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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

PATRICIA
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PATRICIA CORNWELL

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Epworth Heights Luddington, Michigan My Dearest Kay, I am sitting on the porch, staring out at Lake Michigan as a sharp wind reminds me I need to cut my hair. I am remembering when we were here last, both of us abandoning who and what we are for one precious moment in the history of our time. Kay, I need you to listen to me.

You are reading this because I am dead. When I decided to write it, I asked Senator Lord to deliver it to you in person in the early part of December, a year after my death. I know how hard Christmas has always been for you, and now it must be unbearable. Loving you was when my life began. Now that it has ended, your gift to me is to go on.

Of course you haven't dealt with a damn thing, Kay. You have sped like hell to crime scenes and done more autopsies than ever. You have been consumed by court and running the institute, with lecturing, worrying about Lucy, getting irritated with Marino, eluding your neighbors and fearing the night. You haven't taken a vacation or a sick day, no matter how much you've needed it.

It's time to stop dodging your pain and let me comfort you. Hold my hand in your mind and remember the many times we talked about death, never accepting that any disease or accident or act of violence has the power of absolute annihilation because our bodies are just the suits we wear. And we are so much more than that. That everything's going to be all right. I ask you to do one for me to celebrate a Kay. I want you to believe I am somehow aware of you as you read this, somehow looking after you, and life we've had that I

know will never end. Call Marino and Lucy. Invite them over for dinner tonight. Cook one of your famous meals for them and save a place for me.

1 love you forever, Kay, Benton 1

The late morning blazed with blue skies and the colors of fall, but none of it was for me. Sunlight and beauty were for other people now, my life stark and without song. I stared out the window at a neighbor raking leaves and felt helpless, broken and gone.

Benton's words resurrected every awful image I had repressed. I saw beams of light picking out heat-shattered bones in soggy trash and water. Shock rocked me again when confusing shapes turned into a scorched head with no features and clumps of sooty silver hair.

I was sitting at my kitchen table sipping hot tea that Senator Frank Lord had brewed for me. I was exhausted and light-headed from storms of nausea that had sent me fleeing to the bathroom twice. I was humiliated, because beyond all things I feared losing control, and I just had.

"I need to rake the leaves again," I inanely said to my old friend. "December sixth and it's like October. Look out there, Frank. The acorns are big. Have you noticed? Supposedly that means a hard winter, but it doesn't even look like we're going to have winter. I can't remember if you have acorns in Washington."

"We, do," he said. "If you can find a tree or two."

"Are they big? The acorns, I mean."

"I'll be sure to look, Kay."

I covered my face with my hands and sobbed. He got up from the table and came around to my chair. Senator Lord and I had grown up in Miami and had gone to school in the same archdiocese, although I had attended St. Brendan's High School only one year and long after he was there. Yet that somewhat removed crossing of paths was a sign of what would come.

When he was the district attorney, I was working for the Dade County Medical Examiner's Office and often testified in his cases. When he was elected a United States senator and then appointed the chairman of the

judiciary committee, I was the chief medical examiner of Virginia and he began calling on me to lend my voice in his fight against crime.

I was stunned when he called me yesterday to say he was coming to see me and had something important to deliver. I barely slept all night. I was devastated when he walked into my kitchen and slipped the simple white envelope out of a pocket of his suit. .

As I sat with him now, it made perfect sense that Benton would have trusted him this much. He knew Senator Lord cared deeply for me and would never let me down. How typical of Benton to have a plan that would be executed perfectly, even though he wasn't around to see it through. How typical of him to predict my behavior after his death and for every word of it to be true.

"Kay," Senator Lord said, standing over me as I wept in my chair, "I know how hard this must be and wish I could make it all go away. I think one of the hardest things I've ever done was promise Benton I would do this. I never wanted to believe this day would come, but it has and I'm here for you."

He fell silent, then added, "No one's ever asked me to do anything like this before, and I've been asked a lot of things."

"He wasn't like other people," I quietly replied as I willed myself to calm down. "You know that, Frank. Thank God you do."

Senator Lord was a striking man who bore himself with the dignity of his office. He had thick gray hair and intense blue eyes, was tall and lean and dressed, as was typical, in a conservative dark suit accented by a bold, bright tie, cuff links, pocket watch and stickpin., I got up from my chair and took a deep, shaky breath. I snatched several tissues from a box and wiped my face and nose.

"You were very kind to come here," I said to him.

"What else can I do for you?" he replied with a sad smile.

"You've done it all by being here. I can't imagine the trouble you've gone to. Your schedule and all."

"I must admit I flew in from Florida, and by the way, I checked on Lucy and she's doing great things down there," he said.

Lucy, my niece, was an agent for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, or ATF. Recently, she had been reassigned to the Miami field office, and I hadn't seen her for months.

"Does she know about the letter?" I asked Senator Lord.

"No," he answered, looking out the window at a perfect day. "I think that's your call to make. And she's feeling rather neglected by you, I might add."

"By me?" I said, surprised. "She's the one who can't be reached. At least I'm not undercover chasing gun traffickers and other persons of such fine character. She can't even talk to me unless she's at headquarters or on a pay phone."

"You're not easy to find, either. You've been elsewhere in your spirit since Benton died. Missing in action, and I don't even think you realize it," he said. "I know. I've tried to reach out to you, too, haven't I?"

Tears flooded my eyes again.

"And if I get hold of you, what do you tell me? Every-thing's fine. Just busy. Not to mention, you haven't come to see me once. Now and then in the old days, you even brought me some of your special soups. You haven't been taking care of those who love you. You haven't been taking care of yourself."

He had covertly glanced up at the clock several times now. I got up from my chair.

"Are you- heading back to Florida?" I asked in an unsteady voice.

"Afraid not. Washington," he said. "I'm on Face the Nation again. More of the same. I'm so disgusted by it all, Kay."

"I wish I could do something to help you," I said to him.

"It's dirty out there, Kay. If certain people knew I was here alone in your house with you, they'd start some vicious rumor about me. I'm sure of it."

"I wish you hadn't come here, then.."

"Nothing would have stopped me. And I shouldn't be railing on about Washington. You have enough to deal with."

"I'll vouch for your sterling character anytime," I said.

"It wouldn't do any good, if it came to that."

I walked him through the impeccable house I had designed, past fine furniture and art and the antique medical instruments I collected, and over bright rugs and hardwood floors. Everything was precisely to my taste but not at all the same as it had been when Benton was here. I paid no more attention to my home than I did to myself these days. I had become a heartless custodian of my life, and it was evident everywhere I looked.

Senator Lord noticed my briefcase open on the great room couch, and case files, mail and memos spilled over the glass coffee table, and legal pads on the floor. Cushions were askew, an ashtray dirty because I'd started smoking again. He didn't lecture me.

"Kay, do you understand I've got to have limited contact with you after this?" Senator Lord said. "Because of what I just alluded to."

"God, look at this place," I blurted out in disgust. "I just can't seem to keep up anymore."

"There've been rumors;" he cautiously went on. "I won't go into them. There have been veiled threats." Anger heated his voice. "Just because we're friends."

"I used to be so neat." I gave a heartbroken laugh. "Benton and I were always squabbling about my house, my shit. My perfectly appointed, perfectly arranged shit." My voice rose as grief and fury flared up higher than before. "If he rearranged or put something irt the wrong drawer . . . That's what happens when you hit middle age and have lived alone and had everything your own goddamn way."

"Kay, are you listening to me? I don't want you to feel I don't care if I don't call you very much, if I don't invite you up for lunch or to get your advice about some bill I'm trying to pass."

"Right now I can't even remember when Tony and I got divorced," I bitterly said. "What? Nineteen eighty-three? He left. So what? I didn't need him or anyone else who followed. I could make my world the way I wanted it, and I

did. My career, my possessions, my investments. And look."

I stood still. in the foyer and swept my hand over my beautiful stone house and all that was in it.

"So what? So fucking what?" I looked Senator Lord in the eye. "Benton could dump garbage in the middle of this fucking house! He could tear the goddamn place down! I just wish none of it had ever mattered, Frank!" I wiped away furious tears. "I wish I could do it over and never criticize him once about anything. I just want him here. Oh, God, I want him here. Every morning I wake up not remembering, and then it hits again and I can barely get out of bed."

Tears ran down my face. It seemed every nerve in my body had gone haywire.

"You made Benton very happy," Senator Lord said gently and with feeling. "You meant everything to him. He told me how good you were to him, how much you understood the hardships of his life, the awful things he had to see when he was working those atrocious,-cases; for the FBI. Deep down, I know you know that."

I took a deep breath and leaned against the door.

"And I know he would want you to be happy now, to have a better life. If you don't, then the end result of loving Benton Wesley will prove damaging and wrong, something that ruined your life. Ultimately, a mistake. Does that make sense?"

"Yes," I said. "Of course. I know exactly what he would -want right now. I know what I want. I don't want it like this. This is almost more than I can bear. At times I've thought I would snap, just fall apart and end up on a ward somewhere. Or maybe in my own damn morgue."

"Well, you won't." He took my hand in both of his. "If there's anything I know about you, it's that you will prevail against all odds. You always have, and this stretch of your journey happens to be the hardest, but there's a better road ahead. I promise, Kay"

I hugged him hard.

"Thank you," I whispered. "Thank you for doing this, for not leaving it in some file somewhere, not remembering, not bothering."

"Now, you'll call me if you need me?" he pretty much ordered, as I opened the front door. "But you'll keep in mind what I said and promise you won't feel ignored."

"I understand."

"I'm always there if you need me. Don't forget that. My office always knows where I am."

I watched the black Lincoln drive off, then went into my great room and built a fire, although it wasn't cold enough to need one. I was desperate for something warm and alive to fill the emptiness left by Senator Lord's leaving. I read Benton's letter again -and again and heard his voice in my mind.

I envisioned him with sleeves rolled up, veins prominent in strong forearms, his firm, elegant hands holding the silver Mont Blanc fountain pen I had given him for no special reason other than that it was precise and pure like him. Tears would not stop, and I held up the page with his engraved initials so his writing would not smear.

His penmanship and the way he expressed himself had always been deliberate and spare, and I found his words a comfort and a torment as I obsessively studied them, dissecting, excavating for one more hint of meaning or tone. At intervals, I almost believed he was cryptically telling me his death wasn't real, was part of an intrigue, a plan, something orchestrated by the FBI, the CIA, God only knew. Then the truth returned, bringing its hollow chill to my heart. Benton had been tortured and murdered. DNA, dental charts, personal effects had verified that the unrecognizable remains were his.

I tried to imagine how I would honor his request tonight and didn't see how I could. It was ludicrous to think of Lucy's flying to Richmond, Virginia, for dinner. I picked up the phone and tried to reach her anyway, because that was what Benton had asked me to do. She called me back on her .portable phone about fifteen minutes later.

"The office said you're looking for me. What's going on?" she said cheerfully.

"It's hard to explain," I began. "I wish I didn't always have to go through your field office to get to you."

"Me, too."

"And I know I can't say much . . ." I started to get upset again.

"What's wrong?" she cut in.

"Benton wrote a letter. . ."

"We'll talk another time." She interrupted again, and I understood, or at least I assumed I did. Cell phones were not secure.

"Turn in right there," Lucy said to someone. "I'm sorry," she got back to me. "We're making a pit stop at Los Bobos to get a shot of colada."

"A what?"

"High-test caffeine and sugar in a shot glass."

"Well, it's something he wanted me to read now, on this day. He wanted you . . . Never mind. It all seems so silly." I fought to sound as if I were held together just fine.

"Gotta go;" Lucy said to me.

"Maybe you can call later?"

"Will do;" she said in her same irritating tone.

"Who are you with?" I prolonged the conversation because I needed her voice, and I didn't want to hang up with the echo of her sudden coolness in my ear.

"My psycho partner," she said.

"Tell her hi."

"She says hi," Lucy said to her partner, Jo, who was Drug Enforcement Agency, or DEA.

They. worked together on a High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area, or