

CHAPTER ONE

I was at the small, round, glass-topped dining table the previous tenant of my apartment had left behind when my cell phone rang. My breakfast dish to one side, a styrofoam cup of Dunkin Donuts coffee sat in front of me. I looked at the caller ID. It read, "Worth, Alan." I picked it up on the third ring and said, "Michael Drayton, Private Investigations."

"Michael? It's Julia Worth."

"Hi, Julia," I said. "What can I do for you?"

The cigarette I wanted was still in the pack, so I reached across the table for it.

"The usual," she said. "Find Alan for me."

I said, "Uh-huh," and crooked my finger inside the partly crumpled pack. I felt around, and then shook the last cigarette from the dark corners down to the opening. The *I Ching* says that persistence furthers.

"You must be getting tired of us by now," she said while birds argued in the tree outside the window behind me. "It's a strange game we have to play."

"What time do you need him?" I asked as I lit and inhaled.

"Let's see," she said. "It's formal. Charity. I guess I'll need him by about five."

"Five it is," I said. I got up and walked back to the second bedroom I used as an office and stood just inside the doorway. Through the windows I could see small bits of Pawtucket: the edges of a small, drab, brick apartment building on the other side of Walcott Street and part of a house next to it and one beyond. The tall, lonely lights at McCoy Stadium two blocks away stood out against a hazy blue sky. The windows glistened with a summer sunshine that subdivided the room into plats of light and shadow.

"Maybe some day he won't have to hide," she said.

"Maybe," I replied. "You never know." I took a drag of my smoke and exhaled in a sigh.

"I hate it that we keep you from real work," she said.

"I'm not busy today," I said. "It's no problem."

"Still," she said, "it bothers me."

"I can get him earlier if you need me to," I offered.

"No," she said. "He's better off wherever he goes. If he came home early, he'd just drive me crazy."

"I'll have him there for five, then."

"Yes," she said. "That's best."

I said, "I'll see you then."

"This one's important," she said. "Thank you. You really do us a favor."

I said, "Don't worry about it."

"I'll see you at five."

I said, "Bye." I hung up the phone and sighed and felt the breath as it left. My lungs ached around the edges. It was time to quit. The ashtray on my desk overflowed, but I stubbed out the one I was smoking in it anyway and a few flakes of ash flitted out and dotted a corner of a half-finished expense report.

I went to the kitchen, got a glass, filled it with water, and sipped. The water was cool and necessary. It soaked through me, the coolness of it spreading like the far edges of a wave that had rolled itself across a beach. I returned to the office and the window. The sunlight was bleaching the outside world shades of white and yellow.

My two most unusual usual clients were Julia Worth and her father, William Briarbrook. Briarbrook had been one of my first clients and was easily the wealthiest. He lived

in a Victorian mansion that was set into the side of College Hill in Providence, one of a line of such buildings that dominated that part of Benefit Street. Although lacking the size and envy-inspiring grandeur of the famous "cottages" in Newport, it was still an impressive place, brown and forbidding. It had been built in a slightly earlier era than the ones in Newport, a portion of The Gilded Age in which the rich preferred inspiring fear to inspiring desire, a goal accomplished with stolid stateliness and a spiky wrought-iron fence.

It was late summer the first time I met him. The dog days were evolving into early Fall, and college students were in bloom all over the East Side. A river of them flowed around me as I walked to the mansion from where I parked my car, awash in their own innocence, earnestness, and youth. They moved individually and in groups, boys with spotted faces and sidelong glances and girls with too-short dresses and unchaperoned legs. One clump discussed their living arrangements, another trio their class schedules. A rueful nostalgia crept over me as I crested the hill, a shadow cast of the tang and folly of youth's certainty and the ferocity of its beliefs.

I bypassed the servant's entrance on my way down Power Street and rounded the corner onto Benefit and let myself

in through the front gate. The front door was a fair distance from the gate; a wide concrete walkway bisected symmetrical segments of lawn and led to a steep and needlessly wide flight of steps that rose to the front door, which was black and comically small compared to the steps that led to it.

I rang the bell and waited. The sun reflected off the whiteness of the doorway and the concrete of the top step, cooking me slightly. A car passed behind me on Benefit Street, its brakes squeaking as it reached the stop sign. I stood and I waited.

When the door opened, a knife of a man appeared from behind it. Everything about him was sharp and narrow. His nose and his chin mirrored the creases in his pants, and the creases looked sharp enough to split an onion. "May I help you?" he said.

"My name's Michael Drayton," I said.

"And why is that important?" he asked.

"I'm a detective," I said. "John Dingle referred me."

"Ah," he replied and backed into the entryway while opening the door enough to let me in. "I am Eric Meerschaum," he said. "I'm Mr. Briarbrook's personal assistant."

"Hi," I said as I stepped into the foyer. "Nice to know you." I stepped out of the sunshine into the enveloping dark. Meerschaum pushed the door closed behind me, and the world of light was shut away.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust, and I took a couple of hesitant steps through the foyer while they did. By the time I could see clearly and easily, I had emerged into a hallway that looked big enough to be used as a landing strip. It was paneled in two shades of dark wood in a sort of depressed Tudor style, and much of the paneling was coated with original paintings by people I'd heard of. Long, heavy sideboards, littered with expensive baubles, covered up the rest of the wall. A wide staircase curled away from the hall and over and around it to a landing on the next floor up.

Eric Meerschaum wafted past me. He turned his head ever-so-slightly in my direction as soon as I was an obstacle overcome and said, "This way." He never broke stride and was several paces ahead of me by the time I could start to follow. He was waifishly thin, but not tall. He walked quickly, taking long steps, and his arms swung loosely at his sides. His clothes were formally informal and loose. Black was the dominant hue. His hair

was short and carefully trimmed. The perimeter at the back was rounded and uniform at the outskirts of his skull.

He bypassed the stairs and a couple of open doorways on either side and followed the hallway to its conclusion, which was a dead end. Once arrived, he opened the door of a huge armoire and gestured for me to step inside.

I stopped and looked at the armoire and then him.

He just nodded. "Yes," he said. "Even though everyone who wants to see him has to go through here, he still thinks it's a secret."

I said, "What's the point in being rich if you can't indulge your fantasies?"

"I wish I knew," he said. "I wish I knew."

I stepped into the piece of furniture and found that the back was missing and a doorway stood in its place. Beyond the doorway was a large, curving staircase that descended into a cavernous office. I sidled down a couple of steps and surveyed the layout.

It was a huge room, maybe 30 feet long and almost as wide. The outside wall was mostly windows, and you could see the entire skyline and history of Providence from its founding at the foot of the hill, across downtown past City Hall, to the immigrant hills on the other side. Black built-in bookshelves lined the far wall and the wall to my

right, and the number of volumes neatly arranged in each must have numbered in the thousands. The spines of the books perched on the edges of the shelves like Olympic divers preparing to leap.

The remaining wall was dominated by a full-size bar, black and neat.

The rest of the room was a sea of red carpet dominated by an archipelago of furniture in its middle. The main island of the group was a large flat oak desk that was stained a rich reddish-brown. The flat surface was covered by drifts and dunes of books and papers, magazines and files. Pens and pencils were scattered about it, driftwood on a beach of reading material.

Behind the desk was a black leather swivel chair with a tall, imposing winged back like the ramparts of a castle in an old horror movie. The chair surrounded and dwarfed its occupant, a small, bald old man whose pate was the reddest I had ever seen. He was reading a newspaper of the type that bored shoppers peruse at the supermarket checkout counter. Large, lurid headlines concerning the failing marriage of a starlet and an old favorite's courage in facing down inevitable death were easily discernible even from my perch on the stairs. Meerscham swept past me like

a showgirl coming down a staircase and came to a stop on the last step. He cleared his throat.

The tabloid dropped about three inches and a pair of black pupils crouched behind silver-framed glasses glared up at him.

"What do you want?" Briarbrook's voice was high and tight, like a brush-back pitch.

"A Mr. Dayton to see you," Meerschaum replied.

"Drayton," I corrected. And then a little louder for Briarbrook's benefit, "Michael Drayton."

The tabloid dropped some more, and I was treated to his full visage. The whole face was bloated and round and red. A scowl hung on it like a wreath on a door. The roundness was echoed in his glasses and his nose, although the nose was even rounder and redder than the flesh that lay behind it. His lips were full and liquidy. A bloated tongue wiped between them to remove some excess spittle, and he stared for a moment, first at Meerschaum and then at me. "What's he here for?" he finally asked.

"Your lawyer sent me," I said. "John Dingle?"

He laid the tabloid on the desk. "What for?" he asked.

I said, "A job."

He slowly moved his chair back and pushed himself out of it, using the arms for leverage. It wasn't an easy job for him, and he tried to mask the strain with a measured approach and a thousand-yard stare.

Standing he wasn't a great deal taller than he had been sitting, and his body continued the bloated roundness introduced by his face. He made his way around the desk with arthritic grace, supporting himself by using his right hand as a kind of crutch against the hard surface of the desk itself. When he reached the corner of the desk closest to me, he stopped and gestured in my direction.

"Let me see you," he said.

I stepped down out of the shadows of the stairs and around and past Meerschaum, who was stuck on the last step. I stopped a few feet from the desk.

"Come here!" he barked. "Where I can see you."

I took another two strides closer. The blue veins in his nose stood out against the crimson that surrounded them. He circumnavigated me at a hobble and looked me over with the earnestness of a judge at a dog show.

He had circled me once and stopped inches in front of me and looked up my nose. He asked, "What are you? A gardener?"

I looked down on him. "You have your attorney send you gardeners?"

"I don't know what goes through his mind," he snapped. "What are you, then?"

"I'm a detective," I said. "I'm the one that John Dingle recommended."

"Good," he said as he eyed me up-and-down one more time. "You'd make a lousy gardener. Hands are too soft." He looked over at Meerschaum and waved his hand in the general direction of someplace else. "You're not needed now, Eric."

Meerschaum's eyes widened slightly. "Well, I just have mountains to do, anyway. Mountains!" He turned on his heels and marched up the stairs, muttering. He and his monologue disappeared into the darkness that shrouded the doorway.

Briarbrook watched Meerschaum leave and then relaxed a bit against the desk. "Can you keep a secret?" he asked.

"Sure," I said.

"Me, too," he replied and turned and started limping himself back around to the chair. He waved his hand in the air and said, "Take a seat! Take a seat!" toward the far wall. The options available were either of two burgundy leather guest chairs that faced the desk. A small round

wooden table separated them. The chair on the left was closer. I sat there.

He slowly lowered himself into his winged back devil chair, and I began to appreciate how profound his understanding was of the theater of desks and chairs. He knew how to position himself, and how to use the desk as a prop. The tall, dark back of his chair immediately put the occupant of either guest chair at a disadvantage. It towered over them and made them keenly aware of how little back their own chair had. And there are times when you feel the need for as much back as you can get ahold of.

He folded his newspaper into a jumbled half and held it on the desk in front of him, grasping and kneading the folded edge.

"What's it going to cost me," he said, "to have you stay here whenever I'm away?"

"You want me to house-sit for you?" I asked.

"Security," he said. "I want security. So? How much?"

"Around the clock?"

"That's right. If I'm not here, you are."

"That's going to cost me other clients," I said.

He leaned in and gave me a hard stare. "What's it going to take?" he asked. "Five hundred, a thousand dollars a day?"

I said, "Five hundred's about right."

He leaned back against the chair and made a pyramid with his chubby fingers in front of his double chin. "How do I know I can trust you?" he asked.

"You don't," I said. "It's like Tinkerbelle. All you can do is believe."

"Do you drink?"

"Some."

"Smoke?"

"Only a pack-and-a-half a day."

"Gamble?"

"Not really."

"Why not?"

"I don't like the odds."

"I don't mind you eating here, but no visitors."

"Well, I don't mind non sequiturs, but they sank the Titanic."

He struggled up out of the chair and reached a flaccid claw in my direction. I shook it and worked to maintain the fine balance between giving him a firm grip and

possibly crushing the fragile bones of his hand like a bag of oyster crackers.

He gingerly lowered himself back in his seat and said, "Now that that's done—" He felt around the underside of the edge of his desk and then looked toward the doorway at the top of the stairs. I followed his gaze over my right shoulder and watched the door swing open. Eric Meerschaum appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Nice trick," I said, turning back to my host.

"I have a buzzer under the desk here." He demonstrated again how he felt around under the lip of the desk.

I said, "I figured you were either pushing a button or retrieving gum."

Meerschaum's footsteps clattered down the stairs behind me, sounding like a horse at a cantor. Briarbrook spoke before he had the chance to reach the desk.

"Get Mr. Drayhorse a drink," he said.

"It's Drayton," I said. "And I probably shouldn't while I'm on the clock. And I am on the clock."

"Nonsense!" he replied with a dismissive wave of the hand. "We need to solemnize our arrangement. You strike me as a whiskey man. Am I right?"

"Irish whiskey," I offered. "Straight up."

"You know mine," he said to Meerschaum as he waved him toward the bar. "And make yourself a sloe gin fizz or whatever the hell it is you like."

Meerschaum stopped and glared at him. "It's a vodka martini, and you know it."

I said, "Unless you use an onion instead of an olive. Then it's a vodka Gibson."

Briarbrook nodded his head sagaciously. "He's right, you know."

Meerschaum smiled a Borgia smile and then went to the bar. Briarbrook asked me if I knew how to make a Gimlet, which I didn't. Glasses and bottles clinked and clanked from behind me and to the left. Briarbrook stared absently at a space on the floor behind the table that was next to me. I waited for my drink.

Ice was scooped into a glass. A shaker shook. At least once, I heard the gulp of a liquor bottle topped with a pourer being upended. I looked out the window. The glass and concrete of the Hospital Trust Bank Building shimmered behind the spire of the first Baptist church in North America, one shrine in the shadow of another.

Meerschaum circled around me, the drinks balanced on a filigreed silver tray. He served Briarbrook first and set a highball glass in front of him. It looked like scotch

and water. Meerschaum then came around and set my drink on the table next to me and put his beside it. I glanced at him and our eyes met. The Borgia smile returned. I flashed a friendly grin.

Meerschaum returned the silver tray to the bar and then took the right-hand guest chair.

Briarbrook raised his glass in my direction. "To new associations," he said.

From that point on, I never saw him. Eric would send me an email at the beginning of each month setting out what days, if any, I would be needed. I had my own key, my own room, my own routine. Usually, I just stayed overnight. It never went past four nights in a row. Twice he had me investigate individuals he was doing business with. Both were inventors. One appeared to have a drinking problem. The other had a very elaborate model railroad set up in his basement. The drinker lived in Southern California, the railroad man near St. Louis. I filed my report in each case and never heard about them again.

A year later, Julia called me. Her father referred her to me. Her husband had developed a habit of disappearing for days at a time. She didn't think he was a drinker or a philanderer, but she needed to know for sure. I followed him loosely for a couple of weeks before he went

to an address he hadn't been to before and stayed there.
It turned out that he wasn't a drunk, and he wasn't a
roué. He was something completely different.

He was a writer.