Prologue

Two years before

IT WAS SUPPOSED TO make a difference. It didn’t. Just ask them. If you can find them. Oh, wait a minute. You might not be able to.

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“How was your day?”

“I’m not . . . sure.”

“What kind of an answer is that? What do you mean?”

“Okay, then,” she said. “I’ll tell you. Here’s what happened.”

At first, he was surprised. Shocked would be more precise. Either way, the more he listened, the more captivated he became.

Seems the wife got a call from their son’s nursery school teacher. Their son was in trouble. Again. The wife’s presence was immediately required. To pick up the son, take him home. At least take him away from the school. Anywhere else. They didn’t care where. So long as it was . . . permanent. He would not be welcome to return. Ever.

“Why? What did he do? This time.”

“What he did—this time—is not what’s important. It’s what I did that’s important. This time.”

He stared at her. “Alright, then. What the hell did you do? This time.”

She smiled at him, sheepishly. Then, averting her eyes from his: “I just wanted to fix it. So, I slowly took out my wallet. And offered . . . to fix it.”

“My God. Were you out of your mind? And the teacher? What did she do?”

“She . . . fixed it.”
“Oh.”
PART ONE
Chapter 1

Two months before

ELOISE BROOKS LOVED HER husband, Cyrus. And Cyrus loved her back. That was not the problem. They were about to celebrate 55 years of marriage. But Cyrus also had another love. Therein lied the problem. Their problem.

After thirty-five years as a distinguished member of the Washington, D.C. federal bench, Cyrus’s title had changed, from U.S. District Court Cyrus Brooks to U.S. District Court Cyrus Brooks, Retired. But it was all a lie.

Cyrus was anything but retired. His other love was . . . the law. Adding “Retired” to his title did not change that.

Cyrus had been growing restless. And then, as luck had it, about ten years ago, the highly publicized murder trial of accused vigilante serial killer Cliff Norman was assigned to his courtroom. Norman and his family were all but wiped out in the 2008 economic meltdown. Norman was suspected of targeting—and assassinating—corrupt politicians, to get even with them for what he and his family had suffered. It was during the Norman trial that Cyrus first met then recently widowed Frank Lotello, single father of two youngsters, and—more to the point—Metropolitan D.C. veteran homicide detective Frank Lotello.

Almost instantly, Cyrus and Lotello bonded. Illicitly. It was predictable. Inevitable one might say. Their common love of the law was their downfall. Centrally involved in Norman’s arrest, Lotello suspected that Norman was being framed by Washington insiders nefariously connected to the White House.

Both independently committed to a high sense of right and wrong, and justice, technical rules and obstacles be damned, Cyrus and Lotello formed a secret alliance to unravel and get at
the truth, whatever that might be and wherever that might lead. In the course of their unholy association, Lotello was shot. He barely survived. Shortly after, Cyrus retired from the bench. It was rumored that the near death of Lotello had something to do with Cyrus leaving the bench. The rumors were never confirmed, but Eloise knew the cause and effect connection was more than rumor.

The relationship between Cyrus and Lotello continued. Lotello married Leah Klein, now Leah Klein Lotello, the lawyer who had defended Cliff Norman in Cyrus’s courtroom and who, along with Cyrus, following the conclusion of the Norman trial, had become involved in the formation of The National Organization For Political Integrity, NOPOLI for short, a foundation committed to improving the political well-being of the country. With all of these common interests, it was no surprise that the relationship of the two couples flourished.

One of NOPOLI’s first undertakings was to sponsor the enactment of the 28th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, providing for the criminalization of political corruption. Congress challenged the validity of the 28th Amendment. Cyrus, by then retired from the bench, but still licensed to practice law, and Leah, as lead chair and second chair, respectively, defended the 28th Amendment in the U.S. Supreme Court. When Cassie Webber, the eleven-year-old granddaughter of the Supreme Court justice holding the swing vote in the case was secretly kidnapped by political operatives who wanted to control her grandfather’s vote in order to control the outcome of the case, Cyrus and Lotello sprang into action, once again, this time in an attempt to save political pawn young Cassie.

This, then, was Eloise’s problem. Cyrus’s other love, the law, was simply becoming too dangerous for him. It was fine for Lotello. He was younger and stronger than Cyrus. He was trained
to take up arms and do battle with dangerous felons. Cyrus was not. Eloise worried incessantly about Cyrus’s ability to survive his other love.

Cyrus may have been retired, but he still kept his toe in the legal arena. He taught law classes at Georgetown University Law School. He wrote law review articles on obscure legal theories. He handled occasional courtroom cases of interest to him, such as the challenge of the 28th Amendment. He tried to stay out of trouble, bless his heart, but trouble always seemed to find him. As long as he remained actively engaged with his other love, he often seemed to end up smack dab in the middle of it. Trouble. Again and again. Over and over.

Cyrus was not one-dimensional, as most who knew him thought. He loved music. Playing it and singing it. Dancing to it. But only in his mind, of course, because he couldn’t play it, sing it, or dance to it. Not in the real world. Not a lick.

Cyrus also loved books. Exciting novels, especially mysteries and thrillers and whodunnits. The more suspenseful, the better. But, reading them, not writing them, if you didn’t count the five or ten novels he had started over the years, and abandoned every time before the end of a chapter or two. Cyrus didn’t understand the ingredients of good writing. Voice. Point of view. Dialogue. Pace. He was disciplined but he wasn’t patient.

And, then, Eloise had an idea.

She had been pondering what to get Cyrus for their fifty-fifth anniversary, something exciting. She had quickly ruled out music or singing lessons. Cyrus was tone deaf. There was no chance he could play an instrument or sing. She had also dismissed dancing lessons. It would be hard for Cyrus to dance on his two left feet.

And then it came to her. Well, to one of her author friends. Who had mentioned a highly regarded week-long international writing retreat she attended every summer at the five-star Hotel
Marisol destination resort, located on the sun-drenched Mediterranean island of Punta Maya, eleven miles off the coast of Spain. Sponsored by an organization called TITO, The International Thrillers Organization. The conference it sponsored was known as Thriller Jubilee, or just “TJ” for those familiar with it.

It was attended by all facets of the writing world: writers, both branded pros and amateur wannabes, including Eloise’s author friend; editors, literary agents, book cover and interior layout designers, self-publishing advisors, traditional publishing houses, and printing companies, who combined to turn rough manuscripts into finished novels; website developers, social media managers, public relations firms, marketing gurus, and a panoply of distribution experts; the media, who reported on the writing industry, bloggers, journalists, and newscasters alike; and book lovers, who just wanted to watch and listen, buy a book written by one of their favorite big name authors, get it autographed, take it home, read it—and treasure it.

Some went to teach. Some went to study. Some went to eat, drink, and party. There were countless panel presentations, lectures, and interviews, all day long, on the hour, from sunup to sundown. There were networking parties and bar-hopping festivities into the wee hours each night, opportunities galore to meet and mingle. As long as you weren’t shy, or easily overwhelmed.

Eloise decided this would be the perfect anniversary gift for Cyrus, segueing to a writing career where he could stalk imaginary murder and mayhem, not the real-world murder and mayhem that always seemed to stalk him, as a real-world judge and lawyer. He could write about judges and lawyers, instead of being one.

The online pictures of the Hotel Marisol facilities and grounds were beautiful. Dense foliage, gorgeous beaches, sapphire-blue waters. Great dining and shopping. A perfect break for Eloise, too, from her daily routine.
And she’d be there for Cyrus, to prop him up when he needed it. Social skills came more naturally to Eloise than to Cyrus.

Besides: *What could possibly go wrong at a writers’ conference?*