

A winter scene with snow-covered trees and a red park bench. The background is a soft-focus forest of bare trees covered in snow, with small white sparkles scattered throughout. In the foreground, a red park bench with a black metal frame is partially covered in snow. To the left, a small table and two chairs are also visible, partially obscured by the snow and the bench.

Mary Campisi

A Family Affair

Real
families
aren't always the
ones you know about...

When Christine Blacksworth's larger-than-life father is killed on an icy road in Magdalena, New York, a hundred miles from the 'getaway' cabin he visited every month, she discovers a secret that threatens everything she's always held to be true. Her father has another family which includes a mistress and a daughter. Determined to uncover the truth behind her father's secret life, Christine heads to Magdalena, prepared to hate the people who have caused her to question everything she thought she knew about her father. But what she finds is a woman who understands her, a half sister who cherishes her, and a man who could love her if she'll let him. The longer she's around them, the more she questions which family is the real one.

A FAMILY AFFAIR

BY
MARY CAMPISI

He sat in the dark, staring at the slit of moon illuminating the small of her back. She was asleep, the slow, methodic rise and fall of the chenille spread taking her dreams away from him, safe, protected while he hung caught between sleep and wakefulness, dark and light, too afraid to close his eyes lest he miss these last few hours with her. It was always like this, the dread mixing with the longing, pulling at him, shredding his sanity.

Perhaps, this month, he'd find the strength, merge past with present. He fell back against the soft cushion of the wing-backed chair, closed his eyes. Perhaps this month...

Table of Contents

[Dedication](#)
[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Chapter 22](#)
[Chapter 23](#)
[Chapter 24](#)
[Chapter 25](#)
[Chapter 26](#)
[Chapter 27](#)
[Chapter 28](#)
[Chapter 29](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[The End](#)

[Excerpt from Pulling Home, by Mary Campisi](#)

[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)

[About the Author](#)

[The Story Behind the Story](#)

[Other Books by Mary Campisi:](#)

Dedication

To my children,
Danielle, Nicole, and Alexis,
and my stepchildren, T.J. and Laura—
for all you are today and
all you will become...

Chapter 1

Christine Blacksworth scanned the jagged red and black lines on the computer screen, one crossing over the other, peaking, sliding back, inching forward again. She glanced at her watch. It would take at least fifteen minutes to run comparisons, ten more to analyze them, and another five to make recommendations. If she started right now, she'd be done in half an hour...the twenty minute drive would put her at her parents' house around 7:25 p.m. Twenty-five minutes late for her father's welcome home dinner.

Unacceptable. Her mother planned these gatherings with such precision that walking in even ten minutes late would upset the entire evening not to mention what it would do to Gloria Blacksworth's emotional state. Christine rubbed the back of her neck. Twenty-seven should be old enough to pick up the phone and tell her mother she'd be late, or not be there at all. She'd tried that once a year and a half ago when she and Connor opted for the theater instead of a family dinner. What a disaster that had been.

She dimmed the computer screen, gathered up her papers and placed them in a folder to the side of her desk. Uncle Harry was probably already there, draining his first scotch and antagonizing her mother. They tolerated one another for her father's sake. He insisted that Harry attend, though after the initial pleasantries and somewhere part way through dinner, the conversation usually turned to business, which left Uncle Harry and her mother staring at their wine glasses. Christine promised herself every month that she would try harder to include them, perhaps inquire about Uncle Harry's latest golf game, or her mother's garden club meeting, anything to avoid business, at least until coffee was served. But the pulse of the Dow was in her blood, surging up and down; the need to connect with her father emerging past the 'hellos' and 'isn't this Veal Oscar fabulous?'

She understood the necessity of her father's monthly trips to the Catskills. The success of any great executive was down time and Charles Blacksworth, CEO of Blacksworth & Company Investments had found his own piece of Nirvana seven hundred miles from Chicago in a tiny cabin just outside the Catskill Mountains.

And he deserved it.

"Didn't anyone ever teach you that overwork is one of the great sins, Chrissie girl? Especially on Sunday?"

Christine tipped her glass of chardonnay at her uncle and smiled. "I think it was you, Uncle Harry."

He let out a loud laugh and downed the rest of his scotch. "No, girl, I would have said work on any day is a sin." He winked and headed toward the liquor cabinet. He was a handsome man, tall, tan from hours on the back nine and frequent jaunts to Bermuda, or St. Croix with his latest intrigue. Just shy of fifty, he was more fit than many of the men Christine knew, perhaps from the daily trips to the gym, or, or perhaps because Uncle Harry worked at staying in shape and it was the only type of work he was engaged in.

While other men were carving out their careers, striving for betterment in wealth, recognition, and fatter portfolios, Uncle Harry closeted himself in his office on the 16th floor practicing his put and reading *Golf Digest* and managing one solitary account—his own.

Christine noticed the way other people watched him when he came to her office, their eyes moving over him, taking in the Armani suit, the silk tie, the Italian loafers, and then discarding him as though

he were the morning courier come to pick up Fed Ex packages. They laughed at the crude, off-color jokes he told them every morning at the coffee station and then moved past him, to their offices, their work.

“I’m worried about your father,” her mother said, picking up a linen napkin, folding it just so, setting it back down. “He should have been here by now.” She moved to another napkin, picked it up.

“Maybe his plane was delayed. You know how flying on the east coast is in January, one minute you’re boarding the plane, thinking about getting home in time to watch your favorite TV show, and the next, you’re stuck in your seat for two hours while they de-ice.”

“It isn’t raining or snowing outside.”

Christine shrugged as she watched her mother pinch a droopy leaf from a poinsettia. “He’ll be here, Mother.”

“He’ll be here, Gloria,” Uncle Harry said, swirling the ice in his drink. “Do you think he’d miss a opportunity to get back here to his lovely wife?”

She didn’t answer, merely pinched another leaf and then another. She looked beautiful tonight in her beige dress, but then she always looked beautiful, so tiny and delicate, like a porcelain doll that had been constructed with the utmost care. Christine had always felt awkward next to her, like a colt who can’t quite find its legs. Even now, as a grown woman, attractive in her own right, she couldn’t match the ethereal beauty of her mother.

“I say, we start without Charlie,” Uncle Harry said, his deep voice filling the room. “Damn sorry about the luck if he misses out on the lamb.”

Christine glanced at her mother, who was picking up specks of glitter that had fallen from the red poinsettia onto the linen tablecloth. “Mother? What do you think? It’s almost 7:30. I could try his cell phone again?”

Gloria pressed her forefinger against the cloth, her gaze on the glitter stuck to her skin. “If we don’t eat now, the lamb will be ruined,” she said, her lips tight, the muscles around her mouth strained. She spoke in a low voice, “He knows dinner’s at seven.”

The highlight of her week had been to create the perfect meal in the perfect atmosphere only to find out that the guest of honor had not arrived. It was amazing enough that her mother still carried on the ritual for him, after all these years of marriage, or that, he took great pains to accommodate her wish to be where he said he’d be, when he said he’d be there, at least most of the time. Several of Christine’s friends had parents who were alone, whether by choice or divine intervention and even those who still shared a name, didn’t often share a bed or a relationship.

“Sit, sit,” her mother said in a loud, bright voice. “Harry, pour the wine, will you?”

He eyed her a moment, opened his mouth to speak, closed it. “Wine for three, coming up.” He picked up a glass and poured.

“He’ll be here, Mother. You know he will.”

“I know that, Christine.” She picked up her wine glass and took a healthy swallow. Her face flushed to a pale rose. “Would you please tell Greta to serve the salad?”

There was something sad and disappointed tucked away under her mother’s smile, beneath the serene calmness of her poised exterior as she spoke. “Sure.” Christine headed for the kitchen and the radicchio salad. Next month would be different. She’d make sure her father showed up an hour early with a dozen red roses and a bottle of Chanel #5.

That would make her mother forget all about tonight.

How many times did he have to tell her that he didn't like all this crap in his salad? Iceberg lettuce with tomato, cucumber, and a little bit of red onion. Period. Was it that damn hard to remember? Sure, what if iceberg had no nutritional value, if the real nutrients were in the darker greens, like romaine from Boston, or radicchio? He didn't like the stuff, didn't like the looks of it, the feel of it, the taste of it. If he were a damn rabbit, then he'd eat it, but he wasn't. Harry pushed a raspberry to the side of his plate. And what was with the fruit stuck in the middle of a salad? Who the hell thought of that? Armand, the Presidio was the only one who didn't try to put mesclun mix or dandelions, or raspberries, in his salad.

Gloria was so hopped up she probably didn't know what she was telling Greta to put in the salad. Next she'd be sprinkling Crown Royal on top. And he didn't buy that bullshit about her constant pain. She'd fallen off that damn horse sixteen years ago, and broken back or not, she should have enough dope and booze running through her veins to make her numb. Harry laid down his fork and took a drink. He'd need two more scotches just to block out the pathetic look on that woman's face. So what if Charlie was late? Maybe he was holed up in some hotel room banging some young piece of ass and forgot about the time. He almost laughed out loud. That would really make Gloria cry. But Charlie was too straight for that kind of behavior. That was Harry's style. Given the opportunity, he'd be the one shacked up in a hotel room, screwing some young piece of ass, wife or not. And that's why there wasn't a wife, why there would never be a wife.

Just thinking about screwing made him hard. Bridgett was only a phone call away—six foot, blond, blue-eyed. Twenty-three, great tongue. Shit. Why was he sitting here with a hard-on when he could be banging Bridgett? He knew why. Christine and Charlie counted on him being here for this circus, one night, every month, and he wasn't going to disappoint them, even if he had to put up with Gloria. No one ever depended on him for anything, not his work, not his women, not even his cleaning lady who demanded he pay her at the beginning of the month because he kept forgetting the weekly check. Maybe they thought him incapable, uncooperative, or merely uninterested. Maybe they were right.

The phone rang in the background. It was probably Charlie, trying to pave the way for his late entrance. Good old, diplomatic, Charlie.

"That might be Dad." Christine half rose from her chair.

"Sit down." Harry waved a hand at her and stood. "I'll go see." He grabbed his drink and let out a small laugh. "I better warn him to put his boots on before he comes in here or your mother's tears will ruin his shoes."

He swung open the kitchen door and Greta held out the phone to him. She was a pretty thing, close to forty, divorced, two kids. He'd thought about banging her when he first met her a year ago, unwinding that long, blond bun and wrapping it around his fist while he pumped into her, but he quickly dismissed the idea. Too much baggage, and besides, he liked her, which didn't make for a quick, mindless screw.

"Mr. Blacksworth, it's a man, for Christine."

He laughed, momentarily distracted by Greta's accent. He liked the way she said his name, a throaty and ruffled, like she'd just crawled out of bed, naked, of course.

"Mr. Blacksworth. It's a man—"

"I know, I heard. So? Christine's twenty-seven years old, she can talk to men." Greta shook her

head, the thick bun swaying from side to side making him think of hips and sex.

“He says it’s about Mr. Blacksworth.”

That jolted him. “I’ll take it.” He snatched the phone from her hand and said, “This is Harry Blacksworth. You’re calling about my brother?”

There was a second’s hesitation, then a deep voice filled the line. “There’s been an accident. Your brother—”

“What kind of accident? Is he all right? Where is he?”

The other man went on, “...was driving on the back roads, and it was snowing...hard. Jesus, I’m sorry.”

“What?” Harry gripped the phone. “What the hell happened?”

“Uncle Harry?” Christine stood inside the kitchen door. “What’s the matter? Is it Dad?”

Harry covered the receiver with his hand. “It’s for me. You go back and keep your mother occupied with Chrissie. I’ll be there in a minute.” She hesitated a second, then turned and left. “Hold on,” Harry said into the receiver. He went out the back door, down the steps and onto the patio, mindless of the cold. “Now tell me where the hell my brother is.”

“There was an accident.”

“Jesus, I already heard that.”

“His car hit a guardrail and flipped over an embankment.”

Jesus God. Harry’s head started pounding, splitting down the middle.

“It took three hours to get him out...”

“Where”—Harry tried to push the rest of the words out, stalled, tried again—“where is he?”

“He’s dead.”

The words burst into his head, sucked out the oxygen, making him dizzy and nauseous. “Who the hell are you?” Harry sank onto a patio chair and gulped in clumps of cold air. “And where’s my brother?” There was a long pause on the other end of the line, so long, that for a second he thought the man might have hung up.

“He’s dead. He was driving on Sentinel Road in Magdalena when he lost control of his car, hit a guardrail and flipped over an embankment.”

“It can’t be.” A speck of hope crept into his soul. “Magdalena’s almost a hundred miles from Charlie’s cabin. You’ve got the wrong guy.”

“It’s him. I know...knew Charles Blacksworth.” The man paused. “I’ll make the arrangements to have him sent back as soon as possible.”

The salad pushed its way up Harry’s throat. How could it be Charlie? He didn’t make mistakes, especially not the kind that got him killed. This asshole was wrong. Charlie would be here any minute, just a little late, flight delay.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not Charlie.”

“Your brother’s dead.”

How could he sound so certain? “Where is he? Where’s this person who’s supposed to be Charlie? What hospital?” He had to see for himself.

“Don’t come. I’ll take care of everything. It’ll be easier on everybody if I just handle it.”

“Who the hell are you?”

“Nate Desantro. My mother was with your brother when he died.”

The puke came then, green bits of salad and chardonnay spewing his trousers, his Italian loafers, the snow at his feet and two yards beyond. The heaving and gasping covered him in sweat as new snow fell and his stomach clenched in exhaustive spasms, purging until there was nothing left but emptiness.

Chapter 2

Six days had passed since Uncle Harry changed their lives. *Dear God, he's dead.* The rest of the night unfolded in an underwater blur—eyes open, mouths moving but not speaking, hearing nothing. Her mother fell forward, clasping her hands against her forehead, a flower wilting inch by incredible inch. Uncle Harry talked and drank, talked and drank but it was hard to concentrate on what he said because the underwater currents blocked everything—sound, sight, feeling, certainly understanding.

Christine remembered little of that night other than the smear of life and loss pulling her under, sinking her soul, and the sight of her mother crumpled in a chair with Uncle Harry and his glass of Johnny Walker Red. *A man called, he'd said...from the hospital. Charlie was in an accident, his car flipped...nothing anyone could do. They're sending him home.*

Sixty seconds and a handful of sentences was all it took to change their lives in horrible, drastic ways they could never have imagined. He'd taken this trip for years, even in snowstorms gusting in and hail, and always, always come back. She'd never expected to kiss him good-bye one afternoon seven months shy of his fifty-ninth birthday, and never see him again.

A tiny speck of hope still clung to the possibility that the man in the accident wasn't her father, that by some bizarre confusion, it was another man, maybe a thief who had stolen her father's wallet, knocked him unconscious and left him along a deserted road, then took his car, too. When the funeral director contacted them to say the body had arrived, she went with Uncle Harry, praying for a mistake, a miracle, anything. But even at the entrance of the room, some thirty feet away, she recognized the straight nose, the silver-gray hair, the high cheekbones. Her father was dead.

Her mother refused to see him that first day and spent most of her time sequestered in the master bedroom, coming out only once when Dr. Leone brought over a bottle of Valium for her. *Your mother will need these, he'd said. This is going to be very difficult for her.* He was right, of course. She depended on her husband to keep life even, and her daily dose of Vicodin to keep her arthritic back under control.

Now what? Christine rubbed her temples, trying to ease the dull ache in her head. She could step in to take care of money matters and the daily inconveniences that always seemed to overwhelm and upset her mother. But what about the rest? No one could replace Charles Blacksworth. He was the only person she could count on for honesty and direction. Hadn't she carried the sealed letter from Wharton's around in her briefcase four days, waiting for his return so he could share the joy or torment of its contents? Wasn't he the one who helped her shop for a condo and fought the real estate company when they tried to renegotiate the terms?

And how could she ever forget the day he promoted her to Vice President? They'd been eating chicken burritos at El Charro's when he reached in his pocket and pulled out a single key, the one to the large corner office, next to his. The reception six days later was a lavish, formal affair, with two roomfuls of colleagues and friends in attendance, but it could not compare to the afternoon in the corner booth of that dark, Mexican restaurant.

I'm so proud of you, Christine.

Thanks, Dad. That means a lot to me.

You remind me of myself at your age.

I'm only doing what you taught me.

And you do it very well.

I'm going after Granddad's pocket watch next.

It's only a watch, Christine.

We both know that's not true, Dad. It's so much more than a watch.

And it's caused more harm than good in this family. I'd just as soon toss it out.

In that case, I'll take it now.

Your grandfather meant well but he rewarded the wrong things. I earned it because I practically lived at the office. Is that what you want?

I want to be the best, Dad, like you.

You are the best, Christine, right now, just the way you are and no father could ever be prouder than I am of you.

And now he was gone and she was sitting across from Thurman Jacobs's gigantic cherry desk with Uncle Harry squeezed into a Queen Anne wing chair next to her. Thurman Jacobs had gone to MIT with her father, then on to Georgetown before joining his father at Jacobs & Jacobs, one of the most prestigious law firms in Chicago. The firm handled all of the legal issues for Blacksworth & Company and Thurman himself took care of her father's personal matters, including his will. It was the matter of the will that brought them to see Thurman this afternoon. She'd hoped to hold off at least another week before dealing with the business side of her father's death. Who cared how many stocks and bonds he had, how many unit trusts, the value of his investment property? None of it would bring him back—most of it would just be a brutal reminder of his death. But Uncle Harry had insisted. *It's best to get it over quickly, deal with it, straight up.* It was an odd piece of advice from someone like Uncle Harry. She'd come, though, to appease him and immerse herself in the emotionless distribution of assets, anything to stop thinking about her father's face, pale and wax-like against the satin lining of the ebony coffin.

Thurman Jacobs entered through a side door, his tall frame slightly stooped, like a sapling whose weight isn't sturdy enough to hold it erect. His gray suit hung from his shoulders, the excess material drooping at the sides. He was bald on top with a trim edge of dusty brown rimming the sides and back of his skull. The round, wire frames he wore made his nose seem a bit too long, his face too narrow and that coupled with his gangly, bent stature, gave him an Ichobod Crane appearance. At fifty-eight he looked a full ten years older, yet when he spoke, the rich timbre of his voice blurred the outward visage and the listener forgot the awkward homeliness encasing the man, forgot the stooped shoulders, the too long nose, forgot everything but the pure eloquence spilling from Thurman Jacobs's thin lips.

"Christine. Harry." He held out his hands to them from across his desk—bony hands, traced with thin, blue veins. "Thank you for coming so quickly." He eased his hands away, took a seat behind the massive cherry desk and opened a black portfolio. "Christine, your father and I went back a good many years"—he bestowed a sympathetic smile on her—"since our days at MIT. I wasn't just his attorney, I was his friend." He cleared his throat and when he spoke again, the richness of his voice filled the room. "Which makes this whole situation that much more difficult."

"Thank you, Thurman. I know my father held you in very high regard."

He nodded, rubbing his right eye from under his spectacles. "And I him. We had an understanding. Charles and I, one that went well beyond business." He flipped open the black portfolio, pulled out a thick document and leafed through several pages. He rubbed his eye again and shifted in his chair.

“Christine, I wish there was some way to say this, some way to prepare you...”

“Thurman, she’s a big girl. Just say it.” Harry reached over and grabbed her hand.

Thurman Jacobs tugged at his shirt collar and his skinny neck inched out like a chicken. “The estate’s been apportioned into an equitable distribution—one part, including assets, real and otherwise, to you, one part to your mother,” he paused, “and one part to a third party.”

“A third party? Who Thurman? MIT?”

“No, it wasn’t MIT.” His voice turned quiet, unfamiliar.

“What then? Or who?” Christine asked. “Maybe it’s you, Uncle Harry.”

“It isn’t Harry.” Thurman’s strong voice deflated, the air spilling out in one long, slow whoosh.

Uncle Harry squeezed her hand tight, but his gaze remained on Thurman. “Just tell us, so we can be done and get the hell out of here.”

Thurman’s thin lips moved with effort. “One part has been left to a Ms. Lily Desantro.”

The words were out, forming a complete sentence and yet they made no sense. Who was Lily Desantro? The pressure from Uncle Harry’s fingers dug into her flesh. She stared at their hands locked together; her nails pressed into his tanned skin, leaving small, red moons on the back of his hand.

“Jesus,” Uncle Harry swore under his breath. “What the hell was he thinking?”

Christine dragged her eyes from Uncle Harry’s marked skin to the man behind the desk. “Thurman, who is Lily Desantro?”

Thurman Jacobs was a man possessed of great eloquence, the one chosen by colleagues and corporations to represent, to present, to speak, about matters great and small, at conventions and rotary club dinners. And yet now, he stared at Christine, speechless, his bony fingers rubbing the sides of his protruding temples.

“Thurman?”

“Lily Desantro.” The name fell out between half-closed lips as though he struggled between duty and tell, loyalty not to.

“I don’t...understand.”

“Do you have an address?” This from Uncle Harry.

Thurman Jacobs picked up a pen, scribbled something on a piece of paper and held it out. Harry snatched it from him. “Thanks.” Then he stood up, still clutching Christine’s hand. “Come on, kid, let’s go.”

The whole world was one great big screw up. Harry sat in the lounge at the Ritz, waiting for Christine to come out of the restroom. He’d decided to take her for a drink before he told her the truth. Actually, he was the one who needed the drink—several, to give him the guts to carry it out. Why couldn’t people just be who they were? Womanizers, drinkers, liars, and manipulators, instead of pretending around it all, hiding the secrets like dirty laundry stuffed under a bed, and then dying, and the grieving got whammed with two losses—the flesh and blood bodies and the images they thought they knew.

Charlie should have told him he had something on the side. Harry would have understood. Gloria

was a pathetic piece of flesh and bone, a real martyr, served up super-size. How much pain and self-pity should a man have to take? Charlie should have gotten rid of her years ago. So what if she was Christine's mother? No woman would have pulled that clinging crap on Harry. He'd never gotten married. Marriage was nothing but a primitive form of torture; women strapping their hands around a guy's balls and yanking. Move too far to the left, yank, one extra step to the right, yank. Breathe too hard, yank, not hard enough, yank, breathe at all, yank, yank, *yank!*

So, what was he going to tell Christine? He didn't like being left to clean up messes, he wasn't good at them. Creating the mess, now that was his specialty—trash it and duck out, move on to the next catastrophe. Nobody ever expected him to stay around, and certainly not to figure a way out of something like this. Hell, no. But Christine was the one decent human being in this screwed up world. Should he lie and buy a little time, maybe make her think this Desantro woman was some do-gooder out to save the world or some other bullshit?

“Uncle Harry?” Christine slid into the booth beside him. “Are you all right?”

“Just thinking.” He eyed the drinks on the table. “I must be thinking way too hard if I didn't see the waitress bring these drinks.” He let out a halfhearted laugh, picked up his scotch and swallowed.

Christine sipped her wine. “Uncle Harry, what's going on?”

“It's tough, Chrissie.” He stared at the scotch in his glass. Three more of these should mellow him enough to get the words out.

“Uncle Harry, who is Lily Desantro?”

Harry polished off his drink and set it down. “The first time I heard the Desantro name was the night your father died. The phone call—he did not want to do this—“remember that? There was a man on the phone, he was the one who told me about Charlie. Said he hit a guard rail and flipped over.” He didn't mention the part about it taking three hours to pry Charlie from the car. “Anyway, this guy said not to come, he'd have the body sent home. I asked him who the hell he was and that's when he told me about the woman, said she was in the car with Charlie.” He paused and pinched the bridge of his nose. “She was his mother.”

“Is she alive?”

Harry shrugged. “I don't know. I guess so. He didn't say she died but I didn't ask.”

“So, this woman, what exactly was she to Dad?”

This was the part he'd wanted to avoid—the uncertain, almost fearful look on her face, speckled with the tiniest glimmer of knowing. People played games with themselves all the time, asked questions to answers they already knew deep in their gut, yet couldn't admit, or didn't want to admit. He saw it every day, with his married friends who bought their wives bracelets and two carat rings stuffed with diamonds and rubies. All signs of romance, love, affection, devotion, whatever in the hell you wanted to call it, and yet, it wasn't that at all, it was duty, and ninety-eight percent of the women had picked out the piece, designed it, ordered it, and then, told their husbands where to pick it up for Happy Friggin' Anniversary. These same men followed every piece of ass, every short skirt, tight shirt, screwing them with their eyes, sometimes with their dicks, but if you asked any one of them if they loved their wives, they'd say of course, not even a second's hesitation, which always told Harry they were lying and they knew it. That was the knowing part. They knew whatever love they'd felt in their marriage had been reduced to trips to Tiffany's and their Gold Card, and if they had found something on the side, they knew too, that it would stay right there, on the side, because they weren't giving up their homes, their country club memberships, their right to see their kids every night, their 401K's

their life. They weren't giving up their life, and yet, none of them realized they'd already done just that.

It was pretty sad that he could see this when none of the others could. His women were the same way, all thinking they'd change him, love him so much that he'd want a wife, a family, a child... a SUV. And then came the mothering. That's when they had to go.

And now, Christine was staring at him, not wanting to believe what her gut must be telling her. She reached for another scotch, swallowed, let the burn fill his throat, consume his lungs.

"You know, this is really hard, Chrissie, especially for me."

"That's why I'm asking you, Uncle Harry. You're the only one who'll tell me the truth."

She was relying on him for the truth. Now that was just damn sad. "If I were a betting man, and I'd been known to be that in my lifetime," he said, covering her hands with his own, "I'd say your father was... involved with this Lily Desantro."

"You mean an affair?"

Christ. "Looks that way. Charlie loved you, Chrissie. This has nothing to do with you."

"And my mother?" Her voice wobbled. "Did he love her?"

"I'm not the one to ask about love, you know that."

"Is that where he was going every month? To see her?"

Jesus. "I don't know."

"Well, I'm going to find out."

"Chrissie, let it go. It's over. Charlie's dead. Finding out isn't going to bring him back."

"I need to know."

"Sometimes it's better not to know. Nothing can change what is or what happened and digging around in the past is only going to make you miserable."

Her eyes were bright, shiny. "I don't care. I have to know."

Harry shook his head and reached for his drink. "Remember Pandora's Box? This is the same thing. Don't open it."

"How can you expect me to forget what you just told me?"

"I said she probably was."

She threw him a disgusted look. "Uncle Harry, I'm not twelve years old. She was his mistress."

Harry shrugged and took another drink.

"And knowing that changes everything."

"It doesn't change the fact that he loved you."

"But everything he told me, about honor and integrity, was it all a lie?"

"Of course not."

"And this woman, who was she? What kind of woman could make him leave his family to be with her?" She didn't wait for him to answer. "I can't live my life with this lie. I have to find out."

"So, what do you plan to do, just pack up and take off on an excursion? Close up shop? Charlie

wouldn't like that."

"Phil's a perfectly capable CEO. He'll be fine with me leaving for a week or two. Besides, no one expects me back in the office so soon after the funeral."

"And your mother?" This would send Gloria over the edge. She'd be popping those Vicodin like Sweet Tarts.

"This would kill her."

"She doesn't have to find out."

"She can't find out." She rubbed her temples. "She just can't."

"Relax. She won't."

"Uncle Harry, you have to help me. We'll say I went to clean out Dad's place in the Catskills, which is part true, and I'm taking care of a business deal he started up there, which is also part true."

"What business deal?"

"A few months ago, he told me he put up the collateral for some machine shop. I guess the guy was having a tough time making his payments and Dad was going to help him out, set up some alternative financing or something and he wanted me to get involved. I could check that out while I'm up there."

"Chrissie, we don't even know if this Desantro woman is still alive. She could have been killed with your father." Jesus, why couldn't she just let it go? The most she could hope to gain was a piece of the truth and that would end up haunting her for the rest of her life. He should know—thirty-two years ago he'd begged for the truth and it had almost destroyed him.

"I have to know. Don't you see that, Uncle Harry?"

The damn, sad fact was that he did see. He knew exactly how she felt, how she needed to search for the truth so she could understand the pieces of her life that no longer made sense.

"I think you're making a mistake."

"I have to know."

"And if what you find out is worse than not knowing? Then what?" He felt it all rushing back, the words, the lies, the pain. "Then you've got a face, a voice that will haunt you for the rest of your life, Chrissie. It could friggin' destroy you."

"I know. But if I'm going to end up hating the man I loved most in the world, then I want to know everything about that woman, her face, her voice, the color of her fingernails, embedded in my brain so every time I think of my father, every time I wonder why I can't forgive him, I'll think of her and I'll know I have a reason to hate him."

Chapter 3

“So why exactly, are you going away?”

Christine folded another sweater, a tan cashmere, zip in the back, and placed it in the open suitcase on her bed. “Connor, I told you. I’m going to the Catskills to close up my father’s place.” She turned away so he wouldn’t see her face, not that Connor had ever been able to detect anything she hadn’t wanted him to. When she’d called him the night her father died and he offered to come over, she told him no, it was late and he had to get up early. He hadn’t insisted on coming, or better, hadn’t just showed up on her door step, pulled her into his arms and held her the way she’d needed him to.

“I don’t get it,” he said, crossing his arms under his head and stretching his long body on the bed. “I guess I just don’t get this whole trip thing. Why’d he go there every month, anyway?”

To see Lily Desantro, that’s why. “It was his way of relaxing, I guess.” She pulled another sweater from her drawer, black angora with tiny pearls. “An escape from the pressure of his job.” An escape from another woman.

“Couldn’t he just go to the health club? Or play a round of golf?”

“I don’t know, Connor. I don’t know why he had to go there. He just did.”

“Okay, don’t get all testy.” He smiled at her, white on white against his tanned skin. “Just trying to figure it out, that’s all.” Connor James Pendleton, age thirty-two, fourth generation graduate of Princeton and heir to Pendleton Securities, Inc. The Pendletons believed in the stock market, Ivy League educations, and first class. Christine and Connor had been together almost two years, had sunbathed side by side in Hawaii, snorkeled in Cancun, skied in Aspen, and taken a trip to Italy. Twice. With Connor, it was only the best, always; the hotels, the restaurants, the theaters, the people. The only part that lacked was their relationship. It was third rate, maybe less, and no matter how she tried to dress it up, with pearls or diamonds or a package deal to Trinidad, it was still just that, third rate.

Being with Connor was like investing in blue chip stocks; they might be a safe bet and look good on a portfolio, but they’d never give you the ride a tech stock would. Weeks could pass without making love and it didn’t seem to bother him. In fact, he didn’t seem to notice. But then, neither did she. That wasn’t exactly true; she did notice, it just didn’t bother her. How sad was that? Some days, she’d catch herself listening to her assistant, Elena talk to her husband, about inconsequential things like what he would like for dinner, and could he pick their daughter up at daycare. It wasn’t what Elena said, but how she said, it; soft, caring. Christine had tried that once with Connor, called him for no reason just to chat and tell him she was thinking about him. He’d put her on hold, just for a minute so he could talk to Tokyo, and five minutes later Bette, his secretary came on the line and told her Connor would be tied up longer than expected, ‘closing a deal you know,’ and then asked if there was a message. There was no message, none that he would understand, anyway.

People expected them to get married—her mother, Connor’s parents, everyone who saw them together. *You make a beautiful couple, her mother had told her. You with your fair skin and black hair and Connor with his classic good looks, everyone notices the two of you.* Connor’s father was more straight forward—*Great gene pool, can’t wait to see the kids.* Her own father had been polite with Connor but there’d been no ‘join our family’ sentiment in his words or his behavior and certainly no references to extending the family with Connor’s ‘gene pool.’

“Christine? Are you listening? Do you think you’ll be back on the twenty-third? I have to go to Ne

York and I thought you might want to go with me, do a little business, take in a show.”

“I don’t know.” Perhaps, deep down, her father’s lack of acceptance had kept her from committing to Connor.

“I know how you love the city.” He paused and smiled at her. “Besides, I’m meeting with Niles Furband and I was hoping you could work your magic on him again.”

“All I did was talk to the man, for heaven’s sake.”

“That’s just it, Christine. You *talked* to the man. Nobody talks to Niles Furband, the man. They talk to Niles Furband, CEO of Glen Systems, or Niles Furband, heir to the Furband fortune, or Niles Furband, Board of Director for St. Catherine’s Hospital. They ask his opinion on variable loans in the current market and leveraged buy-outs, or how many zeros they can add to whatever donation they’re seeking. Or, and Jesus, this is so lame, the names of his kids, as if they cared.”

“I cared.”

“That’s my point. You cared. The rest of them are just blowing smoke.”

She tucked several pair of underwear into the side pocket of her suitcase. “Like you, maybe? Bring me along so you seem more credible when you hold out your hand?”

He did have the good grace to turn a very dull shade of red. “I’ve got a good deal for him. It’s not bullshit.”

“Are you asking me to go to New York to spend time with you or are you asking me to go to set up a deal for you?”

“I want to be with you.” He sat up, reached for her hand and stroked her thumb. “You love New York. I just thought”—he squeezed the soft flesh of her palm—“this could be a huge deal, you have no idea how big.” The stroking started up again, then the white smile. “Just think about it, okay?”

“I’ll see.” She stood there, the touch of his fingers on her skin, the steady movement brushing back and forth, slow, methodical, and felt nothing.

Christine loaded the BMW the next morning at 6:15 and began the long haul to the cabin in the Catskills. Snow pelted the windshield in thick, wet chunks as she maneuvered through the dark, untamed landscape before her. How many more miles until she reached his cabin? His other home? Was this where he took her? Was this where they shared a glass of wine, a meal... a bed?

Images rolled over her, seeping from her brain into every part of her body, organ, tissue, cell. What did she look like? Young? Oh, God, please not someone Christine’s own age, or worse, younger. Older? How much older? How had they met? Did she know he had a wife and daughter? Another life that had nothing to do with her?

The guessing drove her mad. She’d know soon enough, and then she’d probably wish she didn’t because once she saw with her own eyes, heard with her own ears, the image and the sound would be imbedded in her memory, and nothing, no amount of denial, or drugs or therapy would erase it. But still, she had to know.

She’d spent hours trying to imagine the confrontation. Faces, inflections in speech, odd little nuances, even something as unassuming as educational background or socio-economic condition could help determine what should be said, and how. Yet all she knew about this woman was her name.

Hadn’t her father ever thought about what might happen if his family found out? Had he been :

consumed with love, desire, lust, that it hadn't occurred to him or if it had, the longing was overpowering that he discarded the needs of his family? She hated this faceless woman. As for her father, his lies had turned her whole life on its axis and it would take time to sort out truth from love from hate.

She stopped only twice during the trip—once to refuel and grab a bag of pretzels and a Coke, and the second time to use the restroom and buy a large, black coffee. Hours and miles fell behind her in a white haze of nameless highway, her brain consumed with her destination, filled with both anxiety and dread. By early afternoon she'd reached the New York state line and when dusk seeped down from the mountains, she knew she was in the Catskills. The cabin was located on the outskirts, in Tristan, a tiny dot on the map, smaller than the head of a straight pin, and if she'd calculated correctly, about eight miles from Magdalena, Lily Desantro's home.

The road that led to the cabin was little more than a single lane, covered with snow, and dipping on at the edges, no guard rails or posts to guide or protect. What if she slid off to the right, over the embankment and rolled the car? No one would find her for days. She gripped the wheel tighter, inches toward the middle of the road. There were trees all around, thick, ominous, pushing her along the slick road, forcing the BMW through a vortex of dense brush and overhang.

She slowed to a crawl. The snow had started again, huge, wet splotches beating the windshield. Christine rounded another bend and spotted a mailbox off to the right draped in white. The driveway lay tucked between a copse of evergreen and she passed by it, then had to back up to find the turn off. The cabin stood straight ahead, a small log structure surrounded by evergreen and thick-waisted, naked trees whose coverings had long since fallen. Snow lay in pure, scalloped drifts along the perimeter of the cabin, edging its way to the front door.

Christine shifted the car into park, fished the key to the cabin from her coat pocket, and stepped outside. She left the headlights on to carve a path through the gray of dusk that enveloped her. She fumbled with the key and forced it into the lock. The door opened with a slight push then a grudging creak. She stepped inside, reached for a light, and flipped it on. There was a couch done in blue and cream plaid, a chair, navy blue, a rocker, matching blue and cream plaid cushion, worn and slightly faded, and a small coffee table. A single hurricane lamp rested on the coffee table alongside a ceramic ashtray. This would be the living room. The kitchen snaked to the right, a tiny oblong packed along the edges with a gas stove, a white refrigerator, a stainless steel sink and countertop, a single wicker chair, and a set of four TV trays with sailboats on the front.

There were two doors past the short half hallway that butted up to the kitchen. She opened one, flipped on the light and found a double faucet sink, dingy white with rust around the silver fixtures, a white commode and a porcelain tub with claw feet and a plug dangling on a chain that had been wrapped around the 'cold' fixture. A cracked bar of soap sat in a white plastic tray. No toothbrush, no shaving cream, no sign that anyone had been here a week ago.

She turned away and opened the door on the opposite end of the hall. This was the bedroom. She stood in the semidarkness, staring at the bed. It was a double, covered with a light chenille spread, no accent pillows or fancy afghans draped at the foot like her mother preferred. Was this the bedroom? Christine turned away and closed the door.

She worked her way back to the living room and sat in the rocking chair, coat still on. He'd come here every month for years and yet the place looked unused. Where were the copies of *The Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, James Michener's, *The Centennial*, a gift she'd given him at Christmas? Hadn't he told her he was taking it with him on his next trip? Where was anything that hinted a body move

about, within these walls, lived a life, even if it was only four days a month?

The answer sat around the ring of rust in the bathroom sink, on the coffee table filmed with a fine layer of dust, in the shininess of the navy ceramic ashtray.

He'd told them all a great, fantastic story of the rejuvenating powers found in this cabin hundreds of miles away from everything, where he could think. It had all seemed so noble then, inconvenient, yet so noble. How many other lies had he told? Tomorrow she'd have her answers.

She didn't know how long she sat in the rocking chair, coat on, hands clenched together, staring into the blue emptiness of the ashtray perched on the edge of the coffee table. Eventually, she got up, went to the refrigerator and found it empty except for a box of Arm & Hammer Baking Soda. She quietly closed the door and made her way to the bedroom, kicked off her shoes and laid down on the left side of the bed, the side her father always slept on. She didn't pull down the chenille spread, not even to rest her head on the pillow. And then exhaustion took over and she slept.

Magdalena was exactly seventy-eight miles from Tristan. Christine woke to the pre-dawn sounds of birds and some other unnamed wood creatures. Her back was stiff, her legs sore, her head pounding. And she was starving. Food wasn't something she thought about much, not the way her mother did, arranging and presenting it with such dignity. Christine preferred ordering out or microwave ready, the faster the better, easy cleanup, better yet.

She rolled off the bed, stared at the chenille spread, crumpled from sleep. The questions wouldn't stop, not until she found the one woman who held the answers, and then, there might be hundreds more. She stripped off her coat, took a quick rinse in the porcelain tub, scrubbed her face, her teeth, pulled a comb through her thick hair and put on the same jeans she'd worn the day before. She reached into her suitcase and grabbed the first shirt she found, a black turtleneck. Ten minutes later she was on the road, stopping only at a 7 Eleven to grab a large coffee and a sweet roll.

She entered the outskirts of Magdalena seventy-eight miles later and began to wonder if she should have taken a bit more time preparing for this meeting. Perhaps she should have worn her pearls, a business suit, flipped her hair in a chignon. In business, the aura of 'inapproachability' had served her well, gained access into boardrooms, earned invitations and introductions. Her personal life hadn't reaped the same benefits, not that it had suffered, but it hadn't thrived. Aside from Connor, who was a family friend, many men thought her too standoffish. She wasn't, not really. It was more a cloak she'd donned to protect herself from overexposure, like sunscreen, a way to avoid the undesirable effects of undesirable people, men in particular.

Since the moment she heard Lily Desantro's name, she'd thought of the second when she'd see the woman and a name and a face would merge, one breathing life into the other to form a person, a memory, a past where all supposition would fade into features and voice and realness.

Christine followed the road to the edge of town; to the street on the back of the business called Thurman Jacobs had given her—1167 Artisdale Street. The houses on this street were older, larger, more dignified, with scattered roof peaks, high shuttered windows, and grand porches. They spoke of memories, family and tradition, some with sturdy pillars along the front porch, others boasting wide steps and wider walkways. She was drawn to one half-way down that had pillars and walkways, cribs, white with black shutters, an expanse of window spreading up and out, covering first and second stories. The number above the door read 1167 Artisdale.

She parked the BMW and shut off the engine. Holly bushes filled the front beds, scatterings

evergreens clustered in between. To the right, blocking the tan house next door, stood a copse of pine trees, draped in white. Two wind chimes, one a Christmas tree, painted bright red and green, the other a snowman, plastered in white, hung from the porch, dangling rhythms of sound and sequence.

She should have sketched brief pointers for this meeting, a flow chart of sorts, similar to what she did when she analyzed stocks. Her stomach clenched, bits of sweet roll rising to the middle of her throat. What was there to analyze? Her father had kept a mistress named Lily Desantro at 116 Artisdale, and this was most likely where he'd come during his monthly trips, not the cabin in Tristram with its ringed sink and empty refrigerator.

Maybe Uncle Harry had the right idea after all; never settle for one, just plow through them like a tractor in a field of hay, one after the other. Multiple, meaningless relationships.

She took a deep breath and opened the car door.

Chapter 4

Nate Desantro thought about ignoring the doorbell and would have if he thought his mother wouldn't try to get out of bed and answer it herself. Why couldn't everybody just leave them alone to mind their own business, not his family's?

He couldn't count the number of people who'd been here since the accident, well-wishers offering fresh baked rolls, wedding soup, baked ham with pineapple and cloves. What about peace and quiet? Did any of those do-gooders ever think about offering that? His mother needed rest, not a crowd of people hovering over her. He'd kicked them all out last night. Lily hadn't liked that.

In another week or so he'd be able to get back to his own place, back to seclusion, where the loudest noise at night was a flip between a screech owl and a log crackling on the fire. Just the way he liked it. The majority of the human species was nothing but an annoying intrusion on his state of mind and other than the times when he had to interact with them, he preferred to be alone. Of course, family didn't fit into that category, just everyone else. His mother said he was afraid to open up after what happened three years ago. She was wrong; he didn't care about Patrice anymore, didn't even think about her, not since the day the sheriff delivered the divorce papers. Nate heard she was remarried to some bank president in Palm Springs, drove a Lexus now. Probably silver; she'd always had a fondness for silver.

The doorbell rang again, twice, rapid staccato. "Hold on, hold on." Damn intrusive busy bodies. He reached the front door, preparing the same speech he told all the well-wishers. *She's fine... needs her rest... she'll be in touch when she's up to it.* She'd be furious if she had an inkling that he was blowing off people like Father Reisanski and Judge Tommichelli, but hell, did she have to be best friends with half the town?

He opened the door.

It was her.

"Hello. I'm looking for..."

Her voice was softer than he'd imagined, more breathy...

"...this is a bit awkward..."

Her eyes were bluer than her picture...

"Lily Desantro. Is she here?"

That brought him around fast. "Who are you?" Stupid question, but damn if he'd let on he knew who she was.

She hesitated, a split second extra air exchange. "Christine Blacksworth. I'm... are you Nate Desantro?"

He said nothing. *Let her squirm.*

"Is Lily here?"

"No."

"May I come in?" She tried to look around him, into the house, into their lives.

He blocked the door. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"You... you know who I am, don't you?"

He stared at her, refusing to acknowledge the man or his daughter as hatred seeped through him. ~~brought back the days, months, years, his mother spent alone; four damn days a month for fourteen years.~~

“You called my mother’s house... about my father.”

Her voice wobbled. *Good, feel it, Christine Blackworth, feel what I’ve felt for the past fourteen years every time I saw your father’s bathrobe hanging in my mother’s closet, saw his razor in her bathroom, his glasses on her nightstand. Let it strangle you...*

“I have to speak with your mother.” The words were firmer, part congealed.

“She’s not available.”

“Can’t you work with me so we can get this over with?”

“No, I can’t.”

“Do you think I wanted to come here? Do you think I would be standing here if there’d been another way?”

“I don’t know, would you? Maybe come to see for yourself?”

“This is just as hard on me as it is on you.” Her voice dipped, faltered. “At least you knew. I had no idea. All this time, and I had no idea.”

He almost felt sorry for her but years of living with Charles Blackworth’s comings and goings wiped any pity from his soul. “You think so; you think we’re in the same boat, Christine? What do you think it’s like to see a man coming out of your mother’s bedroom in the morning, one who’s not her husband? And then the bastard leaves her, every month, goes back to his rich family in Chicago, his prestigious job, his three-piece suits. And he does it year after year after year and she cries when he leaves, every goddamn time.”

She looked away, pinched the bridge of her nose.

“You think you had it worse? You don’t have a clue.” He gripped the door handle, forced himself to stay still when every cell in his body wanted to jerk her head up, make her acknowledge his words, feel his hatred. “Go home, Christine Blackworth. You’re fourteen years too late.”

Gloria accepted the fluted glass bubbling with Dom Perignon and smiled at the young man dressed in black who hadn’t left her side all night; Jeremy something or other, investment banker. He couldn’t be more than twenty-eight, a year older than Christine, and yet she hadn’t missed the way his dark eyes took in her pale blue gown, moved from the swell of breast to shoulder, settled on the smooth tanned skin of her neck. Men had looked at her that way her entire life, from the time she was fourteen and discovered that if she smiled wide and long, dropped her voice a few decibels, and glanced instead of stared at other boys, she would gain not only their attention, but their admiration. What a ridiculous game it all was, one she’d never succumbed to, preferring intellect to sexuality. But then she’d met Charles.

She sipped her champagne, tried to concentrate on what the young man was saying.

“Have you ever heard Bocelli?” Jeremy something or other was saying, “I saw him in New York. He’s exquisite, not Pavarotti, but still quite good.”

“And blind.”

“Incredible, isn’t it?” He took her comment as interest, moved closer, his breath fanning her ear.

“I’d love to take you. We could have dinner at The Presidio first. Next Saturday.”

She took a step away, met his dark eyes, sparkling with one too many Dom Perignons. “I don’t think so, but thank you for the invitation.”

He flattened a hand over his chest. “You wound me, beautiful maiden. Please reconsider.”

Oh, Charles, how could you have left me to deal with this? “I could be your mother.”

“But you’re not.” He took her hand, stroked his fingers up her arm.

“I just buried my husband two weeks ago.” Was there no respect for the grieving process?

“I know.” He nodded, his handsome face solemn. “All the more reason.”

“Indeed.” She shrugged his hand off, stepped away. “All the more reason.” Gloria lifted her glass, saluted him and turned away.

She almost hadn’t come tonight, not after last year’s debacle. The West Mount Memorial Banquet had always been Charles’s love; he was one of the original organizers, a major contributor and staunch supporter of the hospital’s research facilities. But this love blinded him, too. When last year’s president asked Charles to double his annual pledge, to help fund research for cancers like your sister’s... Charles readily agreed.

Tonight they were honoring him and had invited Gloria to accept an award in memory of her late husband. How could she refuse such a request? So, she’d chosen a pale, blue Chanel and a clasp of diamonds for the occasion, the muted coolness of color and stone giving her a controlled, untouchable presence; elegant but not overstated, determined in a mask of subtlety but still appropriate for her newly widowed state—her life without Charles.

She worked her way past the fringes of the ballroom to a tiny sitting area papered in heavy cream. There was a smattering of ornate chairs, cherry, she thought, done in burgundy and cream stripes set up in a half circle around an oval glass table. And in the center of the table was a huge spray of red roses, more than two dozen, maybe three, spilling out of a gold vase, tufts of baby’s breath tucked in between.

Her gaze followed a petal that had fallen on the slick surface of glass, landed on the edge of a bright blue ashtray. Gloria walked up to the table, studied the ashtray; shiny, clean, unused. She hesitated, fingers hovering over the single petal, its red brilliance not diminished by its solitary state. So much beauty, so much promise... She brushed it away in one quick motion, mindless of where it landed, her concentration fixed solely on the gleam of the blue ashtray. Then she flipped open her bag, pulled out the black case decorated with needlepoint roses, and tapped out a Salem Light. Her fingers shook as she lit it.

“Now, this is a sight.”

Gloria swung around, pulled the cigarette behind her back. “What are you doing here?”

Harry Blacksworth saluted her with his drink. “I was invited.”

“As though you cared about contributing to anyone’s charity but your own.”

He ignored her. “I saw you with that young boy a few minutes ago.”

She took another puff on her cigarette, held it, blew out a thin cloud of smoke. “Since when did it become a crime to engage in casual conversation?”

“Don’t embarrass yourself, Gloria.” He emptied his glass and added, “And don’t humiliate Charlie’s memory.”

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