

Prologue

The charred body of the mother was a horror for Brilskey, but the little girl shattered his heart. An eight-year-old named Megan, neighbors told him. The fire had been so intense she'd been cremated in her bed, flesh burned to ash, bones pulverized by the fall of a large structural beam. She nearly could have been gathered up and placed in an urn just as she was. Brilskey wished he'd never seen it.

The landlord told them there was a husband, and when he was located it was found he'd been sleeping comfortably in a motel in town while his wife and daughter were being consumed by flames.

Lucky, someone had said.

Convenient was the word that came to Brilskey's mind.

But in the end, that was as close as he got. Despite all the doubts, it was ruled it an accident. A fallen branch, maybe from the wind, had knocked over the grill on the deck, a can of starter fluid had leaked down along the edge of the house and a still hot

briquette appeared to have ignited a loose piece of newspaper. The flames had gathered strength outside for a time, burning the deck then rising all the way to the roof and across before plunging inside. The wood of the old house, treated to resist rot, gave off a thick smoke that almost certainly killed mother and child in their sleep before the horrible things were done to them.

It could have happened that way. It could have happened other ways, too. But all the suspicions led nowhere and as each day inexorably replaced the one before, the case slipped below the surface to be gradually buried by the slow downward drift of sediment from the Sea of Human Trouble.

But one awful image came into Brilskey's mind too often for him to forget or give up entirely. He didn't think of it every day or even every week, but he thought of it surprisingly often.

It was for the husband, the survivor, to remember his wife and daughter at least once every day.

And every day, they thought of him as well.

Chapter One

Suddenly there was a woman next to their table, in her early 30's, Aly thought, mid-height and attractive though pale and thin. Her blond hair fell to her shoulders and she was wearing a long-sleeve beige blouse buttoned up to her neck with a multicolored skirt that nearly skimmed the floor, a style that put her wildly out-of-place in the trendy crowd at Captain Jack's. An artist's case was slung over one shoulder and she was writing with a stylus on a tablet computer, a vague smile on her face.

“May I help you?” Aly asked.

Melanie and Barb looked up at the woman who put the tablet down on the table for Aly to read.

Excuse me for interrupting. I can't speak, I'm mute, so I must use this. I'm an artist. I give tattoos in the privacy of my RV that's parked outside. I'd like to show you some of my work.

“Oh, I don't think we're interested,” Aly said to her.

“Interested in what? What is it,” Barb asked.

Aly turned the tablet towards Barb so she could read it, Melanie leaning over to look as well.

The woman had taken out sheets of paper from her case. She laid them on the table and spread them slightly, and Aly saw they were delicate colored drawings of flowers skillfully done.

“Those are beautiful,” Melanie said, handing the tablet back to the woman who began writing on it again.

They were beautiful, Aly thought. While she understood why people might get themselves tattooed with cartoon figures or obscure Chinese characters, she'd never been tempted by such things. But these flowers were more like true art. She picked up a drawing of a rose with its stem wound around a weathered post that seemed to ground it instead of having it just float freely. She thought that if she ever did get a tattoo, it would be exactly what she'd want.

The woman laid the tablet down in front of Aly.

You have memories of roses? she'd written.

Aly couldn't speak for a moment, a sharp jab of just such a memory hitting her—the back yard of their house, Hal lying on the grass next to her reading as she pruned the bushes. She clipped one rose past its time and when it fell he picked it up and clamped the stem between his teeth, mumbling in a silly Spanish accent, “Ah, my beautiful senorita.” A thorn jabbed him and he winced, spitting out the rose and saying with a laugh, “Beautiful and dangerous—just like a woman I know.” He gave her that wicked smile of his and she bent and kissed him, tasting where blood trickled from his lip.

This rose will never leave you, Aly saw the woman had written on the tablet. Just a few minutes and twenty dollars. I'm parked very close.

“Oh, I never thought of getting a tattoo,” Aly said.

Barb read what she'd written and said, “Twenty dollars? That's free. Mine cost me a hundred and fifty and the guy was a pig.” On her calf, Barb had a tattoo of a heart inscribed with the initials of her brother who'd been killed in a motorcycle accident. “Aly, you don't want to go to one of those tattoo parlors if you don't have to.”

“Your work is beautiful,” Melanie said to the woman. “You're a real artist. What's your name?”

The woman wrote on her tablet Lynda.

Aly had to smile. “My full name is Alyda, spelled with a Y like that.”

The woman wrote again and showed Aly.

They called me Lynny like they call you Aly.

The woman shrugged and Aly thought she understood.

“I’d kind of like to be called something other than Aly, but Alyda just has nowhere to go either,” she said.

Lynny nodded and showed Aly the tablet.

Where would you want the rose placed? she’d written.

Aly laughed. “You’re a good saleswoman, but I just don’t think I want a tattoo right now.”

Lynny smiled and began writing again. Aly thought she was pretty and seemed gentle and slightly sad. It must be difficult being mute, she thought, wondering why Lynny couldn’t speak but not wanting to ask. She obviously wasn’t deaf so it could have been an injury or a cancer which might explain why her blouse was buttoned up to her neck that way.

She showed Aly the tablet. Would you like to have a rose somewhere secret only your lover would see?

A rose just for Hal, Aly suddenly thought. She knew it was foolish, but she couldn’t imagine another lover. She was only twenty-eight so it was silly. She couldn’t stay alone forever mourning Hal. But for now...

Lynny held the tablet in front of Aly. You’ll love it forever.

“Really Aly, this is perfect,” Melanie said. “You’re never going to get anyone to do something as good as that.

“It’s fate,” Barb said. “She draws just the way you love, you both have the Y’s in your names and you look alike, she’s here, we’re here. This is the moment, Aly, and you know it. It will never come again.”

“Carpe diem,” Melanie said. “Or in this case, carpe tattooom.”

She and Barb laughed.

Aly saw Hal so clearly and wished with all her heart that he was there. But he never would be. She looked up at Lynny and was struck again by her sad expression. She’d wondered what it was like for Lynny to be living in an RV, going from place to place giving tattoos and working on her artwork. It sounded sort of lonely, but then she thought her life was lonely too, living in her antiseptic high-rise apartment, working at Seth Myner Memorial Hospital doing billing, something she’d never remotely envisioned back when there was still the dream of a future life. At least Lynny had more opportunity for excitement, a constant stream of new places, people and things. Perhaps it was fun.

Suddenly, her mind was made up.

“All right, I’ll do it,” she said. “I’ll never find anything lovelier than your roses.”

She believed that was true, but really it was for Hal.

“Yes, go for it girl,” Barb said, giving her a high-five.

The three of them put money on the tray with the bill, slid out of the booth and went outside, following Lynny as she headed down the block. Aly felt a bit scared but excited, too. She hadn’t done anything bold in too long a time and she thought this might be just what she needed.

Chapter Two

Lynny led them to a makeshift parking lot about a half block from the club and they threaded the crowd of cars to a small RV parked against the far building. Lynny went up the three folding stairs and unlocked the door, holding it open while they stepped up and went inside. Aly was surprised how bare the place was. She would have expected an artist to show her work, but there was nothing—no pictures or sketches hung or even sitting out, no personal mementoes, no photographs, not even any equipment except for the tattooing machine on a rolling cart to one side. The bareness was slightly disquieting and Aly wondered if she should back out. But she'd seen the woman's work so it should be okay, she thought. And for whatever reason, now she really wanted a tattoo. But why? She forced herself to examine just how drunk she really was, but she

felt completely in control and clearheaded. Just differently clearheaded in some way—more in the moment, less concerned with the future. She liked the feeling.

Lynny gestured towards a leather armchair and Aly sat, Melanie and Barb sitting to one side on a bench seat. Lynny set down her artist's case and wrote on her tablet Can I suggest...

She pointed low on Aly's abdomen to one side and Aly thought it was the right place.

"Yes, I think that's good," she said.

Lynny gestured for her to pull out her blouse and lower her pants, Aly feeling slightly embarrassed as she moved aside her clothing, wondering again if she was doing the right thing.

Lynny gently touched Aly's abdomen with a pointed finger and Aly nodded. Lynny smiled then wrote on the tablet A red rose wound on a post?

The rose in Hal's teeth had been red.

"Yes, a red rose," Aly said.

Lynny then did an odd thing, Aly thought, gently putting her hand on Aly's head briefly. Her hand was so cold it startled Aly and she saw that Lynny was looking at her with such a wistful expression that she was touched. It was if they shared some deep pain and Aly almost said something about it. But Lynny turned away to roll over the tattooing machine and then pulled up a stool and sat down. She took the electric needle from the machine, pressed a pedal with her foot and a buzzing sound started.

“You’re not going to draw it first” Aly asked, not really knowing how these things were done but wondering if she should just commit to have a rose put on her permanently without any idea what it would look like.

Lynny shook her head and mouthed the words that Aly thought were Trust me. She smiled and Aly thought that for no good reason she did trust her.

“All right. I’m ready,” she said.

She watched as Lynny put the point of the needle down on her skin. She expected to feel some sort of pricking, but there was only a smooth feel of the point as Lynny carefully moved it across her skin intent on her work. Aly leaned her head backwards against the headrest of the chair, deciding not to watch. She’d put herself in Lynny’s hands and she’d see what happened when it was finished.

As she looked up at the ceiling, she was surprised to find there was a skylight in the roof. She’d never noticed the stars from downtown before but there they were, brilliant in the sky and there seemed to be more than she’d ever seen even in the darkness of the country. As she stared, she began to feel a pleasant sensation of being almost weightless as if floating among them. Maybe she was a little drunk, she thought, but she didn’t mind.

In a surprisingly short time the buzzing stopped and Lynny stood up.

“You’re done?” Aly asked.

Lynny nodded and handed Aly a small hand-mirror. Aly took a breath and looked. It was better than she ever could have hoped, absolutely beautiful she thought. It was her rose, a flower in her life, the flower of her life, perfect and intimate.

“It’s unbelievable. I love it,” she said. “I’m so glad to have this.”

Lynny smiled. Aly turned to see what Melanie and Barb thought and was startled to find them gone. She looked around, but they weren’t there. Lynny saw her puzzlement and pointed at the door. How could she have not seen them go, Aly thought? Why would they go without saying a thing to her? She wondered if they’d been upset she wasn’t paying enough attention to them, but they had never been like that. It was weird, but... Aly looked at the rose again and felt glad that she’d done it. She absolutely loved the look of it, a delicate red rose with its stem wound around the thin weathered post. She was happy she’d gone through with it.

She handed Lynny the mirror and stood up, touching the tattoo before tucking in her blouse and buttoning her slacks. It felt smooth and not at all sensitive. She had thought it would be more painful and raw, but it looked as if it had always been there.

“I can’t even feel it,” she said to Lynny who kept smiling. “You did a beautiful job. I’m very happy with it.” She reached for her purse. “I want to pay you double what you asked.”

Lynny put her hand on Aly’s to stop her from getting out her wallet, shaking her head.

“No, no,” I insist,” Aly said. “You certainly deserve it. You did a lovely job and it was so comfortable and easy.”

Lynny waved no, gestured with her open palms then touched her heart.

“Oh no, I want to pay you,” Aly insisted.

Lynny shook her head and stared with her wistful expression and touched Aly’s hair again. Aly didn’t feel uncomfortable this time. She almost wanted to cry for some reason.

Lynny pointed at her wristwatch then put her hand on Aly’s shoulder and gently urged her towards the door.

“Let me give you something,” Aly said.

Lynny smiled and mouthed the words that Aly thought were You will. Love them.

Aly didn’t know what Lynny meant, if that was what she’d said. She fished in her purse to find her case with her cards from the hospital. “If you should need anything, please call me...or just come by. Here’s my card.”

Lynny took it and glanced at it, then gave Aly a brief hug. Aly could feel Lynny’s arms trembling and she looked more drained of color than ever.

“Are you all right?” Aly asked.

Lynny nodded, but her eyes appeared drooped and she seemed to be laboring for breath. Aly was suddenly concerned, but Lynny opened the door to the RV and gestured for her to leave. Aly hesitated, wondering if there wasn’t something she could do, but

she didn't know what. She went down the stairs to the ground. Lynny smiled slightly then looked more exhausted than ever, gave a brief wave and shut the door.

Aly was a bit concerned as she started walking towards the club. She glanced back at the RV and saw it had gone dark inside, thinking it was good that Lynny was going to bed as she obviously wasn't well. The whole experience had been unusual, she thought, but the rose made it worthwhile. It could have been scary, something she wished she hadn't done, but it wasn't. She felt good about the tattoo though the thought of Lynny and how ill she'd suddenly looked nagged at her.

She reached Captain Jack's and went just inside the door to look if Melanie and Barb were there, but she didn't see them. She took out her cell phone and dialed Melanie's number that rang until the automatic answering message came on. Aly said she wondered where she and Barb had gone and that she'd see her tomorrow. Then she dialed Barb's number, but she didn't answer either and Aly left the same message.

She reached her Z-4 and, when she started it, the growl of the engine reminded her of the tattoo machine and she ran her hand over her abdomen that felt just as it always had. She'd really expected it to be more of an ordeal with healing and all. It had been so easy, much easier than she'd expected.

She purposefully drove past the turn she should have taken for her apartment in north Seattle, wanting to check on Lynny once more. Lynny who, she suddenly wondered, realizing that she didn't even know Lynny's last name. She didn't know anything about her, wondering vaguely why it hadn't occurred to her to ask.

She reached an intersection with a light and realized she'd gone by the lot without noticing it. She'd have to turn around. Then she thought how Lynny had rushed her out and probably was already asleep. She was tired as well so she decided to go on home, turning the corner heading for the expressway.

As she drove, she thought that, all in all, the entire evening had been out of the ordinary, but maybe that was just what she needed. She had known for a long time that Hal would be disappointed in her reaction to his death. He wouldn't have wanted her to shrivel in mourning. He'd loved life and lived it to the full. He'd died doing something he loved. He would have wanted her to go ahead and she resolved that she would. It would be for him—and her. She began to feel that perhaps life would return to her, that she could hold the memory of her darling fiancé but move on.

She flew along the Expressway and then down onto the streets to her building, hitting the clicker to open the gate at the bottom of the short drive into the basement garage, parking in her space against the far wall just up from the gate. When she reached the elevator and the doors closed and the car began rising to her floor, under her breath she recited, “Home again, home again, hippity hop.” Someone had read that to her when she was very young—maybe her real father or Rita Mason, her adopted mom. She didn't know who, but she never forgot hearing it, maybe because it was almost cruelly ironic considering the multitude of foster and group homes she'd trundled through after the wonderful Masons were killed.

Inside her apartment, she dropped her purse on the coffee table and went right into the bedroom. She stripped off her clothes and laid them on the chair, put on her tee-shirt and shorts, then went in the bathroom to get ready for bed. She looked at the tattoo in the mirror and thrilled again at how beautiful the red rose was with its stem wound around the weathered post. Getting it might have been a rash decision, but it was one she was glad she'd made.

She got into bed and pulled the sheet and blanket up around her and buried her head in the pillow, grateful to sleep, grateful for the first time in too long simply to be alive.

Chapter Three

Claws ripped into her flesh beneath her wedding dress as some unseen animal pulled itself across her belly. Terrified, she swatted at the thing but her hands went through her body as if she were made of gossamer, sending bright silver strands from the shimmering dress spinning into the surrounding darkness where they rushed away to become points of light, distant stars. She wondered if the dress might really be a space suit, but that made no sense at all. Something was...

Suddenly Aly was awake in a dim light, pushing up on one elbow. She was in her bed in her apartment and a wave of relief washed across her that she was awake and safe with the horrible dream rapidly receding—searching a house of endless rooms for a faceless groom, followed by the horrible sensation of sharp claws crawling across her stomach beneath that ridiculous outfit.

Calmer, almost amused, she started to lie back down. But suddenly the claws dug into her belly again and with horror she realized it was real. The nightmare had been created by the terrible sensation, her mind trying to keep her from waking.

She sat up and got her feet on the floor with her arms clutching her stomach. She bent forward and forced herself to breath deeply, trying not to tense any more than necessary. Slowly, the spasms began to fade and thankfully in a few moments were gone.

Dreading what she might find, she reached beneath her tee-shirt and lightly ran her hand across her stomach, but her skin felt absolutely normal, smooth and tight. She touched where her new tattoo was and felt no soreness or welt which seemed a good sign. She thought that if it was infected, it would have hurt when she touched it.

She got up in the darkness and padded into the bathroom and turned on the light. Standing in front of the mirror, she grasped the bottom of her tee-shirt and pulled it up, praying that everything looked all right.

For a moment nothing registered, the image so bizarre it made no sense. Then she looked down and saw scrawled across her stomach the same image that was in the mirror. But that was like her hands passing through her body in the dream. It just couldn't be.

She rubbed at the image on her stomach then grabbed a hand towel and wet it and scrubbed harshly. Her skin reddened but that was all, the lines unaffected. She looked into the mirror and stared, trying to make some sense of it, but she couldn't. She only understood that her familiar life had ended and a new, unknown one had begun.

Stretched across her abdomen was a distinct picture of a house set beyond a picket fence anchored at one side by the rose, the only thing in color, the rest in shades of gray. She bent over and pinched her skin, pulling it up as close as possible and saw that the lines weren't on her skin but beneath it. They were tattooed on her, just like the rose. But Lynny hadn't put them there. Just the rose, the red rose, wound around a single weathered post to give it an anchor.

Now, impossibly, it was more than that, much more.

There was a house, a two story Victorian with a gabled roof and filigree trim, an inviting porch across the front. There was a neat front yard and beyond the house what looked like distant buildings as if it was set up on a hill that dropped away from the back yard giving a view of a distant city.

As she looked it occurred to her that it was such a specific house it might be an actual place, a house she could locate. She went to her bedroom and got her cell phone. Bringing it back into the bathroom, she turned on the camera function and held it out, getting the entire tattoo in the screen and managed to tap the shutter icon. When she reviewed it, the house was there with the rose. She had proof, but of what?

As she studied the image, her eye strayed from the house to the scene beyond and one of the distant buildings caught her attention. She swyped the picture with her fingers to enlarge it and moved it to center on the building and saw she was right. It was the Space Needle downtown, the distinctive round top visible above the buildings in front of it. The city behind the house was Seattle. If it was an actual house, it was somewhere around the edge of downtown. She could find it.

Just the top of the Space Needle was visible with buildings obscuring the bottom, two tall red and white antennae to the right. She thought about the layout downtown and realized that the view was from the west, over Elliott Bay, the buildings being those just inland from the waterfront with the Space Needle a few blocks back. The view was from West Seattle, somewhere in North Admiral up from The Junction, a neighborhood of independent, one-of-a-kind shops. She knew the area as one of the foster homes she'd been in had been located there, a family named Jackson she remembered. They'd just taken her in for the money, they didn't get along very well and she'd run away to San Francisco. After the authorities caught her and brought her back, she'd gone to a group home that she liked much better because there was even less intimacy, more privacy for her.

She liked privacy until Hal. A picture of him reading to her suddenly sprang into her mind: 'Thou has committed...' She saw him stop there and smile at her before going on. '...fornication. But that was in another country and besides, the wench is dead.'

Hal loved poetry and he taught her and she grew to love many poems. But she loved him very much more. She loved him and he loved her, and when he died she thought of joining him. But even in her moments of deepest despair, she knew she'd never do it. She didn't want to die even if life was almost unbearably sad and lonely.

She looked at the picture again and the thought came to her that maybe Hal had something to do with this. Maybe he was coming to her from beyond death, from the other side, directing her to this house for some reason. She'd never believed in the supernatural, but then she'd never not believed in it either. It had never been part of her life in any way. Everything

she'd experienced had been normal and understandable even when not very pleasant. But this was very much not normal, and she didn't understand any part of it.