruption, ferret out the truth about corporate

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scandals, and write poignant commentaries about modern society. Instead, his days were filled with annual budgets, track meets, and Rita Torelli.

He turned to his computer and flipped it on. If not for the computer, he was sure he'd have gone insane long ago. The computer was his link to the world outside Peabody, a world where real issues were debated, real work was done. He turned it on each day with the expectant desperation of a man on a desert island scanning the horizon for a rescue ship.

As the computer booted, his eye fell on the disk from the kid outside the news shop, and he had a thought. Maybe that was his column: the computer revolution was everywhere these days, even on the sidewalk outside the Peabody news shop.

He zipped open the package and stuck the disk in the computer. He knew his editor wouldn't like this. Harold Dodge, the crusty owner and editor of the Peabody Herald, already thought Randall spent too much time on the computer.

A peaceful, classical theme emanated from the computer and an icon appeared on the screen: a spinning globe, superimposed with the image of a large Colonial house. He clicked on the icon and the image enlarged to fill the screen.

"Welcome to the Family," a silken female voice said. "You are about to enter a world of entertainment, activity, and friendship. You are about to enter the Family."

The door to the house swung open, revealing a large foyer.

"Here in the Family, you'll find free access to the Internet, free e-mail, and a teleconferencing system with ongoing discussions on hundreds of topics, from Art to the Zodiac." Graphic images representing the topic areas drifted across the screen.

"You'll also have access to the world's largest collection of free software, as well as an incredible library of online sources for personal and business growth." Well-known magazines, journals, and references appeared, glinting as if illuminated by a spotlight, then faded.

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"Health, personal finance, travel...it's all available in the Family. And it's all absolutely free."

So far, Randall had heard the word "free" three or four times. He was beginning to pick up a theme. So what was the catch? They promised a lot, considering they were giving it away. So how did they pay for it? Advertising?

"You can become a member of the Family in the comfort of your own home," the voice said. "To join the Family free of charge—including the phone call to connect to the Family—please enter your area code, and the first three digits of your local telephone exchange."

Randall entered the digits. A moment later, the voice said, "We're sorry, it appears there is no direct local access number for the Family in your area."

He sighed and leaned back in his chair. That figured. Peabody was so far off the information superhighway there wasn't even a sign for it, let alone an on-ramp. So much for signing up for the free service.

"However," the voice continued, "we have provided a toll-free number which you may use to connect to the Family."

Randall's eyebrows raised. Without asking him, the program dialed the number.

Now logging on to the Family via toll-free number.

There was a series of beeps, followed by a high-pitched whine indicating the connection had been established. A message appeared on the screen.

Congratulations! You are only minutes away from entering the exciting world of the Family. To complete the setup process, we'll need to copy some files to your computer. Hit Enter to begin.

The installation took less than a minute. When it was complete, the image of the house appeared again, and the front door swung

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open. A narrow box appeared across the bottom of the screen. On the left side of the box was a photograph of an attractive young woman. A message appeared in the space next to the image.

Hello. My name's Carolyn. What's yours?

The image shifted slightly, and he realized it was a video image, one that was being updated periodically. He hesitated, then typed

I'm Randall. Who are you?

I'm a greeter. We welcome new people who sign on to the Family for the first time.

He shook his head. Greeters at the door. These people had thought of everything.

Welcome to the Family, Randall. Would you like me to show you around?

In for a dime, in for a dollar, he thought.

Sure, why not.

Great! Let's go.

She led him to the Library, which contained virtual shelves loaded with free books, as well as software programs—graphics, word processing, finance, games. Another section contained online reference works: dictionaries, encyclopedias, atlases, also free for member's use. Next to the Library was a Meeting Hall, a large room with dozens of doors leading off to other rooms, labeled by topic: Computers, Current Events, Environment, Hobbies, Sports, and so on.

This is the Chat area, Randall. There are hundreds of discussions going on right now. You name it, there's a Chat for it, with people from all around the world taking part.

The tour continued with visits to the Mailroom, the Newsroom, the Home Office, and the Game room—all stuffed with state-of-the-art features, and all free. And as far as he could tell, there were no advertisements anywhere.

Randall noticed a Member's Area and asked Carolyn about it.

That's an area containing special features available only to members. If you'd like to join the Family, I can sign you up today, Randall.

What kind of special features?

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I'd be happy to tell you about all the member benefits once you sign up. Would you like to do that today, Randall? There's no cost to join.

She hadn't answered the question. But before he could repeat it, she broke in.

Are there any other questions I can answer for you, Randall?

Just one. If this is all free, how do you pay for it? Where does the money come from?

The Family is a non-profit organization, Randall. We receive support from our members and from a variety of private institutions.

That sounded like a canned answer if he'd ever heard one.

Would you like to sign up today, Randall ?

He was tempted, but he was also skeptical. The Family sounded too good to be true, and if Dodge found out he had signed up for something that cost money, he'd never hear the end of it.

Thanks. I'll need to think about it for a bit.

There's no obligation, Randall, and no fee. If you like, I can sign you up for a free membership right now.

This lady sure knew the hard sell.

Let me think about it. I'll get back to you.

OK. It was great to meet you, Randall. Come back soon!

He leaned back in his chair. He had plenty of material for a column, but he needed a local angle, something more than meeting the kid outside the news shop. Then it came to him: the town grange, once home to a vibrant social structure, now stood empty, facing destruction and replacement by a discount drugstore. Where had the people gone who once frequented that building? These days, they were meeting electronically, via computer.

He began writing, and the words flowed. In half an hour, he had a good chunk of the column done. But he still had a few questions. How did the Family give away so much for free? Was there some catch?

He glanced at his watch. There wasn't time to do a lot of research on this. If he was going to get this column in on time, he needed the inside scoop, and needed it fast.

Then he remembered. Of course: Peter. If anyone would know

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about the Family, it would be Peter.

Peter Jacobson had been his best friend in college. After graduation, Peter had landed a job with PC Monthly magazine, a West Coast startup that had since become one of the most successful publications in the business.

Randall reached for the phone, then hesitated.

He hadn't spoken to Peter in months. They had drifted apart in recent months. After the move to San Francisco, Peter's career had soared while Randall's floundered. It seemed San Francisco and Peabody were far apart in more ways than just geography.

He had visited Peter once, but they argued most of the time, Peter trying to convince him to move to the West Coast. Randall had found himself defending a job he hated, his pride keeping him from admitting that Peter had chosen the better path.

His ego bruised, he had only spoken to Peter a few times after that. The last time he'd called, Peter had been with a woman—Angie, or Andrea, a new girlfriend apparently—and he seemed distracted. He said he'd call back, but never did. Randall had meant to call again, but hadn't gotten around to it.

He hesitated a moment longer, then decided it had been long enough. If nothing else, this was a good excuse to reconnect. He needed some information on the Family, and Peter was the person to supply it.

He pulled a phone list out of the desk, found Peter's work number, and dialed.

A receptionist answered. "PC Monthly magazine. How may I direct your call?"

"I'd like to speak to Peter Jacobson."

The receptionist hesitated. "Just a moment, please."

Canned music drifted over on the line for a few seconds, then a woman's voice spoke. "Human resources. Can I help you?"

Human resources? Why couldn't companies hire receptionists who knew what they were doing? "There's been a mistake," Randall said. "I'm trying to get through to Peter Jacobson."

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"Can I ask who's calling, please?"

"My name is Randall McLagan," he said, beginning to be irritated.

"And your company, Mr. McLagan?"

What was this? Was Peter so important now that he had everybody in the company screening his calls for him?

"I'm a personal friend."

She hesitated. "Mr. McLagan, my name is Joanne Reed." Her tone had changed slightly. It was softer now, less guarded. "I'm the director of human resources for PC Monthly."

Nice to meet you, Randall thought. Now put me through to Peter.

"This is very difficult...I guess you haven't heard yet."

"Heard what?"

"It's...I'm afraid I have some difficult news for you."

He felt something sink inside. Her tone, her manner told him this was not good. "What?"

"Peter...died this weekend."

"What?"

"I'm sorry. It came as a shock to all of us here, too."

His mind raced. "What happened?"

"We don't have all the details yet. Apparently he...fell from the Golden Gate Bridge."

A chill passed through him, dragging a hundred questions behind it. Fell? How did he fall? What was he doing? Wasn't there anyone with him? Don't they have guardrails on the bridge?

He wanted to ask if she was sure but stopped himself. Of course she was sure. His mind seized, not knowing what to say next.

She spoke into his silence. "The funeral service is tomorrow. I can fax you the information if there's any possibility you can attend."

The words landed in his ear like stones skipped over dark water...a funeral...for Peter...Could he go?...Of course he would go...but could he get the time off...for a funeral...for Peter...

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She spoke again. "Would you like me to fax that to you?"

The words penetrated the fog that had settled around him. "Yes, yes, please."

She waited. "If you'll just give me your fax number."

"Sure." He tried to recall the office fax number, a number he normally knew by heart. He stared blankly at the telephone list. A moment later, he remembered that he was looking for the fax number. When he found the number, it didn't seem right somehow. Nothing seemed right now. He had not seen Peter in months. He'd been meaning to call, but hadn't gotten around to it. Now it was too late. He was angry, frustrated.

How could Peter die before he'd a chance to talk to him?

At the front desk of the Peabody Herald, Linda put a caller through to the advertising department and went back to daydreaming about Randall McLagan. Like most of the single women in Peabody—and more than a few of the married ones—she lusted after Randall. He looked like a young Paul McCartney, his eyes dark brown, his hair thick and worn a bit longer than most of the guys in Peabody. It was the kind of hair a woman wanted to stick her fingers in and mess up—a fantasy she entertained herself with periodically.

A door opened in the hallway behind her and she glanced over her shoulder. Randall appeared in the doorway to Harold Dodge's office.

"All right," came Dodge's gravelly voice. "I'll run a repeat or something. Just make sure you're back here by Wednesday. We can't afford to be late to the printer again."

Randall nodded, as if he'd barely heard the words. "OK."

He closed the door but remained standing outside it for a moment, staring blankly down the hall as if he was having a hard time deciding what to do. He looked like a child playing a game for the first time, not knowing what the rules called for next.

He went to his office, and minutes later walked to the front

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desk, pulling on his jacket. "Linda, I have to go away for a couple of days. Would you go through my voice mail and take care of whatever's on there?"

"Sure, Randall. Have a good trip."

He said nothing, and left. She pulled out a message pad and punched in the access code to retrieve his voice mail. There were eight messages, seven from Mrs. Torelli, and one that seemed to be personal. She thought about calling Randall at home to pass that one along, but decided not to. He didn't look as if he needed to be bothered right now. Besides, he'd be back in a couple of days. She would leave the message on the system and he could return the call when he came back.

"Randall?" the message began. "This is Peter."

Somewhere in the Midwest, a high-speed computer noted the exact time Randall McLagan had logged onto the Family. It knew how long McLagan had been on the system and what he had done while there. It knew how much memory was in the computer he used to log on, the size of the hard disk drive, and the peripheral equipment attached to it. It knew what programs were installed on the computer and the last time each of them had been used.

The computer transferred McLagan's name, along with the area code from which he had called, to an automated program that cross-referenced the information with a database of addresses. Within seconds, the program had located McLagan's home address and telephone number. In two days, Randall McLagan would receive a colorful mailing encouraging him to join the Family. The mailing would not mention his recent tour of the system, making it appear as if the timing of the solicitation was purely coincidental. If McLagan did not respond within 14 days, a telemarketer would call his home to offer him a free membership in the world's fastest growing online computer group.

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Chapter 2

The flight was uneventful, hardly registering in Randall's consciousness. A movie flickered on the tiny screen wedged over his head. Sounds drifted up from earphones that hung limply around his neck, as if coming from another room. This did not seem odd to Randall. It was what life felt like now, action going on around him, but little or no sound, as if he were emotionally deaf, hearing everything through a cottony filter of pain and sadness.

The flight arrived in San Francisco at 5:46 p.m. He had reserved a room at the Best Western on the corner of Grant and North Point near Fisherman's Wharf—not a four-star hotel, but he was used to that. The few times that he traveled for the Peabody Herald, Dodge insisted he find the cheapest room available. When more than one person went on a trip, they doubled up. It had been different for Peter, he knew. When Peter traveled, PC Monthly had booked him into the best hotels. He had eaten at expensive restaurants, often courtesy of the computer companies he was writing about. His expense account was generous, and not closely monitored.

At the hotel, Randall checked into his room, a Spartan cubicle that smelled of disinfectant and old cigarette smoke. Among the few amenities was a copy of the San Francisco Chronicle, which lay folded on top of the television set. He opened it aimlessly and

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an item at the bottom of the front page caught his eye.

Popular Columnist Dies

SAN FRANCISCO - The body of journalist and San Francisco resident Peter Jacobson was discovered by police in the shallows near the base of the Golden Gate Bridge on Sunday morning. Jacobson, author of a popular column for PC Monthly magazine, was last seen by his coworkers late Friday afternoon. He is believed to have fallen from the bridge that evening. The cause of the fall is under investigation. "At present, we're classifying it as an accidental drowning," said SFPD detective William Latimer, who could give no explanation for the accident.

He sat, staring at the paper. No explanation for the accident. A wave of anger passed over him. His best friend was dead, and San Francisco's finest couldn't even offer an explanation.

He tossed the paper on the bed. Now what? The funeral wasn't until tomorrow, and he had nothing to do until then. He could not eat. He didn't know anyone in San Francisco, and it was pointless to try watching television or a movie.

Finally, his body acted when his brain could not. He left the hotel and headed toward Fisherman's Wharf, following the crowd. He could still walk. He could still place one foot in front of the other. It wasn't much, but he could still do that.

He drifted past the wharf and Ghiradelli's chocolate factory, then skirted the bottom of Russian Hill, continuing along Fort Mason. He passed landmarks that were familiar from his previous visit, but they had an unreal quality about them now, like scenery from a play after the final performance was over, pointless somehow.

He came to a corner and looked up at the street sign. It was Laguna Street, only a few blocks from the Marina. Without

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thinking, he had walked in the exact direction of Peter's apartment.

Now the walk became a pilgrimage. He turned on Alhambra Street and then to Mallorca. He recognized Peter's apartment building instantly, a yellow Victorian with white trim set in the middle of the block.

Peter's car sat on the street in front of the building. Another wave of sadness passed over him—it hadn't occurred to him that the car would still be there. He approached it slowly, as if it were a shrine. The car was empty, except for a Peet's coffee cup sitting in the cup holder.

He glanced up toward Peter's apartment. The living room window was open and a curtain fluttered slightly, a light shining behind it.

Someone was in the apartment.

In an instant, he realized what had happened. There had been some kind of mistake. It was some other Peter Jacobson who had died. It had all been a ridiculous misunderstanding. In a minute, he and Peter would be laughing about it, tears streaming down their faces.

He trotted to the door and pressed the button marked "Jacobson." A buzzer sounded inside, the door clicked open, and he climbed the steps two at a time, his heart pounding.

At the top of the stairs he heard music coming from the apartment: a Peter Gabriel CD, one that Peter had purchased when they'd been in college. It was his favorite album, and he'd listened to it almost continuously throughout their college years. Randall had grown so tired of it that he'd had threatened to break the CD over Peter's head. Now, it sounded like the Hallelujah Chorus to him.

The door to the apartment stood open, revealing a hallway and the kitchen beyond it. He walked in.

"Peter?"

He walked to the kitchen. Dirty dishes filled the sink, a cereal box on the table. A large stack of mail overflowed next to it. The

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place looked like a museum exhibit entitled, "Habitat of West Coast Man, Late 20th Century."

"Peter?"

Still no answer. Following the music, he came to the living room, where disorder had erupted. Papers lay strewn about, books open, empty boxes piled haphazardly, clothes thrown on the backs of chairs. The CD played unattended. Below the music, from another room, came a different sound, like papers shuffling. Or someone crying.

"Hello?"

The crying stopped. A woman appeared in the hallway. She was blonde, her hair pulled back in a ponytail. Her eyes were blue, but red from crying. She wore a Dartmouth sweatshirt that was several sizes too large—Peter's, he was sure. She seemed startled to see him, as if she'd been expecting someone else. They stared at each other for a second, and in that moment he realized the truth.

Peter was not here. Peter was gone.

She took a half step back. "Can I help you?"

"I'm a friend of Peter's," he said. "Randall McLagan."

Her eyes relaxed, and she exhaled slowly. "I'm Allison. Allison Hughes."

Allison. The girlfriend. Now he knew now why Peter hadn't had time for old friends. "Peter mentioned your name," he said.

"Yours too. A lot."

The thought pleased him. He wondered what Peter had said about him.

She pushed the sleeves of the sweatshirt up her arms and sniffed away tears. "You caught me at a bad time. I was trying to sort through some...stuff."

"I'm sorry. I just got into town. I was out for a walk and saw the light. I didn't mean to interrupt you."

"That's OK. I wasn't getting much done."

She offered him a seat on an old green sofa in front of a window that looked out onto the street. Lowering herself onto the seat, she

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closed her eyes for a moment and shook her head gently. "Sorry. They've got me on some kind of medication. It makes me a little dizzy. I don't really like taking drugs."

"I understand."

They talked about how they'd met Peter. Allison worked at a travel agency that PC Monthly used to schedule its business trips. As a rule, the agency delivered travel tickets to the magazine office by mail. "But one time, Peter scheduled a last-minute trip and came to pick up the tickets himself. After that, he always came in to pick up his tickets."

Randall smiled. For any woman who was paying attention, that would be a dead giveaway. "How long have you lived in San Francisco?"

"Not long." She had come from Arizona only a few months before meeting Peter. Before that she had lived with an aunt and uncle who had taken her in when her parents died. "They were pretty old, and I was a handful," she said. "I think they were just as glad to see me move out."

He could see why Peter had been attracted to her. She was beautiful, vulnerable, and alone. An irresistible combination for most men.

They were silent for a moment. He hesitated, took a deep breath and said, "Can I ask you something?"

Her eyes pinched together slightly. "What?"

"Do you have any idea what happened?"

She pulled her knees up and hugged them, as if steeling herself for the words. "I was supposed to meet him here that night but I was late. When I got here, his car was out front and he wasn't around."

She had waited for him, and when he didn't show up after several hours, she called the police. "They said they couldn't do anything until more time passed, so I went home." She still did not hear from Peter, and the police finally called her on Sunday. She put her hands over her face and wept. "If only I'd been here on

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time."

He knew what she was saying, blaming herself for Peter's death. He had done it himself—what if he had been in touch with Peter, had made contact with him sooner?

He put a hand out to touch her shoulder, but couldn't reach her without moving closer, and that felt too familiar. His hand hung aimless in the air for a moment, then returned to his lap. "It's not your fault..."

"Yes it is," she said quickly. She hesitated, then took a deep breath. "I broke up with him up the night before. He called me that day and said he had to talk to me. I should have been here," she said, her voice cracking.

He blinked, registering what she was saying: she and Peter had broken up, and Peter was so upset that he killed himself.

He was silent for a moment, thinking. Would Peter have killed himself over a woman, even a woman as attractive as this one? The answer was no. Not the Peter that he had known. But then, maybe he hadn't known Peter as well as he thought he did.

He wanted to ask her more questions. Why did they break up? Had anyone seen Peter that night? What did the police know? But this wasn't the time for questions. He sat until she regained her composure and then stood. "I should let you get back to your work."

She nodded, not speaking.

"Is there anything I can do?"

After a moment she said, "The funeral is tomorrow. I didn't really know the people from his office that well. And I never even met his stepfather."

That didn't surprise him. Robert Gebhardt was a banker. Peter once described him as a gold-digger who had married his mother for her money. The two had never gotten along, and when Peter's mother died, there had been some disagreement about her estate. As far as Randall knew, Peter hadn't spoken to Gebhardt since then, so it was no surprise that Allison hadn't met him.

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"I just don't know if I can handle going to the funeral by myself," she said.

"I'd be happy to take you."

For the first time, a faint smile creased the corners of her mouth.
"Would that be OK?"

"Sure," he said, and looking into her eyes he could not help thinking, that would be very OK.

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Chapter 3

Alan Reingold checked his notes one more time before closing the computer file on his new neighbors, the Millers. They had moved to San Francisco three months ago. Sam Miller, a programmer with Digitopia, was busy adjusting to his new job. Julie Miller was a nurse, but not working now. She was at home, setting up house, and lonely. The Miller's son Josh was in school, and not doing that well according to the school's computer.

They were the perfect candidates.

The doorbell rang. Alan fixed a broad smile to his previously impassive face and opened the door wide. "Come on in, neighbors. We've been waiting for you."

Sam and Julie Miller edged past Alan into the entryway, their son Josh trailing behind. Sam, who wore a decidedly un-San Francisco sweater, raised his eyebrows in the direction of his son, a sullen teenager in an untucked flannel shirt and baseball cap. Josh removed the cap with a slow scowl and tucked it into a rear pocket.

Margaret Reingold appeared from the kitchen bearing a tray of cheese and crackers and greeted them in a voice that swung like a back-porch settee. "Well, hel-lo. It's about time we had you folks over here."

Julie, thin and blonde with an anxious smile, handed Margaret a plate with a cake on it. "It's German chocolate. Just something I threw together."

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"Oh, it looks wonderful," Margaret said. "I'll just take it into the kitchen."

The sound of a clicking keyboard drifted down from upstairs. Alan called up the stairs. "Scott? Come down and meet the Millers."

Scott Reingold appeared at the foot of the stairs, looking more like a West Point cadet than a high school student. He greeted the Millers with stiff, formal handshakes.

Margaret reappeared and said, "Dinner will be ready in a minute. Why don't we go into the living room?"

They ate crackers and cheese, the Reingolds expressing interest and delight in everything Sam or Julie said. Then came dinner: chicken Marengo with wild rice, fresh steamed vegetables, homemade bread, an expensive bottle of wine—Margaret had checked beforehand to make sure Sam and Julie drank and what kind of wine they preferred. After dinner came gourmet coffee and Julie's German chocolate cake.

Margaret held a forkful of the dark-brown cake over her plate. "This is so moist," she said. "You have to give me the recipe."

Julie beamed, squeezing Sam's hand under the table, and he grinned back at her. This evening was just what Julie needed. They had hardly been out of the house since moving from Minneapolis to San Francisco. What with work and a new home, they'd had little time to make new friends, and hadn't met a single neighbor until the Reingolds came over to introduce themselves. And the Reingolds were the friendliest people they'd ever met: Alan, with his thinning, swept-back hair, looking like a young Jack Nicholson; Margaret, a homebody with short, curly hair and a persistent motherly smile; and Scott, who seemed too neat and polite to actually be a teenager. In a city where people passed every day without even acknowledging each other's existence, meeting the Reingolds had been like coming out of a dark tunnel.

Alan finished the last bite of his cake. "This really is delicious."

"Too bad she doesn't make it at home," Josh muttered.

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Sam shot a stern look at Josh, and a moment of awkward silence followed.

Alan turned to his son. "Scott?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Didn't you just get a new video game? Why don't you take Josh up to your room and give him a shot at it?"

"Yes, sir."

The boys left as Sam tried to remember if Josh had ever said, "Yes, sir," in his entire life. He didn't think so.

Julie watched them leave, a wistful expression on her face.

"Your son is so well behaved."

"Thank you," Margaret said, smiling and pouring more coffee. "He has his moments. But overall, we're pretty proud of him."

"I can see why," Sam said. At the moment, he felt like strangling his own son.

Julie glanced at Sam, then smiled sheepishly. "We're going through a rough stage with Josh. He just doesn't want to do anything we tell him. And he's so rude." She shrugged helplessly. "Maybe it has something to do with adjusting to a new school."

Alan and Margaret smiled sympathetically. They had a confident air about them, as if they had discovered some secret drug that transforms teenagers into reasonable human beings. "How do you folks do it?" Julie asked.

Alan nodded at Margaret; apparently, this was her territory.

"Well, to begin with, we home-school Scott," Margaret said. "That gives us more control over his environment."

"Really?" Julie asked. "Isn't that a lot of work?"

"Not really. We do most of it by computer. And we belong to a group that helps us."

"A home-schooling group?"

"No, it's a computer group called the Family. We use it to shop, talk to friends, plan our travel. I don't know what we'd do without it."

Julie looked at Margaret blankly, as if she'd just attributed their

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successful family life to membership on a bowling team or a steady diet of rutabaga. "Well, that sounds like...fun."

The Millers retrieved their son, thanked the Reingolds for a lovely evening, and left. Alan and Margaret stood in the door and waved, their broad smiles disappearing as soon as the Millers were out of sight.

"What do you think?" Margaret asked.

Alan nodded, the corners of his mouth tucked in pensively. "I think it went well."

He returned to his study, where the computer was still on—he rarely logged off these days, having installed a separate phone line for the Family. He opened the Millers' file, and the system automatically added the date to the entry as he typed.

Subjects successfully initialized.

In the kitchen, Margaret fed the remainder of the German chocolate cake into the garbage disposal.

Continue reading The Family.