

IN THE SHADOW OF STONE

A NOVEL

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## CHAPTER 1

When Jack Fontaine's sister asked him to fulfill her dying wish, he agreed without a moment's hesitation. It was a simple mission; one he thought would cost him nothing.

"I know we haven't been close, Jack," she said, looking so deeply into his eyes he felt she was grabbing his thoughts. "But I also know that you're the one person who can do this for me."

Except for the dim light above her head, the hospital room was cast in silhouette, a pervading darkness swallowing the numerous get well cards taped to the wall. Jack studied her face, trying to remember how she'd looked before. Over the past year her eyes had fallen deep into their sockets, creating a skeleton-like shadow above her cheeks. The skin of her face was stretched thin, the outline of her cheekbones deforming her face. Her mouth, where there'd once been voluptuous lips, was now a thin slit; when trying to smile, she looked more like a corpse than a living being.

Jack touched the back of his hand to her forehead, wiping away the mist of perspiration. "Of course, Dana," he said, his voice tight with emotion, "anything."

She turned her head away from him and looked to the door. A tear slid down the side of her face into the deep wrinkles lining her neck. She turned back

to her brother. "You're very successful." She licked her dehydrated lips and tried to swallow. "And so organized. That's why I'm asking you to do this for me."

"Organized?" Jack forced a smile. "I think you mean obsessive compulsive, don't you?"

Her lips tightened into a faint smirk. "You're not compulsive," she whispered, turning away slightly.

*Just obsessive,* Jack thought, fighting himself not to read too deeply into her omission of words.

As though she sensed his struggle, Dana lifted her hand from the soaked bed sheet and let it fall on his arm. "You're great at everything you do, Jack. You know how to take control over any situation. That's why I know you'll be able to do what I need you to."

This was the first time in recent memory he'd received a compliment from her. For as long as he could remember she'd been so judgmental, so high and mighty, that he didn't realize she noticed his positive traits, let alone his success. He wanted to take hold of her thinning hair and pull it hard. "Why couldn't you tell me this before?" he wanted to scream, "while there was still time to rebuild our relationship?" Instead he continued wiping her forehead.

Her tongue slowly edged through her teeth to try to moisten her lips. "I made a DVD for Jenna," she whispered, "and I want you to keep it safe until her eighteenth birthday. I'd give the DVD to her father, but I know he'd either lose it

or forget about it." She held his eyes with hers. "You know I love Glen, but there are some things I can't trust him with. He'll be a good father to Jenna, I'm sure of that. But I can't expect him to hold onto a DVD for ten years ... it just won't happen. And I don't know if Mom and Dad will even be around in ten years." She stopped talking and looked at the ceiling. The realization that she was going to die before their parents struck them both at the same time. Her eyelids swelled with tears. "I know you'll be able to do this for me."

She blinked away her tears and cleared her throat. "I hid the DVD in the piano bench a few days before I came to the hospital. No one looks in there. I don't even think anyone realizes the bench opens. No one except you." She struggled with her tongue to keep it from sticking to the roof of her mouth.

"I got it," Jack said, taking the small cup of water from the nightstand and bringing it to her mouth. Unable to swallow the tepid liquid, she swirled it around her mouth and spit into the cup with a look of embarrassment. "It's okay," he whispered, the emotion holding back his full voice. "And I'll take care of the DVD for you."

She let her head drop back onto the pillow and closed her eyes. "One last thing," she said, her eyes still closed. "The DVD is for Jenna's eyes only. No matter what, she should be the only one to see it - and preferably alone on her eighteenth birthday, okay?"

She took a long, heavy breath and within seconds was in a deep sleep – without warning or effort. Jack placed the cup of water back on the nightstand and glanced at the clock. It was 3:30 AM and he was starting to feel the hour. He strolled over to the window, opened the blinds, and pressed his forehead against the cool glass. Stars glittered in the black sky, reminding him of the nights he and Dana had camped out in their backyard as children. “Star light, star bright,” they’d say in unison, “first star I see tonight. I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight.” Staring at the brightest star in the sky they’d make their wish. Back then, Jack would always wish for friends. Dana, he figured, probably wished for a new baseball bat or catcher’s mitt.

As she lay in the cold hospital bed on the edge of death, Jack wondered what Dana had wished for as an adult. He was certain it wasn’t this.

The lights of Boston’s skyscrapers blurred through his tears. Jack closed his eyes to squeeze out the teardrops so he could feel them on his face. He needed to know he was crying, to recognize the emotions he’d hidden for so long. He wanted to let everything out, cry until his eyes swelled, wiping the tears on his sleeve until the white cotton fabric was soaked. But only a single tear fell, the room so deathly quiet, he heard it hit the floor.

He picked the brightest star in the sky and made his wish, painfully aware he was already too late.