

THE  
HIDDEN  
ONES

BOOK ONE OF  
LEGACY OF THE WATCHERS

N a n c y M a d o r e

# CHAPTER

## 1



*Present day, Manhattan*

She knew something was wrong the minute she set foot in the ladies' restroom. It was one of three bathrooms on her floor, shared among nearly two dozen offices, a small café and a nail salon. This one was situated about halfway between Nadia's office and the café, so a trip to the restroom always triggered a craving for a latte—a guilty pleasure at this time of day. But although she loved her work, Nadia's attention would wane in the afternoons, just about the time the sun came round to her window, warm and distracting, gently luring her away from whatever it was she was doing. The Europeans had it right, she thought, with their afternoon naps. And yet, sluggish as she sometimes felt, she knew she would never be able to sleep. A shot of caffeine seemed the next best thing. It would give her that second wind, even if it did leave her a little on edge and make it all the harder for her to sleep that night.

Aside from these two o'clock doldrums, as Nadia came to think of them, she had no complaints. Her career had progressed like a fairy tale, with everything falling magically into place. If only the rest of her life were this easy she might not be spending her vacation in her office. But it comforted her to be there, where everything made sense and her efforts were always met with success. And she was proud of each and every accomplishment, like a mother doting over her children. Why, just to get an office in this part of Manhattan was an achievement in itself. It was impossible to do without the right connections—in addition to enormous amounts of money. And even then, there were concessions. Her office, for example, was terribly small. But size had ceased to matter once she'd gotten her first glimpse out the only window and saw that it overlooked Bryant Park. It was mid-July, and the hollyhocks were coming into bloom. All up and down their imperious stalks were pastel-colored flowerets with furled edges, peeking out from the big, billowing leaves like cheeky girls in Easter bonnets. Nadia also spied an array of bright yellow and orange daylilies among clusters of purple foxglove. There were too many species for her sweeping gaze to identify, but she was delighted by the prospect of admiring each and every one from her new office window. Gardens were in short supply in the city, and she had killed enough house plants to give up on any dreams of someday creating one of her own. But now she could enjoy extensive gardens without chipping a nail. She imagined herself taking long, leisurely walks through the park in the mornings, or bringing her laptop outside to work on sunny afternoons (neither of which she ever actually did in the six years she'd been there). Yet she had a deep appreciation for flowers—almost a distant calling to be near them—and she knew that their mere presence would satisfy that primal urge. Cost hadn't been a factor—apart from the occasional twinges of guilt she felt about it—but in those moments she reminded herself that location played a huge part in the immense sums of money she was able to raise. Her success depended on her proximity to the most privileged, and Manhattan was where the most privileged were housed. Education and wealth afforded social consciousness. Compassion for the less fortunate was as much of a luxury as jewelry or fine wine—a sad fact but one which Nadia had been made aware of from a very young age. That awareness was what

made her so good at what she did. She truly believed in what she was doing. She sometimes wondered who benefited the most—the relief victims she raised money for or the people making the contributions. The key was to make it personal for the donors. Nadia made sure her patrons knew exactly where the money was going, sparing them no detail. She made her charity events educational, and encouraged other forms of giving besides just the writing of a check. Her efforts accomplished much more than mere fund-raising. She'd brought multitudes of people together, improving the lives of more than just her relief victims. Those who had everything found a new satisfaction in such activities as fishing through disaster debris for a treasured child's toy or scrubbing mold from the walls of a flooded school house.

Although she was never satisfied that she'd done enough, Nadia loved every minute of it. Helping people in crisis gave her life a sense of meaning, and the fund-raising was the icing on the cake. It was exciting and effortless, and Nadia went about it 'first class all the way,' as her mother would have said.

Nadia supposed she had a little of her mother in her after all, although her father was the one she had consciously tried to emulate. She'd been influenced, one way or the other, by both parents; one the eternal philanthropist and the other the self-indulgent social butterfly. She couldn't help enjoying the lavish parties any more than she could resist the call to duty in any disaster. She could still see her mother, dark and glamorous, flirting shamelessly with a powerful senator or a wealthy CEO while her father spoke somberly of the issues at hand. Nadia liked being the center of attention too. But unlike her mother, she was interested in other people besides herself, and she liked to think that she would ultimately put their interests above her own. And she was able to find pleasure in little things, like gazing out her office window at the splendor of the park below, or enjoying an afternoon latte when she knew she really shouldn't. But on this particular September afternoon, these pleasures were tempered by an odd, creeping sense of doom.

To begin with, the restroom was empty. In a city like Manhattan, this is an odd thing. Being alone in Manhattan, truly alone, the kind of alone where none of the senses are infringed upon by another human being, can bring

about an alarming sensation. There was always some sign of other people's presence. Smells and sounds wafted through windows and vents, bringing with them a vague but constant awareness of activity, from the shrill scream of a fire engine's siren to the gentle ping of an elevator. In Nadia's office building, there was always a steady flow of traffic making its way up to the fourth floor to conduct business with the various investment companies, publishers and accountants who kept offices there, not to mention the café and salon. There were times when Nadia had to wait in line to use the restroom, and she sometimes wondered if people weren't just wandering in off the street. But no one else seemed concerned by their presence, trusting, she supposed, in the abilities of the security people on the first floor.

But the minute Nadia entered the restroom on this particular afternoon, she knew she was alone. She could tell by the unusual silence that hung in the air. The restroom was actually a long, slightly curving hallway with an exit at either end. The bathroom stalls were lined up along one side, and the sinks and mirrors were located on the other. Nadia's sense of unease increased as she hurried to empty her bladder. It wasn't just that the bathroom was empty. Although unusual, this wasn't unheard of. But there was something in the silence itself that was disturbing; it had too strong a presence to ignore. At one point Nadia actually looked up, half expecting to see a face looking down at her from one of the adjacent stalls. She laughed at herself when she saw that, of course, nothing was looming overhead, but even the hollow sound of her laughter brought her up short. It was a Friday afternoon in September...in Manhattan. Where was everyone?

The odd sense of isolation was so strong that Nadia was actually relieved—though startled—when she stepped out of the stall and found a man standing there. He wore a janitor's uniform and was quietly moving a cloth around the sinks. He glanced up at her with a blank expression.

"Oh!" Nadia exclaimed, moving automatically toward one of the sinks to wash her hands. "I didn't hear you come in!"

The sense of strangeness increased. Everything was wrong, yet Nadia found herself oddly incapable of action. It was as if everything was happening in slow motion while her mind tried to piece the puzzle

together. There had been no sign to indicate the janitor's presence when she came in, and yet neither had there been any warning calls to announce his arrival. In fact, there had been no sounds at all; no clanging of the cleaning cart, no footsteps, nothing.

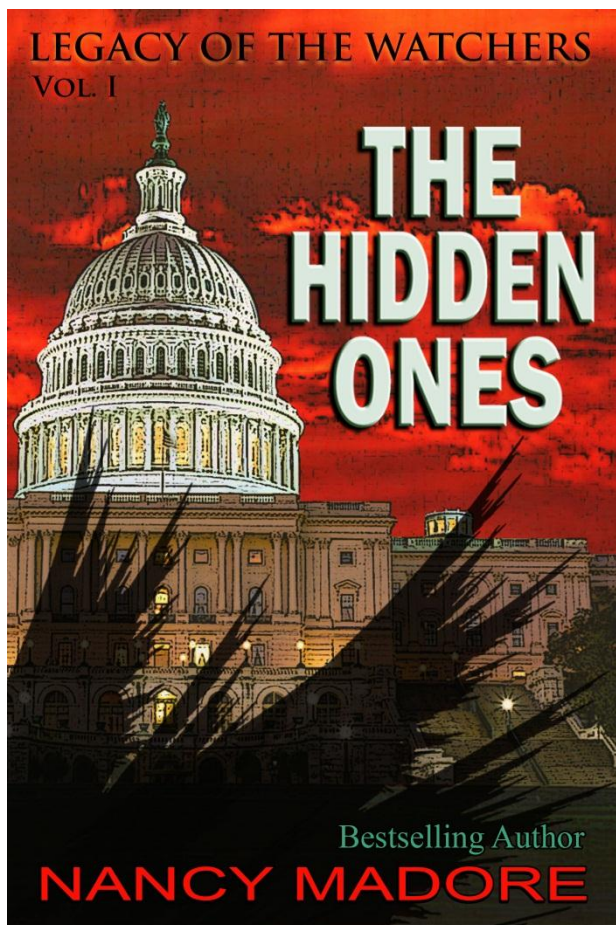
"You must have slipped in after me," the janitor concluded offhandedly.

He was what was most wrong. He looked out of place in the ill-fitting janitor's overalls, which seemed to clash with the rest of him. He was too meticulously groomed; his chestnut brown hair too expertly cut and styled, his expensive shoes too finely polished. Even his hands seemed at odds with the cleaning cloth as his perfectly manicured fingers maneuvered it over the countertops with an almost disdainful air. His demeanor was what was most wrong. He was too superior. His blue eyes flashed over Nadia with cool disdain, almost as if she was the one who had trespassed on him! He certainly didn't act like the other janitors she'd encountered there. Yet for all intents and purposes, he appeared to be completely focused on the job at hand, meticulously circling the cloth over the countertop, moving it quickly and efficiently around the row of sinks.

These observations occurred in mere seconds—in the time it took Nadia to exit her bathroom stall and advance two or three steps to the sink. She acted out of habit, and there seemed no opportunity to alter her course before the man, who'd been circling his cleaning cloth nearer and nearer to the sink she was approaching, suddenly turned and was on her. In one fluid motion he pressed the cloth firmly and securely over her nose and mouth. It was saturated with a nauseatingly sweet-smelling substance that instantly jerked Nadia out of her stupor. She tried desperately to fight the man off, clawing at his hands and wrenching her head back and forth. Nadia was healthy and strong, but she might have been a sickly child for the all the effect she was having. From both sides of her peripheral vision she could see two more men entering the restroom from the exits at either end. They were wearing the same janitorial uniforms as her attacker. It was as if it was happening to someone else as she watched the events in the mirror. People always said she resembled her father, but the woman in the mirror looked more like her mother, which was odd, because Gisele

had been as dark and exotic as Nadia was classic and fair. Yet there was something in her expression—perhaps it was the wild look in her eyes—that so resembled her dead mother that Nadia became momentarily confused. She felt a single, sharp thrill of terror just before everything went black.

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