

Shattered Traditions

Excerpt

A few minutes before four o'clock, Bree McNamara parked her red Rabbit convertible in front of a large two-story home with a full porch and green-striped awnings overlooking Nay Aug Park in the hill section of Scranton, Pennsylvania. The park, neglected for years, was in a revival mode. Screams, from children riding the water slide, filled the air. Brilliant pink roses bloomed along the walkway. Bree bent over to sniff the center of a blossom.

"Nice," a woman's voice said.

"Yes," Bree replied, turning to a woman in her early forties. Her highlighted hair fell over one eye. She ran a manicured finger along it and pulled it behind her ear. Soft blue eyes glistened between long black lashes. She held a lit cigarette in one hand. With the other, she reached out. "You must be Bree McNamara."

Martha Strong squeezed Bree's fingers gently then motioned for her guest to sit on a cushioned white wicker chair on the porch. A pitcher of iced tea and two glasses dripped moisture onto a white wrought-iron glass-topped coffee table. Next to them sat a clean oversized ashtray and a small manila envelope.

Martha Strong, dragging on her cigarette, watched as Bree pulled a spiral tablet and a pen from her bag. "That bag is as big as you are," she said, with a smile

At less than a hundred pounds and a smidgen under five feet, Bree could hardly argue, but replied, "Tiny but mighty." She wrote the date and time on the lined page.

"You said my father helped you at one time. How was that?"

Martha Strong took a long drag on her cigarette, letting the smoke out slowly, tapping the ash into the tray. “A little over six years ago. Mike brought Melissa home. Around two in the morning.” She stared across the lawn to the street.

“And...”

Martha Strong shrugged. “She was at a party. I guess he saw her walking home alone and picked her up.”

“How old was she?”

“Thirteen... maybe fourteen.”

“Did you know she was out that late?”

Martha Strong’s eyes narrowed. “Of course.”

“So... I don’t understand. How did my father help you?” Bree asked.

“He was concerned that she might be in danger that late at night. I thought she was with friends.”

Bree nodded. “You are worried now or you wouldn’t have phoned...” Bree thought about adding *a dead man*, but let it pass. She raised her eyes to heaven and made a silent apology to her father.

Martha reached for the envelope. Her nail polish matched the pink of her roses. She pulled out a colored photograph. “High school graduation,” she said.

Melissa Strong’s naked shoulders revealed flawless skin. Her raven hair, pulled back over one ear, was styled just like her mother’s. Neon green eyes softened by eye shadow gazed seductively at the viewer. Her red mouth pouted teasingly for the camera.

“Wow,” Bree said.

“Beautiful,” Martha said, nodding approval at Bree’s response.

Provocative was what Bree had been thinking. “Why don’t you drive to New York? It’s only a few hours away,” Bree said.

Martha hesitated. “I don’t like highway driving. I can’t leave just now.”

“What about your husband?” Bree glanced at Martha’s naked left hand.

“Melissa’s father...a friend?”

“I’ve raised Mellie myself.”

“I think you should call the police. The New York police need to know she’s missing.”

“No police.”

“I don’t know any private investigators. But I can ask a friend of mine, a detective. He might know of someone. How about a detective from New York City?”

“No. I need someone I trust,” Martha replied.

“I’d love to help you...”

“I was hoping you’d say that,” Martha interrupted. “I’ll pay you. If you can just check her apartment. Maybe she met someone.”

“I don’t know,” Bree said.

Martha Strong placed her hand on Bree’s tablet. Bree inhaled the floral perfume as the woman leaned into her. “You’re Mike’s daughter.”

Bree thought the woman a bit dramatic, maybe crazy.

“Just go to New York for me. You’re a woman...young. You won’t attract attention. Tell them you’re Mellie’s sister.”

“Okay,” Bree said, taking the bait, her pride telling her she could do that. “I’m on my way to New York anyway. I’m in a wedding next week. Fittings and parties this weekend.”

Martha Strong nodded absently and lit another cigarette.

“Tell me about Melissa... height, weight. Any tattoos? Birthmarks? Friends? Phone number?” Bree asked.

Martha Strong sipped on her tea, smoked, and talked about her daughter. Bree wrote, glancing up from time to time to watch the woman’s hands shake as the caffeine and the nicotine went to work.

Finished, Bree flipped back through pages of notes. “I will need to get into her apartment.”

The screen door snapped shut as Martha Strong stepped into her home. Bree sipped the cool tea ‘til Martha returned with a letter authorizing her to go into Melissa’s apartment. Martha Strong’s name was on the lease. She agreed to phone the super and let him know that Bree was coming.

“I may need to talk with the police,” Bree said.

“No police. Once they get involved, it all turns to shit,” Martha said.

Up until then Martha Strong had been in control, methodical in her approach to her missing daughter.

“It didn’t turn to shit with my father,” Bree said. “I have a friend, a detective. He’s discreet. I’d like to involve him.”

“No.” The answer was firm.

Fifteen minutes later, Bree drove away from the manicured home with its manicured owner, wondering how Martha Strong came to call her father Mike after meeting him only once on police business. In addition to the letter of introduction, Martha had also given Bree ten one-hundred dollar bills, which she had pulled from the same envelope that held her daughter's picture. Martha Strong had been that confident that Bree would do as she asked.

Bree's cell phone rang.

"Bree," Tim Mangan said. "I'm going to be a while. We're booking someone. Let's leave first thing in the morning."

It took a second for Bree to reply, "I'm leaving now. I'll see you when you get there. Don't rush." Bree pushed End and turned off the phone just as Tim was saying, "no..."

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