Chapter Two

by Shayne Huxtable

*Lancaster Manor*

*Inglewood Bay*

*Rhode Island*

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Ashleigh Blackthorne wiped her cheeks, sniffed back loose snot to clear her nose and glanced down at the freshly dug hole in the side yard west of her family’s manicured front lawn—her best friend, Danielle, gave her a one-armed squeeze.

 “You have to admit Ash he stunk and his breath was…”—she made a gagging sound.

 She shrugged. “He was all that was left—”

 “Oh for God’s sake! Pull yourself together.” Veronica sneered as she drew long on her cigarette. “I need a drink”—thick smoke swirled about her mouth—“Anyone else?—Preston?”

 Ashleigh glanced at her brother—he eyed Danielle. “Ahhh…later.”

 “Well God damn then I’ll drink by myself.” She flicked her cigarette like a crotch-scratching biker—a flash of her not-so-gentrified upbringing—it landed on the coffin as she wobbled away, her spiked heels aerating the lawn.

 “Charles go make sure your wife doesn’t get into dad’s reserve Brandy,” Preston said.

 He exhaled a soft grunt. “I’m sorry Ash I know you loved him.” She nodded—he looked weary, dark circles underlined his eyes. He gave her a peck on the forehead then turned and trod after his wife.

 Ashleigh wiped her cheek. “If only I’d kenneled him—he hates…hated thunderstorms.”

 “Ash stop beating yourself up,” Preston said as he walked around the mound of dirt. “We were all preoccupied…beside who’d have thought he’d jump through glass”—he took Danielle’s hand—she eyed him. “Come on—leave Franco to fill it in”—he glanced at their gardener—“Right Franco?”

 The old man nodded.

 Ashleigh tossed a flower onto the box. “Bye Banjo.”

 “Get another dog if you want,” Preston said as the three of them strolled back toward the house—he peered at her. “Maybe not a St. Bernie this time.”

 “Nah. No point. He was dad’s dog—and dad’s not coming home—is he?”

 Preston looked away. “Don’t know Ash. I really don’t know.”

 “Be weird though,” Danielle said, “if he just turned up out of the blue.”

 Preston snapped his head around. “What the hell are you talking about?”

 “Nothing—I’m just saying it’d be weird.”

 He veered away from them. “I’m going to check on the window repair.”

 Ashleigh watched her brother stalk off toward the back of the house—*hiding something Preston*—she narrowed her watery eyes—*or she’s got something on you*.

 “He’s been in some sort of a snit all morning,” Danielle said. “I swear Ash if I didn’t know better I’d say his conscience is eating at him. I think he’s going to dump me.”

 “Downers and booze—nothing changes.”

 Danielle sighed. “Yeah I know.”

They approached the wide-swung french doors leading to the family room.

“So why don’t you dump him first?”

 They stopped in the entryway.

 “For God’s sake Veronica! Give it here!” Charles’ tried snatching something from her hands. “Give it here now!”

 “What’s going on?” Ashlee yelled as she moved between the settees toward the bar.

 Charles looked wild-eyed. “She’s burning holes in it!”

 “In wha—Is that the photo?”

 “God damned right it’s the photo”—Veronica sounded loaded—“the God damned photo from your God damned worthless father.” She pressed her cigarette to it, smoke rose, a bright flare appeared.

 “You stupid…” Ashleigh shoved Charles back. “Let me handle her.”

He looked furious, his face flushed but he backed away. “I’ll be in dad’s office.”

 She waited, listening for his quick-stepped bolt up the stairs then turned to Veronica—she grinned with heavy eyelids, took a long pull on a bottle of Vodka—Ashleigh shuddered as she stepped closer. It was a good thing Charles wanted no kids.

 *“Give me that photo or I’ll tell Charles what you and Preston were up to on the desk.”*

Veronica rocked slightly, she closed her eyes as she drew on the cigarette. “You can’t prove anything.”

 “I have it all on my phone. If Charles sees it he’ll divorce you and you get nothing. Don’t you have a fidelity prenup?”—she held out her hand—“Give me the photo.”

Veronica tossed it, it sailed to the carpet. “You were always a mean girl Ashleigh. It runs in the Lancaster family.”

 She bolted up. “You know nothing about my mother’s family.”

 “I know your father’s fortune saved their asses.”

 “Remind me again which gutter Charles found you in?”

 Veronica reared back against the bar with a glare. “You think you’re so much better than me”—she smirked—“I could tell you stories about your father—make the devil cry.”

 Ashleigh squeezed her hand to a fist. Punching her in her painted mouth would feel so… She took a long breath, leaned in to Veronica—her eyes rounded—*is that fear?* “You disgust me.” She turned away, her temples thumped, and as she marched back to the french doors she realized she was a moving target.

 She stepped outside, blew a long breath. “For a second there I wondered if I’d get that bottle in the back of the head.”

 Danielle frowned. “What was that about?”

 “Usual stuff”—she glanced back through the doors—“So I gave her a warning shot—across the bow.”

“I think it worked. She looks gutted.”

She glanced at her friend. “She sunk her ship a long time ago.”

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 Preston stood staring at Edward’s portrait. “You old bastard”—he lifted his glass—“may you rot in whatever hole you’re hiding in.”

 “Who you talking to?”

 He swung around. “No one.”

 Charles strolled to the desk, planted his backside on it. Preston eyed him. “What d’you make of last night?”

 He shrugged. “Nothing. Father left a photo of us taken aboard ‘The Emerald Skye’ the day before it sunk. If it’s supposed to be some cryptic message—I don’t get it”—he unfolded his arms, shoved his hands in his front pockets—“Liebovitz was shocked though. He was green by time he left.”

 Charles smiled. “He’s spent the last five years waiting for payday. God knows how long it’ll be now.”

 He nodded. “I spoke with an attorney—”

 Charles jerked off the desk. “You what!”

 “Just listen”—he strolled to the couch and sat. “I flew to New York last week—had lunch with an old friend from Yale. He said first thing is to have dad declared dead in absentia—”

 “It hasn’t been seven years Preston.”

 “I know but he says if the family consensus is to go ahead and declare him dead—that’ll weigh heavily in the courts’ deliberation —”

 “Deliberation?” Ashleigh said from the doorway. “What deliberation?”

 He glanced at Charles whose face’d flushed.

 “Preston spoke with a lawyer,” Charles said heading to the liquor cabinet. “Says we should consider having dad declared dead.”

 “What!” She glared at him as she marched into the room. “You ass.”

Danielle strolled in after Ashleigh—he tapped the couch for her to sit by him.

“When did you think you’d include me in this conversation?” Ashleigh asked as she rummaged through a desk draw.

“Look Ash it’s not that you’re excluded,” he said wrapping his arm about Dani’s shoulder, she snuggled against him.

“Then what is it Preston?” She slammed the draw shut and held up the recording device.

He tensed—a small tremor rippled through his belly.

“Because I’m damn sure after you hear this”—she placed it on the edge of the desk—“you’ll have nothing else to say—*for a change.*” She pushed play.

He stared at her—she folded her arms and stared back. Charles turned away and poured a second glass.

 Preston blew a long breath puffing out his cheeks and lips then unhooked his arm from Dani and heaved off the couch—Ashleigh was up to her ‘daddy’s girl’ tricks. God he was tired of this bullshit. If he could get out of this family with a few million—he would, and never look back. He needed a drink too.

He glanced at the silent recorder as he strode to the liquor cabinet, quirked a brow, leveled his gaze on his sister. “Did you erase it? Dad’s final message”—he chuckled, flicked his fingers in the air—“poof.”

“It was here last night”—her voice rose in pitch as she grabbed the recorder. “One of you erased it!” She hauled her arm back.

He ducked—it hit the wall by the door.

“God damn you all!”

Veronica leaned around the doorway. “Safe to come in?” No one answered. She weaved slightly as she crossed to the booze. “I’ll have one of those.”

“Haven’t you had enough?” Charles said picking up Ashleigh’s recorder.

Preston handed her a glass, poured one for himself and drink in hand he moved to the middle of the room.

“What I was telling Charles”—he glanced at Ashleigh, she looked on the verge of tears—“was that having father declared dead in absentia would free us to pursue a fair division of the estate.”

“What would happen if he showed up one day?” Danielle asked. They all swung around, she swallowed. “…alive I mean.”

“That’s about as likely to happen as him flying in here on a broomstick,” Veronica said then chucked down her drink—she held up her glass. “Oh look I need a refill.”

“It’s very sweet of you to believe Edward is still alive, Dani,” Charles said as he crossed the room turning the recorder over in his hand—he stopped behind the desk. “But Preston has a point. Maybe it is time to move on.” He tossed the device into a trash can. “I for one agree.”

“Bravo Charles,” Preston saluted him with his sloshing brandy, and glanced up at their father’s portrait. “The old bastard has manipulated us for too many years.” He looked around. “Are we in agreement?” God it was good to say the words, almost relief. Charles lifted his glass, Ashleigh took a long breath, gave a small nod.

He eyed the portrait—their father sitting rigid, square-jawed, eyes ‘looking to the future’ as he liked to say in his obscenely loud, baritone voice. “To Edward—whether you’re breathing or rotting in a grave—today we liberate ourselves.”

He hauled back and with a gravelly bellow hurled his glass at Edward’s head. It shattered against the painting—glass rebounded into the air, brandy splattered—shrieks and yelled curses filled the room. He ignored the commotion, watched the liquor run down the painting like large, ugly tears and drip onto the carpet. *What the hell…* He squinted, felt a punch to his arm.

“God damn it Preston!”—Ashleigh’s voice. “That’s a valuable painting you shit head!” Something dangled from the frame.

He edged closer. *A chain.* *“What in...?”*

“Preston!” He blinked, looked around. Charles glared at him. “Was that really

necessary?”

 “Maybe…I dunno look at this.” He turned back to the painting, reached for the chain and tugged. It came away—he held it up as he turned to the room. “Anyone?”

 “Is that a key?” Ashleigh said reaching for it.

 “Sure is,” he said with a nod and let her take it.

 She turned it over. “Wait! Look there’s an inscription. Oh shit. I know this.” She raced around the desk, opened and slammed the draws.

“Whoa! Calm down Ash,” Charles said from the other side.

She looked up. “Here it is”—and ripped the sticky note from the pad slapping it down on the desk in front of him. She tossed the key to Preston. “Read the inscription.”

“I.T.A.T.B.T.S.”

“That’s what’s written on the paper,” Charles said swinging around. Veronica chuckled in her glass as she strolled to Preston, and glanced at the key.

“God—and you lot talk about my family.” She turned away to the windows giving Dani the once over.

“You ever see that key before?” he asked passing it to Charles who turned it over.

“Never. No markings other than the inscription.” He rubbed the back of his neck, blew a long breath. “This day’s getting stranger by the minute.”

“You’re closer to the truth than you realize darling,” Veronica said holding a lace curtain back. “Know anyone who drives a pink Audi?”

“A Pink Lady?” Dani said and laughed—she glanced at Preston. “You know—Grease—the Pink Ladies.”

“Thank you Eliza Doolittle,” Veronica said and turned back to the window. “Oh. My. God. How utterly delicious. It appears your mother has returned to her nest.