

~ Fractured ~

by Erin O'Reilly

Prologue

Detective Tessa Jacoby stood in the entryway of the special events room at the Pritchard Gallery located in Restin, New York, looking at the portraits of women and children who lost their lives to the depravity of the world. Her eyes finally rested on the family of Dana Stratton, who all stood holding hands in front of Dana's portrait. When she saw the mother, Fran, reach up to touch the portrait, Tessa diverted her gaze. It was a private moment that *didn't* include her.

Tessa's meandering thoughts came back to the present when she heard a soft voice speak. "Thank you for coming, Detective," Fran Stratton said. "The family appreciates all the time you've given us over the last year."

With a nod and a slight smile, Tessa gave Dana's mother her undivided attention. "Tomorrow is the trial and I wanted to speak with you-the family-if you have time."

"Certainly," Fran said with melancholy lacing her voice. "I'll get the others."

Tessa led the group to a small alcove where Dana's sister, Sara, and the sleeping baby, Miranda, now a year old, could sit on a marble bench. She looked at the family and could still see the pain and sadness etched on each face. Clearing her throat, Tessa collected her thoughts. "As you know, the jury has been picked and the trial will begin tomorrow." She saw the expectant eyes of Bob and Fran Stratton, along with Sara and Jeff Macintosh, focused on her. "I know the DA has spoken with you about what will happen."

The brow of Dana's father creased. "Is there something more that we should know?"

Tessa's eyes looked at them with compassion. "The job of the defense is to win their client's freedom. I've seen this defense attorney in action, so I know he will do everything possible to see that happens."

"In what way?" Fran asked.

"By discrediting Dana-making her look guilty-like she was asking for it."

Fran's eyes opened wide. "No, that's a lie."

"I know that, Mrs. Stratton. He won't come out and say that directly but he will ask his questions in a way that insinuates that Dana was somehow responsible. All he needs to do is plant one seed of doubt in one juror's mind. That's his job." When the group in front of her said nothing, Tessa continued, "Did the DA speak to you about the crime scene photos?"

Bob Stratton nodded. "Yes, he said he'd warn us when he was going to show them so we could leave the courtroom."

"Most jurors will look at the pictures, then at the family and the defendant for their reactions." Tessa lifted one shoulder. "If you can, I think you should stay in the courtroom for them," she said softly. "You can cover your eyes or look away."

Sara asked, "So that the jury will see our reactions?"

"Exactly. The news surrounding the murder was front page around here and that's why the defense attorney fought so hard to get a jury from three hundred miles away." Tessa reached out and touched the visibly shaken Fran's arm lightly. "The jury will be looking at Dana's family and friends and, in a way that will shape their opinion of her."

Fran reached into a bag, took out a t-shirt, and handed it to Tessa. "We had these made to wear to the trial," she said. "It is the same shirt Dana was wearing that night."

Unfolding the shirt, Tessa saw a basketball with the words *reach higher to win* ringing the ball. "Thank you." The detective steeled her emotions. "You should tell everyone who'll be wearing the shirt to bring a back-up."

"Why?" Fran cried.

After closing her eyes briefly, Tessa focused on the family in front of her. "Because, the defense attorney will object."

"That's ridiculous," Bob ground out through gritted teeth. "He can't dictate what people wear."

"In the courtroom he can," Tessa said evenly. "The shirt, the pins you're wearing and anything else that reflects on Dana will be sighted as prejudicial to his client. Even before the jury enters, the judge will most likely rule in the defense's favor."

Fran bristled with anger. "No. I will not listen to the judge and wear it anyway."

Tessa moved closer and touched Fran's hand. "Justice is supposed to be blind. If you don't follow the judge's rulings, he won't let you stay in the courtroom. All I'm saying is to be prepared to wear something else," she said softly. "You don't want to jeopardize the trial over a shirt or a pin do you?"

"There's always a chance that the defense attorney will say nothing. Right?" Dana's sister asked.

Tessa shrugged. "There's always that possibility but I wouldn't count on it."

The group fell into a long silence until the baby, Miranda, began to fuss.

Bob smiled fondly at the baby then looked at Tessa. "That's all then?"

"Yes."

Fran stood up. "Will you be in the courtroom for the trial, Detective?"

"Only when I'm called to testify. I can't be there before that."

Bob held out his hand. "Thank you, Detective, for all your hard work and support."

Tessa shook each person's hand before she left for the exit.

#

Rain was threatening as Tessa left the gallery. She raised the collar of her black leather jacket as a sudden gust of cold wind swirled around her. Walking quickly to her car and getting in, her thoughts turned to a year earlier when the Dana Stratton case changed her life.

As she pushed the key into the ignition, a bright bolt of lightning fractured the black sky.

Chapter One

The one thing about police work that Tessa Jacoby detested was testifying in court. It was almost ten and she'd cooled her heels for almost an hour before she took the stand again. She'd spent most of the previous Friday testifying about the investigation into the death of George Markowitz, a local grocer.

Once reminded that she was still under oath, she sat in a chair next to the judge's dais and answered the five redirect questions the District Attorney, Herb Meyers, asked. They all revolved around the procedures used by Tessa and her partner when they first investigated the grocer's body found in a nearby lake.

The defense attorney, Conner Ashley, a big man who looked like a cuddly teddy bear, had scored points the following Friday in his cross examination. Now, the same lawyer stood in front of the witness box with his hazel eyes boring into her. "Are you telling this court, Detective Jacoby, that you had no idea that the victim was a known police snitch?"

"Yes."

"Is it your contention that this evidence,"-he held up several items-"was at the scene when you got there?"

Tessa looked at the jury. "Yes."

"Detective, did it ever occur to you that someone planted the evidence there for you to find so it would implicate my client in a murder he did not commit?"

"No."

"And why is that Detective?"

"Whether that evidence was there or not is immaterial. Our investigation uncovered other, more pertinent information that pointed to the defendant."

"Then why did your partner, Detective Barrett, indicate in his testimony that the evidence found at the scene was, and I quote, *the evidence was essential to the investigation, without it we might not have identified the perpetrator.*"

Tessa raised her eyebrows and shrugged. "Don't know."

"Do you and your partner discuss your cases?"

"Yes."

"But you didn't agree on the evidence at the lake?"

"The evidence found at the scene helped us identify the perpetrator sooner. If it hadn't been there, it might have taken us longer but we would have come to the same conclusion."

Conner Ashley looked at his notes, made several notations, glanced at the witness, and then said. "Nothing further."

The judge's wizened blue eyes fell on the DA "Any redirect?"

Herb Meyers stood up, buttoned his jacket, and said, "Detective Jacoby, do you approach a case with limited evidence any differently than one where evidence is readily available?"

"No."

"Nothing further, Your Honor."

Judge Everett looked down at the detective. "You're dismissed."

#

With her eyes focused on the door, Tessa walked rapidly out of the courtroom and headed for the exit. Flipping her cell phone open and pressing a button, she heard a familiar melodic tone that told her the phone was on-it rang immediately.

"Jacoby."

"You done?" her partner, Gus Barrett, asked.

"Just finished a few minutes ago."

"We have a body."

"You pickin' me up?"

"Yep, I'll be there in a few."

Tessa was almost to the exit when she recognized Anna Mikaelson in an intense conversation with another woman. From Anna's body language, Tessa saw familiarity. *Now why doesn't that surprise me?* Rumor had it that Anna was a player. She chuckled slightly and shook her head. Then she continued toward the exit, ignoring the pain she felt in her heart.

Passing by security, she negotiated three steps, pushed open the door, and then left the courthouse located at Justice Square.

#

Tessa, driven by a work ethic that didn't tolerate anything less than the best both professionally and privately, was the ultimate police detective. Those who worked with her knew her as a demanding workaholic, who played by the book and expected everyone else to do the same.

She hadn't always been that way-not in the beginning. Tessa was the middle child of three girls and always had to fight for the approval of a domineering father and an unbending, distant mother. She often found solace in flights of fantasy that transported her from her life of not fitting in, to a world where she found love.

Her older sister, Jessica, always succeeded and, thereby, was the golden child who could do no wrong. Tessa was a disappointment to her parents and grandparents for she was suppose to be a boy-a stigma that would shape her life forever. Her younger sister, Rachel, with blonde hair and blue eyes, was the one everyone loved and doted on. It would make sense that Tessa might be jealous and resent her sisters but she didn't. Instead, she clung to them in an attempt to have some of their sun shine on her, too-it never did.

During her school years, Tessa never lived up to what her one-hundred-thirty-five IQ said her potential should be. She learned early on that she could get by in school with the minimum of effort and later she took a perverse pleasure in disappointing her parents. Where Tessa failed to achieve her parents' love, she conversely was very popular and voted class president in high school. After obtaining a degree in criminal justice, Tessa applied to the police academy. Her father expressed his surprise at her graduating and told her she'd never make it as a police officer. It was then that she decided to prove him wrong.

Tessa had known since junior high that she didn't get the same thrill as the other girls did over boys-she was only looking at the girls. In her first year of college, she had her first lesbian encounter. It was then that she understood why, despite her popularity, she never seemed to fit in with the other girls.

At first, Tessa was gung-ho at being a homicide detective. She thought of herself as the defender of those who lost their lives to what she called *the deranged element of society*. Near the end of her first two years, Tessa found herself spiraling into depression. She came to the realization,

after several months of therapy, that she could no longer champion the dead-it was too great a burden to carry. She couldn't allow herself to care about the victims and began ignoring the suffering of the murder victim's family and friends. No longer did she cry for those that had no voice. Instead, she closed off her heart as she concentrated on bringing the perpetrators to justice. Yet, nightmares remained.

Her reputation as a solid detective, who had a high rate of arrests, had many seasoned detectives requesting to be her partner. She had three partners before she finally found a good match in Gus Barrett, who she was partners with for the past eight years.

In the romance department, Tessa didn't have time for any type of long term commitment, for she focused completely on her job. The lovers she did have, never asked for more than she could give and that suited her nicely. She had suffered her entire life without the love of her parents and she wasn't about to let anyone hurt her like that again.

Still, her heart cried out for love.

Chapter Two

When federal prosecutor, Anna Mikaelson, saw Tessa Jacoby, she ended her conversation with Beverly Paycheck abruptly. *This conversation is going nowhere. Bev will never get it that I'm not interested in her.* Anna walked quickly toward the exit, pushed open the door, and lengthened her stride. As she neared the detective, she smiled.

They met five months earlier when a chance encounter in a courtroom brought them face to face-Tessa took her breath away. Over the time since that initial meeting, they had shared many lunches at a nearby deli, where playfulness was at the top of the menu. They had dated as much as they could-their hectic schedules always seemed to get in the way of something more meaningful. At least that was what Anna told herself was the reason she hadn't had lunch with or called the detective in almost a month.

Anna's case involving minor members of the Petroff crime family had occupied most of her time for the last several months. Once the trial began, her only free time was when she slept and there was precious little of that. That morning, the judge had charged the jury and the waiting began while they deliberated the evidence. Seeing the detective again set her body humming as the attraction she had for Tessa bloomed. *She's still as stunning as ever.*

When Tessa heard, "Detective Jacoby," a brief shiver went down her spine. With a smile, Tessa turned around to see Anna walking quickly toward her. She could be the poster child for her Swedish heritage. Her height, five-foot-nine, accentuated her lean, muscular body that a charcoal gray suit covered but did not hide. Her naturally blonde hair glistened as the sun seemed to kiss each strand. Her clear complexion, set off by eyes the color of the sky on a crisp, clear winter morning, was flawless. She was a vision of perfection.

They danced to the music of flirtation every time they met and this time was no exception. There was no mistaking the look of pleasure on Anna's face when Tessa's eyes overtly appraised the

lawyer's body. The draw was strong and Tessa knew it wouldn't take much for her to fall for the words that slid so easily off the lawyer's tongue. Nevertheless, the sting of Anna's lack of communication for the last month hurt and she wasn't sure she could or wanted to get past that.

After Tessa overheard two women talking about Anna and her reputation as a skirt chaser, she understood why she hadn't heard from Anna in a month-she'd moved on. In spite of that, it still took every ounce of her resistance not to let herself fall for the smooth lines she knew would come. *My life is complicated enough without adding an unfaithful lover to the mix.* It was foolish of her to think that a philanderer would ever change. Still, there was the attraction, and the kisses they shared at doorways after their dates were both intense and pleasurable. The fact that it was always Anna, who pulled away just as passions began to beg for more, confused her. If the reputation of being a womanizer was true, then why hadn't Anna taken her to bed? Her conclusion-Anna was already bedding someone on a permanent basis. Yet, the familiar stirrings of arousal in her body didn't seem to care.

In a soft sensual voice, Anna said, "I saw you leaving the courthouse. It's been a while, Tessa."

"Yeah, it has. How are you doing, Anna?"

Intense blue eyes focused on Tessa's face. "Oh," she said with a wink, "things are definitely looking up at the moment." She gazed into Tessa's eyes.

Falling easily back into their familiar bantering, with a wide grin Tessa asked, "And why is that?"

"I think you know but I'll spell it out for you, if you like," Anna said playfully before her face became solemn. "I've missed you."

Tessa shrugged. "I didn't go anywhere."

"I know," Anna whispered. *I was such an idiot.*

Tessa saw the lawyer's eyes leave her and settle elsewhere. Following the gaze, she saw a buxom, slim built woman standing nearby and Anna's eyes were raking over the body in what looked like amazement. Tessa stared, too, for the woman's double D breasts were something to behold. "Now, there's a mouthful," she quipped.

Anna laughed and looked at Tessa before her eyes slowly ran up the detective's body. "I was wondering if those big boobs could suffocate someone if their face was buried in them." She grinned.

Wiggling her eyebrows and laughing, Tessa said, "At least you'd go out with a smile on your face."

Reaching out and running a well manicured finger across the detective's hand, Anna shivered. "I can think of other ways to make you smile."

Tess felt her body react in pleasure.

"Have dinner with me and I'll show you what I mean."

Anna's assault on her libido, that was screaming *yes*, made Tessa gulp at the provocative invitation. Maybe this time Anna would actually come inside and not leave her frustrated and alone at the door. *Do I take a chance? II*," Tessa began, relieved when she heard the sound of a car's horn.

Turning, Tessa let out a sigh of relief when she saw Gus behind the wheel of his requisitioned battered old black Crown Vic. Tessa gave him a brief nod before turning back to the lawyer. She let a small smile turn up the corners of her mouth before she again looked back toward the street. "We've got a body I'm sorry."

With a shrug, Anna said, "No problem. I took a chance you'd be freethere's always next time."

Tessa didn't want to end the connection, for something told her this time it would be different. Her eyes searched Anna's until she heard another honk. "I've got to go," she reluctantly said. "I'll see you around or you can call me," she added before she turned and hurried to the waiting vehicle.

Anna watched as Tessa walked away and let her gaze fall on the detective's firm backside. *Nice tight ass*. Feeling stirrings of pleasure, she continued to watch as Tessa slid into the car. She heard someone say her name and when she turned in the direction of the voice, she saw a young law clerk that worked in her office. "Hi, Sylvia," she said, as she took more one quick look at the departing vehicle.

Tessa closed the door, pulled the seatbelt across her chest, and looked at Anna. She hadn't even left the area and the lawyer had already found another woman. *In the space of a few minutes, she's gone from the chick in the courthouse, followed by me and now she's with a girl who might be jailbait*. When the lawyer turned in her direction, their eyes met and Tessa swallowed the lump in her throat before letting out a long, slow silent chuckle. *She's amazing*.

#

Sitting in quiet contemplation as she always did before a case began, Tessa absently said, "Where?"

"South Howard."

"Rough neighborhood."

"A couple of kids were playing in a vacant lot when they came across the body. The grandmother of one of the kids' called it in at ten-thirty."

Tessa looked at her partner of five years. He wasn't a big man—stood about five-seven—his baldness was what everyone noticed first. His head was the only part of him that didn't have hair. He sported a thick moustache, bushy eyebrows, black hair peeked out of his unbuttoned collar where his tie was loosely hanging, and each segment of his fingers had thick black hair. His eyes were a warm brown and his voice low and melodic.

The man was old school police. He felt that the technology was only an aid in smoking out perpetrators. He told his partner repeatedly that it was through old fashioned police investigation that required knocking on doors, finding leads and putting all the pieces together, that brought a murder investigation to its conclusion. Tessa was glad to have him for a partner, for she could rely on him always having her back just as she has his.

"Any other information?"

"Female is all I know." Gus waited a minute before he said, "Cap said that you're primary. You ok with that?"

"Yep." Gus nodded at the white bag sitting between them. "There's a roast beef on rye with horseradish and mayo, just like you like it. Got you a pickle, too. Oh, and a water."

"Thanks. I can't remember the last time I ate." Tessa took the bag, opened it, pulled out the sandwich, tore the wrapper off, and took a bite.

"You and that lawyer still dating?" Gus asked as he kept his eyes on the cars in front of him.

Tessa laughed. "You need some gossip to share with your pals in your bowling league?"

Gus snorted. "No. You know that Helen always asks about you. She *always* wants to know if you're eating right and if you're dating anyone. I figured if I told her you were still dating the lawyer she'd stop giving me the names of women she wants to fix you up with."

Taking another bite of her sandwich, Tessa let her partner's words roll around in her mind. Swallowing, she said, "Tell Helen thanks for thinking about me and that I've got it all under control."

"So you're dating her?"

Tessa grinned. "This sandwich is delicious."

Gus laughed. "You're not going to tell me are you?"

"Nope."

Gus let out a heartier laugh. "Women, I'll never understand 'em."

Chapter Three

The old Crown Vic rolled slowly to a stop and Gus held his badge out the window. A uniformed officer at the police barricade of the entrance to the six hundred block of South Howard pulled back the metal barrier. Gus navigated his vehicle around the multitude of randomly parked police and other emergency vehicles. There wasn't much room to drive, let alone park, but he did manage to get close to the scene.

Once parked, the partners made their way to the yellow crime scene tape that cordoned off a vacant lot. It was an early spring day and the sun was warm against their faces. Tessa and Gus stood on the sidewalk in front of the vacant lot and let their eyes do the first critical survey of the scene. They could see clear signs that a vehicle had recently driven over the dead weeds on the debris laden lot. The impressions left by a vehicle's tires led to where several crime scene investigators, along with the medical examiner, stood around what they could clearly see was a naked body. Other people, who they recognized, were searching in a grid within the lot.

Gus pointed to the tire tracks. "They look fresh."

"I hope we can get something from them," Tessa commented.

"It looks like it's about a hundred and fifty feet or so to the body."

Tessa looked at the distance between them and the medical examiner. "Yeah, that seems right."

Making their way along the outskirts of the lot, the two detectives soon joined the others.

Gus looked at the body, shook his head, and muttered, "Bastard. This never gets any easier."

The first look Tessa took of the body at every murder scene always made her blood run cold-this case was no different. She looked down at the nude body of a woman, who looked like she was in her late teens or early twenties, lying crumpled on the ground. She briefly closed her eyes as she offered up a small prayer to whoever was listening. The cruelty she'd seen over the years made her, at times, question the existence of a higher power but that never stopped her from praying for each victim.

The prominent thing that both detectives immediately noticed were a bloody pentagram carved into the abdomen, cuts on the breasts, along with a slit throat. Tessa crouched down next to the body and felt a distinct reaction-her instincts screamed *this was personal*. She pulled out a pair of blue examination gloves and looked at the medical examiner as she pulled them up her fingers. "Do you have a time of death?"

The man, Ellis Brown, pulled a thermometer out of the body and noted the temperature. "Judging by the liver temp and the rigor, my preliminary estimate is about ten to twelve hours ago."

"That would make it between midnight and two."

"I'll have more for you once I get her on the table." Ellis pointed to the deep laceration with dried blood across the woman's neck. "It looks like exsanguination will be the cause of death."

Tessa looked at the victim's face. It was dirty and fixed in what looked like a grimace. She also noted that there were lighter areas running down her cheeks and Tessa surmised that the girl cried before her death. She pointed to the carving on the victim's abdomen and asked the medical examiner, "What do you make of that?"

"Not sure. Might be some sort of devil worship." The ME reached under the body.

"Or torture," Tessa interjected.

The coroner nodded in agreement, as he gently turned the body. "Take a look at this."

Moving closer, she looked beyond the dirt covering the woman's skin and leaned in. There was clear evidence that numerous other wounds existed there. Initially, she thought they might be something like the pentagram but closer inspection had her questioning that thought. Tessa narrowed her eyes. "Do you have any thoughts on what the cuts on her back are or what was used to make them?"

"Not yet. From what I can see, they seem random. Once I get her cleaned up, they'll be more visible," the medical examiner offered.

Tessa's eyes focused on the ground that was under the body. "I don't see any blood around or underneath her." She looked up at her partner and he nodded. "This is the dump site." Her eyes then focused on something white and rectangular, like a business card, on the ground under the victim's body. She motioned to the nearest CSI and pointed to the object. "Make sure you get that."

"Did you guys get impressions of those tire tracks?" Gus asked Marvin Westcott one of the investigators.

"It's impossible," offered the taller, older man. "The ground is bone dry. All we have is crushed weeds and they aren't giving up what they know." The investigator crouched down in the grass about ten feet from the body. "We did find this."

Gus moved away from the body and looked where Marvin was pointing. "Looks like oil."

"Yeah, it lines up with where the engine would be when the vehicle stopped, if someone backed it in."

"Will you be able to tell much from it?" Gus asked as he crouched down for a closer look.

"Probably not," the investigator said. "But, if you find the vehicle, it will be leaking oil and then we can match the type."

"Find any ID?" Tessa asked.

"All we have is the body," Ellis said.

One of the patrol officers, Kim Ryan, a lean well-built woman, offered, "That's Dana Stratton."

All eyes focused on the officer.

"You know this woman?" Tessa asked.

"Not personally. Dana Stratton was an All American basketball player in high school, then a three time collegiate All American first team and Player of the Year two years in a row." The woman shrugged. "I played against her in high school."

Gus asked, "Any missing persons out on her?"

"When I recognized her, I checked. She hasn't been reported missing," the patrol officer said.

Gus's attention turned to several news vans raising telescoping satellite dishes just outside of the police barricade. "Fuck," he said under his breath. "This is going to be a zoo."

Tessa growled when she saw several of the camera crews with reporters funneling past the barricades and lining up on the sidewalk in front of the crime scene. Gus, along with Tessa, instinctively moved to shield the body from the cameras.

"Who the hell let them get that far?" Tessa grumbled. She looked at the nearest officer and said, "Get them out of here and find me the officer responsible for allowing them to gain access." Turning to the medical examiner, she noted he had already covered the body.

A young officer, barely in his twenties, came up to where the two detectives were and stood waiting for acknowledgement. With her upper lip twitching slightly, Tessa looked at the slim young man. Pointing to the media that other officers were herding away, Tessa asked, "You're the one who let them in?"

The officer rocked back and forth on his heels. Haltingly he said, "I was asking about what we should do with the news vans and when I turned back to the barricade they were already past me. I tried to stop them but they just kept on going."

"Exactly who's in charge?" Tessa scolded. "You or the reporters."

Gus moved closer to the man whose face was drawn and white. "How long have you been on the job?"

"A week sir."

Gus looked at his partner and gave her a shrug. "Is this your first crime scene?"

"Yes sir."

Tessa looked squarely at the young man. "What *you* should have done, once *you* saw they had gotten past you, was to go after them and make them leave! It's *your* job to see that no one and I mean NO ONE, gets by you. If you want to continue being on the force, I suggest you get your butt back over there and make sure no one gets past you again,"

The officer edged a few steps away from the angry detective. "Yes, ma'am," he said before he turned and walked briskly back to the barricade.

"And don't call me ma'am," Tessa muttered. She snorted and looked at her partner. "As usual, you were being too damn soft on him. How can he learn if you mollycoddle him? He needs to know he fucked up so he won't do it again."

"He's just a kid," Gus countered. "Did you do everything correctly when you first started?"

Tessa's face softened. "He shouldn't have let them get by him."

Once Tessa turned back to the body that was now covered, she crouched down, pulled the blue sheet back and looked at the girl's face, distorted by death. The cruelty inflicted on the body made Tessa's stomach knot. Nevertheless, she had to maintain her cool persona, knowing that emotions never solved a murder. Pulling the sheet back over the body she stood up and looked at the medical examiner. "Hopefully she will give us a clue as to who did this to her."

Ellis Brown nodded as his attention turned to the gurney that two men were pulling across the lot. "I'll let you know as soon as I have anything."

Chapter Four

As her eyes scanned the area beyond the vacant lot, Tessa noted that it was typical of an economically depressed area-run down homes with boarded up windows, burnt out hulls where people once lived, along with numerous vehicles in various forms of disrepair. Her eyes caught the movement of a curtain covering a window in the upper floor of a house across the street. The structure stood out like a sore thumb.

"Did you see that?" Tessa asked Gus.

"Yeah." Gus flipped open his tattered notebook. "One of the kids lives there-Joey Carlton. He lives there with his grandmother." Gus's eyes rolled over his notes. "The grandmother is the woman who called it in."

"Her name?"

"Bertram, Mary Bertram."

Without speaking, Tessa nodded in the direction of the house. Then she and Gus walked toward the street and ducked under the yellow crime scene tape. Once they navigated around all the parked vehicles, they stood on the sidewalk outside the house. Both detectives assessed the

house, yard, and driveway. The house was painted white with green shutters around each window. The recently mowed lawn and the dug up flower bed along the front of the house indicated that someone cared about the house's appearance. They walked to the front door, pulled back the screen door and Gus knocked.

The door opened slowly and a tall, slim woman with steel gray hair, dressed in jeans, and a long sleeve shirt, looked at them. "Yes?" the older woman said, as she wiped her hands on a white apron wrapped around her waist.

The wonderful smell of something baking filled her nostrils and Tessa's mouth began to water. "Mrs. Bertram, we're Detectives Jacoby and Barrett. I understand you're the one that called nine-one-one." She turned slightly and pointed to the lot.

"Come on in." The woman opened the door wider and once the detectives were inside, said with a grim voice, "Such a shame. Please take a seat. I was just getting ready to take a pie out of the oven when the doorbell rang. I'll only be a moment."

Tessa took the opportunity to inspect the sitting room, along with the dining room. Everything she noticed was much like the outside-neat and tidy. If she looked far enough into the home, she could make out the kitchen too. Oak hardwood floors, adorned with various area rugs, were highly polished. The furniture that she could see was old but in good condition. When Tessa saw embroidered doilies, she let a slight smile curve her lips. It was just like what her grandmother had throughout her house. *How I miss her. She was the only family member that ever cared about me.* Her eyes rested on a heavy oak dining table, where various bake goods were in a line.

When Tessa saw the woman returning, she turned her full attention in that direction. "Can you tell us what happened?"

"My husband and I moved in here right after we got married. Back then, the neighborhood was a wonderful place to raise kids. Now, there are gangs, drugs and murders," Mary said. "I refuse to let them run me out of my home of forty years."

"It must be tough keeping your grandson from those influences," Tessa remarked. "How did he come to find the body?"

"I've told my grandson to keep off that lot. There are all kinds of things over there that I don't want my grandson to know about." Her voice was somber. "The lot is littered with needles, crack viles, old condoms, you name it, and you'll probably find it there. It's a magnet for the neighborhood kids 'cause it's the only open place for them to play. I've filled out all kinds of complaints with the city but nothing changes," the older woman said, shaking her head. "I've spoken with Councilman Murray and even went to several council meetings. All I got from them were empty promises to make it better." She pointed out the window to the vacant lot. "It continues to breed violence and crime."

In an effort to bring the conversation back to the dead body, Gus asked, "Can you tell us what happened earlier this morning, Mrs. Bertram?"

"I was baking for our church-it's the Holy Redeemer Church right down the street. Every Tuesday we open a soup kitchen and provide the less fortunate with a good meal. A local grocery donates the ingredients and the woman's auxiliary does all the cooking. So far I've made two sheet cakes and four pies." The woman looked at the bland expressions on the detective's faces. "Sorry, I got carried away."

"Please continue," Tessa encouraged.

"Right, you want to know about what my grandson saw. Well, Joey came charging into the house with his friends, screaming about a body. He told me that they saw the body of a woman in the lot. I figured it was a mannequin or something that the older kids put there to scare the younger ones."

Gus asked, "How old is Joey?"

"Nine."

"What happened next?" Tessa asked, prodding the woman to speed up her story.

"I told them to stay put and I'd go see for myself. When I got there, I saw that poor child all cut up like that. It broke my heart. I called nine-one-one on my cell phone then went to the curb to wait for the police."

"Did you touch the body?" Tessa asked.

"No! I know better than that. It was obvious she was dead. When the police came, I gave them all the information I had and came back here. I had my pies in the oven and I didn't want them to burn."

"Who sleeps upstairs in the bedroom that faces the street?" asked Tessa.

"I do."

Tessa eyed the woman. "Did you hear anything strange last night or early this morning?"

"No, I don't think so. I'm a pretty sound sleeper."

"No lights filled your bedroom?"

The woman thought for a minute and said, "Come to think of it, just after I put my head on the pillow the room filled with light but it went out right away."

"What time was that?"

"Around midnight."

"Did you look out the window to see what it was?"

"No. I found out a long time ago it's best to ignore things like that. Besides, it was only for a second. I just figured someone was turning around. That happens sometimes."

"Was your window open?" Gus asked.

"No. If I keep it open, I can hear all the gang kids who hang out there at night," Mary paused, then added, "I don't care for their language."

"Do you know any of the gang members?" Gus pressed.

"I should say so. I taught English for thirty-one years and most of them were in my classes. They leave me and mine alone. We don't pay them any attention and they ignore us." She added, "It is the best way to survive these days."

Tessa briefly closed her eyes in understanding. "Do you know if they were there last night when you went to bed?"

Mary inverted her bottom lip and sucked on it for a minute before answering. "I don't think so. I remember hearing sirens about an hour or so before I went upstairs. They all usually scatter when that happens. I had a long day yesterday, that's why I went to bed so late. I was asleep the minute my head hit the pillow."

Tessa asked, "Is your grandson at home?"

"Yes, he's in his bedroom."

Tessa looked right at the woman. "Can we have your permission to speak with him?"

"Well, I guess it will be all right. I'll get him."

A small boy dressed in jeans, a long sleeve t-shirt, and what looked like new Nikes, walked into the room behind his grandmother. Hiding behind her, the boy peeked around the woman and looked at the detectives with big, owl eyes. Moving forward, he immediately sought refuge by his grandmother's side and she put a protective hand on his shoulder.

Tessa looked at the boy. She disliked speaking with children, for she found they generally parroted whatever someone told them to say. Keeping her face neutral and trying to soften her tone, she said, "Hi Joey, my name is Tessa and this is Gus. Can you tell us what happened this morning?"

Joey looked at his grandmother who nodded. "Me, Tony and Ricky were playing across the street."

Gus smiled at the boy. "Why did you go there?"

"We were looking for money. One time we found over a dollar."

Still smiling, Gus asked, "Then what happened?"

"We saw something against the bushes and we went to see what it was."

The boy's eyes looked at the woman detective when she spoke. "What did you see?"

"It was a girl. She didn't have any clothes on."

For a brief moment, a feeling of sadness washed over Tessa. *No one, especially young children, should have to see what I do on a daily basis.* "Did you or your friends touch the body?"

Joey's eyes grew wide again. "NO!"

Gus's warm brown eyes looked at the boy. "Did any of you find anything and take it?"

With his eyes flitting to his grandmother before he looked away, he softly said, "No."

"Joey," said the grandmother, "you tell them the truth."

Tessa he was certain that the boy was holding something back. "If you or your friends took something, we need to know. It's important."

"We found money."

Tessa asked, "Where is it now?"

The young boy dug into his jeans pocket and pulled out what looked like a slim money clip holding some bills-the top bill was a five.

Tessa groaned silently as she put on exam gloves. *No way are we getting prints off that.* She held out her palm, the boy deposited the object holding the money in it. She felt the coldness of the metal. For a moment, her gaze took in the grandmother, whose hands were trembling while she wrung her fingers on her apron.

Tessa looked at the boy and said, "Did you count the money?" When Joey didn't answer, Tessa tried to soften her voice. "Look, son, we need to know."

Still, the boy refused to answer.

With a voice that he used with his own kids, Gus said, "Joey, we need to find the person who left that there so we can talk to them. We need you to tell us everything."

Joey looked at the floor. "Yeah, I counted it. There's seven dollars."

"Is all the money still here or did you and your friends share it?" Gus asked.

"No, it's all there. I was the first one there. They didn't know I found it."

When Tessa turned the money clip over so it laid flat in her hand, she saw some sort of drawing on the top near the curve and two initials-an R and an S. She looked at the boy and his grandmother and held the object up.

"Do these initials mean anything to you?"

The boy shrank away slightly before he shook his head. "No ma'am."

Looking at the grandmother, Tessa nodded at the money clip. "Have you seen anything like this before?"

The older woman's eyes flashed to her grandson. "No. I've never seen that before."

Tessa looked at her in question. "Are you positive?"

Just as the woman was about to answer, her attention turned to a shrill buzzing coming from the kitchen. "Excuse me I've got to get a pie out." Not giving the detectives a chance to object, the woman rapidly walked toward the kitchen.

Tessa looked at the boy and then at Gus, who cleared his throat. She felt the boy knew more than he was saying but she couldn't question him without his grandmother being there. Tessa slid the object into an evidence envelope and looked squarely at the boy-he turned away.

Once Mary returned, Tessa asked, "Joey, have you told us everything?"

"Yes," he whispered.

Turning to the older woman, Tessa asked, "Mrs. Bertram, what about Joey's mother? Does she live here too?"

"Yes."

"Any chance she saw something last night?"

"Lord no, Vanessa works the night shift at St. David's and, like every night when she works, she's gone by ten-thirty. I don't know how she could help you, since she wasn't here after that." The older woman eyed the two detectives. "Unless that girl died before then."

Tessa ignored the comment. "Is she home now?"

"Yes, she's sleeping."

With an imperceptible nod, Tessa pulled a card out of her jacket pocket. "Will you ask your daughter to call me when she gets up?"

"Ok, but I doubt she can help you. Like I said, she was at work last night."

Tessa cleared her throat and shrugged. "Sometimes it's the smallest observation that leads to the person who committed the crime. Thank you, Mrs. Bertram."

Tessa looked at the boy who cowered closer to his grandmother.

"Joey, you listen to your grandmother and stay away from that lot."

#

Back out on the sidewalk, Tessa asked, "Do you have the address of the other two boys?"

Gus nodded. "Yeah, they're brothers and live a few doors down."

"Let's see if they have the same story," Tessa said, before they started down the sidewalk.

Chapter Five

Tessa pushed open the door to the autopsy suite, where the medical examiner was standing over the body of Dana Stratton. She and Gus had just the girl's parents. As with most notifications that involved a child, Dana's parents were devastated. That part of her job tore her apart. "Do you have anything for me, Doc?"

The man shook his head as he finished rinsing the body. "I've only done a cursory exam. Now that I've got her cleaned up, my observations will be more precise. I'll give you a call when I'm done."

"Yeah I know. I'm not rushing you I just wanted to get a look at her under these bright lights." Tessa's eyes focused on the girl's face, noting that it was no longer dirty. The streaks that her tears created were gone and she could see that the rigor had started to reverse.

The ME let out a small chuckle. "When haven't you been in a rush for my findings?"

Lifting one shoulder, Tessa let a smile play around her lips. She shifted her gaze from the body to the man who was about two inches shorter than she was at almost five-nine. "You know what they say about old habits."

"Yeah, yeah, I hear you. Somehow I don't see you changing anytime soon, Jacoby." Ellis motioned for Tessa to move closer. "Since you're here, I'll give you what I have so far."

"Thanks. Did you find any usable prints on the body?"

"I was hoping I might find some on her face but, no, I didn't find any." Ellis motioned for Tessa to move closer. "I've found some fibers in the pentagram on her stomach. Probably from a carpet from a house or car, but we'll need trace to verify that. The cuts had debris from the scene embedded in them but I did manage to find something strange. Help me turn her over." Once the body was turned, he focused a small camera on one area of the back and pointed to a monitor at the bottom of the exam table. "See that dark green area?"

"Yeah, what is it?"

"It looks like moss or some sort of mold. I don't recall seeing anything like that at the scene, did you?"

Tessa closed her eyes and visualized the ground around the body. "No. It wasn't that kind of area. Wouldn't something like that be found somewhere that doesn't get much sun and it's damp?" Tessa's eyebrows knitted. "Like maybe a basement."

"Yes, that's exactly what I thought. It will be interesting to see what trace comes up with."

"It might give us a lead as to where the actual crime scene is. Is that all you have?" she asked.

The older man shook his head. "No. While I was washing her, I noticed that the cuts on her body and the one across her throat are deep and clearly defined. The first cut must have been in the abdomen, since I found a shallow cut before it went deeper. "

"Hesitation?"

"I think so. Whatever he used to cut her was very sharp and thin."

"Like a razor blade, scalpel, or something like that?"

"Yes."

Looking at the pentagram, Tessa leaned in closer. "They look precise."

"It's clear that someone had a steady hand and took their time, which is most peculiar since the cuts that slit her throat and drew the pentagram were done antemortem and those on her back and right hand were done postmortem."

"Why is that curious?"

"Because the pentagram is every bit as precise as those on her back and that tells me that she was somehow restrained and I don't see any indication of that." The doctor picked up one of the girl's hands. "It looks like her hands and ankles were loosely bound but in order for the pentagram to be so precise she'd have to be completely still." He shook his head. "The toxicology will tell us if she was drugged." He pointed to the slit across her throat. "It starts at one carotid and, with a consistent single stroke, ends at the other one. Most curious."

"What did you make of the cuts on her back?"

"Strangely enough there are four partial triangles on her back and one on the back of her right hand. If you put them all together, you'd have another pentagram."

Tessa lifted her eyebrows. "That's odd," she said, as she noted where the marks were. "How tall is she?"

"Seventy-four inches."

Tessa scratched her head and pursed her lips. "How did someone get the best of her? Usually, the perp attacks someone who is smaller and weaker,"-her hand motioned up and down the body-"she's muscular and obviously physically fit."

"I didn't find any evidence that she put up a fight." The doctor again picked up one of the girl's hands. "The slight bruising around her wrists and ankles is from her trying to get free but it doesn't look like she did do much of that. I didn't get much when I scraped under her fingernails and I don't see defensive wounds on her hands or arms."

As her eyes took in the lower part of the body, Tessa noticed bruising on the girl's upper thighs. "Was sexually assaulted?"

"It looks like both vaginally and rectally and once I examine the stomach contents, we'll know if it was orally, too."

"Find any biologicals?"

"Haven't got there yet. I can give you more on that when I open her up. Once I get her stomach contents, I can send it to toxicology, along with the blood and tissue samples. It'll take a sometime before we get the full report back." Tessa started to leave, and then turned back to the man. "Thanks."

"I'll let you know once you get the preliminary report," Ellis said as Tessa walked away.

Just as she was about to shove the door open, Tessa turned back toward the body and saw the medical examiner with the Stryker saw in his hand. "The parents should be here soon to identify her. I'll call down and let you know when they arrive."

The ME raised the shield off his face and put the saw down. "I'll wait until they see her then." Before the detective was out the door, he said, "You can tell them that once I'm done with the autopsy and have all the samples I need I'll discharge the body."

Tessa waved over her shoulder. "Thanks Doc."

#

When Tessa returned to her desk, Gus was hanging up his phone. "The DA's office manager just called. The warrant to search the Stratton girl's apartment is ready."

"Good. Once we go to inform the parents, we'll go check it out." Tessa thought for a minute then added, "Maybe we'll get lucky and find the primary crime scene there."

"God, Jacoby, when did you become such a dreamer?"

Tessa just looked at her partner and gave him a lopsided grin.

"Get anything from the ME?"

"Not much. The outside of the body is like the lot where those kids found her-it isn't giving up what it knows. Looks like she was raped and" She stopped when Gus's eyes moved in the direction of the elevators.

A man and a woman, clinging to each other, stepped out of the elevator before nervously looking around. Gus nodded. "They're here."

Turning her head, Tessa looked at the couple. "Yeah, that's them. Call down to autopsy and let them know I'll be bringing them down." She rolled her desk chair back. "I hate this part," she said to no one as she started to get up.

"Want me to do it?"

"No, I'm primary, I'll do it. When we get back up here, we can question them again." When they notified the couple earlier, they were so distraught that questioning them was pointless.

"I'll get the room set up and go get that warrant."

Steeling her emotions, Tessa walked toward the two people, who looked at her apprehensively. "Mr. and Mrs. Stratton thank you for coming," she said softly

The couple, not knowing what else to say or do, stood pensively eyeing the detective. Bob Stratton was at least six-four with sandy blonde hair, dark blue eyes and she could see his daughter's square jaw in him. The woman by his side with light brown hair and a full figure was considerably smaller. Her shoulders shook and Tessa braced herself for the onslaught of emotion she knew would surely come. *It was bad enough earlier.*

Fran Stratton finally asked, "Did you check again? Are you sure it's our Dana?"

Tessa looked at the woman, before lifting her eyes in the man's direction. "Nothing is certain until you make a positive identification."

Tessa turned her eyes away from the couple. She didn't want to see the pain and sorrow that she knew was all over their faces. "If you'll come with me, I'll take you to her."

#

Standing in front of a large window with a drawn curtain, Tessa looked at the couple. "Are you ready?" Once they nodded, she tapped on the glass and the curtain slowly opened. A small woman was standing next to what clearly was a body that a blue paper sheet covered. Looking at the detective and seeing her nod, she pulled back the sheet to expose the body's head.

With her hand flying to her mouth, Fran cried, "Oh my God, it's my baby," as she fell against her husband. The husband's arm went around his wife's shoulders as he stared at his daughter.

The sight of the parents clutching each other in shared sorrow made Tessa feel uncomfortable-it always did. Yet, she stood stoically never letting on that the scene was tearing her apart.

The man tugged his wife closer and kissed her light brown hair. "Have you found out anything else about how this happened?"

"We're just in the infancy of our investigation. What I can tell you now is that her death wasn't accidental. If you'd come with me, I'd like to ask you both questions about your daughter." Tessa let her eyes search the faces of the murdered girl's parents. "The more we know about her, the better our chances are in finding out who did this to her."

"NO," wailed the mother. "Not yet, I *want* to go to her."

Closing her eyes, Tessa looked away for a second as she regained her composure. "Certainly."

Once the couple was standing next to the body, Tessa moved to the door and waited as she cast her glance to the floor. *God, I hate this.* The cold air that had a faint odor of death chilled her as she forced her emotions down when she heard the woman and man sob uncontrollably.

Twenty minutes later, Bob Stratton wrapped his arm around his wife's waist and guided her away from the body.

"Please come with me," Tessa said softly. The couple clung to each other as they followed her out the door and down a hallway.

Chapter Six

Tessa looked around the small room she'd brought the girl's parents to-it was tiny with grimy, industrial gray-green walls. Bolted to the floor was a metal table, along with four steel chairs. To one side, underneath the one-way glass, was a small wooden table piled with various forms. Tessa said, "Please take a seat Mr. and Mrs. Stratton. Would either of you like something to drink? Coffee, water, soda?"

Bob Stratton studied the detective who was in charge of his daughter's murder case. She had short, black hair, what looked like green eyes, and a body that looked fit.

"No thank you," the father said to the detective. "When can we have her so we can bury her?"

At that moment, Gus entered the small room. "Mr. and Mrs. Stratton," he said nodding as he slid into the chair next to his partner.

Tessa spoke next. "I know we went over this briefly at your home earlier, but I'd like to go over it again. If it is ok with you we'd like to record the session."

"Sure," Dana's father said.

After placing a recording device on the table, Tessa tilted her head to look at the couple. "We need to go over the timeline of your daughter's activities last night. When did you last speak with her?"

"Around nine-thirty," Fran said in a shaky voice. "As I told you earlier, Sara, our other daughter, was in labor and I called Dana. She said she was at the gym and was finishing up with her coach. She said she'd be at the hospital in fifteen minutes." The woman smiled slightly. "I told her to hurry up because I didn't think the baby would wait much longer. She said, *tell Sara to cross her legs 'til I get there.*"

Silence filled the room until Gus asked, "When she didn't show up did you call her?"

"Yes," Bob answered. "But she didn't pick up. We figured she was still at the gym. The coach wanted Dana to show two potential recruits around." He smiled slightly. "Dana is a big draw for new players. They all want to play on a team with her."

Gus asked, "Was nine-thirty late for such a visit?"

Mr. Stratton pondered the question. "I guess it was since she doesn't live at home we really have no way of knowing what is normal or not. We knew she was with her coach and that meant she was safe." He frowned. "I should have known she wasn't," he whispered.

"When did you call her next?" Tessa asked gently.

Fran's watery eyes looked at the detective. "I called her around eleven, then again at midnight but she still didn't answer. I left a message that Sara had a baby girl and told her to call me."

Gus gave the woman a kind look. "What did you think when she didn't show up at the hospital?"

Fran swiped at the tears running down her cheeks with her husband's handkerchief. "I figured that she was held up or that her phone needed charging."

With compassion, Tessa asked, "Did she often not show up when she said she would be somewhere?"

Bob Stratton briefly closed his eyes before he fixed them on the two detectives. "She's always very responsible."

Tessa looked at Gus and lifted one shoulder. "You weren't alarmed when she didn't come to the hospital?"

Fran Stratton, with tears sliding down her face, sobbed, "We were so ecstatic about the baby that" The woman let out an audible wail. "I should have known something was wrong. It's all my fault."

Once again, Bob Stratton's arm went around his wife's shoulders as he pulled her close. "Shh, it wasn't your fault. It wasn't any of our faults. It's all on the bastard that did that to our little girl."

Gus waited a minute, while the girl's parents regained their composure. "When did you try to contact her next?"

"I called her apartment this morning and Jenna said she didn't come home last night. I knew something was wrong," the girl's father said to the detectives. "Then, we started calling around to see if anyone had seen her."

"Had they?" Gus asked.

"Nono one had seen her since yesterday." Fran began weeping again. "Bob called Coach Barr but didn't get an answer, so he called the police to report that she was missing."

"They told me that someone would get in touch with us. The woman told me that we needed to wait twenty-four hours before we could report her missing," the father said.

Tessa looked at the visibly shaken man. "What time was that?"

Dana's father briefly closed his eyes. "Nine-thirty or so."

"We found her around ten," Tessa murmured.

Tessa looked away from the woman's tear-filled face. "Did anyone call you back?"

Fran shook her head. "We got a call from the police about an hour or two later. The officer I spoke to asked all kinds of questions about Dana. Then she said she'd get the information into the database and that some officers would visit us," Fran said in a shaky voice. "Then you two showed up at our door."

"Does your daughter have a boyfriend?" Gus asked.

Fran shook her head. "Not that I know of-she hasn't had a boyfriend since high school."

Gus looked at the victim's mother. "What about other people? Did your daughter say anything about her having trouble with anyone?"

"No, everyone loved Dana."

"What about you, Mr. Stratton? Did your daughter ever confide in you about someone harassing her or stalking her? Anything like that?" Gus asked.

"No, if she told anyone about something like that, it would be her sister."

Tessa asked Bob, "Do you own a money clip?"

The man scowled as the area between his eyebrows formed a deep crevice. "You mean like something to put your bills in?"

"Exactly."

"No, all my bills are in my wallet."

Tessa looked directly at the man. "So you never owned a money clip?"

"No."

Gus asked, "What hospital is your other daughter in?"

"St. David's. She'll be discharged this afternoon."

"Can you give us her phone and cell numbers?" Tessa slid a notepad and pen across the table.

The victim's father jotted the numbers down and slid the notepad back across the table.

"What's the name of your daughter's roommate?"

Confused, the father asked, "At the hospital?"

"No, your daughter at school," Tessa said.

"She doesn't live on campus," Fran offered.

Tessa tightened her fingers around the pen she was holding. "Can you give us that address?" She already knew the answer but wanted the parents to confirm it.

"Twenty-two-forty-five West Hanover, apartment one-thirty-two."

"The name of the roommate?"

"JennaJenna Rudolf."

Tessa quickly penned the information before she eyed the couple. "Your daughter only has the one roommate?"

Bob listened to the rapid fire questions both detectives asked until he couldn't take any more. He pounded his fist on the metal table and the sound reverberated off the walls. "She has a name! *Our* daughter has a name. Can't you even say her name?"

Tessa said, "Yes, I knowDana."

Gus remained silent for there was nothing to say. He didn't think that the grieving parents would understand that, if they personalized a victim, they couldn't be objective in their pursuit of the perpetrator.

"Does she have a computer?" Gus asked.

"Yes."

"I included that in the warrant," he said absently to his partner.

"Take whatever you need to help find out who did this to Dana," Fran said.

Bob held up a hand. "I think you should get a warrant."

Gus nodded. "Ok, sure, no problemit's protocol."

Tessa pushed away from the table, stood up, and offered her hand to the man and woman. "Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Stratton. If we need anything else, is it ok if we get in touch with you?"

They both nodded.

Gus interjected, "We'll keep you up to date with the investigation. If you hear something in the news about the case that disturbs you or that you don't understand, please call my partner or me. The media doesn't always get the story straight, so be prepared for all kinds of rumors and misinformation." He slid his card across the table. "Don't hesitate to call me."

Tessa, with a grim expression, looked at the couple, who were now on their feet, too. "Once the medical examiner is finished with the autopsy, and assuming he finds nothing that needs further examination, the body should be released in the next few days. Someone from the medical examiner's office will contact you to find out which funeral home you want to pick her up."

Gus pushed away from the table and then nodded at the victim's parents. "Please remember to call me for anything you need," he said in a soft voice before opening the door.

Tessa followed behind the couple to the elevators. When they stopped, Tessa offered her card. "I know you're in shock right now and, once it sinks in, you'll become very angry and might think that we aren't doing enough. Please know that we will be working hard to bring to justice whoever did this to Dana." She made eye contact with the couple. "My private number is on the back of my card. If you have questions or think you have something that will help the investigation you can call me any time."

Bob Stratton took the card and nodded, before guiding his wife into the waiting elevator. Without another word, the doors smoothly closed as the car rattled slightly before it began its descent.

#

"I hate talking to the parents. It's the pits. I don't know how you manage to always remain so calm and in control." Gus said as Tessa sat down. "What's with you giving them your private number?" The man drew his head back. "I don't think I've ever seen you do that before and I wouldn't have believed it, if I hadn't seen it myself."

Tessa shrugged and her forehead creased. "I don't know why." She scratched her arm as a slight grin formed in her lips. "You think I'm getting old like you?"

"Hey, watch that old guy stuff," Gus warned as he raised his eyebrows and did a little shake of his head. "We've only just begun and I have a bad feeling that we're going to be busting our balls over this one."

Tessa grinned. "Speak for yourself on that one."

"Jealous?"

"Hardly." Tessa flexed her jaw. "We have a case with no evidence that will make headlines."

Gus opened the thin murder book-by the time the investigation concluded, it would be full. "Cases with kids are the worst. The parents always take it the hardest."

"Shell shocked," mumbled Tessa as she took out her notebook. "I didn't think they were holding anything back." Tessa shrugged. "Except for the father telling us we needed a warrant."

Gus held up the warrant. "Not a big deal. I agree that was kind of a strange thing for him to do. Most families bend over backwards to help in any way they can."

Tessa raised her eyebrows. "It's been a long day already and we haven't even scratched the surface." She stood up. "Let's go see what her apartment has to tell us."

Chapter Seven

Gus and Tessa stood in the hallway outside apartment one-thirty-two, waiting for someone to open the door.

From the other side of the door, they heard, "Who is it?"

"Police."

"Let me see your badge."

Tessa took the gold shield attached to her belt off and held it up to the peephole. "We need to speak with you about Dana Stratton."

The sound of a chain moving and a deadbolt turning preceded the door opening. "Yes?" said the small woman with a swollen and red face.

"Ms. Rudolf?"

"Yes."

"May we come in?"

"Dana's parents were here a little while ago. I can't believe it." She opened the door further and motioned for them to enter.

Tessa's eyes took in what she could see of the apartment. "Did they go in her room or take anything?"

"No, they didn't go in her room at all. They just told me what happened, we cried together then they left. They said they had to meet Dana's sister when she got home from the hospital with the baby." The girl sniffed then blew her nose. "I don't think Sara knows."

Gus asked, "Did you see Dana at all last night?"

"She was here for about an hour around five then she left for the gym to meet her coach and two possible recruits for next year. I think they were going out to dinner."

"Did she come back after that?"

"No, and I didn't really expect her to. She said her sister was having contractions and would probably have the baby last night. When she wasn't here by midnight, I thought that's what happened." Jenna started to weep harder. "If only I had called her mom and asked where she was. I should have done something."

Tessa hated the way people fell apart when they heard of a death. To her, death was a part of life and you just accepted it. Grieving was something best done in private or with someone you

trusted. *Accept it, Tessa, and get over it.* That's what her mother always would say to her about most things-Tessa followed that rule.

Gus handed the girl a piece of paper. "Ms Rudolf, we have a warrant to search your roommate's room."

"Yes, I know, Mr. Stratton told me you'd be here to do that."

Going into the basketball player's room, Tessa looked around in surprise. It was spotless and neat as a pin. The bed made, dirty clothes in a hamper, and not strewn on the chairs-everything was where it was supposed to be.

Standing in the doorway, Jenna watched as the detectives inspected Dana's room. It was surreal.

"Is her room always this neat?" Tessa asked.

The girl looked around the room. "Yeah, she's pretty anal about that."

"What about boyfriends or girlfriends?" Gus asked.

Jenna's brow furrowed. "Just because she plays basketball doesn't mean Dana is gay. If she had a boyfriend, I didn't know about it. Her life was either in class, researching something at the library, at the gym, or here studying. She's been on the Dean's List every semester and Penn's medical school accepted her for the fall semester. She always told me she'd have time for dating after she graduated from med school." Jenna started to tear up again. "I guess she'll never get to do that now."

Tessa turned her back to the girl and pressed the button to start Dana's computer.

Gus, the more sensitive of the two, handed the girl a tissue out of the box on the desk. "Do you know if she had any special places she liked to hang out?"

The sobbing girl shook her head. "Like I...I said she had her priorities and she never compromised them." Jenna wiped her tearstained face with her sleeve. "I just can't believe this happened to her."

With her back still to the girl, Tessa asked, "What do you mean by priorities?"

"Well," Jenna said as she took a calming breath. "Even when she had a late class, she'd get up early and head for the library to do research for some project she was doing. She'd even do that on the weekends, when she wasn't at an away game."

Gus turned and looked at the girl. "Projects, like what? Papers, research something like that?"

"Mostly, it was term papers. Sometimes she had to do hands on training, but the last time she did something like that was a year ago."

"Did she have many projects?" Gus asked.

"At least one a semester but sometimes she had more."

Half listening to the conversation between the roommate and her partner, Tessa waited impatiently for the computer to come to life. When it finally did, she sat down and began moving the mouse and opening various programs. To her surprise, the girl didn't have any chat room programs, blogs, or Facebook account. In the history and favorites, she found sites that all related to various themes that had to do with medicine. She turned to the roommate and asked, "Did she ever chat with people on the Internet?"

"Not that I know of but I wasn't watching what she did or didn't do. As far as I know, she only used the computer for research or papers she had to do." The girl shrugged and said, "I guess she had email but I really don't know anything about that. If I needed to tell her something, it was by text message."

Pointing the cursor to Outlook Express Tessa's eyes widened in surprise. "Do you share this computer with her?"

"No, I have my own laptop."

Tessa's eyes tracked to the girl. "Did your roommate use your computer?"

"No. I don't let anyone else touch my laptop. It cost too much money."

"You sure she didn't use it when you weren't around?"

"No, my laptop is password encrypted, so you need to know the password before it will turn on completely." The telephone rang. "Excuse me I need to get that." Jenna moved away from the room.

Tessa looked at the victim's email account. Unlike most people who leave the password on their email accounts so they will open automatically, it required one. "We need the techies to go over this," she said to Gus, as she turned the computer off and unplugged it from the wall. She disconnected the monitor, the keyboard, mouse, and the network connections. "Strange that the roommate and the vic are so restrictive with their computers."

"Remember that case we had a few years back with that kid in the dorms? Didn't we find that those kids had passwords on their computers? Didn't the roommate there say something about using passwords?"

After thinking for a moment, Tessa smiled. "Yeah, he said it kept prying eyes out of his business."

"That's it," Gus replied. "Probably the same thing here."

Tessa nodded in agreement. "I think it's safe to say the murder didn't happen here. Did you find anything else?"

"Nope, nothing. No stash of drugs or anything that would raise a red flag." Gus scratched his head. "Does that seem odd to you?"

Tessa let her eyes roam the room. The decor was in neutral colors of beige and a very light green. The coordinated bedspread and curtains were perfect. Again, the fact that everything was neat and tidy struck Tessa as odd. On one wall was a bookcase neatly jammed full of books and on another, pictures of what she assumed were the dead girl's family.

"Didn't that officer at the scene tell us she'd received all kinds of awards for basketball? And didn't her roommate just tell us she was on the Dean's List?"

Gus looked at his notebook. "Yeah, she was an All American, player of the year, and student athlete of the year. It looks like she excelled in both basketball and academics."

"Look around this room. Is it an athlete's room? Does it look like the owner stood out in her sport or even in school? There are no certificates, no medals no trophies. I played softball in college and every award or trophy I got was in my room somewhere."

"So she wasn't a jock," he said. "Maybe they're all in her bedroom at her parents' home. You know, not every woman that plays a sport wants to be macho."

Irritated, Tessa glared at her partner. "It has *nothing* to do with macho! It is a pride thing. Basketball was a big part of her life, yet there is nothing in this room that tells us that."

"Maybe we'll find out more when we speak with her coach."

"Yeah, I guess. Something isn't adding up here. It's like she's too perfect."

Before they left, Tessa asked the roommate, "Did she seem like something was bothering her lately?"

Jenna said, "She never talked about personal stuff with me."

Tessa focused on the girl. "You're roommates but didn't share anything personal why is that? Weren't you close?"

"We are friends but both of us are completely focused on our studies...anything else was secondary." The girl thought for a minute, then added, "But I did get the sense over the last few months that something different was going on with her."

Tessa eyed the young woman and watched for any body language that would signal deceit-she saw none. "In what way?"

"She'd leave early every morning. Some evenings she'd go out and not come back until late."

"That's unusual?" Gus asked.

"Yeah, before that if she wasn't at basketball practice or at school she was pretty much a homebody. I asked her if she had a new boyfriend and she said, *get real, I don't have time for that.*" Jenna shrugged. "Other than that, I can't tell you anything more. If something was going on with her, she was keeping it to herself."

Chapter Eight

Gus knocked on the frame of the open door to the basketball coach's office in the athletic complex at Restin State University.

Deirdre Barr, sitting at her desk, was startled when she looked up and saw a man and a woman standing at her office door. Her eyes went to the badge the woman wore on her belt and the bulge inside her jacket. The man was older, bald with a slightly flabby belly but had a kind look to his face. The female detective's face had what appeared to be a permanent scowl.

"May I help you?"

"Coach Barr, we're Detectives Jacoby and Barrett. We need to speak to you about one of your players."

Deirdre looked at the woman suspiciously. "Which one?"

"Dana Stratton."

The coach's eyes narrowed in question. "Dana, what about her?"

Both detectives looked at the coach.

"Haven't you listened to the news today?" Tessa asked as she looked at her watch-it was past three. She knew that the story of the basketball player's death had been all over the news for at least two hours.

"No, I'm the only one here today. They're resurfacing the court." She eyed the two people. "How did you get in here? The door is locked to everyone."

Tessa raised an eyebrow and said, "Not to us."

The woman cocked her head and frowned-she didn't like the woman detective. She lifted her eyes to the television mounted in the corner by the door.

"I've been watching videos that potential players have sent me. I have about fifty to go through today." The coach shrugged. "I'm looking for a shooting guard."

"No one came in or called you today?"

"No, I turn off my phones when I'm working. If I get distracted, I may miss something a player does or doesn't do that will impact on my decision."

"Tell us about Dana Stratton," Tessa said in a matter-of-fact manner.

"Why?"

Tessa played close attention to the woman's face. "She was found dead this morning." Genuine shock was apparent on the coach's face.

"She was just here last night. She took two prospective recruits out for pizza, then, when they left we talked about her future. I thought she had a good shot at the WNBA but she said she wasn't interested."

"Did that upset you? Were you angry with her?" Gus asked.

"No, no I was proud of her. She had her head on straight and knew what was important in her life."

To Tessa it seemed as though the woman was deliberately scrunching up her face in an attempt to make herself cry. She looked at the woman with a critical eye. "Is that so?"

Tears began to flow in rivulets down the woman's cheeks. "Are you sure it's her?" the coach asked as she swiped at her nose with the back of her hand.

Tessa nodded. "Do you know if she was having any kind of trouble with school, teammates, or her parents?"

"I make it a practice to make sure my girls are keeping their grades up. I also make it my business to know what's going on with them," the coach sobbed. She looked directly at the detectives and, in a trembling voice, said, "I may play the role of coach while they're on the court, but I'm more like a parent to my girls when they're here at school. I also counsel my players and have chats, sometimes on a daily basis if necessary. If they know something about one of their teammates that might affect their grades or game, I want to know what it is so I can nip it in the bud."

"Do they tell you?" Tessa asked.

Deirdre sucked in a breath and regained some of her composure. "Mostly, we are a close knit group."

"Did Dana confide in you?" Gus asked.

"Not really. She kept personal stuff to herself." Deirdre shook her head. "Over the last four years I've tried to get her to open up but she would always smile and say *everything is good*. Recently, I could see by her expression that something different was happening with her. She never opened up to me about it or even acknowledged that something was going on." The coach blew out a calming breath. "Whatever it was it didn't seem to affect her grades or her game-she appeared to be happy."

"Do you think any of the other players might know?" Tessa asked. "Was she close with one of them more than the others?"

"Dana was friendly with all my girls but she never socialized with them."

Gus's brow creased. "What do you mean?"

"She was a team player and would always encourage her teammates and compliment them on their play. However, off the court, she kept to herself. She never would go out with the rest of the team after a home game."

"Why do you think that was?" Tessa asked.

"Don't know she's always done that. I think she was completely focused on where she wanted to go."

"And that was?"

"To be a doctor-basketball was secondary to that."

Tessa gave the woman a thoughtful look. "Did she have friends that came to her games?"

"Other than her family, I don't know of any."

"What time did she leave here last night?"

"I don't know, around ten, maybe a little later. She said her sister was going to deliver at any moment and she was on her way to the hospital."

Gus looked at his notes. "Did you see her get into her car and leave?"

"Yes, we left at the same time. Her car was parked next to mine and we both got in and waved to each other before leaving."

"What direction did she go?"

"She went out of the parking lot and then went left. It's the direction that I'd expect her to go, since the hospital is that way."

"Did you see anyone following her?"

"No, I watched her drive away until I couldn't see her taillights anymore."

"Where did you go after that?" Gus asked.

"Home."

"Can someone vouch for that?"

The coach looked at the male detective suspiciously. "Yes, my husband. Look, if you're trying to say I had something to do with Dana's death you're wrong."

Tessa eyed the coach. "No one said that you did, Coach. Did she have any problems with her team members or an opposing team's players?"

Deirdre felt her back stiffen. She disliked the female detective even more. *Cold hearted bitch.* "No, I can't think of anyone who didn't like her. She's the real deal."

"In what way?" Tessa countered.

"There is nothing fake about her. She's a genuinely nice person."

"But she was standoffish."

"Not in a mean way. She was always kind and genuine with everyone. She just didn't confide in others or get close to them."

Tessa set her jaw. "And you think that somehow made her the *real deal*?"

"Yes." Deirdre felt the tears sting her eyes again. "If you're trying to insinuate that she was responsible for her death you're dead wrong."

"I wasn't implying anything," Tessa said. "A young woman was murdered and it's our job to find out who's responsible."

"*Dana*, her name is *Dana*."

Tessa nodded. "I know. We need a list of all your team members that includes trainers, scorekeeperseveryone."

"No one on the team killed her," the coach said with indignation.

"I didn't say they did," Tessa replied.

"Don't you need to have some sort of court order?"

With a measured response, Tessa asked, "Is that what you want to see happen? If the media gets wind of our asking for a warrant to get the information, it might not be favorable press for you or the university. It will look like you don't want to cooperate in finding the murderer."

"Are you threatening me, Detective?"

Gus stepped in. "No, she isn't threatening you, Coach Barr. That's not what she's saying at all. Look, we've been involved in,"-he lifted his eyes-"almost a three hundred homicides and we know how the press works, especially in high profile cases. We want to find out who killed Dana and that means we have to investigate all aspects of her life. We'd really appreciate your sharing the information with us."

The coach smiled at Gus. "I understand. Can I fax the information?"

"Yes." He took out his card. "This has my number along with the fax number. Do you think you might include a list of your team's schedule for say, the last two or three years?"

"Certainly," the woman said.

With a quick glance in Gus's direction, Tessa pulled a card out of her pocket and offered it to the coach. "If you can't get in touch with him you can always contact me. We'd appreciate it if you'd let us know if you think of anything else that will help in the investigation."

Glaring at Tessa, Deirdre snatched the card out of her hand. "I've told you all I know."

Tessa shook her head. "I've yet to have anyone tell me all they know about a victim or a suspect the first time we speak with them." She smiled. "You never know who holds the key to solving a murder. Who knows, a minor detail you may have forgotten could be that key."

"If that's all, please leave my office," the coach said, before she flicked on the DVD player and the television.

Chapter Nine

It was past five when Tessa walked back into the detective's area. Their captain, John Flynn, stopped her when she got off the elevator. "Where's your partner?"

"He's checking on the status of the vic's computer."

"Want to explain to me why the basketball coach at Restin U called me to complain about you?"

"Me?" Tessa said pointing to her chest. "It was routine and nothing more."

Just then, Gus walked up to them. "That techie guy, what's his name, said to come back in the morning." He looked at his partner then at the captain. "Anything wrong?"

"A complaint about Jacoby."

Gus pulled his head back. "From who?"

The captain looked at the paper in his hand. "Deirdre Barr."

"The basketball coach? Jacoby went by the book. We thought it was strange that by three, when the girl's death was all over the news, the coach didn't have a clue. You'd think someone would have told her, like the janitor, a student, anybody." He shrugged. "She told us the team was close knit. How close can they be if no one bothered to tell the coach that her star player was murdered? You tell me if that sounds strange to you."

The captain shook his head. *My best damn detective is a loose cannon.* "How many times do I have to warn you about alienating witnesses, Jacoby?" The man rolled his eyes. "The ME wants to see you two." He shook his head again and walked away.

"Did you get someone to look at the camera feeds from the university?" Tessa asked Gus as they walked toward the medical examiner's suite.

"Yeah, they weren't too happy that they had to go there to view them because something hinky was going on with the university's system."

Tessa let out a small snort. "Let's hope hinky doesn't apply to last night."

Gus nodded in agreement. "I went over the route she would have taken to St. David's and have a BOLO for her car."

"They can be on the lookout for that car but I doubt they will find it on the streets," Tessa remarked. "The perp left us no evidence to speak of so I doubt he left the vehicle out in plain sight."

"It's all we have for now," Gus said before they pushed through the door to the autopsy suite and saw Ellis Brown at his desk with his head bent down.

"Hey Doc, what do you have for us?" Gus asked his old friend.

The doctor looked up and stood before he walked over to the two detectives. He smiled before he offered his hand to Gus. "How are Helen and the kids?"

"They're all good, thanks for asking."

"Tell Helen hello for me."

"Will do. Hey, when are you going to get time to get back to bowling with us?"

Tessa cleared her throat, which made both men look at her.

"Ah, yes," the medical examiner said, as he picked a piece of paper off his desk, "the murdered basketball player. Just as I expected, exsanguination was the COD. Preliminary findings indicate that the scrapings from under her fingernails were her own DNA. We need another day or two for the final report. I'd doubt that the person you are looking for has any kind of scratches. As I told you before, Jacoby, I saw no signs of defensive wounds. I found bruising everywhere. From their appearance, the beating was after death. The marks appear to be from some sort of long cylinder, like a pipe or bat."

Tessa eyed the man. "Was that used for the rape too?"

Elis shrugged. "Maybe, but there's no real way to tell that."

"Broken bones?" she asked.

"No."

"Did you find anything in the way of trace evidence?" Gus asked.

"Not really. Trace found that the fibers in one wound were generic threads from a cheap towel, which would be consistent with what we'd expect to find at a gym. Other than that, the only other thing I found was a common moss found in most dark, damp areas. There is evidence of sexual assault. Her stomach contained partially digested pizza but didn't contain semen. I found no usable trace in the vagina or rectum. The guy probably used a prophylactic although I didn't find any kind of trace of that so I can't be sure that's the case."

Gus said, "The pizza goes along with what the coach told us about where she was last night."

Tessa asked, "Do you have any good news for us?"

The medical examiner shook his head. "Yes, I did find an injection site on her right hand that the perpetrator apparently tried to mask with the cuts he made there. The preliminary toxicology screen found that the drug Pavulon was in her system."

Tessa looked at the doctor. "Isn't that the lethal injection drug they use in prisons?"

The doctor nodded. "It's a muscle relaxant and that in would explain why the pentagram was so precisely made. Of course, it would have been terrifying for the girl." Elis thought for a minute then absently said, "I wonder if he thought she would be aware but unable to move for a longer period of time? Unless ventilated, death would occur in less than five minutes after the injection. Slitting her throat was overkill."

"How would someone obtain the drug?" Gus asked.

"It's not hard. The Internet would be the most anonymous source. You can buy almost anything there if you know where to look and finding that isn't hard. Prisons and hospitals along with

anesthesiologists are required to keep stringent records of what they use. If the drug was missing from either place, they would know."

"Couldn't someone alter the records?" Gus asked.

Ellis looked at his old friend. "Probably, if they knew what they are doing but I'd go with the Internet. With lawsuits the norm these days, hospitals strictly regulate the drugs they use. It seems to me that whoever did this didn't understand the ramifications of the drug. "

Gus eyed the man. "Why?"

"The fact that he gave her the drug and slit her throat if he knew what the drug did he wouldn't have done that."

Tessa made a notation in her small notebook to check with the hospitals.

"Anything else?" Gus asked.

"No, not until I get the complete toxicology and that will take a while. Whoever did this was meticulous."

#

When Tessa returned to her desk, she had a voice message from Vanessa Carlton.

She quickly dialed the number and, when the woman answered, Tessa said, "Ms. Carlton, this is Detective Jacoby."

"My mother tells me that you want to speak with me, Detective."

"Yes, do you think you could meet me at the station?"

"Can't we do this over the phone? I really need to get something to eat and spend some time with my son before I have to get ready for work."

"I'd prefer a face to face meeting."

"I don't see how I can help you."

"Ms. Carlton, I've seen the most innocent information lead to the perpetrator."

Tessa heard the woman sigh.

"Can I stop by after work in the morning?"

"Yes. What time do you think that will be?"

"As long as there isn't some sort of emergency and I leave on time, I can be there by seven-thirty."

"I'll be looking for you then." Tessa plunked the receiver down and looked at her partner. "It always amazes me the number of people that don't give a damn."

"The Carlton woman gave you attitude?"

"Not really. She just didn't want to come here for the interview. Just like her mother said, she claims she has nothing to give us."

Gus chuckled. "Obviously she doesn't know that nothing is always something." He looked pointedly at his partner. "She's probably right. The doc put the TOD around midnight or one and, if she left for work at ten-thirty, there's no way she'd have seen anything happening in that vacant lot. We know by the lack of blood at the scene that the vic was killed elsewhere."

Tessa raised her arms and stretched before she let out a yawn. "I know it's a long shot but maybe she saw a car that she'd never seen before or someone lurking around the area."

Gus picked up the phone. "I'll have one of the techs check the hospitals for that drug."

#

The tip hotline had generated numerous calls, some good, but most were outlandish-they investigated them, nonetheless. One call caught the detective's attention. Someone reported seeing the victim in a white SUV with a man after ten the night before.

"We'd better follow up on this one personally," Gus said.

"I'll give her a call and set something up for tomorrow morning. Until we get all the tox and trace reports back, there's not much more we can do right now."

"The crime unit will be busy with all the crap they found on that lot," Gus surmised. "I betcha ninety-nine percent of it has nothing to do with our case." He paused for a moment. "Maybe even a hundred percent."

Tessa's brow furrowed. "Yeah, I think you're right. We need to catch up with Silverstein and see if he found anything of value on her computer."

"He said he'd need at least until tomorrow."

"What do you say we call it a night and look at it with fresh eyes in the morning?"

"Sounds good to me." Gus, with a slight smile stood up, took his gun out of his desk, and slid it into its holster. "I'm going to head out now, unless you need me for something."

"No, go on I'll be right behind you. We'll pick this up in the morning with the Carlton woman."

"What time?"

"She said seven-thirty."

"Ok, I'll see you at seven." Gus looked at his partner, who was still sitting in her chair. "Thought you said you were heading out too."

Tessa looked at the case folder. "First, I want to call this woman who said she saw the vic around ten last night."

Tessa watched her partner walk away. He was going home to his wife and family and she was still working on the case. *Not like there's anything waiting for me at home.* Picking up her phone, she dialed the tipster's number.

"Hello."

Tessa heard the voice and her initial reaction was that the woman sounded harried. "Is this Joann Stewart?"

"Yes."

"I'm Detective Jacoby with the police and am calling about the tip you left regarding Dana Stratton."

"Yes, yes I did leave a tip. Listen, I can't talk right now. Can I call you me back in the morning?"

Tessa heard a baby crying in the background and some kind of loud music.

"I really need to go," the woman said.

"Can you come to the station tomorrow morning around nine-thirty?"

"Yes, I can be there then."

"You know where to go?"

"Yes, I'll find you...Jacoby right?"

"Yes. Thank you, Mrs. Stewart."

Chapter Ten

Tessa sat in her black Ford Expedition waiting for the gate to her condominium complex to slide open. The investigation into the murder of Dana Stratton was in its infancy, yet something about

it gnawed in her gut. She had a good idea about what that *something* was but she wasn't ready to resurrect that demon. She glanced at the case folder on the seat next to her. One of the photos of the crime scene had slid out onto the leather seat. Even though that particular photo was in black and white, she could still see the horrific scene in full color.

Once she pulled in front of her garage, she pushed a button and the garage door began to lift. "I'm going to find the bastard that killed you, Dana," she said absently, as she guided her car into the garage and lowered the door. In complete darkness, Tessa sat in surprised silence. The case was less than twelve hours old. *When, in that short span of time, did I begin thinking of her in that way?* Her rule-never call the victims by their names. The vic, daughter, son, mother, father, woman, man, or in any combination were acceptable. If she started thinking of the basketball player in terms of her name, she would lose all objectivity. Her only focus had to be on finding the perpetrator.

Once in her condo, where she felt a modicum of safety, Tessa slipped her jacket off and placed her gun in the safe near the door. She made her way to the kitchen, where she found a bottle of Yellowtail Pinot Noir, opened it, and poured a generous glass. In the living room, she flopped down in her favorite oversized red chair and picked up the remote for the CD player. The sounds of Andrea Bocelli filled the silence of her home. After taking several swallows of wine, she set the glass on a side table, brought her knees up, and wrapped her arms around them.

Tessa let the music wash over her and let the stresses of the day dissolve. The first day of any investigation was always difficult, for she had to witness the gambit of emotions that crossed the faces of everyone involved. The victim's family was the most difficult for Tessa to see-she knew their pain all too well. Her sister, Rachel, killed herself after a brutal rape that left her fragile and frightened. Tessa watched, as the Rachel she knew faded into an empty shell that refused to exist in the world-it was a pain she wished on no one.

Perpetrators had a far-reaching effect on more than just the victims they brutalized. Tessa found her sister's body lying in a pool of blood that came from her slit wrist. She remembered sitting on the floor holding the lifeless body of her sister while she rocked her gently, as she whispered words of love and sorrow into the cold unfeeling cheek. Tessa felt a sorrow that still haunted her ten years later. Because of Rachel, Tessa diligently worked to bring those that defiled life to justice. Every time she looked at a murdered body, she thought of her sister. Whenever Tessa dealt with the grieving loved ones of a murder victim, she let a wall of impersonal emotions surround and protect her. Otherwise, she wouldn't survive being a homicide cop.

Now, sequestered in the safety of her home, Tessa allowed the anger that threatened to boil over recede, as the haunting melodies of the opera singer enveloped her. She finished off the last of the wine in her glass and, briefly, closed her eyes. Her mind did not comprehend the meaning of the tenor's words, but her heart understood them all.

Eventually, Tessa switched off the music and went to the kitchen to get another glass of wine. Picking up the television remote, she clicked on the plasma screen mounted on a wall and saw the local news flicker to life. Not really paying attention, she listened to the commentator drone on about something that she had no interest in.

She had no close friends-none she acknowledged-except maybe Gus. She never felt the need to surround herself with people and, outside of work, there was no one she could call in an emergency and know they'd be there for her-not even her family. When she'd first met Anna Mikaelson, she hoped there would be a deeper relationship. When the lawyer, like so many others in her life, stopped calling, she knew that the closeness she hoped for would never be. Seeing the lawyer again this morning, brought back into focus the longing she always felt when Anna was near. *Lovers are for sex. I've always preferred a life free from entanglements. Why does Anna make me want more?*

The detective's attention turned to the television, where a man with dark hair and dressed in a suit with a purple tie was saying, "Sources close to the investigation indicate that Dana Stratton was beaten, raped and tortured before her death."

"Who the fuck told them that?" she said, as she automatically dialed Gus's number. "Hey, did you see the news?"

"No, I'm at the mall with Helen buying Robbie new shoes."

"Well, somehow they know the particulars of how our vic was beaten and raped before she died."

"Shit," Gus said.

"Yeah, my sentiments exactly. I can't believe how stupid people who leak that kind of information are. Now, we're going to have every nut case calling us with leads that go nowhere. Fuck."

"Nothing we can do about it now," Gus remarked. "I'll get someone to work on finding out who it is in the morning."

Tessa chuckled sarcastically. "You know the list is endless."

"Yeah, I know. You sound upset, what's going on with you?"

"I'm just tired. It's nothing that a good night's sleep won't cure."

Gus softened his voice. "How many glasses of wine have you had? No, don't answer that. I might have to breathalyzer you in the morning." He heard Tessa snort. "Take it easy ok, get some sleep. I think we both have to be at the top of our game with this one."

"Yeah, me too. I'll see you in the morning," Tessa said as she closed her phone. A small smile filtered across her lips as she thought of Gus. He was one of the rare guys, who found time to have a happy family life, do his job, and still care. She occasionally wanted to allow that into her life but it had always eluded her.

Chapter Eleven

With the rumbling of her stomach, Tessa remembered she hadn't eaten since the sandwich that Gus brought her earlier in the day. The unfinished portion probably was still sitting on the floor of the Crown Vic. "Never had a chance to eat that pickle."

Making her way to the kitchen, Tessa began opening cupboard doors and closing them. The refrigerator contained a jar of olives, some moldy cheese, and a carton of milk that had expired two days earlier. The cupboard where she stored canned food had a lone package of Ramen noodles. "Guess this is it," she said, before she turned up her nose. "I'm not that desperate. I'll call for a pizza."

Tessa was dialing the number for Toni's Pizza when she heard a knock at the door. "Who the hell can that be?" Tessa grumbled, as she closed her phone and walked quickly toward the front door.

Tessa looked through the peephole and, to her surprise, saw Anna Mikaelson. Her body buzzed with instant arousal and she felt her nipples grow hard as she opened the door. "This is a surprise-twice in one day." She opened the door wider. "Come on in."

Anna gave the detective a once over, stopping briefly at her chest before she made eye contact. "I see you're glad to see me." She grinned and let her eyes return to the nipples straining against a tight black t-shirt. "I'm saving you from a boring meal." Holding up a bag from a Chili's restaurant, she added, "I heard on the news about your case and knew you probably hadn't eaten yet, since this is the first day of the case. They always seem to be the most intense the start of the hunt."

With a genuine laugh, Tessa motioned for the woman to follow her further into the room. "I was just about to call for a pizza." She turned and let her eyes take in the woman. The suit jacket she had on earlier was gone and light pink cashmere sweater hung over the charcoal gray skirt that rested just above her knees. As always, her shoes were the perfect complement to the outfit.

"This is much better, trust me." Anna placed the bag on the tall, granite top dining room table and looked around. "Nice place. I pegged you as a rare hamburger kind of gal," she said as she pulled a box out of the bag.

Tessa laughed and it felt good. "You got it right in one," she said, as her mouth watered-she could taste the hamburger. "How did you know I liked Chili's?"

Anna handed the detective the container. "I saw you there once. You were eating a hamburger. You were alone."

I bet she did then she ran the other way. "I take it you didn't say *hi* to me because you weren't alone."

"No, actually I was by myself. I just didn't know you then. Imagine my surprise when I found out you were in law enforcement too."

Tessa went into the kitchen and poured them both a glass of wine. "Try this, I think you'll like it," she said handing the lawyer a glass.

Anna sipped the wine and saw that the bottle was almost finished. *Guess she was thirsty.* Her smile widened as she asked conversationally, "It's really good. What is it?"

"Yellowtail Pinot Noir, it isn't as heavy as some red wines."

Anna's face filled with a bright smile. "I like it."

To Tessa, the woman's smile seemed so full of repressed sexuality that she wanted to crawl inside the lawyer and satisfy her every want and need. Instead, she pushed open the tab, lifted the top of the container, and picked up the cheeseburger that fries surrounded. "Yum, and to think I was within minutes of a pizza."

"I'm happy I saved you from that fate." Anna smiled and looked into Tessa's green eyes, as she rested her hand on the detective's arm. Tessa was slightly shorter but not by much. The short black hair served as a frame for her eyes that sparkled. She was wearing the same outfit she'd always associated with the detective-jeans, a black t-shirt, and black service shoes. The black leather jacket she usually wore was resting on the back of the couch.

The contact Anna's hand had with her arm made Tessa swallow hard. The innocuous contact made her clitoris swell and harden so it strained against her underwear. "Aren't you eating?"

The lawyer smirked. "Already did earlier eat food that is."

Clearly, she knew what the innuendo meant but she couldn't think straight as Anna's fingers stroked Tessa's arm. She swallowed hard, hoping that the hand wouldn't move. The movement of the fingers on her arm was sending ripples of desire throughout her body. When she looked into the lawyer's blue eyes, Tessa felt drawn to her and tired to gulp back the desire-she couldn't.

Anna held Tessa's gaze. "From the sounds of it, you pulled the short stick. The cases with an unknown assailant and little physical evidence are always the hardest to solve." She tilted her head. "That is, if the news reports are correct."

"Yeah."

"When I heard the details on the news, I knew it wasn't something that the detectives or anyone close to the investigation would say. When a leak happens to one of my cases, I fume about it for days." Her eyes rested on Tessa's face. "Any idea where the leak came from?"

"Nope." Tessa answered as she took a bite of her sandwich in an attempt to squelch her libido. Finally, she was able to say, "Man, this is so good. Thanks."

A smile filled Anna's face. "You're welcome."

Tessa laughed. "We were at the house of the woman who reported finding the body and she was baking pies. My stomach rumbled so loud that I looked around to see if anyone noticed."

"Did they?"

With a crooked smile, Tessa said, "I don't think so."

Anna reached out and touched Tessa's arm again. "You need to take better care of yourself. When was the last time you ate a proper meal," her eyes traveled to the wine bottle, "or are you on a liquid diet?"

Tessa frowned at the reference and was about to say something, when her phone rang. Pulling her phone out of her pocket, she said, "Jacoby."

"Detective, this is Ira Silverstein."

"Did you find anything on the computer?"

"Yes. For the last three months, the vic was receiving e-mails that started out as fan mail and then turned suggestive before morphing into threats."

"Do you know who sent them?" Tessa looked at Anna and mouthed, *I'm sorry* as she listened to the tech's words.

"The account used to send the email seems anonymous. I'll have to dig deeper to see if it a free version that doesn't require a credit card or one that does. I'll have to contact the provider to see if there's any more information. The screen name is bball_fan99."

"How long will it take you to find out who it is?"

"It depends on how cooperative the provider is."

"We need to find out who sent those e-mails."

"I know. Count on me. I'll find out for you."

"Ok, I will. Make copies of the e-mails and put them on my desk," the detective said before adding, "Keep me informed."

Tessa folded her phone. "Hey, I'm sorry about that."

"No problem, I'm not on a schedule."

Tessa lifted a shoulder and gave Anna a brief smile. "The computer forensic specialist found some threatening e-mails." She rubbed the back of her neck. "It might lead us to the bastard who killed the girl."

Anna saw the strain on Tessa's face. She stood up, moved behind the detective, and gently put her hands on Tessa's shoulders before her fingers began to massage them.

When Tessa felt strong hands on her shoulders, she knew she was on the edge of an orgasm. She melted into the fingers and thumbs that worked on her tense muscles. "Mmm, that feels so good." Tessa let her body relax into the rhythmic motion as her clitoris pulsed in time.

"I've noticed by the way you walk you always carry all your tension in your shoulders," Anna said as her fingers continued to work on Tessa's tight neck muscles. "When was the last time you had a day off?"

"Murderers don't take days off. You know that." Tessa closed her eyes as all thoughts of the case disappeared. Her only focus was on the hum going through her body. "God, your fingers are magic."

Anna leaned in and whispered, "If you'd like, I can give you a full body massage."

Tessa moved, stood up, encircled Anna's waist and pulled the woman into her. Her mouth hovered near the lawyer's mouth until their lips met. Tessa ran her tongue over Anna's bottom lip and her mouth immediately opened. Their kisses were long and fervent, only stopping long enough to breathe before the assault continued. Tessa's fingers snaked under the cashmere sweater Anna wore and began running them up and down the soft skin of her back. When she heard Anna moan, she moved her hands to the hooks that held a bra in place and deftly released their hold. Her fingers splayed and her thumbs ran along the edges of Anna's breasts.

Feeling the warm hands caressing her back and teasing her breasts, Anna's mind warred with her body. *I can't let her close. I just can't.* Her hand tangled in Tessa's hair as she pressed for deeper, harder kisses. She positioned her thigh so it was between the detective's legs and began to press hard. Never had she felt so much passion for anyone yet she pulled away. *I can't.*

The need between Tessa's legs screamed for release as she ground against Anna's thigh. "Don't stop baby," her husky need driven voice said.

"I need to go," Anna said breathlessly. "I'm waiting for the jury to come back."

Anger flashed in Tessa's eyes. "Give me a break, Anna, that jury went home for the night a long time ago." Her eyes narrowed. "Why do you always do this to me?" Tessa growled.

"What?" Anna asked, knowing what Tessa meant.

Tessa's voice rang with hurt and frustration. "Get me all worked up then move away whenever we start getting close to more. The word is that *you* have a new woman everyday-what's wrong with *me*. Why don't you want *me*?"

I do want you more than you know. Anna felt her anger begin to rise at the words but held the emotion in check "Those accounts are over exaggerated to the point of being completely wrong."

The look in Tessa's eyes told her that she didn't believe the words. "Look, I'm very attracted to you and want to have a relationship with you but"

With her body still tightly coiled, Tessa ground out, "But what, Anna?"

Anna's hand caressed Tessa's cheek. "You're someone that needs my complete attention. Ever since we met, I've been embroiled in one case after another. Right now, it's the Petroff case. Every case I've had has demanded my complete attention. The times we dated or went out were like a lifeboat to me." Her eyes searched Tessa's eyes. "Do you know what I'm saying?"

"Not really," Tessa said belligerently. *You're my lifeboat too.*

Moving closer, Anna lightly kissed Tessa's lips. "Once this case is over and you've captured a murderer, we can get to know each other on all levels." She kissed Tessa again before she stepped back, put her arms around her back, and rehooked her bra. "Nothing about you is casual to me, Tessa, and that is exactly why we have to stop now." *I'm afraid.*

Over her career, Tessa prided herself on knowing when someone was telling the truth-Anna's words held no deceit. "I'd like that."

Anna picked up her keys and headed for the door. "For the record, it isn't true you know. You can count the number of lovers I've had on one hand, with fingers to spare." She began for the door, only to stop again. "The jury asked if they could deliberate longer." She looked at her Blackberry. "No word that they aren't still doing that."

Tessa caught up to the lawyer. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

No, I'm the one who should be sorry. Anna kissed her gently. "Apology accepted. I'll call you tomorrow."

Standing alone, Tessa watched the door close behind the lawyer. She couldn't decide which to treat first-the threatening headache or the need for release. Knowing how wet and hard she was, Tessa's hand slid between her skin and her jeans.

[Continued...](#)

[Erin O'Reilly's Scrolls](#)
[Index Page](#)

~ Fractured ~
by Erin O'Reilly

Author's Note

This story has murder, mystery, and romance. The romance includes intimate moments between consenting adult women. If you are under 18 please find something else to read. The events portrayed in this story are fictional and any resemblance to actual events and/or people is purely coincidental.

Chapter Twelve

In the very early morning, in the space where dark fractures light into shadows, Tessa ran through the streets that lights occasionally illuminated before plunging her back into the dark. It was like her life-dark, except for a miniscule amount of light that would give her hope. Hope for what, she didn't know. She ran further than she normally did, hoping that the cold air hitting her sweaty body would shock her system and cause her brain and overactive libido to shut down. They didn't.

She never did get to sleep the night before. As soon as her head hit the pillow, her body and mind went into hyper-drive. At first, her mind exploded with every picture of every victim of every case she worked. And, she saw Rachel laughing and dancing, before the image of her body lying in her own blood came into view.

She pushed thoughts of the dead away, only to have Anna appear. Her body reacted as it always did when she thought of the lawyer-unbridled desire. But, this time, she felt something different that she couldn't quite grasp. Along with the passion that still hummed with the pent up need that her fingers could not squelch, she felt a sense of peace. *How can that be?* She craved the woman in a way she never imagined. What scared her-the tender feelings that told her that, if Anna only held her, that would be enough.

Tessa arrived at work when it was still dark and the streets were mostly silent. Getting out of her SUV, she looked at the long, empty stretch of the parking lot-the analogy of her life being like the parking lot was not lost on her. Occasionally, she would allow her mind to indulge in the fantasy of having a private life that included a lover and close friends. In the end, another murder would always occupy all of her time, leaving nothing left to explore the possibility of a relationship-Anna floated into her consciousness.

As Tessa made her way into the police building, the new case came back into focus. She managed to push all thoughts and memories that didn't pertain to the case down-concentrating on the Stratton murder took priority. Her focus turned to the computer forensic specialist who promised her that he'd come up with a name to match the threatening e-mails. They needed a name but, more importantly, they needed a motive. Once she read the e-mails, she could determine how viable the lead was and if it would lead to a motive.

Slipping into her desk chair, Tessa pulled her Glock out of its holster, placed it in a drawer, and locked it. Her eyes tracked to the stack of papers neatly sitting on her desk. She picked up the pile and smiled-the tech had put them in chronological order.

The first mail was innocuous.

Hey Dana,

You are so good on the court that I wish I could be you.

A fan

She read the next six e-mails and they all were equally bland. When she read the eighth one, she scooted to the edge of her chair.

Dana-

I don't know why you keep ignoring me. What will it take to make you notice me? Do I have to capture you and show you my love? Will you take me seriously then?

A fan

The next six e-mails became more descriptive of what the person would do to her. She saw no mention of pentagrams, or paralyzing drugs, yet she saw a thread that told her the e-mailer was evolving. In the last email dated three weeks earlier, the e-mailer's intentions were clear.

Dana-

You've ignored me for the last time. Now you must pay.

No longer a fan

Tessa eased back in her chair and began rocking. The e-mails certainly were threatening but the question, why did the person wait three weeks to carry out the threat. It didn't gel. However, she couldn't deny that there was something compelling about bball_99.

"Who are you?" Her emotions that she had trouble keeping a tight rein on ever since the case started yesterday were telling her two different things. Her gut was telling her *this could be it* and her head told her *don't jump to conclusions until you have the full story*. She spread the e-mails out on her desk and looked at them again. No matter how many times she reread them the tingle she always got when she knew she was on the right track never appeared. Nevertheless, she needed to pursue who sent the e-mails.

Gus breezed into the detective's room at seven-fifteen. When he sat in his seat, he said, "Can you believe it? I had a flat."

Tessa just looked at her partner. "I've been here since before five."

With a hearty laugh, Gus got up, rounded his desk, and put his hand on Tessa's forehead. "Don't you understand what sleep means?"

She immediately swatted his hand away. "Sure I do. What the hell was that all about?"

"Wanted to see if you were sick," Gus said with another laugh. "What had you here so early?" He wasn't surprised at her early start, for that was her pattern with all the cases they investigated. Tessa would give the victim everything she had, and more, to find the perpetrator often at the expense of her own well being.

Tessa took hold of the email folder and shoved it in her partner's direction. "Take a look at these and see what you think."

"What are they?"

"E-mails that the vic got from someone who said they were a fan."

Tessa watched Gus's face go from neutral to interested.

"Is this for real?" he asked.

"Apparently so. Silverstein told me he'd get us the name of who sent them soon."

"This might get us one step closer to the perp," Gus said as he saw a tall woman exit the elevator. "Looks like the Carlton woman is here. She looks like her mother."

#

Vanessa Carlton arrived for her interview. She was a tall, attractive woman dressed in dark blue hospital scrubs. Sitting down in an interrogation room, the woman fixed her eyes on the two detectives that sat across from her-she wasn't happy.

"I've been up all night. Can you make this fast?"

So have I.

"Thank you for your cooperation," Gus said to the woman as he placed a small recorder on the table. "I'm going to record this, if it's ok with you."

Vanessa nodded. "Sure, whatever. As I said on the phone, I don't know how I can help you."

Tessa asked the first question. "Where do you work in the hospital?"

"In the orthopedic ward...why?"

Ignoring the question, Tessa asked, "When did you leave for work Sunday night?"

"My usual time around ten-thirty."

Gus asked, "Did you notice or hear anything in the lot across from your mother's home?"

The nurse shook her head. "There was the usual assortment of thugs there. They usually hang out there, talking smack and selling drugs. We call the police all the time but nothing changes. Those punks are still there every night. Maybe you should be talking to them and not to someone who has nothing to tell you."

Tessa nodded. "I understand how frustrating it is for you, especially with your son being at such an impressionable age. Perhaps we can find a solution later...but we're not here for that now. We're here because someone left a girl's dead body in the lot across the street from your mother's house and your son found that body." She gave the woman an intense gaze. "Now, can you tell me if you saw any sort of vehicle parked in the lot when you left for work?"

"No," the nurse said. "Those guys just hang out there and don't usually have their cars with them."

"What time did you arrive home yesterday?"

"From work?"

Tessa nodded.

"Around this time-seven-thirty."

"Did you notice anything unusual about the vacant lot?"

"No."

With her eyes fixed on the nurse, Tessa said. "Think back to when you pulled up to your house, did you look in the direction of the lot?"

"No, why would I?"

"Did you pull into the driveway?"

"Yes, I always do."

"Did you notice any vehicle parked on the street that isn't usually there?"

Irritated, Vanessa growled. "No! Look, I told you I didn't see anything. From what I heard on the news, the murder took place early Monday morning. I was at work at that time."

"So you're telling us that you didn't notice anything out of the ordinary when you went to work or when you came home." Tessa's eyes intently studied the woman's body language. "You didn't look at the vacant lot or notice a body there?"

Vanessa's eyes widened. "That's what I told you when you called me. Listen to me very carefully-I don't know anything that will help you."

Tessa noticed that Vanessa had big hands. "You play basketball?"

"I did in high school. That was more years ago than I care to remember."

"Did you know Dana Stratton?" Gus asked.

"Look, I work six nights a week, so I don't have much time to watch television or even read the paper if we got one. From what I heard on the radio, the woman who was murdered was a basketball player. Just because I played basketball years ago in high school doesn't mean I know every woman that plays the game."

Tessa nodded. "Point taken. Would you bring Joey in for another interview?"

The nurse's face hardened. "There's no way I will let that happen. My son told you all he knows."

Taken aback by the woman's unwillingness to let them question her son again, Tessa fixed the woman with a long hard stare. "All we want to do is go over what he said again. Maybe he remembers something else that will help us find the murderer. You *do* want us to find the murderer, *don't* you?"

"I'm *not* that callous, Detective. Of course, I want to see justice done, but not at the expense of my son, who is already traumatized."

Studying the woman, Tessa gauged the reaction that her next words would have. "It's not a request."

The woman's body stiffened.

"We would appreciate your bringing him in here so we can speak with him again," Tessa said in a tight voice.

"I've got to get some sleep before I do that."

"What about Joey's father...can't he bring him in?"

The nurse blew out a breath. "No. Can my mother bring him in?" The nurse saw the detective nod. "What time?"

Tessa kept her voice neutral. "Sometime this morning."

"Fine, I'll bring him in later this morning."

"Ok, then," Gus said as he stood up. "Thank you for your help, Mrs. Carlton."

Tessa handed the woman her card. "Yeah, thank you. We'll be looking for Joey later this morning."

Vanessa Carlton opened her mouth then shut it before she said, "Before noon then."

#

When Tessa returned from escorting the nurse to the elevators, she pulled back her chair and said, "What a bitch."

Gus shook his head. "The woman wanted to do whatever she could to see that her child was safe and didn't have any more trauma than necessary." He shrugged. "That's what I'd do."

Tessa didn't reply for she didn't have a comeback. Instead, she said, "I hope the woman who said she saw the vic Sunday night has something pertinent to the case." Opening the case folder, Tessa looked at the crime scene and autopsy photos for the hundredth time.

"Anything change?" Gus asked with a chuckle. "You can look at them all you want but you can't make evidence appear."

Tessa swung her eyes over to her partner "Wouldn't this job be much easier if everything happens the way television portrays it? We'd have a *ta-da* moment when we suddenly are presented with evidence that breaks the case wide open."

"And on day one," Gus added, as he raised his eyebrows and grinned before his face became serious again. "Hey, did you hear anything more about the e-mails?"

"Not yet. I would have expected Silverstein to ask for a warrant by now. He did say last night that he hoped the Internet provider would cooperate." Tessa shuffled some papers around her desk then looked at her partner. "Anything on who's leaking the information?"

Gus nodded. "I put some feelers out and have someone I know we can trust working some angles, but nothing so far. I ran into the captain on my way in and he said he was looking into it. I told him I was glad to hear that, since we have enough to do just working the case."

"Maybe one of the uniforms," Tessa said.

"Or, the grandmother, one of the lab techs, or anyone who has a passing interest in the case," Gus interjected.

"I doubt we'll ever know. Unnamed informants remain just that-unnamed."

Gus raised his bushy eyebrows. "Maybe we should set up a sting like we did on the Palmer case."

Tessa let out a genuine laugh. "That was sweet, wasn't it?" She smiled, before her face went blank. "We have the uniforms but they wouldn't know about the beating since that wasn't known until the ME cleaned her up."

"That would point to the techs that work down in the morgue with Ellis." Gus tapped a finger on his lips. "We can't rule out the crime scene techs."

Tessa scrunched her face. "I disagree. Have you ever noticed that on the television crime shows the criminalists know everything? They even have guns and chase down the bad guys." She tapped her chin as an introspective look crossed her face. "But, to rule them out, we need to find out who is friendly with the morgue staff. It comes down to who talks to who."

"Or who talks to the press," Gus added. "And we can't rule out the judge or the DA or anyone that works in those offices."

Tessa shook her head. "From now on it will be on a need to know basis. That way we know who we give the information to and can match it up with what's leaked."

"If that means we have to be here twenty-four-seven, you're going to have to explain to Helen that I can't make it home except to shower and change. Otherwise, we're going to have to find the leak in our spare time." Gus eyed his partner, who still had a vacant look on her face. "Who's up next?"

Shaking a thought away, Tessa replied, "The woman who said she saw the vic Sunday night with a man is due here around nine."

Gus held up a piece of paper. "I have the name of a guy who says he knows who did it-figure he's a wacko. I also have someone coming in who said he saw her that night too."

Nodding in agreement, Tessa said, "Maybe we'll get lucky with my witness and yours. If they lead us to the perp, we can wind this case up."

"You certainly are optimistic. If we wind it up now, it will be a record."

"Yeah, I know, but stranger things have happened."

With a knowing look, Gus eyed his partner. The scowl that usually masked her face was harder and deeper than he'd ever seen. "You look like you haven't slept in weeks," he said not disguising his concern. "You need to start taking better care of yourself before you burn out."

Tessa recalled that Anna had told her much the same thing the night before. Just the thought of the lawyer made shivers go up and down her body. "No worries, I'm good." *Am I trying to convince Gus or myself?*

Gus nodded in the direction of the elevator. "I think your nine o'clock is here."

Chapter Thirteen

Tessa sized up Joann Stewart as she escorted her into an interview room. Joann was a good looking woman with strawberry blonde hair, deep blue eyes, a taut body, and a friendly expression on a face full of freckles.

"Thank you for coming in, Mrs. Stewart," Tessa said with a slight smile. She placed a recorder in the middle of the table. "I'm going to record our conversation. Is that ok with you?"

"Yes. I'm sorry about last night when you called," Joann said in a low smoky voice. "My six month old was crying and my three year old was banging on the piano."

"No problem. Can you tell me about what you saw last Sunday night?"

"My husband and I were going home after the movies and were stopped at a stoplight, when I saw Dana."

"What time was that?"

"Around ten-fifteen."

"How did you know it was her?"

"Ever since first grade we went to school together. We always sat close to each other, since both our names started with an S. She was Stratton and I was Sutton. In our sophomore year, we were lab partners in biology."

"Were you good friends?"

"I wouldn't call us friends...more like friendly."

"What kind of vehicle was she in?"

"The SUV is what I first noticed. My husband, Rick, and I are looking for a bigger car. When I saw the Pathfinder, I said that I liked its looks and that we should test drive one. It was after that I looked at the driver. I told Rick that it was Dana Stratton."

"What make of car were you in?"

"A Volvo wagon."

"Color."

"Black."

"Was she alone?"

"No, there was a man sitting in the passenger side."

"What can you tell me about the man?"

"Not much really. Dana was blocking the view. I do know he was white and was wearing a ball cap."

"Anything else?"

"When Dana looked out her window, I smiled and did a little wave but she just stared at me, before she turned back and looked up at the stoplight."

"Did she look like she didn't know you?"

Joann shrugged. "No, it was more like she was distracted. Her eyes seemed blank to me." Her brow creased. "You know what I mean? She was looking but not seeing."

Tessa made a notation. "Did you think she was drunk or drugged?"

Shaking her head, Joann said, "I didn't see her face long enough to know something like that."

"Tell me what happened next."

"After that, I saw the man put his arm around her shoulders and I think he kissed her but I'm not sure that happened. I couldn't see anything other than his arm and head moving. I figured she was on a date. The light turned and we went left and Dana's vehicle went straight."

"Where was this?"

"The corner of Montgomery and fifty-eighth."

"You turned left onto fifty-eighth?"

"Yes."

"Did you notice the license plate?"

The woman closed her eyes, opened them, and shook her head. "No, sorry."

"What about your husband?"

"I'm afraid he was more interested in catching the last minutes of the Lakers' game." When she saw the detective raise her eyebrows slightly, she added, "We have XM so we can get games from all over the country."

Looking at the woman's intelligent face, Tessa felt certain that her account was factual. She'd have one of the techies see if they could verify the story with surveillance footage.

Tessa stood up. "Thank you for coming in, Mrs. Stewart." She handed the woman her card. "If you think of anything else, please call me."

"I will." The woman gave Tessa a tentative smile. "It was horrible what happened to Dana. She was too nice a person to die like that."

Tessa's face remained stoic.

#

As she was returning to her desk, Tessa stopped when Gus came out of an interrogation room and, in a low voice said, "I need you to join me. This guy is telling one interesting story."

"Ok," she said, before following her partner into the interrogation room. The man, sitting in one of the steel chairs had short brown hair and he wore a black windbreaker that covered a blue oxford shirt.

"Oliver Applegate, this is my partner, Detective Jacoby." Gus smiled and nodded at the man. "Mr. Applegate here was telling me about seeing Dana Stratton around ten-twenty last Sunday night and driving in an erratic manner. Said he saw what he thought was her struggling with a man."

Tessa asked, "Ok. Mr. Applegate, where did you see her?"

"Montgomery Avenue," the man answered.

"What kind of vehicle was she in?"

"I think it was a white, two-thousand-six Pathfinder but I'm not sure of that."

Tessa gave her partner a sideways glance. "How did you know it was Dana Stratton?"

"My daughter, Angie, went to basketball camp at the university and Dana was the coach of her team."

"Recently?" Gus asked.

"For the last two summers."

Tessa made a notation then asked, "Can you describe the man?"

"All I saw was his upper body but from the way he sat in the vehicle I'd say he was around six feet. He had on a light colored ball cap. I saw his hair sticking out of it. I think it was brown, maybe black." The man stopped for a minute, and then added, "He was white."

Tessa tapped her pen on the metal table for a second before she looked at the man again. "What were you driving?"

"A gray Ford F-one-fifty pickup."

Knowing that the man's story corroborated her earlier witness's statement, Tessa asked, "Did you get a look at the license plate?"

"No, sorry. I was too interested in what was going on in the vehicle."

Gus asked, "Did she look like she was in trouble?"

"No, she was pissed and was pointing her finger at him. I could tell she was screaming."

"Did you think about getting out of your vehicle and helping her?" Gus asked.

"No, it wasn't like that."

"Then how was it, Oliver?"

The man swallowed hard, as his face turned red. "She was pissed but seemed to be handling it. It didn't look to me like she was in any kind of danger."

Gus fixed his gaze on the man. "What happened then?"

"I got a phone call and answered it." His eyes darted between the two detectives. Frustrated that he thought that the detectives were making the wrong assumption, he said, "She didn't look like she was in danger. If I thought she was I would have done something...I really would."

Tessa looked at the witness intensely, and then nodded. "Did you hear anything?"

"I got curious and rolled down my window. I heard him say something like, *come on baby just one kiss.*" Oliver shrugged. "At least that's what I thought he said. The light changed and I moved on."

Gus focused on the man. "What kind of voice?"

"You mean like the tone, accent, or that kinda thing?" He saw the male detective nod. "He sounded like an ordinary guy there was nothing distinctive."

Tessa rubbed the back of her neck as her lack of sleep suddenly overwhelmed her. "Mr. Applegate, thank you for your time. Here's my card. If you think of anything else, please give us a call."

After the witness left the interrogation room, Gus shook his head. "Did you buy that?"

Tessa's hand moved to her forehead. "Actually, he verified what my witness told me. Now, we have two witnesses that gave the same description of the vehicle. We now know we are looking for a white Pathfinder."

"I'll get someone to map out the route the vic would take from the university to Montgomery. Then they can check out the footage from the surveillance cameras. Maybe we can get a better look at the vehicle and the license plate."

"We need to locate her vehicle."

"I'll have the units who patrol that area and lookout for the vic's vehicle."

"Ok and I'll call Silverstein to see if he has anything more on those e-mails."

#

After calling the computer tech, Tessa was about to leave her desk when she looked up and saw Anna standing in front of her. Her soft mouth wreathed in a smile and for Tessa the room seemed to narrow and everyone but Anna faded away.

"Hey," Tessa said in a barely audible tone.

Anna's eyes bored into the detective. "I took a chance that you might be free."

Looking at her wristwatch, Tessa cocked her head to the right and shrugged. Keeping her voice level so she wouldn't show that her heart was hammering uncontrollably, she asked, "Want to catch a bite to eat? The last thing I had was that hamburger you brought last night."

Anna let her eyes run lazily over the detective's body as Tessa pushed back from her desk and stood up. With a wide grin she said, "I see you're happy to see me again."

Tessa, aware of the lawyer's gaze on her now engorged nipples, grabbed her jacket and hurriedly put it on. When she looked back at Anna and her smoldering blue eyes, she felt like her legs would give out. "Is Lou's Café good with you?"

Anna nodded and saw Tessa's partner coming in their direction. "Here comes Gus, do you want to wait?"

With a wide grin that turned into a deep chuckle, Tessa said, "Hell no. He'll want to come too and I *don't* want that." She had no sooner said the words than Gus came up to the two women.

"Jacoby, I've lined up the shrink to speak with the boy when he gets here."

Tessa frowned. "I thought we were doing that."

"I was talking to Clancy about the kid and she said it might be better for her to do the interview. I asked if she wanted us there and she said no-if the kid is hiding something and we've already talked with him he might clam up."

Tessa mulled over the words as she rubbed the back of her neck. "Ok. I spoke with Silverstein-nothing yet."

Gus looked at Anna and nodded. "How ya doin'?"

Anna smiled. "Good and you?"

"Hunky-dory. You here about a case?" he asked, not hiding his grin. "Jacoby, you didn't tell me we had such a good looking visitor. He turned to his partner, whose face was slightly red. "You tryin' to keep me out of the loop or somethin'?"

"Give it a rest, Gus." Tessa winked at the man. "We're going for coffee. Page me when the kid gets here." Tessa started to leave, and then said, "You want me to bring you something?"

Barely able to control the bubble of laughter that begged for release, Gus looked at his watch and said, "I got nothin' to do. I'll go with you."

Looking at Anna, who was grinning, and Gus, who was laughing softly, Tessa said, "Hell no. Come on," she said grabbing Anna's hand, "let's get going before he starts insisting." She turned to her partner. "I'll bring you back one of those mocha coffees that you like so much," she said, before she and Anna headed for the elevator.

Gus broke into an all out laugh and called after her. "Almost had you going there, Jacoby."

#

The two women quietly walked down the bustling sidewalk in lock-step. When a man pushed past them, their arms touched-they each sucked in a breath.

From the first moment she met Tessa, Anna was captivated. Something about the detective made her crave to know and share-that scared, yet intrigued her. The last time they dated and she left the detective at her door wanting more, she vowed not to see her again. It was far easier to walk away than take the chance on being devastated again where love was the prize. When, she saw the detective the day before, all the old feelings and desires flooded her senses. She wondered what was wrong with her. Tessa was desirable and they were simpatico in many ways. *I'd be a fool not to explore a relationship with her.* Tessa was fun to be with-more importantly, she felt safe with the detective. She hadn't felt that in a long while. The night before, when she allowed her passion for the woman to spill over into her kisses, it took everything ounce of her reserve to

walk away. Seeing Tessa this morning, Anna was certain that she wanted more than sex from the woman.

The accidental touch of Anna's arm on hers made tiny pleasurable sparks sting Tessa's body. She recalled how she desperately tried to squelch her passions on several occasions the night before by envisioning the lawyer's finger inside her. But that wasn't enough and her body continued to hum to the tune of desire all night. Now, with Anna by her side, she knew she'd have to fight her feelings, if she was going to maintain her edge in the Stratton case.

When they entered Lou's Café and Bakery, Tessa said, "Coffee?"

Silently, Anna nodded.

"Do you want anything else? I can vouch for their muffins."

"No, just coffee," Anna said. "I'm too wired to eat anything." She reached out and touched Tessa's arm. "Thanks," she whispered, before walking toward an empty table in the corner.

As the detective waited for the order, her eyes tracked to Anna who was simply breathtaking in so many ways. She had always shied away from entanglements of the heart. Her job as a homicide detective, in many cases, showed her the seedier side of love, so she kept her romantic liaisons about her need for sex-Anna was different. Deep inside she knew she wanted more than sex from Anna. She felt the need to protect and take care of her-that knowledge, along with her body's overwhelming need to touch Anna, frightened her.

"Ms," a male voice said. "Your order is ready."

With her thoughts interrupted, Tessa nodded at the young, skinny man behind the counter, lifted a small tray, and started toward Anna. All the while, her heart was beating fast, as she felt the familiar tightening between her thighs, not to mention her swelling nipples that pushed against her shirt.

Instead of sitting opposite the lawyer, Tessa sat next to her then put the steaming cups on the table, along with a muffin. As she sipped on her coffee, Tessa covertly studied the lawyer's face. There was no doubt that Anna was beautiful. She saw something else in the woman's demeanor besides the cool, calm in-charge persona that Anna showed the world in general. She saw smoldering passion. She knew that look all too well and speculated that, if she looked in a mirror, would she see the same expression on her own face.

When their eyes did meet, Anna smiled as she gazed longingly at the detective. *Why am letting her get to me like this?* The stirrings of arousal running through her body ever since she entered the police building and saw Tessa was her answer-it was sexual-but she knew better.

The detective pulled apart her muffin, picked up a piece and was about to put it in her mouth, when she put it down and said, "Did you get the verdict yet?"

Anna rested an arm on the table and leaned toward the detective. "Around ten-thirty last night I got the call that they reached a verdict. Court reconvened this morning at nine. The verdict was *guilty on all counts*."

A big smile crossed Tessa's face. "That's wonderful, Anna," she said as she reached across the table and placed her hand on the lawyer's arm. "Because of you, there are a few less criminals on the street."

The lawyer shrugged. "Thanks. But you know that it's only a drop in the bucket. Until we catch the big fish, they will still be in business." She studied the hand on her arm and suddenly felt tongue-tied. "I'm sorry about last night. I should never have started massaging your shoulders," she said with a hesitant smile, "it wasn't the time, or the place and I should have known better."

Tessa grinned. "I'm not sorry even if you made it very difficult for me to sleep." She withdrew her hand.

Anna studied the jet black hair framing the strong beautiful face. She had a clearly defined jaw line, a small nose, slightly full lips, and green eyes that seemed to change color with her mood. Full of passion the night before, they were emerald and as she now gazed into their depths, she saw the same color. The lawyer grinned. "You weren't alone. In fact, when the phone rang with the news about the jury, I was disappointed that it wasn't you."

"You know there's a flaw in your plan don't you?"

"Really? And what would that be?" Anna asked, as she took a sip from her cup-her eyes never leaving the woman next to her.

"If we're going to wait until we can both concentrate fully on a relationship it will never happen. By the time I'm done with my case, you'll already be on another one."

The tip of Anna's tongue ran along her lips as she eyed Tessa. "Then I guess we will have to figure out a new plan."

"Which is?"

With blue eyes growing dark with desire, Anna smiled seductively. "I take you here and now and we go from there."

Tessa laughed louder than she meant to. The only other customer looked up from his newspaper and the kid behind the counter stared at her. Regaining control, she said, "I like the idea but not the place. She leaned in and Anna did the same. In a conspirator's voice she whispered, "My place tonight."

"Damn, I'm leaving for D. C. at noon and I'm not sure when I'll be back." Anna winked. "Sure you don't want to do it here?" She nodded to a nearby door. "There's the bathroom if you want privacy," she said with a grin.

Looking around the nearly empty café, Tessa considered the offer before she too grinned. "It'd have to be a silent quickie."

"Oh, I don't plan on being silent."

Tessa's face turned serious. "A bathroom isn't where I envision us making love for the first time."

"Me either. I like that you said making love and not just sex."

"I want more than sex," Tessa whispered, before she realized she said her thoughts aloud. When she lifted her eyes, Anna locked on them.

They sat gazing at each for several minutes before Anna said, "Can I ask you a question?"

"Anything."

"You said you heard I had lots of girlfriends-that I'm a player." Tessa nodded. "Will you tell me who told you that?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"It's simple. If someone is spreading false rumors about me, I'd like to know who it is."

"Beverly Paycheck."

"Now there's a surprise," Anna said sarcastically.

"Why?"

"She's been trying to get in my pants since I arrived here."

Tessa frowned. "Didn't I see you talking with her in the courthouse yesterday?"

Anna rolled her eyes and shook her head slightly "Yes, she was making another of her feeble attempts. When I saw her coming my way, I tried to get away but I wasn't fast enough."

"Didn't have your running shoes on, did you?" Both women laughed. "I was in a stall in one of the courthouse restrooms and heard her speaking with Carrie Collins about you. Normally, I don't pay much attention to that sort of talk, but..." Tessa shrugged, "We'd dated a few times, and I was interested in you so when I heard your name, I listened."

Anna shook her head. "She's told me on more than one occasion I'd be sorry if I didn't date her." She shrugged. "I figured she was referring to her prowess in bed-apparently, she's more vindictive than I realized."

"In my line of work I see all kinds. Many of them would throw their mothers under the bus before telling the truth. I didn't see the woman's eyes but something told me she was blowing smoke."

"Yet, you believed what she said?"

"Not really. The words didn't fit the woman I knew as Anna. There was a ring of dishonesty to them."

Anna searched Tessa's face for any sign of deception. "What made you think she was lying?" She moved closer and rested her hand on Tessa's thigh.

The blue eyes that had been scrutinizing her ever since they sat down along with the hand caressing her thigh sent a shiver down Tessa's spine. "I think the tone of her voice...maybe the cadence of her words. I don't know, I just get those feelings sometimes when people aren't telling the truth. Oh, and I wanted to get to know you, so I knew I'd have to find out for myself." Tessa swallowed hard. Barely above a whisper she said, "I wondered why you didn't want me."

"I do want you, Tessa, and that scares me." Anna smiled when Tessa's hand covered the one on her thigh and moved it slightly higher. The two women sat quietly staring at each other until the harsh sound of Tessa's beeper filled the silence. The others in the bakery looked in her direction. She lifted the small object out of her pocket and looked at it. "Sorry, I need to get back."

"Too bad," Anna said, as her hand gently rubbed Tessa's thigh. "I was going to do some exploring."

Tessa rubbed Anna's hand. "And I would have reciprocated." She smiled, cleared her throat, and then chuckled, "You know you're killing me."

Anna wiggled her eyebrow and laughed. "In a good way, of course."

"Absolutely." Tessa stood up and held out her hand. "Come on, let me get Gus's coffee and we can walk back together."

#

Once Tessa went inside her building, Anna made her way across the street to the courthouse. Looking at her watch, it was almost eleven and she didn't need to be at the helipad for another thirty minutes. "I need to pay Bev a visit," she whispered, as she set her jaw and began walking faster.

Anna entered the District Attorney's offices and saw the office manager, Beverly Paycheck immediately. When the older woman lifted her head and noticed Anna approaching, she smiled. The grim look on the lawyer's face made the woman's expression flatten. "Anna, what's wrong?"

"Bev, I've just heard an interesting piece of gossip that seems to have stemmed from you," Anna softly growled, as she leaned in close to the woman.

Filled with bravado, Beverly said, "Really, and what is that?"

Anna laugh wasn't humorous. "I've been told that you've been telling lies about me being a womanizer."

"Who said that," Beverly countered.

"Doesn't matter, Bev, all you need to know is that I know."

"Jacoby-right." Beverly let out a derisive laugh. "I saw the way you ran after her yesterday. Really, Anna, you should have more pride than to sniff around her type. I hear she's a lousy lay."

Anna steadied her emotions. "The game is up, Bev, and you lose."

Beverly lowered her voice. "Is she so far up your pussy that you can't tell a lie from the truth? She's lying to you. I never said anything about you sleeping around. What would I have to gain by saying something like that?"

Leaning in even closer, Anna hissed, "Give me a break, Bev."

"We had a chance until that woman came into your life." Beverly grinned. "Paybacks are a bitch, aren't they?"

A low chuckle filled the space between the two women as Anna straightened her back. "Don't you get it? You never had a chance."

"That's where you're wrong, Anna."

Anna shook her head. "Get a life and stay out of mine." The lawyer walked away without a backward glance.

Chapter Fourteen

Tessa stiffened her composure as she tried to push all thoughts of Anna on the back burner. But, the lawyer's face kept worming its way to the surface and her body was ripe for release. *She's killing me...but what a way to go.*

Sorting through the crime scene photos, she stopped and looked at the crumpled body of Dana Stratton lying in the dirt on the vacant lot located on the south side of Restin. She studied the picture for several minutes. What she saw made her mood turn from one of sexual frustration to anger for the girl who was viciously murdered.

"You're back," Gus said, as he picked up the coffee she'd brought for him. "Thanks," he said, holding the cup up. "The kid and his grandmother are waiting in four and Clancy is on her way."

In a clipped tone, Tessa said, "Good. I hope she can find out what he's hiding." Her eyes met her partner's face. "Did you tell the grandmother she couldn't stay?"

"Yeah, she wasn't thrilled, especially when I told her a psychologist was going to talk with him. She told me he didn't need a shrink."

"Want me to speak to her?"

"Wouldn't be a bad idea once Clancy gets started."

Tessa pushed back from her chair and headed for interrogation four with her partner.

#

Clancy Murdock was petite and in her mid fifties. Her gray hair, pushed behind each ear, was wavy with an unruly look. Her clear blue intelligent eyes focused on the detectives. "I've gone over your notes and wanted to know why you thought he wasn't telling you everything."

With a contemplative expression, Tessa said, "It is just a feeling I got from the way he acted-no eye contact, soft inaudible voice, clinging to his grandmother."

"Not just the trauma of finding the body?"

Tessa shook her head. "No, it seemed to be more than that."

"Ok, let me speak with him and see what I can find out," she said, as she opened the door and smiled warmly at the boy and his grandmother. "Mrs. Bertram, I'm Clancy Murdock."

Scowling, Mary said, "My grandson doesn't need a shrink."

"That's not why I'm here," Clancy said as she neared the woman. "Finding the body must have been traumatic for Joey. I just want to make sure he's ok." She gave the woman another warm smile. "If you'll step out with the detectives, I can get started." Clancy saw the doubt in the older woman's expression. "I won't be long."

Mary reluctantly left the room and joined the waiting detectives. When the door shut behind her, she turned to Tessa. "He's a good boy. I don't know why you've singled him out, since there were two other boys there."

Tessa pursed her lips. "We aren't singling him out, he was the first one to the body, and that alone must have been horrifying for him. We just want to make sure he's doing ok." Tessa gestured to a nearby door. "Please, Mrs. Bertram, come with us while we wait. Can I get you anything to drink?"

"Joey had a nightmare last night," she whispered.

Hesitantly, Tessa patted the woman's arm. "That's why we wanted Dr, Murdock to see him." The detective gave the woman a sideward glance before she cleared her throat. "Does Joey's father live with you too?"

"No."

"Can you tell me his name?"

"Why would that matter to you? Do you want to implicate him now? My grandson and daughter aren't enough for you?" Mary Bertram said, accusingly. "Well, that man is long gone and I say good riddance to him."

"And what was his name?"

"Joe...Joe Carlton. Go ahead look him up and you'll find him arrested on more than one occasion. He's nothing but a no-good."

Tessa nodded, as she made a notation of the name. "I'm not accusing anyone, Mrs. Bertram I'm just trying to find out how the girl's body got on that lot."

"And you think me and mine know?"

"No," Tessa said softly. "Joey found the body and you called it in and that makes you the first eyes on the scene. If Joey has a relationship with his father I need to know."

"Why?" Mary demanded.

"Because Joey may have confided in him."

"He didn't we haven't seen hide no hair of him for a long time. Good riddance I say."

A half hour later, Clancy and Joey emerged from the room. The doctor eyed Mary Bertram and said, "Will you come with me for a minute?" She saw Joey huddle around his grandmother's legs. "You can come too, Joey."

In the room, Clancy looked at the older woman and said, "Joey is going to need to see me again. He is having a hard time with what he saw and what he touched."

"Touched," Mary said wide eyed.

"Yes, he poked her to see if she'd move. That's when he noticed the money clip. The other two boys then bullied him into doing it again."

Mary wrapped her arms around Joey. "Oh, sweet Jesus, my poor baby."

"Do you think you could bring him to see me at my office?"

"I'll have to check with my daughter-insurance might not cover that."

Clancy nodded and slid a card across the table. "I understand. Here's the number you can call for an appointment. If I'm not in your daughter's plan, we can tell you who is. Either way, it will help Joey deal with what he saw and did."

Clancy stood up and opened the door before escorting the pair to the elevator. Returning to the room where she joined Tessa and Gus. "What a horrible thing to happen to that kid. From what I could ascertain, the only thing he was holding back was the fact he touched the body. He is traumatized by everything and will definitely need counseling."

"That's what he was hiding-he touched her." Tessa rubbed her forehead trying to dissuade the headache that threatened.

"Big flipping waste of time," Gus remarked before his face softened. "I'd never wish that on anyone especially a kid." He gave Clancy a slight smile. "Thanks, Doc."

"Yeah, thanks," Tessa said. Once the doctor walked away, Tessa turned to her partner. "Let's go see if Silverstein has any good news for us."

#

"I hope you have something for us, Silverstein," Gus said.

The small, slight man with dark hair and a pimply complexion looked up. "Still working on it, Detectives,"

"What's the hold up? I thought *you* said you'd have the information soon." Tessa looked at her watch. "That was hours ago."

"Tracing the IP and MAC address hasn't yielded what I need. Whoever set up this email account used an anonymous proxy."

"What's that?" Tessa asked.

"It disguises the real email address. I've worked around that and I'm just now able to see the IP address-it was bouncing all over the world. I finally found the actual Internet service provider. From there, I should be able to find out who the account belongs to." The technician eyed Tessa Jacoby. Her reputation for doing everything by the book was exemplary-she didn't need to know his hacking into the service provider's mainframe was illegal.

Tessa tried to dampen her annoyance with the man. "How long?" she asked in a low, ominous tone.

"Give me a couple hours. I should have the name by then."

Tessa leveled the man with her best *don't fuck with me* glare and said, "*Don't* make me wait too long."

Ira watched the detectives leave before he made some key strokes and worked his way into the Internet host's mainframe.

#

Back at her desk, Tessa struggled with her frustration with the computer forensic specialist and the lack of anything meaningful from the boy who found the body. She closed her eyes, knowing that underneath it all those annoyances were her growing need to be with Anna. From the first time they met, Tessa was attracted to the lawyer and had always enjoyed their repartee when they were together. When Anna seemed to disappear from the scene, Tessa considered that the rumors were correct and the lawyer had moved on to another conquest. After last night, everything changed-Anna wanted to explore a deeper relationship with her. That scared Tessa because she knew that the lawyer wasn't just another one night stand-she was more.

She saw the flashing light that meant she had voice mail and punched five to listen to it. There was one message from the victim's roommate about hearing what she said was *the murderer's voice*. Punching in the number, she waited until she heard Jenna Rudolf's voice. "This is Detective Jacoby returning your call."

"I think the person that murdered Dana left her a phone message," the young woman blurted.

"I don't recall an answering machine in her room," the detective countered.

"It isn't...we both had cell phones but we also had a phone we shared. I was deleting the saved messages this morning when I heard someone say, *Dana, you can't deny me anymore.*"

"Is that all it said?"

"Yes. Do you think it is the killer?"

"I'm sending an officer to your apartment. When he gets there will you please give him the machine?"

"No. I don't have a backup."

"Ms. Rudolf, I can get a warrant to compel you to turn over the machine."

"Can't you just listen to it?"

"No. If it's, if it the person that murdered your roommate, we will need it as evidence."

"When will I get it back?"

Tessa really didn't need the woman digging her heels in about the answering machine. SNAP-her pencil broke. "No telling. It depends on how long it takes to find the person who murdered your friend and when a trial is scheduled."

The girl's voice rose. "I can't go that long without my answering machine and I don't have money to buy a new one. It's going to be hard enough to come up with the extra rent until I can find another roommate."

Tessa rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Don't *you* want us to find out who murdered *your* friend?"

"Yes."

"Then, we need that answering machine. Either you can cooperate or I can get a warrant. It's your choice, Ms. Rudolf."

"Fine! You can have it."

"Thank you for cooperating. The officer should be there shortly." Tessa hung up the phone and looked at her returning partner.

"What's that about?" Gus asked as he sat down in his desk chair.

"We might have a recording of someone threatening the vic."

#

Ira Silverstein entered the detectives' area and walked briskly toward Tessa's desk. "Detective Jacoby, the person who sent the e-mails doesn't exist. I traced the account, only to find that the information given to the service provider was from someone whose identity was stolen eight months ago."

"What's the name on the account?"

"Walter McNamara."

"Phone number."

"Five-five-five-seven-one-four-eight."

"Do you have an address?"

"Seven-twenty-two Huntington Place."

"In the city?"

"Yes."

"Ok, thanks."

Ira added, "I'm going to run a program that will recover everything that was ever on Stratton's computer."

Tessa looked up. "What about stuff she deleted?"

Ira smiled. "A piece of cake."

"Keep me informed," Tessa said, as she turned away from the man and picked up the phone.

"Hello," a woman's voice said.

"Ms. McNamara?"

"Yes. If you're calling for money, I don't have any."

"This is Detective Tessa Jacoby with the Restin police. I understand Walter had his identity stolen. Is he your husband?"

"Walter died two months ago," the woman said, with a slight hitch in her voice. "He was my brother."

"I'm sorry to hear that he's passed. Do you know if he had his identity stolen?"

"Yes, it was and it's causing me and the rest of the family all kinds of problems in trying to settle his estate. Do you have any idea what it's like to fight for what you know is right?"

Tessa let a wry smile curve her lips. "Yeah, I have an idea. Did they ever find out who was responsible?"

"No. Up until the day he died, my brother was on the phone trying to get all his accounts settled." The woman paused then asked, "Are you calling because you found out who did this to him?"

"No, I'm afraid not. His name came up in a case I'm investigating. Someone used his name and all his information."

"As far as I'm concerned, when you find him you can lock him up and throw away the key. He made my brother's last days miserable."

"I'll do just that," Tessa said. "Thank you for your time, Ms. McNamara."

#

Tessa sat turning the money clip in her hand long after her shift ended and Gus had gone home. So far, they'd come up with the clip, the threatening e-mails, and the eye witness accounts of seeing the victim in a Pathfinder. She couldn't shake the feeling that they were missing something-it was gnawing a hole in her stomach.

The number of white Pathfinders in the city alone was in the thousands, which meant they would start working the phones. If they were lucky, they could narrow down the number to something manageable then start looking up those owners. She put a lot of confidence in the surveillance cameras placed around the city. She knew their best chance of obtaining a firm identification on the Pathfinder was through those cameras.

The trace evidence the crime unit collected turned up, as she expected, with nothing usable. The unknown voice on the answering machine was just that-unknown. The caller used some sort of distortion device. Even with the most sophisticated equipment that the crime lab had, the voice was still unrecognizable and there was no usable background noise.

We can't seem to catch a break on this case.

She sorted through the crime scene photos again, looking for something that she might have missed. Her eyes rested on the pentagram carved into the woman's midsection. She looked at the placement on the body. *Inverted, wonder what that means.* She didn't know much about the symbol but did know that the point that traditionally would be at the top pointed down, with two points aligned with each breast.

"Why a pentagram?" she asked, as she moved the mouse on her computer and brought up the search engine that linked into a national database. Typing in the word *pentagram*, she found there were almost a million sites. Clicking on the one that had a partial definition, she waited for the screen to fill. When it did, she scanned the words until she found *inverted pentagram*. She read that inverted symbolized the reduction of the person's importance. The article also said that others think that an inverted pentagram denotes Satan.

Continuing her search, Tessa found a reference to Wiccans, who were believers of a religion known as Wicca. The religion teaches that the five points of a pentagram represent spirit, air, water, fire, and earth. Many Wiccans believe they will gain knowledge about life and its mysteries, if they take hold of both male and female personas.

Tessa continued to scan the article until she read that many occultists wore the symbol as a talisman against evil. A pentagram was pivotal in the occult in their pursuit of knowledge and power. She stopped reading, and then focused on one passage. *If the point is to the north, they do not worship Satan. If toward south, they do.*

She quickly spread the photos of the crime scene on her desk, and then took out a city map. Howard Street, where the kids found the body, ran north and south. The body was more or less

horizontal to the street, with the feet pointing to the north. If she went by what she read, whoever carved the pentagram did not worship Satan.

"Well, that's a comfort."

As she read on further, she discovered that some found that the number five was both mystical and magical. The points of the pentagram were equal to the number of fingers, toes, and senses. Five also was associated with Mars, signifying harmony through conflict. Christ had five wounds and, in the Muslim faith, there are five pillars. The list of what five signifies was endless and Tessa considered whether it was a coincidence. A man or a woman drawn within the pentagram represents the Hermetic philosophy of associativity, meaning *as above, so below*. The last line she read seemed to have the most implication for the Stratton murder. *Some believe that a pentagram provides potent protection from evil-a symbol of conflict that shields the wearer.*

Stretching her arms above her head, she yawned before lowering them and taking her gun out of the desk drawer, Tessa wondered if the perpetrator was trying to shield the girl from evil. Standing in the elevator, she shook her head and chuckled. "Yeah, that's why he killed her."

#

Turning the key and opening the door to her home, Tessa entered and punched in the code for the alarm system. She pulled her Glock out of its holster and locked it in the small safe near the door. She listened for any sound-it was quiet.

Stripping and falling into her bed, Tessa closed her eyes, only to have the pentagram float into sight. Did it mean anything or was it nothing more than a red herring? She was bone tired and needed sleep-it eluded her.

It was in the time between awake and sleeping that Tessa let her guard down. The fire that Anna set in her from the first time they met reignited. The lawyer had invaded her mind and body on more levels than she would ever admit. The anger and hurt she felt when the woman didn't called her in over a month seemed to dissipate once she saw her again the day before. That meeting set off a series of physical and mental emotions that she didn't understand but knew she wanted to explore. In a moment of clarity just before sleep captured her, she knew that, no matter what happened, she wanted to take the chance and let Anna inside her heart. In all her previous liaisons that threatened to destroy the wall of solitude that she had around her, she ran. Not this time-she was tired of being alone.

Chapter Fifteen

As her eyes opened, Tessa yawned in reaction to only sleeping sporadically. The quiet of the night didn't give her any answers to the case. It only brought darkness. What she knew and didn't know about the case whirled in her brain all night. Added into the mix was the federal prosecutor, who made her body fill with what was becoming an unquenchable desire.

Tessa closed her eyes in her dark room and a sense of sexual need flooded through her body. She imagined Anna, laying next to her, naked-wanting. She could see Anna's creamy flesh flush with desire as her fingers lazily touched her skin, evoking moans of pleasure and cries of delight. She could see the blue eyes darken with want, as her body began to move rhythmically to the fingers that were insistently gliding inside her. Tessa was panting hard as her own insistent fingers pumped as her hips lifted and gyrated to the rhythm. Her engorged clitoris trembled as her thumb rubbed against it. Finally, she felt her body explode before she collapsed. She left her fingers inside as she felt small tremors against them.

For a long while after her orgasm subsided, Tessa lay still, knowing if she thought of Anna again, the desire would rise once more. She forcibly got herself out of bed and dressed in spandex running leggings and a long sleeved t-shirt before she took to the streets. She knew the route by heart but her eyes still scanned the area constantly for any sign of threats-she saw none. It was as she neared the end of her run that her focus returned to the Stratton case. So far, the paper found under the body yielded nothing of value. A vague thought of something she heard or read rolled into her head. There now were sophisticated tests that the lab could run to make whatever was on the card more visible.

#

At six the next morning, Tessa was standing outside the crime lab waiting for Brenda Marlow, in hopes that the technician had a trick for refreshing what she assumed was a business card found under the body. She saw the woman approaching her. The most notable thing about the lab tech, other than her short stature, was the scar that stretched across her left cheek.

Stopping in front of the lab, Brenda asked, "Detective, are you waiting for me?"

With a smile, Tessa nodded. "I was wondering if there's any way to get more off that card we found."

The woman let out a low chuckle. "Funny you should ask. Last night I was reading about a new technique that a lab in D. C. uses to replenish degraded paper. I can try that but you should know that the card is so poor that I seriously doubt it will yield anything useable." She shrugged. "It's not a big leap to think that it was there long before the body was."

Tessa said, "I know but will you give it a try anyway?"

"Ok. I'll let you know what I find."

"Thanks."

#

The room that the homicide detectives shared was quiet when Tessa arrived. At the far end, she could hear a phone ringing and the noise of a fax machine. She threw the case folder on her desk and pulled out her chair before sitting down. They were in the third day of the investigation and

only had a white Pathfinder, a money clip, untraceable e-mails, and a threatening phone message to go on. The only thing usable was the vehicle that the witnesses saw the vic in-*shit*. She lifted up the receiver of her phone and punched in a number.

"This is Jacoby. Do you have anything for me?"

A voice on the other end said, "You're in early. Yeah, on the feed from the university we have the girl leaving at nine-fifty-seven. We picked her up on Mercy at ten then we lose her."

"What about the SUV on Montgomery or fifty-eighth?"

"Just getting to that now."

"Now? You're only getting to it now. You've got to be kidding."

"Look, Detective, we're shorthanded and, in case you didn't know, yours isn't the only homicide we're looking at."

With an angry tone, Tessa said, "Fine, I'll come down there and *do it* myself!"

The man on the other end of the phone said, "Stay put, Detective. I'll get back to you in an hour."

Tessa slammed the receiver onto its cradle. "Fuck," she mumbled. "I'm working with a bunch of morons." Two other detectives in the area looked at her and eyed her knowingly before going back to their cases.

Grinding her teeth, Tessa pushed away from her desk and walked several feet to the only window on that side of the room. She looked down at the vehicles and the people below and wondered why she was letting the case get to her. *Am I losing my edge?* Normally, she ran a case with an attitude that many called callous. To her, it was the only way to be successful. At a ninety percent solve rate, she and Gus had the highest rate of conviction for the entire police department. The photo of the body that she always carried was in her pocket was there to remind her of her goal when she felt like she did now. She took it out and stared at the nude, dirty body. "Someone did this to you and I won't let them get away with it," she whispered.

Her mind drifted back to the first homicide she worked on and she shivered. She could still see the girl's bloodied, bloated corpse, beaten beyond recognition. The young girl's body had various flies, beetles, and rodents making a meal of her flesh. It had taken weeks before Tessa could no longer smell death. She hadn't solved the murder. Like the Stratton case, clues were few to none. Unlike the Stratton case, no one claimed the body and the child remained nameless. For her, it was unacceptable to allow the basketball player's case to go unsolved.

After running her fingers through her hair, Tessa tried to figure out when she changed-when her heart hardened. She'd forgotten how to smile and wondered when the last time was that she had a genuine laugh. "Anna," she whispered and she felt her heart soften. The lawyer had awakened feelings that she didn't think she ever felt. The warm sensations Anna evoked in her made her

smile, as she felt a strong desire to hold her close. *Daydreaming about her has no place in the investigation.* Squelching emotions that threatened to take hold, she returned to her desk before opening the file again.

#

Gus slid into his chair and stared at his partner. "Anything new?" he asked.

"Only that some asshole has been sitting on the surveillance videos," Tessa grumbled as she looked at her partner, "said he had other cases." Tessa frowned. "How the hell do they expect us to solve murders when they don't give us the support we need?"

Gus held up his hands. "Hey, settle down. All I did was to ask you a question. What's got you in a knot this morning?" He eyed his partner. "Want me to go strong arm him and hurry him along?"

For the first time that morning, Tessa let a slight smile form around her lips. "What, big bad Gus is going to go slap the techie around for little ole me." She chuckled sarcastically and that relieved some of her tension. In a more serious tone, she said, "Sorry." She steepled her fingers and shrugged. "So far this case is a bust. If we can't get a good look at that Pathfinder, then where do we go?"

"We do what we do best, Jacoby. We turn over every rock we find until we get that one lead that will crack the case wide open."

Tessa slid the file across to him. "I think this needs new eyes."

Gus took the file and opened it just as his partner's phone rang. "Jacoby."

"Detective, we've got the video of that Pathfinder."

"Good, we'll be right there." Tessa looked at Gus. "Guess the techie heard you might slap him around," she said with a grin, "he's found the vehicle."

#

Tom Cho looked through his tortoiseshell glasses at the two detectives as they arrived in his work area. He liked the man but found the woman abrasive and unappreciative of those that supported her. "I've found the Pathfinder turning on to Montgomery off Fifty-Second." He moved the film forward. "You can clearly see the black Volvo next to it at the Fifty-Eighth Street intersection."

They watched the Pathfinder proceed down Montgomery and saw the Ford pickup just like Oliver Applegate said.

"Can you get a license plate number?" Gus asked.

"Yeah," Cho said. "It's Y-J-L-four-eight-seven."

Cho then linked with the state's license database. "Joel Waterston, nine-twenty-six Anderson Drive."

Tessa leaned in closer and pointed to the driver's side of the truck. "Can you focus in on that?"

"I'll try." Cho maneuvered his mouse over the window, highlighted the area, and magnified it before increasing the number of pixels. "That's the best I can do."

Both Tessa and Gus looked at what appeared to be a woman with a ponytail sitting in the driver's seat.

"Hard to make out," Gus said. "It could be her." He rubbed his hand over his face. "Isn't there a bank on that corner of Fifty-Eighth?"

"Yeah, First National. We'd better check that out first." Tessa made eye contact with the technician. "Good work. Sorry I was so hard on you earlier."

The man's eyes widened and he looked suspiciously at the detective. "No problem."

"You driving?" Tessa asked, as they hurried toward the door.

"I received the surveillance films from St. David's," Cho said to the retreating detectives. "What do you want me to do with them?"

Gus stopped and looked back over his shoulder and said, "Hold on to them and get to them when you can."

#

The bank manager, a large man with salt and pepper hair, showed Gus and Tessa to the room that controlled the monitors that ran the surveillance cameras for the bank, the ATM located on Fifty-Eighth Street. "Let me know if I can be of further help Detectives," the man said as he left Tessa and Gus alone.

They quickly found the footage of the previous Sunday evening and soon had it narrowed down to between ten and ten-twenty. Scrolling slowly through the film, Tessa stopped and said, "There it is." She backed the film up and tried to get the picture of the Pathfinder before it stopped at the corner. With patience, she moved the video forward frame by frame until she saw one that clearly showed the truck and driver.

"What do you think?"

Gus asked, as he leaned forward. "It could be her but there's no way we can say it's her positively."

Tessa nodded in contemplation then said, "Let's get this to Cho and see if he can do his magic to it. In the meantime, we can inform the captain and see if we have enough for a warrant for the truck at least."

#

Cho failed to improve the grainy video so they could make a positive ID on the driver of the Pathfinder-the distance was too far. Captain Flynn made the call by saying there was enough of a resemblance with two corroborating eye witness accounts. Tessa walked rapidly across the street to the building that held the district attorney's offices. When she entered the office, she immediately saw Beverly Paycheck, who glared at her.

"What do you want?" the boney woman asked.

Tessa loomed menacingly over the woman's desk. "I need to speak with the DA"

"I'll see if he's in." Beverly rolled her chair away from the detective.

Tessa wondered about the frosty reception and wondered if Anna had something to do with it. By the way Beverly was eyeing her, Tessa guessed that Anna must have had a chat with the woman. *Now that's my girl. Way to go counselor.* As she realized what she thought, it made her smile. It felt even better when she silently rolled the words over her tongue again. *My girl.*

"Mr. Meyers will see you now," the office manager said with a glare.

At the door to Herb Meyers office, Tessa did a brief knock before she twisted the doorknob and pushed it open. When he looked up, she gave him her best, almost sincere smile.

"What can I do for you, Detective?" The district attorney was medium built, thin man with graying hair and thick glasses. The most distinguishing thing about him was his voice-it was soothing and melodic. It drew the listener in and made them believe whatever it was he was saying was the truth. As a DA, he was the best.

"Need a warrant."

"What do you have?"

Tessa opened her file and said, "We have two witnesses that say they saw Dana Stratton Sunday evening. Surveillance cameras confirm that the vehicles were where the witnesses said they were. We have the name of the vehicle's owner, Joel Waterston. We also have the video from the camera at First National Bank that corroborates the other findings."

"What are you looking for?"

"Blood and trace in his two-thousand-and-six Pathfinder."

"What you have is solid?"

Tessa shrugged. "The woman who identified her went all the way through school with her and Stratton coached the other witness's daughter."

"Come back in thirty minutes and I'll have it for you."

"Thank you."

Herb followed Tessa out of his office and went to the office manager's desk with the information.

#

After leaving the district attorney's office, Tessa stopped for a moment and considered the wisdom of seeing if Anna was back from DC-it was a no-brainer. Arriving at the office, she pushed the door open and looked around.

A pleasant woman with curly brown hair said, "May I help?" and smiled at Tessa.

"Yes, I'm looking for Anna Mikaelson. Has she come back from DC?"

"Not yet. I expect her anytime. Would you like to leave a message?"

Yes." Tessa scribbled a note and handed it to the woman.

Even though she was disappointed at not seeing Anna, Tessa decided she didn't need the distraction and shoved thoughts of the woman deep inside her head, before briskly walking back to the police station."

Thirty minutes later, when she returned to the DA's office, Beverly handed her the warrant. "Mr. Meyers had to leave. He wanted me to tell you that the judge limited the scope of the warrant to the vehicle only. He told me to tell you to make sure you adhere to them."

Tessa snorted at the disagreeable woman. "I always do."

Once she had the warrant to search the Pathfinder in hand, Tessa walked rapidly down the corridor toward the elevator bank that would take her to the first floor. She felt the adrenalin rush that she could always count on when she was about to question a person of interest. At the end of the corridor near the elevators, she entered the stairwell and ran down two flights.

Tessa called Gus and said, "I've got the warrant."

Chapter Sixteen

Gus pulled his vehicle along the curb at nine-twenty-six Anderson Drive. The two detectives approached the house cautiously as they both surveyed the surrounding area. Tessa nodded at the driveway. "If the Pathfinder is here, it will be in the garage."

With a quick nod, Gus adjusted his Smith and Wesson, just in case he needed it.

Tessa followed suit and when they reached the front door, she rang the doorbell.

When the doorknob rattled and opened, both detectives were surprised to see an overweight woman with graying hair holding a baby. The woman's eyes immediately went to the detective's badges and hugged the baby tighter, which made the child wail.

"We're Detectives Barrett and Jacoby. Is this the residence of Joel Waterston?" Gus asked.

"Yes, but he's not here," the woman said, as she eyed them both. "He's at work."

Tessa said, "Does he still work at Casey Enterprises?"

"Yes. What's this all about?"

"Who are you?"

"I...I'm Marilyn Hunter. Joel is my son-in-law. If you tell me what you want, maybe I can help."

"We just needed to ask him about his Pathfinder. He does still own it, doesn't he?" Gus asked.

"Yes, was it in some sort of accident?"

Tessa eyed the woman. "Thank you for your time, Mrs. Hunter."

#

The black Crown Vic slowly circled the parking lot of Casey Enterprises until they found Joel Waterston's Pathfinder.

Tessa pointed to the vehicle. "There it is."

The squad car that was following behind them stopped too. Tessa got out and walked rapidly to the other police vehicle. "Wait here until the tow truck arrives. Make sure no one touches it."

The older police officer behind the wheel said, "Have you already called for the truck?"

Nodding, Tessa said, "It should be here in about five minutes."

Tessa and Gus entered the lobby of Casey Enterprises with their badges exposed.

The eyes of a young dark-haired woman, who sat behind a glass pedestal desk, bulged when she saw the detectives enter the area. "May I help you?"

Tessa looked at the woman. "We'd like to speak with Joel Waterston."

After seeing the squad car and the activity in the parking lot, Gregory Casey, the owner, entered the lobby. "Can we help you officers?"

Gus lifted an eyebrow and said, "We need to speak with Joel Waterston."

The older man took off his glasses and frowned. "Joel?"

Tessa said, "We need to speak with Mr. Waterston?"

"I'll get him," Gregory said.

Gus blocked the man's movement. "We'll do that. Where's his office?"

The owner pointed down a hallway. "It's the second door on the left."

With a brief knock on the door, Tessa and Gus entered the office of Joel Waterston.

The man looked up in question. "May I help you?"

"We have a warrant to search your Pathfinder, Mr. Waterston. Will you give me the keys?" Gus said, as he held the piece of paper up before depositing it on the man's desk.

Confused, the man asked, "Why?"

"We also would like you to come with us downtown for questioning."

Joel's eyes blinked rapidly. "There's no way I'm going anywhere with you or allow you to search my car."

In an ominous tone, Tessa said, "You have no choice. We have a warrant. You can cooperate and give us the keys or we can get a locksmith...no difference to us. You need go with us downtown for questioning or we can arrest you." Her green eyes bored into the man. "It's your choice."

"I will not allow you to come into my office and harass me like this." The man looked out his window and saw a tow truck dragging his Pathfinder up to the flatbed. "You can't do that," he said defiantly.

Gus pointed to the warrant on the desk. "That says we can."

Tessa eyed the man who, in her mind, wasn't acting like an innocent person. "Like I said, you can either cooperate or not, the choice is yours."

"At least tell me what this is about."

"Murder," Gus said.

The man's eyes grew wide. "You've got to be kidding."

"Are you going to come with us peacefully?" Gus asked.

"Do I have a choice?"

"You always have a choice," Gus said. "I have to tell you that, by not cooperating, you look guilty."

Joel blew out a breath. "Ok."

As Gus and Tessa walked with the suspect out into the main lobby, Gregory Casey gave them a puzzled look. "Officers," the owner said, "Whatever it is, I can assure you that you've made a mistake."

Ignoring the man's comments, Tessa and Gus left the building with Joel Waterston in tow.

"Get my lawyer on the phone," Gregory said to the receptionist who had a stunned expression on her face.

#

Tessa let out a breath as they neared the police station. All they needed to do was question the suspect. If they played their cards just right, he would confess and save everyone time and energy. She was surprised to see the throng of reporters standing on the sidewalk by the entrance.

"What the hell?" she said under her breath. "We've got to find that leak."

Gus bypassed the main entrance and went around the building to the employee parking lot. A handful of reporters milled around with cameras at the ready. "Shit, I can't believe this," Gus grumbled, as he pulled up close to the door.

Tessa got out, opened the back door, and signaled for the man to get out. Once they all exited the vehicle, the detectives rushed Waterston past the reporters and photographers. Inside the relative quiet of the police station, Tessa took a firm hold of the man's arm and led him to an interrogation room while Gus took the key to the Pathfinder to the crime lab techs.

Joel had long since stopped complaining, figuring it would be in his best interest to cooperate. He let the officers guide him to a small room. When he saw the large mirror, he suddenly became scared. *This is for real.*

"Please take a seat, Mr. Waterston," Tessa said.

"I want to know what this is all about!" Joel demanded with a bravado he didn't feel.

"You know what it's about," Gus said, as he entered the room. He opened a folder and slid the picture of Dana Stratton's dead body lying in the vacant lot. "Does *this* look familiar to you, Joel?"

Once he saw the picture, Joel pushed it away in disgust. He pointed at the picture. "NO," he said, with a tremor that was now permanently in his voice.

Gus spread out a few more pictures then tapped one. "*This* is what she looked like when her parents had to identify her in the morgue."

"I didn't do that."

Tessa looked at Joel and said, "Where were you last Sunday night?"

The man's eyes darted around the room. "I...I think I was at home."

"Is there anyone that can verify that?"

"Yes, my wife. Ask her...she'll tell you I was with her."

The detective pulled out a picture of his Pathfinder with a date and time stamp. "Is *this* your vehicle?" Gus asked.

"I don't know. It looks like it."

Next, Gus showed him a close up of the license plate. "Is *that* your plate number?"

Joel frowned. "Yes, but where did you say you got this?"

"We ask the questions, Joel, and you give us the answers," Tessa said.

#

Standing in front of a one way glass window, Captain John Flynn, and ADA, Mark Blodgett, watched the interrogation.

Blodgett was tall and muscular, with movie star good looks and was the second in command at the DA's office. He had a reputation for being tough on crime and winning most of his cases.

"We've got him dead to rights," the captain said.

Not entirely convinced, Mark shook his head. "Anything back on trace from his vehicle yet?"

"Not yet. The crime unit will let us know as soon as they find the evidence."

"Until we get definitive proof that the Stratton girl was in his vehicle, we can't be sure he's the murderer."

The captain shrugged. "We have two eyewitnesses that saw the woman in his vehicle. *Waterston is guilty.*

"I've seen too many eyewitnesses be wrong and even if she was with him, it doesn't mean he killed her. Maybe her car broke down and he was giving her a lift."

John Flynn laughed. "And he let her drive, right."

The ADA's attention returned to the interrogation room.

#

"I think I'd better speak to a lawyer before I answer anymore of your questions."

"Ok, if that's what you want," Tessa said. "You know, once you do that, we can't help you anymore."

"Asking for a lawyer, Joel, makes you look like you're guilty," Gus added.

With his eyes fixed squarely on the two detectives, Joel said, "I want a lawyer."

Tessa gathered up the photos, put them back in the folder. "Have it your way," she said.

Once the door shut, Joel Waterston looked nervously at the one way glass and knew that whoever was behind it was looking at him. He slowed his breathing and sat quietly.

#

"What do you think?" Gus asked the captain and the attorney, as he looked at the man in the other room.

"How solid is your witness?" Mark asked.

Just then, another officer entered the room. "The guy's wife is here demanding to see her husband."

"Put her in interrogation five," Tessa said. "I'll speak with her."

She looked at Gus. "You good here?"

"Yeah."

#

Entering the interrogation room, Tessa was in her *take no prisoner* mode. Tessa quickly looked at the suspect's wife as she eased into a chair opposite the woman. She dropped the case folder on the table and opened it. "Are you Joel Waterston's wife?" she asked, still sorting through the file.

"Yes. What have you done with my husband?"

Tessa continued looking through the pictures before taking one out and putting it in front of the woman. "That is what your husband did."

Sally Waterston's hand went to her mouth as she gasped. "I don't believe it. Joel would never do anything like that."

"We have an eyewitness that saw her with your husband in his white Pathfinder last Sunday evening." Tessa arranged the pictures in a neat row across the table. "Take a look at what he did."

"Never! I don't believe you!"

"What about last Sunday night, where was he?" Tessa asked.

"He was with me."

Tessa chuckled. "Ok. Where were you?"

"We were out for dinner then we went to the Jazz Café to listen to music."

Tessa looked up as the woman blew her nose. "He said he was at home with you."

Sally covered her eyes with her hand. "He was with me but not at home-I'm positive of that. We went out that night. I remember because it was the only night my mom could babysit."

"How convenient." Rubbing her hands, Tessa really looked at the woman. She guessed that Sally in her late twenties, with her dark blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail. After a long moment, her eyes snapped wide open and she frowned. Looking at the photographs still in the folder, she stopped when she found the one she wanted. She whispered, "Shit," before gathering up the photos, putting them in the folder, standing up, picking up the folder, and walking rapidly out of the room.

Sally watched as the detective left the room and the door closed shut. "What now?" The suspect's wife began to get up, only to stop. The arrogant woman detective didn't tell her she could leave, so Sally stayed in place not wanting to do anything that might jeopardize her husband.

#

Tessa slammed her hand hard against the wall. "Fuck," she growled. "I can't believe how fucked up this is. Damn!"

Looking up, she saw Gus, along with the captain and Mark Blodgett, coming toward her.

"What's going on?" John Flynn asked.

"It's fucking unbelievable," Tessa said. "Come with me."

All four of them stood in the room looking at Sally Waterston through the one-way glass. Pulling out a picture, Tessa held it up for everyone to see.

"Mrs. Waterston said she and her husband went out for dinner last Sunday."

The captain grabbed the photograph and shook his head. "Holy shit!"

"Unfucking believable," Gus added.

Just then, Tessa felt her phone vibrate. "Jacoby."

"This is Ellen Crandle from trace and we've finished with the vehicle.

"And."

"It's clean. No traces of blood. Nothing links the vehicle to the murder victim. No hair, blood, or fibers along with none of the victim's fingerprints."

Tessa said, "Thanks." She looked at the others. "They found nothing in Waterston's vehicle that links it or him to the murder."

Mark Blodgett glared at Gus, Tessa, and Captain Flynn. Angry, he said, "Now, I suppose you want me to clean this mess up."

Resigned, Tessa shook her head. "No, I'll take care of it."

#

Entering the interrogation room where the suspect's wife was waiting, Tessa looked at the woman and said, "You can go now."

"What about Joel? I won't leave until I can see him."

"If you'll give me a minute or two, he will join you."

"You mean you're letting him go?"

"Yes," Tessa in a voice laced with frustration. "Just let me go get him. You can wait in here or in the corridor. Your choice."

Joel Waterston was huddled with his attorney when Tessa entered the room.

The attorney, Gretchen Smith, scowled at her. "What kind of trumped up charge is this, Jacoby?"

Tessa pinched her lips. It had been several years, but she had dealings with the attorney both professionally and privately. The woman was petite with long black hair and rimless glasses. Tessa knew she shouldn't underestimate the woman because of her size. She had learned just how resourceful she was.

Pulling the photograph out of the folder, she laid it on the table. "We had one eyewitness that said they saw Dana Stratton in a white Pathfinder last Sunday night. We ran the plates and came up with your client. Another witness said he saw the girl in the same vehicle arguing with the man."

Joel's eyes opened wide. "I told you that I was with my wife." He looked at the picture of Dana Stratton and cocked his head. "The resemblance is amazing."

"Yes, it is. You're free to go, Mr. Waterston."

"What about my car?"

"I will have an officer deliver it to your home once we've detailed it. Your wife is waiting for you."

Gretchen snorted. "You think you can buy him off by detailing his vehicle?" The woman laughed. "You're going to have to do better than that, Jacoby. You invaded my client's place of business. You embarrassed him in front of his co-workers and his face is already all over the television and in tonight's edition of the Post-I'm sure it will be above the fold. My client is clearly innocent. How are you going to correct the damage you've done to him?"

"We did everything by the book," Tessa countered. "We had solid evidence that pointed to Mr. Waterston. We had no way of knowing that his wife bore a remarkable resemblance to the victim."

Mark Blodgett opened the door and stepped inside. "How can we settle this?" he asked. "The evidence pointed to your client and we acted judicially,"-he held up the photograph-"it is a clear case of mistaken identity. It happens."

"I want you to hold a press conference and exonerate Mr. Waterston. I want the DA's office, along with the police department, to admit their mistake."

The ADA nodded. "It will be done within the hour." He looked at Joel. "Mr. Waterston, please accept my sincere apology for what has happened to you."

Joel gazed at both the ADA and the detective. "I didn't do anything. Why couldn't you just listen to me?"

Tessa massaged her forehead with her thumb and forefinger then closed her eyes. "Look, what happened to that girl is horrendous and we are trying to find who did it. If I had to do it all over again, I'd still bring you in for questioning."

Mark hid his annoyance at the detective's pronouncement.

Joel said, "Am I free to go?"

"Yes."

#

As she closed in on her desk, Tessa saw Dana Stratton's parents looking at her with expressions that were a mix of sadness and anticipation.

"Is it true? Have you arrested the bastard who murdered our daughter?" Bob Stratton asked.

"No, we haven't."

"But the news on the radio said you were questioning someone for Dana's murder." A tear coursed down Fran's cheek.

When Tessa saw the woman's eyes look past her before her hand covered her mouth, she didn't need to turn around-Fran Stratton was looking at Sally Waterston.

Refusing to let the woman's grief draw her in, Tessa said, "It was a case of mistaken identity."

The murdered girl's parents were clinging to each other as they continued to eye Sally Waterston until she entered the elevator and the door slid closed.

Chapter Seventeen

Anna sat in her office with the door closed. When she arrived back in Reston from DC, she sequestered herself so she could finish all the miscellaneous items from the Petroff case. She had two things on her mind: one pleasurable and the other troublesome. Tessa Jacoby had dominated her thoughts ever since they met again on Monday. The woman was incredibly hot and just thinking of her made Anna's body sing with unresolved want.

It had been two years since her last, and most intense, affair with one of the law clerks at the Justice Department. She had, for the first time in her life, given her heart to someone. Everything about Devon was exciting. It was like a never ending roller coaster ride that promised, and delivered on, thrill after thrill. They had been lovers for almost three years when Anna accepted a transfer to the San Francisco office. Anna was happy-Devon was not.

"Why do you have to go?" Devon asked, when Anna told her the news. "I thought you loved me."

With her hands cupping the younger woman's face, Anna gently kissed her lips. "I do love you and I want you to come with me. San Francisco is a place where we can be together and not be afraid to hold hands. We can think about the family we talked about starting. Everything will be perfect."

Devon pulled away and folded her arms. "I won't go with you," she said angrily. "I have too much here."

Anna looked at the expression on her lover's beautiful face. "Like what?" she asked cautiously, not really wanting to know the answer.

With a derisive laugh, Devon snarled, "Come on, Anna, you're a smart woman. Surely you know I've been dating others."

"You have? When?"

"You spend a lot of hours working. It gets boring rambling around in this big house waiting for you. That's all I ever do is wait for you to come home. Then when you do, all you want is a quick fuck then you do more work." Devon glared at the lawyer. "I don't even know why you bother to come home. You never loved me-your work is your lover. There's no way I'm moving with you."

In seconds, Anna recovered from the shock of her lover's statement. She shrugged. "Ok. You better find yourself somewhere else to live, since I already have a buyer for the house." She didn't but the sooner Devon was gone the better.

"Fine, I'll get my things tomorrow."

Devon went out the door and, as it slammed behind her, Anna collapsed and cried.

That was two years ago. Anna stayed in San Francisco for a year and a half before requesting a transfer. For some people, the west coast was nirvana-for her it was like a prison sentence for her broken heart. All she ever saw there were the lost dreams she had planned with Devon. She arrived at the Restin, New York, U. S. Attorney's office, six months ago, which was only an hour from her home town. In that time, her heart had healed. When Detective Tessa Jacoby came into her life five months earlier, the attraction was instantaneous.

They met for lunch often and dated at least once a week, going out to dinner or to a show. When Tessa wanted more intimacy, Anna balked and stopped seeing her. The pull Tessa had on her heart was frightening-then she saw Tessa again. Now, she couldn't get Tessa off her mind as she craved the detective's body.

The other thing weighing on her mind was the information she received when she went to DC. The conviction of the Petroff underlings, who were less than minor players, had sent a ripple of anger from Serge Petroff, himself. Intel said that the crime organization had targeted her-the

implications were not clear but the higher ups encouraged her to keep on her toes. She turned down the offered bodyguard, saying she wouldn't spend her life hiding out because some thug objected to the results of a case she prosecuted.

As she mulled over her options, she reread Tessa's note.

Anna, I was in the building getting a search warrant and stopped by to see if you were back yet. Beverly wasn't happy to see me-can't imagine why! Well, maybe I can. If you get a chance, give me a call...T.

"It's a start," Anna said, as she gathered her briefcase to go home. "Maybe I'll stop by and see if you're still at work."

#

Anna exited the building and noticed a gaggle of reporters and news media outside the entrance to the police station. Gravitating toward the group, she stood at the fringes of the crowd before she asked a man with a camera, "What's going on?"

"They questioned a person of interest for the Stratton murder."

"Do you know who?"

"No. They let him go. Blodgett is going to make a statement."

With her thoughts turning to Tessa, Anna left the crowd and entered the police building. When she exited the elevator, she saw Tessa sitting at her desk, seemingly lost in whatever she was reading.

"Hey," the lawyer said softly.

Tessa heard Anna's sultry voice and felt her body react in pleasure. She lifted her head and looked into the blue eyes. Shaking her head, she let out a sarcastic chuckle. "Hey, yourself."

"I got your note, sorry I missed you." Anna took a tentative step closer to the detective.

"The day went downhill from there."

"Rough day, huh?"

Tessa's face was devoid of expression. "You could say it was something like that."

Anna pulled the chair next to Tessa's desk up so she was sitting where she and the detective were facing each other and almost touching. "Want to talk about it?"

Green eyes looked at the lawyer and softened. Tessa snorted and let out a sigh that came from the center of her chest. "We had two witnesses that both knew Dana Stratton tell us they saw her last Sunday night in a white Pathfinder. We located the truck right where they said it was. After we got the license plate number and brought the guy in for questioning. We solidly had him," Tessa said with a frown.

"So what went wrong?" Anna asked.

"You'd think the chances of the guy's wife being a dead ringer for the vic would be astronomical but damned if that isn't what happened."

Anna put her hand over Tessa's and rubbed it slightly. "That's unbelievable. Why did the ADA have a news conference? It was an honest mistake, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was and, presented with the same information, I'd do it again." Tessa shook her head. "The guy had Gretchen Smith for his lawyer and unfortunately she had already arrived when we realized what happened." She eyed Anna. "Do you know her?"

Shaking her head, Anna said, "I've heard the name."

"Barracuda sums her up. She'll do whatever she can do to make the DA's office and the police department look foolish."

"So, Blodgett didn't have a choice."

"No, she had him by the balls and the fact that she and I dated didn't help. She was going for the grand slam."

Anna looked at Tessa with curiosity. "You dated her?" Tessa nodded. "Was it serious?"

Tessa's mouth curved into a half smile. "She thought it was."

Anna scooted her chair even closer to the detective and whispered, "Ouch, that didn't help the cause did it?"

"Nope," Tessa said in a low voice.

"I just bet you'd be hard to get over," the lawyer said with a wink.

For a long moment, Tessa looked at the lawyer debating whether to say more. "I've never had a really *serious* relationship with any woman I've dated."

Anna warily asked, "Why?"

Tessa ran her fingers through her hair and sucked in a breath. "Guess I never wanted one."

"Never?" Anna asked, as she captured Tessa's gaze and didn't let it go.

Tessa thought of Gus and how on the crummiest of days when things in an investigation was going downhill fast, he had Helen to go home to-she wanted that. "No, I want it," Tessa said softly.

With her fingers lazily moving over Tessa's arm, Anna smiled and said, "Why don't you let me take you home and see if we can put a better spin on your day?"

Tessa closed her eyes and shook her head. "As tempting as that is, I can't, Anna."

"No expectations. Just you and me sharing a glass of wine after a long day at the office."

Anna's words reflected everything Tessa's heart yearned for but now wasn't the time for that. She had to catch a killer and satisfying primal needs, along with her sudden longing for a committed relationship, had no place in her life-not yet.

It was a long time before either woman spoke again. Anna let her eyes roam around the area, searching every nook and cranny and, when she saw no one, she leaned in and kissed Tessa. "I won't press the subject further...for now anyway. I'll only be a phone call away." She ran her hand up Tessa's arm. "You take care," she whispered, before standing up and winking at the detective as she walked away.

As her eyes looked at the closing elevator doors, Tessa regretted her decision but knew it was the right one-for now. She sat alone for another fifteen minutes before she unlocked a drawer, pulled out her Glock, and pushed it into her holster. "I need to get out of here."

#

Grabbing her gym bag out of her vehicle, Tessa walked quickly back into the police building. Instead of going up in the elevator, she went down to the gym. There were a handful of other police personnel in the area. Most were running in place on treadmills, with a few lifting weights. Once she'd changed, she spied the punching bag and claimed it. The first punch was light but soon she was hitting the leather bag with so much fury others stopped and stared as they heard the *whomp kathunk* of Tessa's gloved hands repeatedly connecting with the bag.

When her arms could no longer propel her hands forward, Tessa ended the assault on the bag and slid down the wall to the floor. After taking a long swig from her water bottle, Tessa wiped her face with a towel from her bag before she blew out a cleansing breath. Looking around, she saw that the room was now empty except for someone who was skipping rope. Her mind focused on how to proceed with the case then detoured to the woman who suddenly was occupying her mind non-stop. For the first time in a long while, she had hope-the possibility of not going home to emptiness might exist for her-Anna gave her that hope. *And I sent her away*. Getting up, Tessa didn't bother to change opting instead to go home. *I wish I hadn't*.

#

She felt like a thief leaving the scene of a crime as she circumvented the reporters, who were still milling outside the police department. Walking into the parking lot, she chirped her car open fifty feet before she got to it. She sank into the comfort of the Expedition's seat and sat there for several minutes before she started the engine.

When a day is going badly, it seems that everywhere you turn disaster waits. Tessa's drive home was no exception. Lights seemed to stay red forever and the drivers in the center of town took it upon themselves to pull out in front of her without any notice. When she reached the freeway, she thought it would be clear sailing-she was wrong. Fifty yards in front of her, a panel truck pulled into the center lane at the exact time that an old clunker did. The result was a massive traffic jam with each driver's anger rising while waiting for the accident scene to clear.

The absurdity of the jangled traffic that somehow reflected her day made her laugh. *One big fucked up mess.* But, she would get past it by refocusing on what was important-finding a murderer. Finally, she was able to guide her vehicle down an off ramp. She made a right and continued down the street until she saw a sign for the Lotus Blossom Chinese restaurant. Pulling into the parking lot and stopping, she got out and went inside. The pungent smells made her mouth water, as she let her eyes run restlessly across the take out menu before she settled on spicy noodles.

The smell of the food sitting alongside her in the car made her stomach grumble as she waited for her garage door to open. As she went inside her home, she switched on the light, and listened to the silence and realized just how much she wanted what Anna had offered her-companionship. In the deepest recesses of who she was, she knew it was far more than that. *"What an idiot I was."*

She reached for her cell phone, flipped it open, and was ready to dial before she flipped it closed. "My mood is lousy and the last thing she needs is for me to subject her to that again." Kicking off her shoes, Tessa felt her body and mind relax slightly. The day was a disaster on so many levels but the one that bothered her most was the victim's family. Her mind kept replaying the devastated look on Fran Stratton's face when she saw Sally Waterston.

After switching on the television, she wandered into the kitchen, got bottle of beer, a fork, and a spoon before sitting in her chair. While she was slurping her noodles, she heard a news commentator saying-*the police brought in a man who was a person of interest today for the murder of the All American Dana Stratton, only to issue a statement that he was not involved. Although Assistant District Attorney, Mark Blodgett refused to give the name of the suspect, Channel Nine News learned that a man, Joel Waterston, whose picture you see here, was the man police suspected. The assistant district attorney said that they had cleared the man of all suspicions. In other news...* The reporter's word solidified what she already knew was a *fucked up* day.

Finishing her noodles, she clicked the set off before dropping the remote onto the couch. She went into her bedroom and stripped for a shower. Just as she opened the bathroom door, she heard the phone ring. Standing silently, she wondered if it was Anna or work but decided it was

probably some reporter trying to get a leg up on the others. *"If it's important, they'll leave a message."*

As the warm water cascaded over her body, Tessa closed her eyes and gave her mind and body permission to relax. She knew that no amount of water would wash away the day but the water gently pounding her body soothed her. As she braced herself against the tiles, she thought of Anna and their earlier encounter. Anna was kind, gentle, soothing, and sincerely concerned about her. Most surprising to Tessa, she didn't feel vulnerable when her guard was down and she let the woman in. *I should have taken her up on her offer. Maybe if I had, she'd be scrubbing my back right now.* It would be so easy to let Anna in to her heart-the loving feelings the woman evoked in her were getting harder to resist. Her need to maintain a shield over her heart that locked in and protected all her tender emotions was slowly dissolving and she was letting it happen.

In spite of knowing that any thoughts of the lawyer had to take a backseat to the investigation, she couldn't prevent the images of Anna that frequently came to mind. She thought about Gus, wondering how he seemed to manage the stresses of the job, along with a stable and happy family life. *I wonder how he does it. Maybe I should ask him.* The thought made her shake her head and laugh. "Hell no! I'd *never* hear the end of it if I did."

Twisting off the water, she toweled off before crawling under the sheets and closing her eyes. The day was disastrous on so many levels yet, she focused on the blue eyes that looked at her not in judgment but in concern. She smiled, and then closed her eyes as sleep overtook her.

Chapter Eighteen

Tessa sat in her car outside the police station located on Justice Square and repeated a familiar mantra for her job. "Heart detached, mind focused." Emerging from her car, Tessa entered the police station with new determination. Those she passed by that spoke to her, received a grunted, "Hi." She had no time for pleasantries and suspected they were only greeting her out of curiosity. No doubt, some of them dubbed her *the detective who made the department look bad*. She knew that they had made the right call with Waterston.

#

For an hour, she went over all the information in the murder book. She also had called the university and made an appointment with Dr. Thomas Fullerton, who had extensive knowledge about alchemy. When Gus arrived, she looked at him with a grim expression.

"We aren't going to find this guy, if you keep coming to work late," she bit out.

"Hey, I'm not the enemy."

Looking at her partner, Tessa let a shadow of a smile form around her lips. "I'm sorry," she said before adding, "I didn't sleep much."

"You never do when we have this kind of case."

"The pieces don't seem to be falling into place this time, do they?"

Gus regarded his partner's words and nodded. "Not yet, but they will. They always do."

"We need to go back to the beginning," Tessa said without looking at her partner. "And, we need to find her vehicle."

"I put out a BOLO when we first got the case," Gus said, as he picked up the case folder. "I agree with you that we need to go back to the beginning. That means the vacant lot, then start knocking on the doors around it."

Tessa nodded toward the case file in Gus's hand. "Take a look at the crime scene photos and see if you notice anything unusual."

After studying all the pictures, Gus shrugged. "The only thing I notice is the lack of physical evidence. Whoever the perp is, he knew enough not to leave any trace evidence." His eyes widened. "You thinkin' it might be a cop or someone in law enforcement."

"Maybe. I think we need to rework our profile. Whoever did this has knowledge about what we look for in a crime."

"That doesn't necessarily mean the perp is in law enforcement," Gus interjected. "After all, there are all those shows on the box that feature just that. And, it takes no time to look it up on the Internet."

"That's true. We need to go to the university," Tessa said, as she pointed to the pentagram. "From what I've been able to find out, these are related to everything from Wiccans to Christianity. I've set up a meeting with one of the professors at the university who can tell us more about pentagrams."

"When?"

"I told him we'd be there at nine-thirty." Tessa picked up the phone and dialed a three digit number.

"Silverstein."

"This is Jacoby. Did you find anything else on the Stratton computer?"

"Everything that was deleted was schoolwork. I've printed all the papers she wrote, along with all the courses she took over the last two years."

"I need that information," Tessa said with impatience.

"Sure, I'll have someone bring them right down."

"No, you bring them. I might have questions."

#

Tessa looked in thoughtful contemplation as she perused each page that Silverstein brought her. The victim was as thorough in her studies as she was at sports. Noting the courses she took, nothing jumped out at her-they were what she expected from someone who was pre-med.

Gus asked him, "Any indication that she was hiding something? Like she knew how to permanently delete stuff from her computer?"

The man shook his head. "Not that I could find. If she had an erasure program for something like that, it would leave traces and I didn't find any indication that happened."

Tessa said, "Ok, thanks for your time."

Gus watched the man go. "Wonder if the vic has a computer at home that has something more than her school files."

Tessa puckered her mouth before she tented her fingers and slowly tapped the tips together. Her eyes fixed on the stack of paper from Dana Stratton's computer. Finally, she looked at her partner. "Good thought." She shook her head again. "Something is off-I just can't put a finger on what that is." She picked up the phone and dialed a number.

"Hello," a weepy voice said.

"Mrs. Stratton, this is Tessa Jacoby...from the police."

"Yes, Detective."

"Did your daughter...Dana, have a computer at home that she used?"

"No, she took it with her when she went to college. We bought her a new one two years ago."

"What happened to the old one?" Tessa asked soothingly.

"We donated it to an outreach program."

Tessa's back straightened. "Which one?" she asked with cautious optimism.

"Um, it was the Urban Project, I think."

As she jotted down the name, Tessa felt a tingle. "Did it still have Dana's information on it?"

"I don't know what you mean," Fran asked with uncertainty.

"I mean, did you erase everything on the machine before you gave it away?"

"Oh, yes, my husband's friend had a program that would erase the hard drive to meet defense department standards or something like that." The woman's voice softened. "Dana was the one who told us to do that. She said that there were too many people who could take information from a computer and use it for identity theft."

Tessa heard the woman sniffle. "Thank you for your time, Mrs. Stratton."

After hanging up the phone, Tessa said, "Another bust."

Gus said, "Nothing stacks. No one is this good...no one. Usually, the vic's life screams at us. Something always comes out that no one expected. But, with this one, there's not even a murmur."

Tessa gave her partner a quizzical look. "What does your gut tell you?"

"My gut tells me we haven't looked in the right place yet," Gus said succinctly.

Biting the inside of her cheek, Tessa contemplated Gus's remark. "We need to look for something that we thought was inconsequential." She looked directly at Gus. "It's got to be there."

"We need to find more stones to turn over," Gus said, as he stood and slid his gun into its holster. "I have one of the desk guys making appointments for this afternoon with anyone that has anything to do with the vic's basketball team. I figured, if we divide them, it won't take long."

Tessa too put her gun in its holster. "What time are you looking at?"

"I told him not to book any interviews before one."

"If the professor can give us something concrete about the pentagram, then maybe that will lead us to the thread we're looking for," Tessa said, as she rounded her desk to join her partner. "It also will give a point of reference when we interview the basketball team."

"Ready to roll?" Gus asked.

Tessa nodded, and then glanced at the newspaper on Gus's desk. She saw the headline about their case but her eyes focused on a picture of Anna with the words, *Federal Prosecutor strikes a blow to organized crime*. She closed her eyes as she reprimanded herself for not letting Anna take her home. Instead of celebrating her victory, Anna was concerned about how she felt and Tessa turned her away.

With her cool exterior in place, Tessa said in a clipped tone, "Let's go." She couldn't allow thoughts of Anna to cloud her mind.

#

Dr. Thomas Fullerton looked like the typical professor. He had snowy wisps of white hair and wore jeans with a herringbone wool jacket that had the requisite elbow patches. His ready smile accentuated his face, deeply lined by age. But nothing masked the twinkle in his clear blue eyes.

"How may I help you, Detectives?" the man said in a strong voice. "You said on the phone it had to do with that poor girl who was murdered. I don't know how I can help you. Until last Monday I didn't even know who she was."

Tessa took out the picture that depicted the pentagram on Dana Stratton's abdomen, and handed to the professor. "Can you tell me what this mean?"

Dr. Fullerton put on his glasses and studied the picture. "A pentagram crosses all instances of life around the world. As you probably know, it has five points and five is a number that encompasses many religions. Some think that five is the most important number in the entire world. Others, of course, would argue the point."

The doctor took off his wire rimmed glasses and tapped the picture with the earpiece. "Tell me what you know about pentagrams."

Tessa shared all that she'd gleaned from the Internet.

Putting his glasses back on, the doctor looked at the detectives. "What part of what you learned do you consider the most relevant?"

Anxious to move forward, Tessa said, "I guess that it is some sort of protection from evil."

With a twinkle in his eyes, Dr. Fullerton said, "Ah, so you thought that it had some nefarious meaning that would solve a mystery?" He shook his head. "As you found in your research, the pentagram has multiple connotations. Unless you know the why, you will never know the what. If there's a hidden meaning, I wouldn't know what it is, for there are too many connotations to give you a definitive answer." He gave the detectives an apologetic smile. "There's no one right answer."

Both Gus and Tessa stood up. "Thank you for your time, Dr. Fullerton. If you can think of anything else that might help us we'd appreciate a call." Gus handed the man his card and said, "Thanks again."

"Like I said, they can have multiple meanings. I'll delve deeper and see if I can shed any more light on a potential message," the doctor paused, "but know that I don't hold out much hope."

After getting in the Crown Vic, Gus asked, "Back to the scene?"

Tessa nodded, before she turned her head and looked out the window. "How do you do it, Gus?"

Gus gave his partner a sideways glance. "Do what?"

"Juggle the job and family life. Do you have to neglect one in favor of the other?"

With a slight shrug, Gus said, "Sometimes I have no choice. Fortunately, Helen understands, most of the time. It's not easy and takes commitment to pull it off...I have to work at it. Why do you ask?"

"No reason...just curious."

"Uh-huh." He knew that his partner always had a reason for every question she asked. Stopping for a light, Gus stole a glance at Tessa. Her jaw was set and her eyes focused forward-the discussion was over.

#

As Gus and Tessa walked through the tall weeds and the debris littering the lot, they noted broken glass, needles, a crack vile, used condoms, whiskey bottles, and beer cans.

"I can see why the lady across the street wants this place cleaned up," Gus said. "It's a dump. And to think that CSI cleaned most of it up a few days ago-sure can't tell it now."

Tessa shook her head as she kicked a can out of her way. She surveyed the area where they found the body and saw a multitude of shoeprints. It was the light rain of two days before that allowed her to see just how many people visited the scene.

A makeshift memorial at the tree nearest the chalk outline of the body had candles, stuffed animals, messages, and other paraphernalia left to immortalize the basketball player. Tessa bent down, picked up one of the notes, and read it. *Dana, you were my hero.* Closing her eyes briefly, she refolded the paper and put it back.

"I think we need to get someone out here and look at all the messages," Tessa said.

Gus shrugged. "Good idea." He flipped open his tattered notepad and made a notation.

Tessa shook her head. "I doubt whoever did it would take that chance but you never know-he may just be cocky enough to do something like that." She glanced at the street and watched as a patrol car silently went by. "Even though a cruiser comes by every half hour, it would still give someone time to not be noticed."

"I'll get someone on it as soon as we get back."

Moving closer to where the body was and crouching down, Tessa looked at the partially obliterated white line that had encircled the dead body. "The professor reaffirmed what I found on the Internet... some believe it is part of satanic worship. I can't wrap my head around that. With everything that the vic endured, the murder was clearly personal. Whoever killed her knew

her. I'm sure of that. Supposedly, the inverted pentagram is an attempt to reduce the significance of the individual. If we go by that theory, then we're looking for someone who was jealous of the girl's accomplishments or wanted to dominate her."

"You think sexual domination?" Gus asked.

Tessa looked up. "I don't get that feeling. I don't think this was about sex." She stood up and pointed to the fading outline. "We need to figure out how this happened."

Gus walked the perimeter of the outline several times before he spoke again. "It seems to me that, by the depth of the cuts on her body, whoever killed her felt a sense of rage. And, if our thinking is that she knew her assailant,"-he gave his partner a thoughtful look- "I don't think we can rule out any of the members of the basketball team. The coach indicated that everyone liked the girl but, as you said earlier, no one is that good. Someone didn't like her." He gestured at the outline. "We know the how, but not the why."

Tessa let her eyes take in the surroundings, which were typical of a rundown older area. "This isn't the sort of place that someone with a dead body in their trunk just happens upon. The murderer knows the area."

"I agree."

"We should run all the team players and other staff to see if any of them live around here." Tessa's eyebrows knitted. "I think we should also check the opposing players."

Gus jotted another note. "Maybe a disgruntled fan."

Tessa thought about the comment. "This was too personal to be something like that, Gus."

"Not if he's a stalker."

"Possibly. Whoever the murderer is, he wanted her to suffer, but not physically. Even if he didn't know the correct usage, the use of the paralyzing drug tells us that. He wanted her to watch her own death and be unable to stop it."

Gus stood beside his partner as they both surveyed the surrounding houses. "Someone saw and someone knows. It's time we canvas the area again and find some answers."

#

After failing to have any response to their knocks on a half dozen houses, the two detectives finally found a door that someone answered. An elderly man with white hair and eyebrows looked at them and said, "I don't know nothin'."

"How do you know that?" Gus asked. "We haven't asked you anything yet."

"I saw you snooping around where that girl got killed. I didn't see nothin' and don't know nothin'."

"Did you know Dana Stratton?" Tessa asked.

"I said I don't know nothin'," the man said belligerently.

Tessa stared at the interior of the home for a long moment before she let her eyes rest directly on the man. "What's your name?"

"Henry White."

"Tell me, Henry, what did you think about a murder right down the street from you?"

"Not the first time it happened and it won't be the last," he said, as he began to close the door.

Tessa's eyebrows knitted. "Someone was murdered there before?"

"No."

"You said it happened before. Was someone killed around here recently?"

"About twenty years ago."

"Do you know who it was?"

"Like I said, I don't know nothin'. Now, go away and stop harassing me."

Gus pulled out a card. Between the doorjamb and the door, he shoved it at the man. "If you think of anything, Mr. White, give me a call."

Back out on the sidewalk, Gus made a notation about the earlier murder. Tessa let her eyes rest on the only house where they had gotten any information.

"Think the Bertram woman remembers anything more?"

Shaking his head, Gus said, "There's no one else around here that will give us any information. They don't want to know and, if they do, they aren't going to tell us. I think, if we want to know more, we'll have to bring them in for questioning."

A cold wind blew and Tessa shivered. "Someone here knows what happened. I can feel it."

"Maybe so," Gus said with a shrug. "Maybe when we interview the basketball team this afternoon, we'll get some answers. It wouldn't be a bad idea to get another detective to go to all her classes and ask questions."

Tessa nodded. She looked at Mary Bertram's home and saw the front room curtain move. Her mind focused on the interview they had with the woman. With her grandson finding the body, the woman was clearly distressed. Her being upset didn't change when she brought her grandson in for questioning. *Was she upset about that or something else?* "Let's visit Mrs. Bertram again." Tessa shivered again and didn't know if it was the wind or a forgotten memory that made her shudder.

The woman who answered the door was clearly not expecting company. She had on a heavy robe and pink fuzzy slippers were on her feet.

"I've told you all I know," she said before she yawned.

"Sorry to bother you again, Mrs. Bertram," Gus said.

"You accused the wrong man, so you thought you'd come back here to harass me and my neighbors."

Tessa ignored the comment. "It was your grandson who found the body, you called us. It's logical that we would visit with you again. We can do it here or downtown it's your choice."

"You coulda asked me yesterday when I brought Joey in for that shrink to mess with his mind." Mary clutched the neck of her robe and motioned for the two detectives to enter. "I don't know what you think I can tell you that I didn't already say," she said as she shuffled her slippers along the wood floor. "I've been sick."

Unmoved by the woman's predicament, Tessa said, "Are you certain you didn't see anything that night?"

"I told you I didn't."

"Being sick, does that mean you've been in bed this morning?" Tessa asked.

"Yes," Mary said in irritation. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Didn't you say the other day that you sleep with your window closed so you don't hear the noise across the street?" Tessa said.

"Yes."

"I noticed the window is open. Why is that?" Gus interjected.

"I thought the fresh air would help."

Tessa gave the woman a sideways glance. "Maybe the night the body was dumped across the street it was open for fresh air too."

Mary's eyes narrowed. "I told you it wasn't open. It's real quiet out there, now that the police come by all the time. Maybe this will get that lot cleaned up."

"Have you remembered anything else about that night?" Gus asked in a soothing voice. "I know you've been sick and that our being here is a big imposition, but we really need your help."

Shaking her head, Mary ignored Tessa and concentrated on the detective's partner. "After I saw the television show about the girl, I've wracked my brain, trying to think if there was anything else I could remember. I've told you all I know."

Gus smiled at the woman. "Thank you for trying, Mrs. Bertram. I hope you get to feeling better."

Back in Gus's vehicle, Tessa growled. "*I hope you feel better.* What kind of sappy thing is that to say and why do I always have to be the bad cop?"

Gus laughed. "You know you love it."

Tessa grinned and held up her thumb and forefinger fractionally apart. "Maybe just a little. Let's get an early lunch," Tessa said. "It's my turn to pay, so you pick where we go."

Chuckling, Gus said, "Now, why couldn't you be that nice to Mrs. Bertram?"

Tessa stared at her partner. "Because I think she knows more than she's saying. Did you smell the whiskey on her breath?"

"Was it whiskey or one of those cold medicines? Besides, just because she drinks, it doesn't mean she knows anything about what happened."

"Smelled like whiskey to me."

Gus looked around. *I think, if I lived here, I'd be a drinker too.*

[Continued in part 3 of 4](#)

If you like or dislike my story please let me know at erinoreilly@msn.com

[Erin O'Reilly's Scrolls](#)
[Index Page](#)

~ Fractured ~
by Erin O'Reilly
Author's Note

This story has murder, mystery, and romance. The romance includes intimate moments between consenting adult women. If you are under 18 please find something else to read. The events portrayed in this story are fictional and any resemblance to actual events and/or people is purely coincidental.

Chapter Nineteen

Entering Ramon's Pizzeria, the pungent smell of pizza, pepperoni, peppers, onions, and deli meats assaulted the detective's noses. As they stood at the glass counter and looked over the variety of slices, the man behind the counter said, "How ya doin today, Detectives?"

Gus smiled and nodded. "Good. I'll have a slice of the meat lovers and iced tea."

"And you?" the man asked, looking at Tessa.

"Plain, with a glass of water."

The two detectives took their slices and drinks to a table. They were glad for the time away from the case. A newspaper left on the table caught Tessa's attention and she picked it up. On the front page, beneath the fold, was a story about Dana Stratton. Her eyes quickly scanned the article about how her loss affected her family and the team.

"Read this," Tessa said, as she shoved the paper in her partner's direction.

Gus picked up the paper and shoved it back in her direction. "I declare this a case-free zone. Besides, you know as well as I do how reporters always make things sound different from what actually is."

With a knowing smile, Tessa nodded. "Yeah, how many times have we both said, *I didn't say that.*" She took the paper and began reading the article about the trial, which Anna litigated.

Although the indictment of three members of the Petroff family dealt a significant blow, the Federal Attorney in charge of the case doubts there will be a lasting impact. The prosecutor, Anna Mikaelson said, "Unfortunately, the Petroff organization replaced those convicted as soon as they were arrested. The fight to rid our country of criminal factions is ongoing. While an arrest and a conviction are positive steps, we can never rest-the criminals don't.

"What's so interesting?" Gus asked.

Tessa lifted her head. "You said this was a case-free zone, so I was reading about the Petroff conviction."

"Your girlfriend's case right?"

"She's not my girlfriend, so give it a rest."

Gus smirked at Tessa's words. "Yeah, and I'm not married, with kids." A glare greeted him.

"Hey, I'm happy for you. It's about time you had something in your life besides work."

Tessa snorted. "What part of *give it a rest* don't you understand?"

Gus laughed. "Hey, I saw the way you two looked at each other yesterday. Remember...you wouldn't let me tag along?"

Tessa wadded up her napkin and chucked it at him. "Didn't want the competition."

"The way she was looking at you, I didn't stand a chance." Gus fixed Tessa with a serious gaze. "I heard this morning that the mob isn't too happy with the results of that trial. Someone even speculated that there might be a hit out on her."

Lifting her eyes and focusing them squarely on Gus in a neutral gaze, Tessa said, "Doesn't that sort of thing go along with the job?" She wouldn't let her partner know that her gut was twisting into a knot.

"Yeah, I suppose it does. My buddy in the organized crime unit said they might want to send a message to law enforcement by killing her."

Tessa's look was level and flat as she kept her external mantle in place. "Now, why doesn't that surprise me?" she said. Inside, she was shaking.

"Just like us, it's part of the job," Gus said.

Tessa took a swallow of her water, shook her head, and remained silent, as she tried to keep the bile from reaching her throat.

"Did she mention anything about that when you two had coffee yesterday?"

Quickly looking away from her partner and at her pizza slice, Tessa said, "She never mentioned anything about it."

"Maybe she doesn't know," he said, with his eyebrows raised. He could tell by the fractional jerk Tessa made when he mentioned a possible hit, that his information upset her. It had been a while since his partner had someone in her life. In fact, he'd bet his next paycheck that the only time someone special enough had entered Tessa's life, was the lawyer. When Mikaelson turned up yesterday, he could tell that the chemistry between them was unmistakable.

Tessa gave her partner a quizzical look. "Why the interest?"

Gus shrugged, and then smiled. "I just was having a conversation with you, that's all."

She said, "Sounds like a fishing expedition to me."

Holding up his hands with his palms toward Tessa, he said, "Hey, I need to tell Helen something."

Regarding Gus's comment, Tessa wondered what he saw that brought him to the conclusion that there was a thing between her and Anna. "And what is it that you've told Helen?"

"I told her that, for the first time in all the years we've worked together, I've never seen you react to someone like you did yesterday with the lawyer." He eyed Tessa. "I said it looked to me like you'd finally found the right one," he said, bracing himself for her wrath-it didn't happen.

He's right. "We'd better be getting back."

While Gus drove, Tessa looked out the window and wrestled with the thought of Anna being in possible danger. Surely, she had received threats from disgruntled defendants on more than one occasion. *Like Gus said, it goes with the job.* She looked at her watch. *I'll call her before we start the interviews.*

#

"Do you have a copy of the roster from the basketball coach?" Tessa asked, as she sat down at her desk. She looked over the schedule of the interviews that were set up for that afternoon. "Did you get the schedule?"

"Yeah." Gus moved several papers around on his desk then held up the roster. "Here it is," he said as he passed it across to her.

Tessa looked the page over. "Looks like they were able to schedule everyone."

"It's going to be a long afternoon," Gus said.

"We can get a feeling for them and then, if anyone is suspicious, we can see how they react at the funeral tomorrow."

Flipping through her rolodex, Tessa found Anna's work number. She listened to the ringing, and then had to catch her breath when she heard, "Anna Mikaelson."

Tessa stammered. "Hey."

Anna felt the stress of her day fade away and she smiled. "Hey, yourself. How are you doing today?"

Feeling her shoulders relax, Tessa let out the breath she was holding. "Better than when you last saw me."

"Good to hear."

"I never asked you how your meeting in DC went."

"Why don't I tell you about it tonight at dinner?"

"Is that an invitation?"

Anna smiled. "Sort of but I'd rather call it a date."

"I like the sound of that. Anna?"

"Yes."

"Gus told me that the Petroff organization might want to make an example of you. Do you know about it?" *I'm worried about you.*

Anna sighed. "Yes, I know all about it. I don't want to talk about that now." *I don't want you to worry.*

"I'll bring it up at dinner."

"I know you will," Anna said with a slight laugh.

Gus tapped her desk. "They're here."

Tessa nodded, before returning her attention to the phone and Anna. "Hey, I've gotta go. Want me to pick you up?"

"Sure."

"What time?"

"Why don't you call me later, when you're free, and we can figure all that out then."

"Sounds good to me. Bye."

"Bye."

#

Five-four was on the small side for a basketball player especially at the division one level but, according to newspaper articles, *Carson and Stratton are the one, two punch that leads their team to a division title.* Tessa sat across from the basketball guard and marveled at how well developed her muscles were. Her body built for power.

"Ms. Carson, thank you for coming in today," Tessa said with a slight smile. "May I call you Tina?"

The girl nodded.

"Do you object to my taping what we say?"

"No, it's cool. I still can't believe what happened to Dana. It's so unreal."

"Were you friends?"

"We're something much more-we are teammates. I watch her back she watches mine."

"Did you ever see or know if anyone paid her unwanted attention?"

Tina's eyes welled with tears. "Everyone wanted to know her. Everywhere she went, people recognized her and that made her uncomfortable."

"In what way?"

With a slight chuckle as she wiped her nose, Tina said, "She was always amazed when someone would come up to her and ask for her autograph or to have a picture taken with her."

"How did she handle that?"

"It embarrassed her. When the team would stop for dinner after an away game, she always wanted to stay in the bus." The girl shrugged. "I think she was self conscious. She wasn't comfortable in her own skin." The girl looked at Tessa. "You know what I mean?"

"Not really," the detective said.

"She once told me that, for years she hoped that when she went somewhere people would recognize her, until it happened, then she hated it. She didn't like the attention and shied away from public places."

"Did she ever say anything about someone having a crush on her or sending her threatening e-mails?"

The girl shook her head and scrunched her lips toward the side of her face. "Don't know of any crush or e-mails. We all participated in a blog that the coach set up." She shrugged. "It was for fans to chat with the players."

"Do you know if she participated on that?"

Tina's eyes closed as she thought. "Maybe once or twice. We used the coach's computer. I saw Dana on it once and I could tell she wasn't happy-it wasn't her kind of thing. She was more into her studies and practicing."

"Do you know if anyone paid her particular attention?"

"You mean like stalking her?"

"Yes."

"No. Coach keeps an eye out for us. There's a group of fans that follow the team around but I can't see any of them as stalkers, much less murderers."

"Do they have names?"

The basketball player frowned. "You don't seriously think one of our fans killed Dana?" When Tina saw the questioning look on the detective's face, she said, "No, none of them would hurt a flea. I think their median age is sixty-five and most of them use canes."

"Just because they are old doesn't mean they can't kill." Tessa sorted through her folder of game photos, and then spread them across the table. "Are any of them in these pictures?"

Tina looked through the pictures and picked one up. "Here, these four come to all our games. Away and home."

Tessa took the picture, looked at the men, shook her head, and sighed.

"I told you none of them would hurt Dana."

"Do you know if she had a special someone?"

"Like a boyfriend?"

"Yes."

"Not that I know of. She was pretty straight-laced in that area." Tina thought for a minute, and then added, "From what I could tell, her social life was nonexistent."

"Thank you for your time, Tina." Tessa stood up and held out her card. "If you think of anything else, give me a call...ok?"

"Sure," the girl said, before she left the interrogation room.

#

Later in the afternoon, Gus waited outside of the room where his partner was interviewing the scorekeeper. When they came out, he motioned for Tessa to join him.

"What do you have?"

"I'm getting ready to interview the trainer, Rod Gambado. Come to find out, he had an arrest for rape seven years ago."

Tessa focused only on her partner. "And we know this how?"

"I had Mike run a background check on all the players and staff to see where they live and if they had any priors and up comes this guy's arrest."

"Did it stick?" Tessa asked cautiously.

"No, the girl dropped the charges." He handed Tessa a paper. "Here's the report."

"Is he in there now?"

"Yep." Gus grinned. "Shall we?"

#

Rod Gambado was a well built man with olive skin and jet black hair. Just looking at him, Tessa could see that he took great care in his appearance.

"Mr. Gambado," Gus began. "You're the head trainer for the woman's basketball team?"

"Yeah, I am," he said confidently.

Gus nodded. "Then I take it you had contact with Dana Stratton on many occasions."

The man shrugged. "Not really. She had remarkable endurance and played injury free for the last three years."

Tessa looked at the trainer thoughtfully. "You weren't her trainer for all four years?"

The man smiled at Tessa and it made her skin crawl.

"I was the trainer for the wrestling team during her first year."

Tessa pressed her lips together and looked at the man. "Are you saying that you never had any contact with Dana?"

"For the most part, that's true," the trainer said. "One time she was vomiting on the way to a game. I gave her intravenous fluids before and after the game."

"Why didn't you make her sit out instead?" Gus asked.

"Someone like Dana wouldn't sit out a game because of illness," the trainer pointed out.

"She had a true athlete's mentality then," Tessa said.

"She was one in a million."

Gus eyed the trainer. "Intravenous fluids. Does that mean you have medical knowledge?"

"I have a degree in physical therapy. I'm working toward a sports medicine degree."

The two detectives eyed one another.

"You lose your money clip, Rod?" Gus asked.

The trainer frowned. "No, I don't own one."

Tessa tapped on a piece of paper. "Your name is Rodney S. Gambado. Is that correct?"

"Yeah, what's the big deal?"

"You use your middle name, Rod?"

"No, why would I?"

"Did you ask Dana out and she turned you down?" Tessa asked, as she eyed the man with suspicion.

"No. I'm married. Besides, it would be unethical to date a player."

Gus smiled at the man. "Says here that you were charged with rape seven years ago, Rod."

"That was all a misunderstanding. The charges were dropped."

Tessa rubbed an eye with one finger then said, "Says here, the girl dropped the charges after receiving death threats. Know anything about that, Rod?"

"No, I don't. What does that have to do with Dana?"

"Where were you Sunday night?" Gus asked.

"My wife and I were coming home from a vacation in the Bahamas."

Gus shook his head. "Can you verify that?"

"Yeah, our plane got in at nine-thirty Sunday night."

"You go straight home, Rod?" Tessa asked.

"Yes."

Gus smiled at the man. "What time did you get home?"

"I don't know, somewhere around ten-thirty I guess."

"You go anywhere once you got home?" Tessa asked.

"No."

Tessa continued the questioning. "Any witnesses?"

"Yes, my wife."

"Do you have a number where I can reach her now?" Gus asked.

"Yes."

Tessa shoved a pad of paper and a pen across the table. "Write it down."

The two detectives took the number and left the room.

Five minutes later, Gus returned to the room. "You can go, Mr. Gambado."

"I told you I was with my wife," the man said, as he stood up.

"Don't leave town," Gus warned, as he waited for the man to leave.

Chapter Twenty

By five o'clock, Gus and Tessa had interviewed most of the members of the women's basketball team, the head trainer, and the two assistant coaches.

Gus wearily plopped down into his desk chair. "Sure thought we had something with that trainer."

"Let's not rule him out completely," Tessa offered. "Who knows what we might turn up about him?"

Gus searched his partner's face. "The timeline doesn't match."

"I know. We'll just leave him on the back burner for now." Tessa eyed Gus. "One thing I am sure about is that the vic should be elevated to sainthood." Tessa bit her lip. "I'm sure everyone I talked to was all holding back something. It was as if someone coached them about what to say and not say."

Gus raised his eyebrow at the irony. "Like the coach," he said with a small chuckle. "Speak no ill of the dead." He shrugged. "If they tell us some of the locker room gossip then it might reflect badly on the vic but, more importantly, on the team or the school."

"Yeah, I guess. I don't think any of the girls I interviewed knew anything about the murder. What about your group?"

"Except for the trainer, they were like yours, rehearsed. I didn't get the feeling they were holding back about who the murderer might be—they were protecting a teammate, that's all."

"I had Silverstein check to see if the vic had a My Space or Facebook account. He didn't find any but did find one blog site that someone just put up called The Dana Stratton Memorial. He found that many of the bloggers wrote about the vic and said she was a prima donna, who wore her celebrity status like a glove. That's probably what her teammates didn't want to say."

Tessa tapped a pen on her desk. "Everyone I interviewed said she didn't like the limelight, so why would there be comments like that?"

"Good question. Maybe it's like I said, don't speak ill of the dead...especially if she's your teammate."

Tessa massaged her forehead with her thumb and forefinger then rubbed her eyes. "We've hit another dead end. That trainer was our best lead of the day and that's not even close to being solid."

"Hey, we're only four days into the investigation." Gus laughed. "People think we're like the TV cops and can solve cases in a matter of days or even in an hour." He eyed his partner. "We'll see who turns up at the funeral tomorrow. Or...who doesn't."

Tessa raised her chin a notch and gave her partner a serious gaze. "You know that it's gonna to be a media circus."

"Yep." Gus smiled and nodded toward a man coming in their direction.

Tessa looked up and asked, "What' brings you here?"

"You two had a lot of interviews today," Their Captain, John Flynn, said. "Find anything interesting?"

Tessa shook her head. "Nothing much panned out. The trainer had an arrest for rape seven years ago, but the witness refused to testify, so they had no choice but to dismiss the charges. His wife

gave him an alibi for last Sunday. Other than that, we don't have much to go on. Whoever the murderer is, he didn't leave anything behind." She cocked her head. "Except for a money clip that has the vic's father's initials."

"Do you think the father is involved?"

"No, he and his wife were at the hospital. Everyone there vouches for him."

"Do you have a profile?"

Tessa shook her head. "The murder was personal, so the perp is probably someone she knew. He used a super sharp instrument to cut the vic and had means to obtain the drug he used to paralyze her. Other than that, we've got nada."

"I've asked Roger Rudisill if he could give us a hand with the profile."

With a raised eyebrow, Tessa said, "We really don't need his help. Besides, isn't he working on the Benter case?"

"I think you should take whatever help you can get," the captain said.

"We're only four days into the murder," Tessa said.

"It won't hurt to bounce your profile off him and see if he agrees or maybe he can add something."

Tessa folded her arms.

"He said he could give us a half hour. He should be here in about fifteen minutes."

Gus said, "I need to make a quick call to the wife."

The captain looked at Tessa. "Listen to the man and don't discount him. He's very good at what he does and he's doing this as a personal favor, so play nice."

Gus rejoined them and said, "Don't worry boss, we won't embarrass you. We welcome all the help we can get."

Tessa glared at her partner as the captain walked away.

"What?" Gus said.

When her phone rang, Tessa picked up and heard Anna's *hello*.

Turning her back on her partner, Tessa quietly said, "Hey, I was just getting ready to call you."

"Guess we were thinking of each other at the same time. How does seven at Las Cures Grill sound to you?"

"I'm sorry, Anna, I'm going to have to pass. Something has come up and I'm not going to be able to get away."

Anna didn't hide her disappointment. "Oh, I was so looking forward to tonight."

"Me, too," Tessa said. *What's wrong with me? Why don't I meet her? Because I can't give her all of me, right now.* "Can I get a rain check?"

"Yes," Anna said, before adding, "Will you call me later?"

"I will. Listen, I have to go. Someone is here to speak with us."

"Ok, bye."

When she hung up her phone, she saw Gus grinning. "Was that the lawyer?"

"Give it a rest."

#

Although Tessa had heard about Roger Rudisill's prowess in profiling, she had never met the man. When the captain introduced him, she was surprised, for he was not what she expected. He had a medium build, was in his fifties, with round wire rimmed glasses, a balding head, and a bushy, steel gray beard.

His handshake was strong and Tessa could feel his eyes scrutinizing her. Being good, Tessa said, "It's good to finally put a face with the name," as she shook the man's hand.

Gus smiled. "Hey, Roger, how's your bowling?"

The profiler laughed. "I think my team was glad when I quit."

Once their laughter subsided, Roger became serious. "I've been following your case. Tell me what your assessment is."

"There's not much to tell since the case is still in its infancy," Tessa said. She spread the photographs of the scene, along with those from the autopsy and the autopsy report, across her desk. "I'd rather hear what you have to say before I tell you what we're thinking."

"Fair enough." Roger nodded, and began to sort through the photos. He picked up each one and studied it before he moved on to the next. "This person was very methodical. It doesn't look like the cuts were hurried and the person had a steady hand." He held a picture close to his eyes. "I can only discern what appears to be one small hesitation point. That's probably the first cut

made. The pentagram is a curious choice. It's almost as if it's a ruse to throw you off track. At the same time, I don't think you can rule it out."

Tapping his finger on the medical examiners report, he said, "The use of the paralyzing drug is puzzling because it indicates that the killer didn't want the victim to feel pain, but whoever it was didn't understand the limitations. That leads me to believe that on some level the victim knew her assailant and that the perp cared about her." He pursed his lips as he stared at one of the photos then rubbed his bushy chin. "All those cuts were done in a deliberate manner. That tells me that, whoever did this to her, wasn't in a hurry or in a rage."

"But they are deep," Gus countered. "Wouldn't that be seen as rage?"

Roger answered, "Not in the classical sense. If they were hastily made and varied in depth, I'd consider rage, but this is too neat and too clean to be considered anything other than a deliberate action."

Tessa added, "The perps out there are getting as clever as we are with technology."

"You're right about that, Detective." Roger looked at the coroner's report. "The coroner indicated that a rape was evident given the substantial tearing around the vagina and rectum with no evidence of semen."

In a low voice, Gus said, "They use all kinds of foreign objects these days. Whatever he used the son-of-a-bitch raped her."

Tessa's face contoured into a grim expression. "It took a truly sick mind to do what he did to her."

The hand of the profiler rested on Tessa's shoulders and she shook it away immediately. "I agree it is a sick mind. To understand who it is and why they murdered, we have to get inside their head," Rudisill said.

Gus joined the conversation. "Something about this case doesn't feel right. The victim is too perfect and the murder is too clean."

The profiler swept his hand over Tessa's desk. "Is this all you have?"

"No, we thought we had a suspect. What do you think the odds are that the person our witnesses saw was a dead ringer for the vic?"

Roger nodded. "That is rather odd."

Gus let out a small laugh before he shook his head. "It was too easy, Roger. It was like the whole case was handed to us on a platter."

"What items did you find at the scene, Detective Jacoby?"

"Nothing. We don't even have the true crime scene. There wasn't any blood. The kid who found her said he took a money clip from the scene and we later found out he touched the body." Tessa pulled the item out of an evidence bag and handed it to the man.

Roger peered at the clip through the clear plastic and pursed his lips. "I take it no one in the victim's family or her friends can be connected to this item?"

"Nope. The only possible link is that the vic's father has the same initials." Tessa paused. "We did interview someone today that has the same initials, if you look only at his first and middle name-had a rape arrest. But his wife gave him an alibi, though we don't take it as solid."

Gus interjected, "We checked all her friends, family members and all her teammates."

"You're sure it wasn't the father's money clip?"

"He's clean. No one we interviewed ever saw him with it," Gus said.

The profiler looked at the detectives. "Did any of the other people, who you might identify as a suspect, have those initials?"

Tessa flexed her jaw. "The one with those specific initials is the father and, maybe, the trainer."

"As Gus said, there's something distinctly out of step in this case. I think you might want to broaden your profile and not limit it to those initials on the money clip-they may not be relevant. The person you are looking for is clever and is disguised in such a way that you probably won't see him for what he is."

Tessa held up her hand. "Wait a minute. Are you saying that we can't develop an accurate profile because the perp disguises himself so well that we won't recognize him? That sounds ridiculous, coming from someone who is so highly regarded as a profiler."

Rudisill fixed Tessa with a sharp look. "I can tell you that the perpetrator is probably male in his late twenties, early thirties, and a loner, who probably works at a job that often overlooks his potential. I don't think that will get you any closer to who it is. Assumptions can be dangerous, Detective. With your lengthy experience in homicide, I am confident that you know that what school taught you isn't always the same out in the field. Sometimes, you have to look outside the box to make a break in a case. What you see isn't always accurate." With a slow upturn of his lips, the profiler smiled before picking up his copy of the case file. "I'll give this some more thought, Detectives. If you find out anything new, please call me."

With a curious gaze, Tessa's eyes focused on the profiler. "Your gut feeling is?"

Roger thought for a moment, and then said, "I can tell you what it's not...this isn't a serial killing."

Gus said, "We'd already figured that one out. The funeral is tomorrow. It stands to reason that, if the perp knew the vic, he'll be there."

The profiler raised his eyebrows. "Let me know if I can help you further. Good night."

With eyes narrowed to slits, Tessa watched as the man left. "What a colossal waste of time. He told us nothing that we didn't already know." She gathered up all the photos and papers pertaining to the case and put them back in the murder folder.

"Not a total waste of time," Gus said slowly. "He confirmed that our initial profile was on the mark."

"Yeah, aren't we good detectives," Tessa said sarcastically, as she looked through the folder again.

Gus stood up. "I'm heading out. I promised Helen I'd be home at a reasonable hour. You should do the same. Why not ask your lawyer friend out for supper. It might get you to relax for a few hours."

Tessa looked at Gus and snickered. "Will *you* just give it a *rest*? There's nothing going on...no romance...nothing. Now hurry along home to the little woman," she said, before chuckling.

As he walked away, Gus said, "See you in the morning."

"Oh, and," Tessa said to his retreating back, "let Helen know I'm doing ok." She could hear her partner laugh as he lifted his hand, gave it a shake, and continued to the elevator.

Chapter Twenty-One

"Where the hell is it?" Tessa growled, as she sorted through all the papers in murder book. Getting up, she went to Gus's desk to see if it was there.

The newspaper she had noticed in the morning was still on his desk. She stopped and gazed at Anna's picture. She remembered Gus telling her that some nameless person in the crime unit speculated that the mob might seek revenge on the lawyer. Calling Anna and asking her about the Petroff threat again would probably result in the same casual brush off she had previously but it was worth another try. Grabbing the phone, she dialed Anna's number and listened to it ring before she heard the lawyer's voice.

"Hi, this is Anna, you know what to do."

When she heard the beep, Tessa said, "Hey, Anna, its Tessa. Listen, I'm sorry about dinner and that I didn't call you earlier but one thing lead to another along with the stack of papers on my desk keeps growing. I really want to talk to you about the Petroff family threat. Call me."

Replacing the receiver, Tessa sighed. She was disappointed when the call went to voicemail. She blinked several times with the realization that thinking of Anna made her feel warm in ways that weren't sexual. *When did that happen?* She shook her head and looked at the paper on her desk-for now, she needed to focus all her energies on the Stratton case.

#

When Tessa next looked at her wristwatch, she noted it was close to midnight. She had found a reference in one of the papers Dana Stratton wrote regarding alternative medicine. In the report, she wrote about the use of herbs and other natural remedies. To the casual reader that meant nothing. When Tessa read the footnote, she felt a tingle go up her spine-she'd seen it before. The footnote referenced a book-*Herbs, Spells and Potions*, written by R. J. Santana. She noted the same reference twelve more times.

"This can't be a coincidence. Can it?"

With rapid taps on the keyboard, Tessa typed *Herbs, Spells, and Potions*. She found that the book's author had a large following, most of who identified with the occult. Reading further, she discovered that occultism is the study of hidden wisdom or truth, which loosely related to what Professor Fullerton had told them earlier.

She was surprised to read that many consider occultism a religion. The belief of the religion is that every human being is a divine soul. Inside each body that resides in the material world is a trapped, imperfect God. The religion believes that each person creates the God and it is up to him or her to free the celestial being's soul.

Tessa ran the name R. J. Santana through the police database and found that he had several arrests-all dismissed. Running her eyes over the man's arrest sheet, she stopped when she saw the police picked him up twice for operating a business without a license-his business- Magical Knowledge and Occult Wisdom.

Once she typed the man's name and did a search for him, she found that he owned a witchcraft supply store in Restin. When she saw the business's address was six blocks from where the boys had discovered the body, she felt the beginnings of the tingle that told her she was on the right track-coincidences were adding up.

Taking the money clip out of the evidence bag, then out of a plastic bag, Tessa looked at it again with new eyes. The initials certainly could be those of Santana. She thought about the trainer, who had an alibi, albeit a shaky one, and felt that they should keep him on the list as a person of interest for he did have an arrest for rape. "I wonder what Santana's story is?"

She played with the money clip as she tried to formulate a scenario that included Santana. Her eyes looked at the object where the crime lab indicated there was a stamp presumably of the manufacturer. She could almost make out some sort of drawing and took a magnifying glass out of her desk. She held the round glass as close as she could to the image before pulling it back-the other side of the clip, butting against the stamp, obscured a part of it. Prying the two pieces apart,

she wedged a coin between the parts, and looked at it again with the magnifying glass. It was then she was able to discern what it was.

"A goat?" She looked at the crime lab's findings and they had referred to the image as a Sabbatic Goat. *"I've seen this somewhere."* Going back through the history on the Internet Explorer browser, she came to the page she was looking for. The same goat-like figure stared at her. It was a Baphomet or the Sabbatic Goat, which dated back to the crusades. There was a reference to the Knights Templar, who supposedly worshiped the idol. As Tessa read more about the goat, she rubbed her eyes. She looked at the image on the money clip and then to the one on the screen. Had she found the link she was searching for or was it another dead end? Her gut told her *this is it.*

Tessa considered the wisdom of waking a judge and getting a warrant. She could assemble a team and have a midnight raid that would surprise the man. "God, I must be losing it-I don't do knee-jerk reactions. First, I'll make damn sure he's the one." She'd go with Gus to the funeral, armed with the man's mug shot. If he was there, they could bring him in for questioning-the morning couldn't come fast enough.

#

Tessa had gone home long enough to take a quick shower and change her clothes. By six, Tessa was back at her desk reading more about the occult, the goat, and R.J. Santana. When Gus finally arrived, she was on him instantly with the information.

Tessa allowed a small amount of the excitement she was feeling to show in her face and voice. "I just know this is what we've been looking for."

"Yeah, could be but... "

"But what Gus? His initials fit the money clip and the vic referenced his book in her papers...not once but multiple times...obviously, she took what she read to heart...we need to get our hands on a copy of the book."

"Slow down," Gus softly chided. He saw the dark circles and the deep groove between her eyes. "Did you get any sleep at all?"

Tessa rubbed her eyes and quietly said, "Murderers don't take a holiday but they do get to sleep."

"Unlike you right?"

Ignoring the question and avoiding his eyes, Tessa continued, "Look, my gut tells me that this is the path to the murderer. Is Santana that person? Could be or, maybe he's the thread we need to discover the identity of the perp. I figure if he's at the funeral we can bring him in for questioning."

"Do we have a picture?"

Tessa held up a black and white computer generated photo. "Not the best, but it'll do." She laid another photo on Gus's desk. "This is from his website," she said with a grin.

Gus looked at the picture then back to his partner. "You're not serious are you?"

"I'll give you the link and you can look for yourself."

A genuine laugh left Gus's mouth. "He looks like...I don't know how to describe him."

Tessa smiled. "When we catch up with him we can see if the picture does him justice."

"Sounds like a plan," Gus said as he looked at the picture one more time. "Did we get a list of who will be doing surveillance with us at the church?"

"Yeah, I got it after you left last night-Baker, Winston, Pomeroy, and Gentry."

Gus looked at his watch. "We should leave in about an hour." He fixed his gaze on his partner. "Want me to get you some coffee? You look like you can use it."

"Thanks, but let me get it. I drained the last of the pot about thirty minutes ago."

#

It was a dreary, blustery day with threatening skies and a cold wind that seemed to swirl around and chill a body to the core. As expected, the number of people attending the funeral was enormous. Satellite dishes from television trucks reached high into the sky as reporters circled the attendees for an interview.

Tessa and Gus, along with the four other detectives, scrutinized the mourners as they passed into the church and by the closed coffin before settling into a pew. Gus, noticing the look on his partner's stoic face as she stood with her arms folded, followed her gaze. "We can't make them go away. They have every right to be here."

"Those vultures don't even have the decency to stay across the street."

Gus said, "I don't like it either but there's not much we can do about them."

Surveillance cameras sent a live feedback to the police station, where a tech was monitoring them for any suspicious activity. At the main entrance, Marcus Gentry, a detective who was clearly taller than most, discreetly took pictures of everyone who entered. When a man in his twenties with dark hair purposely shielded his face with a cap, Detectives Winston and Baker pulled him out of the line.

Detective Eleanor Baker was a compact woman, who had a firm grip on the man's arm. She asked, "What's your name?"

"Let me go! I don't need to tell *you* that," the man countered.

Moving close to the man, Detective Allison Winston, who was almost as tall as the man was, whispered, "*Yes, you do.*"

"Alex Madigan," he begrudgingly said.

"Tell me why you didn't want your picture taken, Alex," Eleanor said as she glared at him with her dark eyes.

"I don't want my picture to be part of your *big brother network.*"

Allison lifted a digital camera and snapped the man's picture. "You don't have a choice in this," Detective Winston said. "How do you know Dana?"

"I don't."

"You're attending the funeral of someone you don't know? That sounds a bit odd to me. What do you think, Detective Baker?"

"Sounds to me like he might be some sort of stalker." Detective Baker looked up at the man. "Are you a stalker, Alex?"

"No, I'm not a stalker," Alex blurted out. "I just wanted to pay my respects."

Allison motioned for one of the uniformed officers to join them. "We need to take this young man in for questioning."

Alex's blue eyes went wild. "Wait. No. I didn't do anything. She went to the senior prom with me in high school."

"Why didn't you tell us that from the start?" Eleanor asked.

"Because I was scared."

"Of what?"

"It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know why you're here and taking pictures-to find a killer. It isn't *me*...I haven't seen her in four years. When I came home from vacation, I saw the news about her murder."

"When did you get home?"

"Two days ago."

Eleanor cocked her head and jotted his name in her small notebook. "Let me see your driver's license," she said to the man.

Once she had all his information, she gave him back his license. "Give me the phone number of someone who knows you were on vacation and when you came back."

"That's easy. My mom took my friend Billy and me to the airport and she picked us up."

Once Eleanor had the number and confirmed the man's story, she said, "You're free to go."

Tessa approached the detective. "What was that all about?"

"He didn't want his picture taken. He's harmless."

"Look who came," Tessa said when she rejoined Gus. "Wonder why they're here?"

"Guess we should ask them," Gus answered.

Walking up to the woman, Tessa said, "Mrs. Bertram, I'm surprised to see you here."

The woman stiffened and fixed Tessa with a glare. "My grandson found that poor woman and it is our duty to see that she is properly put to rest."

Tessa let her eyes rest on the young boy and she asked, "You've been keeping off that lot?"

Tony lifted his eyes and looked at the detective. "Yes, ma'am."

"I've had a long talk with him about why he needs to stay away from the criminal element. Finding the body scared him," Vanessa Carlton said softly.

Tessa nodded and said, "Excuse me," before she and Gus walked away.

"Do you think it's odd that they are here?" Gus asked, as they walked along the brownish green lawn in front of the church.

As her eyes scanned the people filing into the church, Tessa regarded her partner's question. "I think being here is exactly what Mary Bertram would do but I don't know about her daughter-she doesn't seem the type."

"Bet Mary didn't give her a choice."

Tessa nodded in agreement as one of the other detectives, Bill Pomeroy, a dark haired man with good looks and a ready smile, emerged from the church, and joined the lead detectives. "They're packed like sardines in there. Every pew is full and the people in the back are standing three deep."

Tessa told the man, "Keep an eye on things out here, Bill. Gus and I are going inside."

#

An hour later, Dana Stratton's coffin came out of the church and slid into the coach that would carry her to the cemetery. As the procession passed slowly along the streets, where Dana grew up, Tessa and Gus saw people come out of their houses and businesses to pay their respects.

Once in the cemetery, Gus and Tessa stood away from the burial site. As their eyes gazed over the crowd gathered around the coffin, the priest commended the body to God. Most of the people, they had interviewed, including every girl on the basketball team and most of their coaches, were present.

After the service concluded, people left or gathered around the family to offer their sympathy and support. Jenna Rudolf, the victim's roommate, was the only nonfamily member that remained once everyone else departed.

"That's curious," Gus said to Tessa.

Tessa said, "I guess she's close to the family. Maybe they want her around since she was one of the last people to see their daughter alive." She studied the scene, and then looked at Gus. "At this point we can't rule out anyone."

Back in Gus's vehicle, Tessa chewed on her lip as she looked back at the gravesite. "I don't think going to their home now will produce anything positive. Winston and Baker can let us know if anything happens there that's strange."

Gus nodded, as he engaged the ignition and pulled out onto the narrow gravel access road. "I agree. Those two blend in wherever they go. "

Tessa's eyebrows knitted. "You know who I didn't see at the funeral?"

For a moment, Gus thought, and then said, "The trainer, Gambado."

"Everyone from the basketball team was there, but not him." Tessa looked out the window that a fine mist covered. "I don't think we can rule Gambado out."

"Maybe we should get a warrant for his vehicles." Pressing the brake pedal and stopping, Gus asked, "Where to now?"

"Let's hold off on the trainer. That Santana character wasn't at the funeral and we need to locate him. My gut is telling me that he'll have some answers for us."

#

Gus's Crown Vic parked on the street in front of Magical Knowledge and Occult Wisdom, which was both Santana's store and residence. Two large, plate glass windows with antitheft bars protecting them were on either side of the entrance. They could also see where someone attempted to scrub away the graffiti that was along the plaster under the windows.

The thing that both detectives noticed was the large red sign-CLOSED.

"Fuck. The website said it was open on Friday." Tessa growled. She scanned the windows on the second floor and saw no sign that someone was there.

Gus took out his notebook and flipped it open. "He owns a black '0-four-Lincoln." He looked up and down the street. "Don't see it."

The day had turned dark, cold, and damp. The two detectives got out of the vehicle, pulled their collars up around their necks and walked toward the front door of the business. With hands cupped and pressed against the bars on the door, Tessa peered inside the store for any sign of the owner-there was none.

Gus looked at his partner and nodded in the direction of an alley on either side of the store separating it from the neighboring properties. He took the left and Tessa took the right as they ventured down the narrow walkway toward the back of the store, with their guns at the ready. Behind the store was a padlocked gray steel door with the store's name in black block letters emblazoned on it. They saw a garage that opened to another wider alley that ran the length of the street. When they peered inside through a grimy window pane, they saw so much clutter that there was no way a vehicle as big as a Lincoln would fit inside.

Tessa rolled her shoulders. "We need to put a BOLO out on this guy," she said as they walked toward the front of the building.

When they arrived at the street, a behemoth of a man stood staring at them with his massive arms crossed. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Gus walked toward the man and Tessa pushed aside her jacket to expose the badge on her belt.

With his palms up, Gus said, "We're looking for Mr. Santana. Have you seen him recently?"

The tattoos on the man's arms danced as he flexed them. He took a step closer to Gus. "You have no business here," he said in what Gus thought was a thick Haitian accent.

Tessa's hand reached inside of her jacket, flicked back the strap, and gripped the hilt of her Glock. "We just need to speak with him, that's all," she said, as she too held her ground.

"Go away from here. The store is not open," the man growled, as he unfolded his arms and moved to within inches of Gus's body.

Her Glock was out of its holster and pointed at the man. "Back away," Tessa ordered. "I don't want to shoot you, so back away."

The man's black eyes were predatory and his fists balled, as he glared at the detectives. All three stood motionless. When Tessa clicked the safety off her weapon, the man stepped back.

Gus let his shoulders relax somewhat as he looked up at the man towering over him. "All we want to know-have you seen Mr. Santana lately?"

"No."

"When was the last time you saw him?" Gus asked.

"Don't know."

It was clear that the man wasn't going to say more. Gus moved a fraction of an inch closer. "You want to take a ride downtown?"

When the man took a quick look at the other detective, he saw, she still had her weapon trained on him. "Mr. Santana told me to watch the store when he's gone and the store is closed. He pays me." He nervously eyed Tessa. "I don't want no trouble."

Once Gus saw the man take two more steps backward, he said, "Get lost."

Both detectives were surprised when the man turned around and walked quickly away. It was only then that Tessa lowered her Glock, clicked on the safety, and returned it to its holster.

"How long do you think it will be before that guy calls Santana?" Gus asked, as they slipped into his vehicle.

"Not long. Let's sit on this for a little while and see if he comes back."

#

While Gus watched the store, Tessa went to a neighborhood grocery and deli that was two doors down from Santana's store to get them something to eat. She asked the woman who made the sandwiches if she'd seen the store owner. The answer-a blank stare.

Back in the car, she handed Gus a rare roast beef sandwich, a bag of chips and a large cup of coffee. Before he bit into his sandwich, he gave Tessa a thoughtful look. "What'd you make of that man?"

"If given the chance, he would've killed us."

The words had creases deepening in Gus's forehead. "Why do you say that?"

"His eyes were filled with hatred. No way was I going to let him get the upper hand."

"Makes you wonder why Santana needs someone to guard his store."

"My guess-drugs. One of his arrests was for possession," Tessa said before she bit into her sandwich. When she had swallowed, she added, "Maybe he's an illegal."

"Could be," Gus said, before he concentrated on his sandwich.

#

It was close to five and rain was cascading in torrents down the windshield. They had moved their vehicle a block away so they wouldn't spook Santana if he returned. In all likelihood, the man guarding the store had warned the owner. They had watched the store for close to three hours and the sudden downpour made their surveillance difficult.

"Doesn't look like he's going to show," Tessa said, as her eyes strained through the heavy rain to see the storefront.

"Let's get a patrol unit to drive by every hour, and then pack it in," Gus said in irritation. "As long as this rain keeps up, there's no way we can see the store from here."

"I agree. We'll try again in the morning."

As the Crown Vic slowly moved away and disappeared into the heavy rain, R. J. Santana's Lincoln turned the corner and stopped in front of the store. As Santana got out of the vehicle, the man he paid to guard his store approached him.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Tessa was bone tired. Because of the funeral and the rain, the day had been depressing. Mixed into that, was a heavy sadness that seemed to hang in the air and eat at her soul-funerals always did that to her. After entering her home, she shrugged off her jacket, walked into her bedroom, and took off her clothes, letting them all puddle around her feet. Much like her life, she was alone and naked. Her thoughts drifted to Anna, and wondered how long it would be before the lawyer did another disappearing act. "Do I dare let her into my heart?" she whispered.

The insistent ringing of a phone brought Tessa's thoughts to the present. She looked on the floor, picked up her pants and felt for the cell phone in the pocket. "Hello," she said in a voice that didn't disguise her weariness.

Anna heard the tenor of the voice on the other end of the phone and asked, "Tessa, are you all right?"

Tessa closed her eyes, as she let the sound of Anna's voice wash over her. "It's been a really long day."

"I'm sorry I didn't get back to you sooner. They needed me back in D. C. for a meeting."

"Does that happen often?" Tessa asked, recalling Gus's comment about retribution against the lawyer.

Anna paused, wondering if she should tell Tessa what she'd learned about the Petroff case in DC. *She already told me that she knows about the threat.* "Sometimes. Mostly, it's about pending cases."

Tessa yawned. "I'm glad you're back."

"That's nice to hear. I've been thinking about you a lot over the last week." *I wonder if she has any idea how captivated I am.*

"Have you, Anna?" She hesitated. "Good things, I hope." Tessa put her hand over her mouth and stifled another yawn.

"I saw the news about the funeral."

"Yeah, funerals are always a bitch but more so when the person is murdered." Tessa thought for a minute. "It just seems so wrong," she said in reflection. "The media creating a circus atmosphere didn't help either. I can't believe how disrespectful they are. They were like vultures hovering over a carcass."

"Unfortunately, they have the first amendment protecting them. I agree with it most of the time but sometimes I wish there was a way to stop the bottom feeders." Anna looked at her watch. It was close to nine-thirty. "I know it's late but have you eaten yet?"

Tessa swallowed the tightness in her throat that the invitation created. Seeing Anna was what she wanted but she just didn't have the energy. "Anna, I'd like nothing better but I'm exhausted and running on fumes. Maybe we can do something tomorrow or Sunday."

A pregnant pause lengthened into a minute as Anna tried to squelch her disappointment. "When was the last time you had a decent night's sleep?"

Tessa snorted. "To be honest, I don't know. The only thing I know how to do on a case is to immerse myself in it completely. If that means not sleeping, then so be it."

Anna let out a soft laugh. "You're preaching to the choir." She hesitated, and then said, "Why don't I get some take out to share. You can tell me about your day."

I want...no need that. Tessa was tired of being alone and coming home to empty rooms. Anna was giving her the possibility of having what she'd craved all her life-somebody to love her. "Yeah, I'd like that."

"Good. Anything special you'd like."

"No, surprise me."

"Ok, I'll be there before you know it."

"Anna?"

"Yes," the lawyer said softly.

"I'm glad you called."

#

Tessa heard the doorbell shortly after she stepped out of the shower. Pulling on a robe, she opened the door and took in the vision that was Anna. "Hey, perfect timing."

Anna's heart melted. Tessa's beautiful eyes were wreathed in dark from what she suspected was very little sleep and probably a lack of a proper diet. She stepped inside, placed the bag of take out on the small table, kicked the door so it would close, and then engulfed Tessa in her arms.

Tessa let her body melt into Anna's, as the last four days of running on empty came crashing down around her. "Thank you for coming," she whispered into Anna's ear.

Anna breathed in the scent of the detective's damp hair. She hugged Tessa closer and felt the steady thumping of her heart. She stepped back and caressed Tessa's face, before taking her hand and leading her to the couch.

Once they both sat down on the leather sofa, the lawyer hugged the detective again. As she stroked Tessa's hair gently, she felt the woman relax even further.

"What's going on?" Anna whispered.

In the cocoon of Anna's arms, Tessa felt safe and that threw her. Could she forget the past and just move on or would her fears continue to rule her life outside of work? Tessa drew in a breath of the lawyer's perfume and closed her eyes. "I'm glad you're here."

Anna pulled Tessa closer and gently kissed her hair. "That makes two of us." She felt Tessa's body completely relax, as her breathing evened out and became slower-Tessa had nodded off. Anna dislodged herself and got up off the couch.

A hand reached out and took Anna's arm. "Don't go."

"I'm not going anywhere." Still holding Tessa's hand she gently tugged it. "Come on, let's get you to bed." With her arm around Tessa's waist, Anna guided her into the bedroom. Once she pulled back the covers, she untied Tessa's robe and had to catch her breath when she saw the naked body-it was everything she imagined and more. Once Anna pulled the covers over Tessa, it didn't take long for her to fall sound asleep. Anna looked down at her with a fond smile before

she kissed her forehead. It took all her resolve not to crawl in next to Tessa, but she didn't and left the bedroom quietly closing the door behind her.

#

When Tessa awoke, she looked at the clock and was surprised it was almost eight am. She felt refreshed. She couldn't remember the last time she slept so deeply or so long. The sleeplessness that usually visited her had taken the night off and, for that, she was grateful. Breathing in deeply, she caught the aroma of coffee and smiled-Anna was still there. Pulling on shorts and a t-shirt, she made a stop in the bathroom before going in search of the lawyer.

"Good morning," Tessa said with a slight smile.

Anna turned toward the woman and shook her head. "You really need to get some food in here." She laughed. "I was shocked when I found you actually had coffee." She held out a cup. "How did you sleep?"

Tessa felt her body react in pleasure at seeing the lawyer. "Like a baby. Thank you for being here." She moved closer to Anna and took the offered cup. "What about you? Did you sleep in the spare bedroom?" *Why didn't you sleep with me?*

With a quick shake of her head, Anna smiled. "No, I slept on the couch."

Tessa frowned. "That couldn't have been very comfortable."

"Actually, it wasn't bad once I found a blanket."

With concern in her eyes, Tessa asked, "Will you tell me what's going on with you and the Petroff Family?" She felt Anna's body tense.

Damn, I hoped she'd let it go. "That's one of the reasons I was in DC. I'll tell you what I told them; this isn't the first threat I've had and I refuse to take the words of anonymous sources seriously."

Tessa put her cup down and pulled Anna into a hug and whispered, "You should...you're dealing with dangerous people." *I worry about you.*

Anna melted into Tessa. "I know." She kissed Tessa's lips and it didn't take long before they were sharing deep passionate kisses.

Lost in the moment, Tessa didn't hear the distant ringing of a phone. When she realized what it was, she reluctantly pulled back and felt bereft when she let go of Anna.

In a husky voice, Anna said, "You'd better get that."

Her body screamed *it can wait* and Tessa leaned in and kissed Anna again. Her cell phone finally stopped the insistent noise and she wrapped Anna in her arms. Her body was on fire and it begged for release. The loud buzzing of her beeper made Tessa drop her arms and move away from Anna. "Shit!" Frustrated she said, "I'd better get that."

Anna closed her eyes as she hoped that whoever wanted Tessa would be quick. When she heard Tessa's voice in the other room say *be right there*, she knew she would have to let go of the fragile bond they just created.

Several minutes later, a dressed Tessa entered the kitchen, pushing her gun down into its holster. "That was Gus. A guy we've been looking for has shown up." Looking at the lawyer, Tessa smiled and, in a quick move, kissed Anna pulled her close. *God, how I want you.* "I really don't want to leave you but I have no choice. I'll call you when we're done."

Their kiss was soft and unhurried as their lips conveyed what words refused to say. Swallowing hard, Anna pulled back and smiled before her hand cupped Tessa's face. "When I saw you last Monday, I knew instantly I had made the biggest mistake of my life when I stopped seeing you. I'm not going anywhere, Tessa."

Tessa's kiss was long, hot and was full of promises. Her pager beeped again. "Damn. I'll call you when I'm done."

"I know how investigations go so don't worry if you can't." She gave Tessa one last kiss, then patted her back side. "The sooner you get going, the sooner you'll be done."

As Anna heard the door close, she said, "Be careful."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Tessa and Gus walked up to the police vehicle parked outside of the store, Magical Knowledge and Occult Wisdom. When the officer lowered his window, Gus asked, "Is he still inside?"

"Yeah, I saw him in there ten minutes ago."

With their badges visible, the two detectives moved cautiously toward the entrance of the store, then opened the door. Entering the store, both detectives' nostrils filled with the pungent smell of incense. Low lights and candles lit the interior and there was a distinct chill in the air.

Tessa had one word to describe it-*creepy*.

A small, round man, with thick glasses, and a hawk-like nose dressed in a deep blue silk robe greeted the detectives. "May I help you?" he asked in a soft melodic voice.

As Gus eyed the white hair braided down the man's back along with an equally long white braided beard and silently chuckled. *His net picture doesn't do him justice-in person, he's ever weirder.* "Are you R. J. Santana?"

"Yes, I am. And you are?"

"We're Detectives Barrett and Jacoby."

The man gave the detectives a forced smile. "What can I do for you?"

"You know Dana Stratton?" Gus asked.

"The young lady who was murdered last week?"

Tessa focused on the man and his body language as she let her partner ask the initial questions.

"Yeah, that's the one."

"Other than hearing about her on the news, I've never met her," he said in a sickening sing-song tone.

Tessa pulled out a picture of the money clip and laid it on the counter. "Is *this* yours?"

Santana pointed to a basket behind him. "As you can see, I do have them. I give them away to my special customers."

Gus's eyes looked around the store. "What does a money clip have to do with,"-he said waving his hand around-"mysteries and truths?"

"The goal of a good alchemist is to transmute common metals into gold or silver, thereby creating the elixir of life. Perhaps some use it as a money clip, but in my reality, it is a talisman. Used in combination with the philosopher's stone, it symbolizes the evolution from ignorance to enlightenment. I made my talisman in the form of a money clip to remind my clients of the gift of gold."

"Just who are the *enlightened ones* that get your *talisman*?" Tessa asked with a half smirk.

The man pondered her question, and then looked at Tessa squarely. "I have many who come into my humble shop. Those who receive my special talisman are rare."

Tessa narrowed her eyes and focused them on the man's dark eyes. "Then you shouldn't have any trouble in telling us who the few are."

R. J. Santana let out a low chuckle. "Alas, this is a cash only business, so I have no way of knowing details about my customers."

"I think we need to take this downtown," Gus said to Tessa.

"You're going to arrest me because I don't know my customers' names? That's ridiculous!" The store owner reached for the phone. "Shall I have my lawyer meet me there then?"

Tessa shrugged. "We're not arresting you, only taking you in for questioning, Mr. Santana."

Santana scowled. "What do you want to know?"

"Right now, you're near the top of the list of suspects." Tessa pointed to the picture of the money clip. "We want to know who owned that thing. Either you give us some idea about the people you gave them to or we can take a ride downtown. It's your choice, Mr. Santana."

The man fingered his beard before he smiled at Gus. "You must be the good cop," he said with a titter. "You wouldn't believe the nut cases I get in here. Everyone out there thinks there must be an answer. Some of them look to the occult, magic, or alchemy for enlightenment. The truth *is* that the answer *is* staring them in the face."

Both detectives raised their eyebrows in surprise before their expressions turned to suspicion.

The store owner saw the change in the detective's demeanor. In a voice that took on a serious tone, he said, "Look, I put those things in people's bags as part of the shtick to get them to come back. This get-up is supposed to give me credence." R. J. touched the beard. "I do it all in the name of the holy dollar."

Tessa said, "I'm not amused. I should run you in for impersonating a human being," She put a picture of a pentagram on the glass surface of the counter. "What can you tell me about this?"

When Santana turned away and began pulling something out of a drawer, both detectives automatically reached for their guns. Looking at both detectives, Santana smiled and said, "No need for weapons, I was merely getting this."

On the counter, he unrolled a piece of heavy paper and spread it out. A large pentagram appeared. "As I'm sure you know, this is a pentagram," he said with his eyes trained on Gus. "The point at the top represents the spirit. Going clockwise the next point represents water followed by fire, earth, and air. The one you have there is an open pentagram, which means it's active." He saw the detectives frown and said, "It doesn't have a circle around it."

"What does that mean," Tessa asked. The professor at the university had already told them all about pentagrams but she wanted to hear what the strange little man had to say.

"In paganism, it means an open and active approach."

"It's inverted. Does that have any meaning?" Gus asked.

"There are many interpretations of that," R. J. said. "It could mean the spirit is subservient or, as many pagans believe, it's a sign of the dark side. It's also used to help a witch learn to face her darker side."

Tessa eyed the man carefully. "What does it mean to you?"

R. J. smiled. "A subservient spirit."

"Tell me about your book, Mr. Santana," Tessa said.

"What do you want to know?"

"Is it a big seller?"

R. J. smiled. "I do sell a fair share of them."

I can't believe this guy. What a fraud. "To who?" she asked.

"To my customers, of course."

"Give me a break," Tessa growled. "We need to take this downtown and then maybe you'll be able to give us some detail."

Gus put his hand on his partner's arm only to have it shaken away. "May I call you R. J.?" he asked with a smile.

The store owner's head moved fractionally. "Of course."

"We need your help. The more information you give us the better we can understand what all this stuff is about."

Santana nodded.

"Do you think you can help us out?"

"I'll try. I'm telling you the truth. I have no way of knowing the names of my customers."

Gus smiled. "Will you to come downtown and look at some pictures for us, R. J. Maybe you'll see someone that you remember coming into your store."

R. J. laughed and winked at Gus. "I like you. Sure, I'll help you out."

"Now," Tessa said.

"There's no way I can be there before Monday."

Tessa looked at her partner. "Enough of this bull, let's take him downtown."

Holding up his hand, R. J. focused on Gus. "Look, my uncle died and my mother asked me to be with her at the viewing today-except for me, she has no one. That's where I was yesterday." He dug into his pocket and pulled out a folded prayer card. "Here, you can see for yourself."

Gus took the card and read the dates and the name before handing it to his partner.

Tessa had enough of death. "Be at the station by eight on Monday."

"I can't be there before ten." The peculiar little man shrugged. "I have to arrange for someone to be here in my place."

"That goon you had guarding your store?" Tessa asked.

R. J. let out a raucous laugh. "Javier? I hardly think so."

The look that Tessa gave the man stopped his laughter. "It's your choice, Mr. Santana. If you aren't willing to be there Monday morning at eight, then you can come with us now."

The store owner capitulated. "I'll be there Monday morning, first thing."

Tessa nodded and Gus took his card and laid it on the glass. "Thanks."

#

Once they were back in the car, Tessa gave Gus a sideways grin. "I didn't know you were such a stud muffin."

Gus laughed. "It must be my dashing good looks." He chuckled, before his face turned serious. "Why did you let him off so easily?"

Tessa looked squarely at her partner. "He's what, five-two? A foot shorter than the vic. There's no way he could have overpowered her, even if he knew her."

"Maybe he had a weapon or that goon was with him," Gus offered.

"Does he strike you as someone who could get the better of anyone? And, if *Javier* helped him I'm pretty sure we'd see evidence of that on the body."

Gus thought about his partner's words. Tessa was good at pigeon-holing people. Ninety-five percent of the time, she was right. He pictured the small man and said, "You're right. He doesn't fit the profile."

The muscles in Tessa's face tensed as she looked out the car window. "I think we need a day off to get our focus back."

Gus pulled the vehicle to the curb and stopped. He gave his partner a long look before he said, "What's going on with you? You've seemed off ever since we got this case. I've never known you to not work twenty-four-seven until we have the case solved."

Tessa stared mutely at the man as she considered his question. *Have I changed?* She knew the answer was *yes*. A deep sense of loneliness envelope her. She yearned for someone to love her- she longed for Anna and knew she always had. "I guess there's a time when things change."

"You ok?" Gus asked softly.

"Yeah, I'm good."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Hours later, after catching up on the mountain of paper work the case generated, Tessa headed home. She had slept better the night before than she had in a long time. She attributed it to Anna. Tessa had to admit she was surprised that the lawyer was still there this morning. That perplexed her. By staying, Tessa thought that Anna was sending her a signal-letting her know that she could trust the woman. *Didn't she say as much this morning?* She chewed on her lip. *But can I trust that?*

When she stopped at the market, she lifted one corner of her mouth, as she remembered Anna in her kitchen. Just thinking of the woman made her shoulders relax for the first time since she arrived at the station earlier. She also felt the same stirrings of pleasure she always felt when she thought of, or was near, Anna. As she chucked a loaf of whole grain wheat bread into her cart, she faintly smiled. *Bet that's what she'd buy.* Fifteen minutes later, she had the bread, eggs, milk, mayo, mustard, granola, cheese, and a variety pack of lunchmeat and was on her way home.

Unlocking the door, Tessa half hoped that Anna was still there. When she went inside, she felt her heart sink. "Stupid to think she'd be here," she mumbled, as she carried the plastic grocery bags to the kitchen.

As she lifted the bag with the milk to the counter, she saw a note with her name on it. Forgetting all about putting the groceries away, Tessa picked up the note and opening the folded page, she read...

T- I hope your day goes well. I want you to know how special it made me feel when you let me take care of you. I can't wait to see you again. Call me-A.

Picking up her phone and dialing Anna's number made Tessa take her first relaxed breath since she left Anna earlier that day.

"Hello," Anna's sultry voice said.

Tessa's body turned to mush. "Hey, I got your note."

"And you called, I'll take that as a positive sign," Anna said, with a lilt in her voice.

"I bought groceries. You want to come over and share some of the take out we didn't have last night or a sandwich with me?" Tessa held her breath.

"My folks just arrived unexpectedly and they want to go out for dinner. Why don't you come along?" Anna hesitated then added, "I'd really like that."

Tessa felt her back stiffen. "No, I think you need to visit with your folks. I'm sure they came to see you and not me. We can talk at a more convenient time."

"Your call isn't inconvenient," Anna whispered. She could hear the distance in Tessa's voice. "My folks were in town shopping and took a chance I'd be home. I see them all the time. They've never met a friend of mine that lives here and I'd like the first one to be you."

Tessa closed her eyes at the tempting invitation. "No, it wouldn't feel right barging in on your family time."

Anna wasn't going to let Tessa get away but, at the same time, didn't want to press the subject of meeting her folks. "I'll tell them to go without me."

"No, don't do that...we can get together another time."

"Don't you get it, Tessa? I'd rather be with you."

"Sometime I'll tell you about my folks and you'll know why I don't want you to blow your parents off."

Tessa's words intrigued the lawyer. "I'd like that. Hey, I usually run first thing in the morning. Want to run with me?"

After feeling the warmth, seep back into her body, Tessa smiled. "I run then too. How far do you usually go?" Tessa knew that the lawyer's body was fit and she certainly had the legs of a runner. *Can she run as far as I do?*

"About three miles, unless I'm trying to figure something out and then I go for five."

"Impressive," Tessa said with a slight chuckle. "Do you think you can keep up with me?"

Anna's voice dropped an octave. "Oh, I'll give you a run for your money." She laughed. "You can run but you can't hide from me." *I'd hunt you down.*

Sharing a laugh, Tessa said, "We'll see about that."

"What time?"

Tessa usually ran around five-thirty but only the deranged were out on the streets at that time. "It starts getting light around six-thirty, is that too early for you?"

"Nope, sounds good to me. I'll be at your place by six-fifteen."

"Ok."

Tessa was about to say goodbye when she heard Anna say, "I'm looking forward to seeing you."

The comment, along with the whole conversation, took Tessa so far out of her comfort zone that when she tried to speak, she couldn't. Finally, she said, "Me, too. I'll see you in the morning." Before she hung up, she said, "Anna, be careful ok?"

Anna laughed off the warning. "Don't worry I always look out for danger whether it's real or imagined. Besides, I always have my equalizer handy."

"You have a gun?"

"It's registered and I *do* know how to use it."

Just hearing Tessa's voice made Anna's body react with a sense of joy. She held onto her phone as if it were a lifeline to the detective. They took the first tentative steps toward a close meaningful relationship when Tessa let Anna comfort her the night before. She ran her fingers across her lips. The kisses still lingered.

#

"Did I hear that you invited someone to join us?" Sonya Mikaelson asked. The woman, who her daughter was a spitting image of, put her arm around Anna's shoulders.

"Yes, I did, Mom, but she can't come."

Sonya tugged her daughter closer. "Is it that detective you told me about several months ago?"

Anna rested her head on her mother's shoulder. "Yeah, but it took me all this time to realize how much she means to me. I'm afraid I treated her badly because what I felt for her scared me. Now, it's like taking one step forward and two steps back. Just when I think I'm gaining her trust, something happens and I'm back to square one."

"Is she worth it?"

Anna put her arm around her mother's waist and sighed. "Yes. Do you think I'm foolish?"

Her mother laughed. "Foolish isn't a word I'd associate with you, darling."

Sonya thought back to the broken heart her daughter suffered when Devon, her first serious lover and relationship broke it off after three years. It had been a time of deep sorrow for Anna and one of revelation about her daughter's sexual preferences.

No mother likes to see her child suffer and once she had gotten past the initial shock of Anna being gay, she embraced her daughter and told her it would all work out. She remembered telling Anna that, one day, she would find someone who would cherish and love her forever.

Is this woman the one? "Are you sure you're not projecting onto this woman what you want her to be? You know sometimes we are attracted to a person because they intrigue or reject us."

"I know that, Mom, but it isn't like that-I rejected her and, I suspect, hurt her deeply. I will always regret the time wasted because I was afraid of what might happen if I allowed myself to care again. I want, no need, Tessa in my life."

"Then be patient, darling...*all good things come to those who wait.*"

Anna sighed. "I know, Mom, I know."

#

Tessa still was smiling from her conversation with Anna. The woman made Tessa want to let her in and close the door behind her. For the first time in her life, she was considering an intimate relationship. Anna made her tremble and it was the most overwhelming feeling that she had ever felt. As her trust in Anna not to break her heart grew, another part of her worried that Anna wasn't taking the threat against herself seriously.

Once she was finished eating some of the food that Anna had left, Tessa inserted a disc with several of the basketball games that Dana Stratton played in, into the DVD player. Using a remote, she pressed several buttons until the video began to play.

She watched the first quarter of the game and could see why many called the girl a phenomenon in the world of women's basketball. On offense and defense, Stratton outshone everyone else on the court. She made three point shots just as easily as she made foul shots or baskets in the paint. As a power forward, she was the best. Her defensive prowess seemed to make the players on the other team hesitate or play sloppy, thereby, giving her the advantage.

As Tessa watched the game unfold, she paused whenever the camera panned to the audience to see if she could recognize anyone-no one jumped out screaming *I'm the murderer*. She did notice the group of older men who sat directly behind the team. After interviewing them, she and Gus had declared them harmless.

It was clear after watching three games that the victim had the skills and the potential to fight off an assailant. That, then, begged the question of why the girl's body didn't have any type of defensive wounds. The only conclusion she came up with was the one she had when she first saw the body-Dana Stratton knew her assailant. Just who that was remained a mystery.

That night, while she slept, the detective replayed the basketball games in her dreams all the while looking in the crowd for a murderer. She kept seeing R. J. Santana's face.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Tessa woke with a start and looked at the time, -five-thirty. Climbing out of bed, her mind focused on seeing Anna again and she smiled only to have it fade away immediately. She questioned the wisdom of allowing the lawyer to be a bigger part of her life. Her philosophy was *better to take the break than the fall*. Yet, with Anna, there definitely was an attraction and if she was honest with herself, she craved the woman's companionship-she always had.

Is that what I want-a friend and not a lover? If that were the case then why did she feel the stirrings of pleasure every time she saw Anna or heard her voice? Slipping into a clean pair of running shorts and shirt, Tessa had her answer. She wanted Anna on all levels. But, would she be able to rein in her habits of a lifetime? In the end, would she close the lawyer out of her life just as she'd done in the past with other women who wanted a deeper relationship? Anna was different.

When she heard the soft knocking on the door, Tessa felt her heart skip a beat as she quickly went to the door. Pulling it open, she saw Anna and let a genuine smile cross her face.

"Hey," was the only thing that Tessa's parched mouth would say.

Anna gently ran her hand up and down Tessa's arm as she passed by the woman. "Good morning. You ready to run?"

Tessa chuckled. "The better question is, are you ready to keep up with me?"

"You have the advantage by knowing the route, so I'll give you that handicap. But be warned, I can go as far and as fast as you can."

"We'll see about that," Tessa said.

Once they were on the street, both women did some light stretching before they started their run. Tessa checked her watch, clicked a button and they began their run. Tessa laid out the route for the lawyer before they began and let her set the pace-she lagged slightly behind. As she watched the ease with which Anna ran, she felt a large part of the wall she had around her heart collapse. She smiled and kicked into a faster pace as she caught up with Anna. Usually, she'd run three miles and stop. Today, she would see if the lawyer could keep up with her.

Anna let Tessa take the lead when they ran down a street, narrowed by vehicles parked on both sides. She had never enjoyed running with someone, for it always cramped her style-Tessa was different. The detective didn't dictate the pace but let them develop a mutual speed that was neither too slow nor too fast. She tried not to think of the emotions that running with Tessa evoked. Once she realized that she couldn't stop nature, she gave into the feelings-she wanted the detective in her life.

When they stopped, Tessa's lungs burned and the sweat on her arms felt like little pinpricks were dancing on them. She looked at Anna, who was breathing hard and had a thin sheen of sweat

covering her arms and legs. She couldn't help noticing the lawyer's damp t-shirt that clung to her body. The woman consumed her and, the more she fought the feeling, the more she wanted it to stay.

Anna noticed Tessa's nipples straining against the tight fabric of her running shirt. Breathing hard and bending slightly, she asked, "Too much for you, Tessa?"

With an all out laugh, which sounded more like a grunt, Tessa eyed the lawyer as she straightened her body. "No way."

"I don't know about you, but I'm always ravenous after a run. I know of a small place within walking distance of here that has great breakfast plates."

Tessa ran her fingers through her sweat soaked hair and blew out a breath. "Think they'd want two sweaty runners in with their Sunday breakfast crowd?"

Anna laughed. "Probably not. Why don't we both get cleaned up and then we can go."

"You bring a change of clothes?" Tessa asked.

As she let her eyes suggestively run the length of the detective's body, Anna felt aroused. She moved closer to Tessa and touched her wet arm. "Yeah, I did."

The tingle Tessa felt when the lawyer touched her had nothing to do with her sweaty body and everything to do with desire. Gulping down her emotions, Tessa smiled. "Good. I'll show you the guest bathroom."

#

It had taken all of Anna's resolve not to invite Tessa into the shower but she managed to squelch her libido. Tessa wasn't a *slam-bang-thank you ma'am* kind of woman-she deserved better. *Slow and easy*, her inner voice said. *Woo her and romance her first*. Forty-five minutes later, both Anna and Tessa were entering the Tragus Diner, packed with the Sunday brunch crowd.

On their short walk to the restaurant, Anna told Tessa that the owner lost his brother in an organized crime murder that she litigated. Upon entering the establishment, a tall dark man with thick wavy hair, pushed through grumbling patrons and pulled Anna in for a hug.

"It's so nice to see you," he said, as he took hold of the lawyer's arm and led her through the crowded waiting area. "You come with me...I have the perfect table for you."

Anna saw the confused look on Tessa's face and winked. As Tessa followed behind Anna, she fixed her eyes on the woman's backside. She felt like a puppy following its owner for a treat and that feeling was strangely pleasurable.

Tessa was about to sit opposite the lawyer when Anna smiled and touched the one next to her. "It sometimes gets loud and we won't be able to hear each other." She gave Tessa a seductive smile. "Promise I won't bite...not here anyway."

Smiling, Tessa scooted her chair so her knee was touching Anna's and touched her thigh. "Biting you say," she whispered. "What else is on offer?"

Anna was about to answer when a young woman with wavy black hair that framed her pretty face said, "Good to see you again, Anna. Coffee?"

Tessa watched the ease with which Anna conversed with the girl and smiled. She thought back to banter with Anna moments before and immersed herself in the good feelings that caused in her.

When the girl moved away, Anna said, "It's a family run business." Not missing a beat, she said, conspiratorially, "I believe you wanted to know what else I have to offer." She wiggled her eyebrows. "Patience my dear...patience."

Tessa nodded and fixed her gaze on Anna's beautiful face. *Do I really want that?* She continued to stare until she heard Anna say, "What?"

Dragging her mind back to the present, Tessa smiled and waved at the crowded tables. "Judging by the number of people here, they must have great food."

Anna looked at the detective and grinned. *Wonder what she was thinking?* "I'd recommend anything on the menu, but my favorite for breakfast is the Greek omelet."

They ate in silence for a while each stealing quick glances at the other, much like a boxer pokes and jabs to find the opponent's strengths and weaknesses. There was no doubt about the sexual energy that was flowing around them in tumultuous waves.

When Tessa clunked her coffee cup on the table, she caught Anna's gaze and held it. "I need to talk to you about the Petroff family."

Anna's blue eyes broke the contact. *Damn.* "You aren't going to let it go are you?"

"Nope."

"I wish we could have gotten Serge Petroff. Unless we cut off the head, the beast will continue to thrive."

Tessa nodded and her expression became somber. "The rumor is that you really pissed them off."

As Anna picked up her coffee cup and took a drink, the young girl appeared at the table with a full carafe of coffee. "Freshen your cup?" she asked.

Tessa said, "No, I'm good."

Anna smiled at the young woman and held her cup, while the steaming dark liquid flowed into the cup. When the lawyer turned her gaze to the detective, she smiled before her face took on a serious expression. "This isn't the first time I've pissed someone off or been threatened." She let out a long sigh. "It's the nature of the beast that I face every day. As you know, crime is everywhere. How effective can we be if we run and hide each time we're threatened?"

"You should have more than a gun for protection," Tessa said in a serious tone. *I want to protect you.* "A mob threat isn't something you should take so lightly. Having a gun won't stop a professional."

Anna shook her head and lifted one shoulder. "There is no actual threat. It's all conjecture and rumor. Those I convicted were so low in the organization that I can't see Petroff taking the chance of sending someone after a federal prosecutor for them. I won't live my life in fear, Tessa. Besides, being followed around by a body guard isn't my idea of living." *Unless it's you.*

"But, Petroff has the resources to see the threat through."

"If the threat is real and, as I said, at this point we don't know, and I can't see it. I've been threatened many times by those I've sent to jail," Anna said with a slight smile.

Tessa stared at the woman, whose eyes belied her words. To the world, Anna was a tough, prosecutor that rarely lost her cases. She showed the criminal faction no mercy in her zeal to see them pay for their crimes. Yet, Tessa saw something more.

When the detective laughed, Anna furrowed her brow. "What's so funny?"

Tessa splayed her fingers before they ran through her hair. "We are the same you know."

"In what way?"

The truth of what she was about to say hit Tessa squarely in the jaw and stung as if she had actually been hit. "We both show the world only what we want them to see."

Anna reached for Tessa's hand. "I want to really get to know you, Tessa. Not just sexually but all the facets of you."

Tessa closed her eyes. "I don't know if I can do that." She shrugged. "But, I'd like to try."

Anna's hand squeezed Tessa's before she drew it back. "We'll take it slow and see where it goes. No pressure, no expectations."

"I like the sound of that." *I don't want to be alone anymore.* She wanted to share her life with someone and that someone was Anna. She felt a new shroud cover her-Anna's protector.

Early Monday morning, Tessa did her usual three mile run before going into work. Pulling into the nearly empty lot of the police station, she felt more refreshed than she had in a long time. After sharing breakfast the day before, she and Anna walked in the park until they finally stopped and sat close together on a bench. They talked for an hour until Anna's Blackberry chirped.

The subsequent phone call had Anna saying, "I'm sorry. I need to go in and broker a plea deal."

Reluctantly, Tessa stood up. "No need to be sorry. I'm a homicide detective, I know all about having to stop everything when the job calls." She grinned. "Don't like it but I understand."

Anna touched Tessa's hand. "I don't want to go." She smiled. "Can we continue you this later?"

"Oh, I think that can be arranged."

When they reached Anna's Saab, they embraced before their lips lightly touched. As hard as she tried, Tessa couldn't shake the vision of Anna and if she was honest, she didn't want to.

#

As she walked into the building, she knew that the day that lay ahead of her and the challenges that it posed were clear. A week had passed by since the three boys discovered the body. Dana Stratton was in the ground and her family and friends were learning how to cope without her in their lives. The person responsible was still unknown.

In a murder investigation, seven days is an eternity. With each passing day, the trail was getting colder, which was especially important since they didn't have that much to go on from the beginning. They needed to find the victim's vehicle and, so far, they had come up empty.

One of the *hot* tips they got was from someone who said they saw someone pushing a green Honda into the river. That tip proved unreliable but it served to accentuate the vast number of places someone could hide a vehicle so it wouldn't be found.

Tessa lifted her head and was surprised to see Gus sitting down at his desk. She looked at the clock above the door then back at her partner. "Something going on?" she asked. "It isn't even seven yet and you're already here."

Gus nodded. "A day off and I'm ready to go. I've been going over the case and I know there's something we're missing. I can't quite put my finger on what it is yet, but I will."

"We're on the same wavelength then," Tessa remarked as she got up. "I'm getting some coffee, you want some?"

"I'm good but if there are any doughnuts, I'd have one."

When Tessa returned to her desk, she had a cup of coffee and one glazed doughnut. "Here you go. I thought you were watching your weight."

"Helen let's me have a half a grapefruit and a piece of dry toast for breakfast," he said before he took a bite. "Hmm, now *this* is a decent breakfast."

Tessa laughed before she looked down at her notes. "Santana should be here in less than an hour."

"Let's hope he shows up. I still can't believe you let him off the hook so easily."

"Considering we're investigating a murder and we were just at the funeral it seemed like the right thing to do. I understood his need to help his mother out." Her mind flashed to her own mother, who she hadn't seen in over seven years. On holidays and birthdays, Tessa would call her mother-other than that the distance between them suited them both. At one time, she thought that time healed everything but it hadn't-in the case of her family, she suspected it never would.

With a serious look, Gus said, "You bought his story...usually I'm the one wanting to give the benefit of the doubt."

Focusing on her partner, she said, "The prayer card was real and I looked the death up on the Internet. It's real." Tessa pulled a packet of photos out of her desk. "Like I told you Saturday, I can't see him getting the better of someone a foot taller than him especially when there were no defensive wounds."

Gus laughed. "Well, that's a turnaround." Gus eyed his partner-she was relaxed. "You should take time off more often," he said. "It agrees with you." He looked at her closer. "You go out on a date or something? Like maybe with that good looking lawyer."

Crumbling up a piece of paper, Tessa flung it at her partner. "Give it a rest, Gus." She gazed at him and then a smile slowly spread across her face. "Know how I know Santana is going to show?"

Shaking his head, Gus said, "Can I stop you from telling me?"

"Nope."

"Then go ahead."

Tessa winked. "He's only helping us because he has a man crush on you." She laughed when she saw the mock aggrieved look on Gus's face.

"The guy would throw his mother under a bus, if he could make a few bucks off it."

"You're probably right but he's the best we've got right now."

It wasn't often that they laughed and it felt good to both detectives. Tessa knew that all too soon they would be back to the business of murder.

Gus eyed a folder on Tessa's desk. "Did you get the pictures from the funeral?"

"Yep, I've managed to whittle them down from a thousand to a more manageable number. If he sees someone that he recognizes in the crowd shots, I can pull up an individual picture of the person. Crowd shots are all we'll give him right now. I had the techies set up in one of the interrogation rooms so we can enlarge them on a screen with a computer. His glasses are so thick that I doubt that his looking at them on the computer screen will do any good." She chuckled. "Especially with the laptops we have here." She picked up the envelope and passed it to Gus. "I know it's a long shot but I included a picture of Joel Waterston too."

"What about Gambado?"

"He was there. I saw him in one of the shots."

"Guess he was trying to avoid us," Gus said. "Why let him view the crowd shots and not individual pictures?"

Tessa thought for a minute. "You know as well as I do that viewing one mug shot after another is confusing at best. I figured if he saw a group he could hone in on one easier."

"Sounds reasonable." Gus's phone rang. "Barrett." Gus's face reddened as he listened. "Do we have to send someone to pick you up, Mr. Santana?" Gus rolled his eyes. "What time will you be here?" Gus listened and flexed his jaw. "If you're not here by one, I'll put out an arrest warrant for you." Sighing, he said, "Ok, go ahead." He listened and nodded, "You're welcome. Bye."

Once Gus hung up the phone, Tessa said, "What's his excuse?"

"Said he's still upstate with his mother."

"You believed him?"

Gus laughed and shook his head. "He put his mother on and she said *thank you*."

"Shit, I hope I didn't make the wrong call."

"We'll see at one this afternoon. My money is on him showing-you're usually hit the mark when you read people."

The phone rang again and Gus picked it up. "Barrett." As he listened, his eyes widened. "We'll be right there."

"What's going on?" Tessa asked.

"Tom Cho was going through the hospital parking garage footage and found Dana Stratton's car."

Tessa frowned. "She was at the hospital? Her parents said they didn't see her."

#

Walking briskly into Tom Cho's work area, Tessa said, "Let's see what you have."

The technician looked at her and nodded.

Gus said, "Good morning, Tom. Is it cued up?"

The man smiled at Gus. "Yep. Here she is entering the parking garage in her Honda Prelude at ten-fifteen and, a little later, she parked her car and got out. She begins walking to the door when another vehicle stops and she has what appears to be an animated conversation with the occupant."

With her eyes focused on the monitor, Tessa saw the girl raise her hands in what she thought was conciliation before she rounded the vehicle and got in on the passenger side. "Can you get the license plate number?" she asked.

"I tried but there's something over the plates obscuring them."

"What's the make and model?" Gus asked, as he leaned in to get a better look.

"The lighting is poor but I'm pretty sure it's a late model Jeep Cherokee. The film is in black and white so all I can tell you is that it's dark in color."

Tessa pointed to the driver's side window. "Any way of enhancing the picture there to see who she's talking to?"

Cho said, "Maybe." He made a few keystrokes and cropped the area before increasing the number of pixels to sharpen the resolution.

This time Tessa leaned in and ran her finger across a part of the enlargement. "What does that look like to you?"

Gus focused on where his partner's slim finger touched the screen. "The steering wheel. Whoever this person is, he doesn't want anyone seeing him. Looks like he might be leaning back to keep out of the camera's view."

Tessa said, "Premeditated. The perp knew the cameras were on so he obscured his license plates and made sure the camera never sees him." Tessa pursed her lips then looked at the outside mirror of the car. "Don't suppose we can get anything from there," she said, as she pointed to the mirror.

"I tried but whoever this person is, he made certain there was no way of identifying him through the mirror. I tracked the Jeep from the time it entered the garage until it left. There are no usable images of the driver."

Shaking her head, Tessa asked, "You saw that car entering the garage?"

"Yeah, it came in right after the Stratton girl."

"From the same direction?"

"Yes."

"Will you look through the surveillance footage around the hospital and see if you come up with any street shots of both vehicles. See if the Jeep is following the vic and where it went when it left the garage with Stratton."

Cho nodded. "I saw it leave the hospital and go north on Meridian, then it turned on Brighten, where there are no cameras. So far, I haven't picked up where the vehicle comes back onto a camera feed."

Uncharacteristically, Tessa patted the man's shoulder. "Good job."

#

"We need to get the forensic team to that parking garage," Tessa said, as the elevator took them down. "Whoever killed her was stalking her. She obviously knew the person, since she got into the vehicle willingly." The elevator stopped and they got off. "Whatever the person said to her was more important than being there for her sister."

Gus shook his head. "We haven't interviewed anyone that said she had a friend like that. My impression is that she knew a lot of people but none were close."

Tessa arrived at her desk and pulled out another folder. She looked through it until she found the brief phone interview she did with the vic's sister.

"The sister said that she thought something was bothering the vic but didn't know what it was, or even if it was legitimate. She said, *my hormones were all over the place and that may have made me feel something that wasn't there*. I think we need to speak with her again. Sisters tell each other things that they don't tell others."

Nodding, Gus picked up his phone and called the woman. "She's asking if we can come to her home," he said, holding his hand over the mouth piece.

Tessa looked at her watch. "Find out what time the baby takes its afternoon nap. We can go there after we're done with Santana."

While Gus spoke with the sister, Tessa called the crime lab and informed them of the vehicle's location. She didn't think they'd find anything, since it was clear that the girl arrived at the parking garage alone and left with an unknown person. "Let me know when you have it back here," she said to a technician.

"The sister asked if we can come now," Gus said, when Tessa hung up her phone. "When I asked her if her sister confided in her, she hesitated. Figure she knows something."

"Let's hope so. All we have now are bits and pieces that don't seem to fit." She raised her eyebrows and added, "We need a common thread."

Gus stood up and slid his gun into its holster. "Let's hope that is Santana."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Their vehicle pulled up in the driveway that belonged to the victim's sister and her family. It was a two story, garrison colonial with three steps leading to a small landing where the front door was. The lawn was well cared for and a pink stork, with its wings flapping in the breeze, adorned the front yard, heralding the birth of the baby girl.

Tessa knocked on the door but not as loud as she normally would in deference to what might be a sleeping baby. When they heard the doorknob rattle, Tessa pushed her jacket back to show her badge.

Sara Macintosh, who was dressed in loose fitting sweat pants and a zippered hoodie, opened her front door and looked at the two detectives. "Please, come in," she said as she showed them into the living room. "I don't know what more I can tell you."

Tessa had seen the sister at the funeral and remembered thinking that the girl looked nothing like the vic. From behind her dark sunglasses, she gave the woman the once over. Where the woman's sister was tall and muscular, she was petite and soft.

Keeping her face neutral, Tessa said, "From your sister's computer and interviews we've done with her teammates, we get the feeling that there was something going on in her life that people sensed, but didn't know what it was."

"We thought you might be able to fill in the pieces for us," Gus added.

"You've made a trip out here for nothing," the sister said.

"I know how special the bond can be between sisters," Tessa said. "You tell each other things that you might not share with others."

"How would you know what it's like to have a sister, then lose her?"

Gus mentally cringed, knowing how sensitive the subject was for his partner. *It must be tearing her up inside. That must be why she's off her game. I wish she'd talk to me about it.*

Tessa took off her sunglasses. "I know because I was you once."

Comprehending the meaning, Sara sighed and closed her eyes. "I'm sorry," she said to Tessa. "Really, there's nothing I can tell you."

Gus and Tessa exchanged a look. "How would you characterize Dana's interaction with other people?" Tessa asked.

Sara shrugged. "I don't know. She always seemed to get along with everyone. Sometimes she was standoffish...I think that was because she was very self conscious of her height."

Tessa smiled at the woman. "Anything else?"

The woman shook her head. "Not that I can think of."

"If we're going to find out who murdered your sister, we need to know what was happening in her life," Gus said in a gentle tone. "We need your help."

Sara remained silent.

Tessa let the silence lengthen before she said, "Look, all her friends at school and her roommate told us that they knew something was bothering her. No one seems to know what that was. Not your parents, not her teammates, so that leaves only you, Sara."

With a trembling voice, Sara said, "She didn't have anyone that you'd call a close friend at school." With her left hand, she swiped at the tears brimming in her eyes. "They were all jealous of her and did everything they could to make her life miserable," Sara spat.

Tessa eyed the woman. "Do you have any names to go with the team members who did that to her?"

"I don't know who they are. Any time I asked Dana about her teammates she'd always frown and changed the subject."

"Ok," Tessa said. "Please continue."

"All of Dana's life, she was the special one. I was five when she was born," she whispered. "My parent's doted on her and, when she started speaking in sentences when she was eleven months old, they...." The woman paused. "Let's just say she was the shining one and they only saw her."

"How did you feel about that?" Tessa asked softly.

"I adored my sister. My parents think the sun rises and sets on her and I feel the same." She looked at Tessa with tears spilling out of her eyes.

In an uncharacteristic gesture, Tessa reached out and touched the woman's hand. "Did she tell you what was upsetting her?"

"I really don't know what it was. I noticed a change in her several months ago."

"What kind of change?" Tessa prodded.

"She became quiet and withdrawn, like she was wrestling with a problem. When I'd call her, she sounded distant, like she didn't want to talk to me." Sara shrugged. "I'd ask her what was going on and she would always say *it's all good, Sara.*"

"Did you buy that?"

With a shake of her head, Sara said, "No."

"Why?" Tessa asked gently.

"The reason Dana went to Restin University was so she could be close to home." Sara's face filled with a brilliant smile. "There were big division one universities like Tennessee, Texas, and North Carolina recruiting her. Coaches would come to our home offering her full scholarships armed with literature and a spiel about their school and how much they wanted Dana to go there." Sara went quiet, as she brushed tears away. "She wouldn't let any of them sway her." The woman idly picked at a thread that clung to her pants. "I think in the end she really wished she had gone away to school."

"Why do you say that?" Tessa asked.

Sara looked at the female detective. "Did you go college?"

"Yes."

"Did you change?"

"I guess."

"Living away from home makes you grow up faster. Dana found the freedom to do whatever she wanted. I think living in the same town that she grew up in cramped her style. Oh, she still had her core values, but she pushed the envelope that first year."

"In what way?"

"Growing up, Dana was always focused on learning. She loved to learn and soaked up everything like a sponge. I think she missed being a kid. So, when she was on her own it was like

she was free to be the kid." Sara laughed. "I remember one night during her first spring break when she came home for a week. She went out with some of her old high school friends. She borrowed my ID. She was so drunk when she came home, it was a wonder she didn't kill herself driving. Fortunately, our folks were out of town-I was the mother that night-I don't think she ever went out drinking after that."

As Tessa listened to Sara speak lovingly about her sister, she let her mind drift to her own sister. Shaking away the thoughts, she looked at the woman. "What was happening with her over the last few months?"

"I honestly don't know. She was home over the winter break and was involved in a holiday tournament that the university was hosting. She won MVP of the tournament," Sara said with pride. "During that time, I think she was happier than I'd ever seen her. She had one more semester then she was off to medical school. That was always her dream. It was after she went back to school for the spring semester that she became withdrawn."

"Did she let whatever was upsetting her interfere with basketball or her studies?" Gus asked.

"No, I don't think so." Sara looked at the detectives. "That's all I have," she said, as she wiped at her tears and her nose with her sleeve. "I can't let myself get this upset-it isn't good for the baby."

Both Tessa and Gus stood up. "Thank you for your time, Mrs. Macintosh."

The sound of a crying newborn filled the room. Sara looked at her watch. "Right on schedule."

Tessa handed the woman her card. "If you think of anything else, please call me."

"I will. I'm sorry I wasn't more of a help."

With a half smile, Tessa said, "You helped us know your sister better and that's of great value to our investigation. Thank you, again."

#

Once they were back in their vehicle, Gus gave his partner a critical gaze. He knew that for Tessa to do the interview with the vic's sister probably brought up old painful memories. Tessa never wanted to discuss that aspect of her life, so he decided on different tactic.

Gus laughed. "Who was that warm touchy feely detective in there?" He grinned when he saw Tessa raise her eyebrows. "Are you going soft on me, Jacoby?"

His partner's bland expression let him know that his effort at levity to lift her spirits hadn't worked. Tessa shrugged and said nothing before she looked out the window that was dotted with moisture from the mist that shrouded the sky. In a whisper she said, "It's tough when you lose a sister."

Gus had heard his partner's words. "Yeah, I thought it was a hard one for you." Gus kept his eyes on the road as she slowly moved away from the residence. "Helen is making that pot roast you like so much tonight. She told me to ask you to join us."

With a curious look, Tessa studied her partner's profile. "Tell her thanks for me. I have stuff to do tonight."

Gus gave his partner a quick look before returning his attention back to the road. He calculated what Tessa's reaction would be if he asked about the lawyer again. He had seen the connection between the two women when Anna came to see Tessa last week. There was definitely something going on. He decided *what the hell* and said, "You going out with that lawyer?"

"Give it a rest, Gus," Tessa said, as she turned back to the window.

"Well, for the record, I think she'd be damn good for you. It's what you need...it's what we all need, Tess...someone to go home to." Gus didn't check out the reaction of his partner as he allowed a smile to filter his lips-she hadn't denied it and that was real progress.

[Continued in conclusion](#)

If you like or dislike my story please let me know at erinoreilly@msn.com

[Erin O'Reilly's Scrolls](#)
[Index Page](#)

~ Fractured ~

by Erin O'Reilly
Author's Note

This story has murder, mystery, and romance. The romance includes intimate moments between consenting adult women. If you are under 18 please find something else to read. The events portrayed in this story are fictional and any resemblance to actual events and/or people is purely coincidental.

Acknowledgement

Thanks to Julie, Gail, Wendy, and Brenda for their valuable input-couldn't have done it without your encouragement and help.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Once the detectives arrived back at the police station, they visited the crime lab's garage. Dana Stratton's Honda Prelude had all the doors open and two members of the crime team were going over every inch of the vehicle.

"Find anything, Ramona?" Gus asked of the small, thin brunette woman.

"Not really. We've pulled fingerprints from inside the vehicle."

Tessa moved so she could see inside the car. "Did you find any blood, seminal fluid, or other viable DNA?"

"Nothing showed up when we scoped it. It's clean-I found a receipt from a car wash dated last weekend. From the amount, it looks like she had it detailed."

"That would be in keeping with how we found her room." Tessa blew out a breath. "Keep looking and let us know what you find."

"I'll do my best, Detective, but I can't find something if it isn't there," Ramona said.

#

The two detectives had been back at their desks for less than five minutes when they saw R. J. Santana get off the elevator.

Tessa was listening to her voice messages as the man strutted toward them. There was a message from the ME telling her that he had received additional information from some of the toxicology and found nothing additional to hone in on the perpetrator-she hadn't expected anything more. Another message was from her dentist, reminding her of an upcoming appointment. Sliding her tongue across her teeth, she shrugged. They'd wait until the case was over to get a cleaning. She quickly dialed the dentist's number and rescheduled.

Listening to her voice mail again, she heard Ira Silverstein telling her that he'd exhausted all avenues with the victim's computer. The last message made a slight smile curve her lips-Anna. She heard *call me* and felt pleasurable sensations course through her body. Just as she was punching the buttons for the Anna's number, R. J. Santana stopped at Gus's desk. She let the receiver clunk back into its cradle. *I'll call her later.*

Clearing his throat, the man gazed at Gus and said, "Well, here I am, Officer," in a melodic tone. "You will be gentle with me, won't you?"

It was nearly impossible for Tessa to keep from laughing but she managed to keep her face neutral. "Trust me, Mr. Santana, Gus is always gentle."

R. J. shot Tessa a malevolent look before he turned back to Gus and pointed to his desk. "Are those the pictures you wanted me to take a look at?"

Gus, in his all business mode, said, "Yes, come with us and we can get you started."

Getting between Tessa and her partner, R. J. followed so close behind Gus that he bumped into the detective when he stopped at a door.

"Oh, so sorry, Officer," the man said, as he held onto Gus's arm. "I hope I didn't hurt you"

Once in the interrogation room, Gus spread several stacks of pictures out across the table and stood with the table between him and the store owner. "We have over a hundred crowd shots that we need you to look at."

"Once you've identified any that you need to get a better look at, we can enlarge them," Tessa added. Unfazed by the glare the man gave her, she pulled down a screen on a side wall in the room. She switched on a projector and a laptop before a picture came onto the screen. She said, "All you need to do is tell us which photo you want enlarged." After the man nodded, she turned everything off.

With a huge sigh, R. J. picked up one photo, held it close to his eyes, and looked at it through his thick glasses. He looked at Gus and smiled before he said, "What do you want me to look for?"

Gus's mouth curved into a frown. "See if you recognize anyone as someone who comes into your shop."

Tessa didn't like the man and didn't want to spend any more time with him than necessary-Gus could handle him. "Do you want something to drink, Mr. Santana? Coffee, soda water?"

Looking up, R. J. cocked his head and fixed Tessa with a quizzical look. "Sure, coffee... black."

With a quick nod, Tessa left the two men and made her way to the coffee maker. After filling two Styrofoam cups with the brew, she headed back to the interrogation room where she found Gus looking over R. J. Santana's shoulder.

In an irritated tone, Gus said, "Once again, if you think you see someone who looks familiar, just put the pictures in a pile and we can enlarge them once you've gone through them all." Gus's eyes met his partner's and he gave her a grateful smile.

"Here's your coffee," Tessa said, as she placed a cup for her partner on the table. "And, here's yours, Mr. Santana. See anyone familiar yet?"

"I've only just started, Detective," the man grumbled.

#

Anna Mikaelson walked briskly down a long corridor past several courtrooms until she reached the elevator bank. Her meeting with Judge Edwin McKinney had lasted longer than she intended. She needed to go by her office and pick up a brief so she could deliver it to yet another judge. It

was important to an upcoming case that she convince the judge that a pre-trial motion requested by the defense was erroneous. Her argument was strong and she cited numerous legal precedents that all supported her argument. She knew logic didn't always persuade judges, so she needed to be at the top of her game.

As she pushed open the door to the U. S. Attorney's suite of offices, a heavysset man in a yellow windbreaker and black cap followed close behind her. When they both were in the reception area, the man asked, "Is this the U. S. Attorney's office?"

Anna looked at the man for a moment, certain she'd seen him somewhere but couldn't place him. With a slight smile, Anna pointed a finger in the direction of a woman, with silver hair pulled back in a bun and who wore glasses, sitting at a desk to the left. "That's Mary, she'll help you."

I hope Tessa called. The thought of the woman made her smile and if she was honest, the most important reason for coming back to her office was to see if Tessa called. Opening her office door, Anna heard someone say, *Anna Mikaelson* and, when she turned toward the voice, everything began to go in slow motion. She saw the man with the yellow windbreaker pointing a gun at her. She heard the distorted sound of someone screaming *he's got a gun get down*. Then, she saw the flash from the gun and felt herself falling into her office. Grabbing her head and rolling to the side, she pushed the door shut and reached up to lock it just as another screaming bullet hit the steel door. In spite of the warm blood she felt running down her face, she managed to crawl under her desk. Pulling her briefcase open, she pulled out a small Smith and Wesson and held it between her trembling hands.

In the distance, Anna could hear more gunshots as she sat unmoving under her desk. Then, it went eerily quiet. The rattling of the doorknob had Anna shivering uncontrollably but she managed to scream, "I've got a gun."

"Ms. Mikaelson, it's the police. You can come out now, it's all over."

"I don't believe you," Anna shouted. She heard the doorknob rattle again. "If you open that door I'll shoot," she screamed. Willing herself to stay aware of what was happening, she shook her head as blood obscured the vision in her left eye. "I'll only open it for Detective Jacoby," she said as loud as she could before she felt everything spinning around her.

#

Tessa had her fill of the sniveling, patronizing R. J. Santana and stood up. The man had been going through the funeral group pictures for a little over fifteen minutes and had only looked at five. Most of the time he was fanning his feathers to get Gus's attention.

Inwardly, she laughed, wondering how much more of it she or Gus could take, but she wouldn't desert her partner. "Gus, why don't you take a breather? I'm sure R.J. and I will be just fine." She eyed the witness. "Isn't that right?"

R. J. fanned himself and his eyes behind the thick glass widened. "Ah, but the detective is being so helpful that I'm not sure I can do this without him here."

Gus rolled his eyes. "I won't be long."

Tessa winked and said, "Take your time, we'll be just fine."

Almost immediately, Gus came back into the room with their captain, John Flynn. "Tessa, I need to speak with you for a moment," the captain said softly.

"Shit, what have I done now," Tessa muttered under her breath. She passed by Gus who had a strange look on his face and stopped. "What's going on?"

"Go with him and I'll keep R. J here company until you get back."

Out in the hallway, John took Tessa by the arm and guided her into another room.

"Now, you're freakin' me out. What's going on Cap?"

"There's been a shooting in the U. S. Attorney's office."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Tessa felt her stomach lurch as she fought to maintain her defenses.

Anna.

"And..."

"Your friend Anna Mikaelson is locked in her office and won't come out until you tell her it's ok."

Calmly, Tessa looked at her captain. "Is she hurt?"

"They can't tell but they did see blood leading to her office. They asked if you'd go over there. Apparently, she has a gun. She won't open the door unless she hears your voice."

I should have insisted on her getting some sort of bodyguard. With her outward appearance belying her inner turmoil, Tessa hurried out of the room, ran down the three flights of stairs, and was out in the street within minutes.

Justice Square contained the courthouse, where the judges, DA, and the U. S. Attorney had offices. The main police station that housed the chief's offices, along with the detective division, was located there too. Various other building where lawyers had their offices along with bail bondsmen also was located around the square. All around a small square were emergency

vehicles and more police officers than she could count. She ran across the square and into the courthouse, only to have a guard stop her at the door. "You can't go in there," the burly man said.

Tessa flashed the man her badge, then in full combat mode, she pushed past him and caught the elevator just as it was closing. "Come on, come on," she said between her gritted teeth. Finally, the doors slid open and she was on the run again, until she reached the suite of rooms that had Anna's office. She held up her badge as she pushed past the commotion and the bodies that were bleeding on the floor.

When she reached Anna's door, Mike Bonus, a redheaded, balding detective said, "We haven't heard anything from her in the last five minutes."

Tessa sucked in a breath and knocked on the door.

Anna heard the knocking and immediately opened her eyes. "I told you I have a gun," she murmured.

The faint sound of Anna's voice, had Tessa whispering, "Thank God," before she called out, "Anna, it's, Tessa. You're safe now. I'm coming in." She looked at the man next to her. "Do you have a key?"

Mike said, "Here, wear this," as he gave her a bullet proof vest before inserting the key and turning the knob.

The first thing Tessa saw was a sizable bloodied area on the carpet near the door. Her eyes followed the trail to the desk. Slowly, she moved closer. "Anna, I'm here. Are you ok?"

"Tessa?"

Squatting down, Tessa peered under the desk then sat on the floor and gently took the gun out of Anna's limp hand. She saw blood running down the left side of Anna's face-her white silk shirt covered in the red congealing liquid. Easing her head back around the desk, she softly said, "We need a medic." Tessa turned back to Anna. "You can come out now it's safe." She held out her hand and let go of a breath when Anna took it. "I've got you now," she whispered as Anna fell into Tessa's arms sobbing.

Two paramedics were by the desk-both females who looked fit and capable. "We need to get to her, Detective."

Tessa looked up at them and nodded. "I need to let you go so the medics can look at you." When she saw the panic in Anna's eyes she leaned in and whispered, "I won't be far...I'll never be far away."

While Tessa stood by and watched the medics tend to Anna, Mike Bonus stood next to her.

"How's she doing?" he quietly asked.

"Don't know yet." Tessa narrowed her eyes. "What the hell happened here?" she growled, as all her pent up frustration spilled over into her words. She pulled the vest off and shoved it in his direction.

Mike frowned and said, "Hey, I didn't do it."

Tessa closed her eyes. "I know I'm sorry."

"The best we can figure is, the shooter," -he pointed to a man in a yellow windbreaker with a gaping hole in his head- "came in here looking for Mikaelson. We found a newspaper article in his pocket about a murder at Holcomb Prison-his sister. Why he chose Mikaelson we don't know, but my best guess is she prosecuted the case."

"How did he get in with the gun?"

"We're working on that."

They watched as the medics put Anna on a stretcher before pulling it up and locking it into place. Tessa was immediately by Anna's side. Anna clutched Tessa's hand, as the stretcher she was on began clattering toward the door. When they reached the elevator, one of the paramedics said, "We need to take it from here, Detective."

"I'm going with you," Tessa said in a voice that brooked no argument.

Tessa leaned down and whispered, "Don't be afraid. You're safe now. I'll be in the ambulance with you."

Anna clutched Tessa's hand tighter then closed her eyes. "Ok."

#

Sitting in the emergency waiting room, Tessa leaned her head against the cool light green wall and began to shake. Looking down at her bloody hands and the darker stains on her black t-shirt, she trembled, knowing it was Anna's blood. "I should have insisted on the bodyguard."

Standing up, Tessa took her phone out of her pocket and called Gus. When she heard his voice, she said, "Hey, I'm at the hospital. Don't know what her condition is yet. She lost so much blood," she whispered as she fought to keep the fear out of her voice. Reacting in such an emotional way was foreign to her. She had acted exactly the way the academy taught her-calm and steady under adversity yet her body was shaking. It had nothing to do with the shooting and everything to do with Anna.

She gathered her emotions and tucked them away as she waited for news. Finally, after thirty minutes a nurse came to her and said, "You can go in now, Detective. She's in room six."

Poking her head in the door, Tessa was relieved to see Anna sitting upright. "Hey," she said softly.

Anna's eyes brightened immediately. "Hey."

Once she was at Anna's side, Tessa took her hand and looked at the bandage on the left side of Anna's head. Blood was still evident on her clothes and skin. "What did the doctor say?"

Anna briefly closed her eyes. "The bullet didn't go in my brain but the impact bruised it. He said they wanted to do a CAT scan to be sure. That's what I'm waiting to do now," she said with a trembling voice.

Tessa gently stroked Anna's face and encircled her shoulders with her arm. "I've got you."

No longer able to keep the tears of fear away, Anna sobbed openly. "I was so scared, Tessa."

So far, out of her comfort zone and not knowing what to say, Tessa leaned in and kissed Anna's tear stained cheek. "I know."

Tessa pulled away from Anna when the door opened. A middle aged woman with highlighted brown hair, glared at her. "Her parents are here" The woman said, "Only one visitor at a time."

Tessa looked at the nurse. "Just give me a minute more."

The nurse grumbled and said, "Fine...one minute."

Tessa turned back to Anna. "I need to go back to the station."

Anna grasped her hand tighter. "Please don't leave."

"Your folks are here and I'll be back in a little while."

"Promise?"

"Yes." Tessa gently pressed her lips to Anna's forehead. "I won't be long."

#

Gus met her before she entered the interrogation room. "You ok?" he asked.

"Yeah, I washed off all the blood and, luckily, I had an extra shirt in my locker."

"How's she doing?"

"She's had ten stitches. The bullet seared her left temple. A plus was she didn't lose consciousness but I expect they will want to keep her at least overnight."

The cool tone of his partner's voice worried Gus. "Hey, if you want to go back to the hospital, I can take care of things here."

"No, I'm good. Anna's parents are with her. I'm better off here-it'll help me focus." She looked at Gus and gave him a thin smile. "Can't leave you alone with R. J. too long...there'd be hell to pay if Helen found out." She shrugged and moved into the room.

Entering the interrogation room, Tessa looked at the small man inspecting the pictures. "You find something for me to look at while I was gone?"

R. J. said, "Perhaps. Can I get another cup of coffee?"

"I'll get it," Gus said, as he brushed past his partner.

Without saying a word, Tessa sat down opposite the man and focused on what he was doing.

Santana ignored her and continued to inspect the pictures. When Gus came back in the room with a fresh cup of coffee, the man's eyes brightened. "Oh, thank you so much, Detective. You're so kind to me."

The partners sat silently while R. J. slowly made his way through the pictures. They watched as he held up the last picture, shook his head, and put it in the discard pile.

"Ok, I have sorted through all these pictures. I'm going to need a magnifying glass for some of them.

Gus gave the man a sideways glance. "I told you that we'd put them on the overheard so you could get a better look."

The harsh words made R. J. slump in his chair. "I'm sorry," he whimpered.

Exasperated with the witness, Gus got up and moved toward the pathetic man. "Which are the ones you need to get a better look at?"

R. J. touched one pile. "In this one I don't know anyone." He moved his hand to the other stack of pictures. "These I think I recognized people but I can't be sure. The image is too small or not very clear."

"Did you see someone you recognize?" Tessa asked.

"Not sure. There's something familiar about some of the people." The man shrugged. "I need a better look at them."

"Fine, we can enlarge them for you." Gus said.

R.J. looked at Gus and smiled before he reached out and touched the detective. "Yes, *enlarged* is always good, don't you think?"

Gus closed his eyes and moved away.

With an amused expression, Tessa watched and listened to the small man who was clearly enamored with her partner. She was impressed that Gus had kept his cool-she could tell by his expression that he wasn't happy. *Wonder how much more he can take.* When Gus looked her way, she winked.

Tessa picked up the pictures and guessed that the man had designated around ten photos for further review. "Mr. Santana, if you'll give me a minute, I'll get this up on the screen so you can take a closer look."

Once Tessa had correlated the numbers on the back of the pictures to the ones on the laptop, she made a few keystrokes, created a slideshow, and then brought the first picture up on the screen.

Both detectives looked at the picture, noting whether they knew any of the people and if they'd interviewed them.

Tessa said to R. J., "Tell me when you want to see the next picture, Mr. Santana."

The crowd shots kept flicking on the screen without comment from the witness. He'd give a wave of his hand when he wanted to see the next picture.

Irritated, Tessa's jaw clenched in reaction to the tension she felt in her body. "If on the second look you don't see anyone you recognize, Mr. Santana, can you at least tell us which ones you thought were familiar?"

Flustered, the man shot the woman detective an angry glance. "I'm doing the best I can," he said defiantly. "Do you remember every person you meet, Detective?"

Tessa smiled. "As a matter of fact I do, Mr. Santana-it's my job."

Gus moved closer to the man. "You're doing a good job, Mr. Santana. Please keep on looking."

The shop owner looked up at Gus and smiled.

When the seventh picture appeared on the wall, Santana said, "Stop," as he got up and moved closer to the screen.

Both Tessa and Gus moved to within inches of the man.

With a stubby finger, R. J. tapped it against the image of Rod Gambado. "I've seen him before."

"In your shop?" Tessa asked with suppressed excitement.

"Not sure. I only know that I've see him. He's a man I'd never forget."

The detectives waited while the man stroked his braided beard and focused his beady eyes on the picture.

SNAP. The sound of the man snapping his fingers rang loud in the silent room. "I know where I've seen him."

"Where?" Gus asked, as he moved closer to R. J.

"He comes to a club that I frequent," R. J. said, as he wiggled his eyebrows at Gus. "A club for men called the Lavender Poodle. You should go there sometime, Detective Barrett."

Tessa's gaze shifted from her partner to the witness. "Let's move on," she said, before flashing the next picture on the screen.

R. J. shook his head and waved his hand. On the next picture he said, "I know her. She's been in my store. She came in and bought my book." R. J. shook his head. "She didn't want me to autograph it, said that it was for a friend and she would come in herself for an autograph." He continued tapping on the face on the wall. "I remember thinking she wasn't the typical person who came into my store."

With her eyes focusing on the spot where R. J.'s finger was pointing, Tessa asked, "Why did you think that?"

"Well," the man started, as he sat back down. "Most of the customers I get are the earthy type. One might even say they're odd." He shrugged. "Much like me," he said, before he grinned. "I've seen you looking at me like that," he said to Tessa. "That's my modus operandi." He smiled. "Got to keep the customers coming back for more."

"How was this woman different from your other customers?" Gus pressed.

"She looked more like a school teacher than a mystic in search of life and meaning."

"How often did she come in?" Gus asked cautiously.

R. J. fingered his bearded chin before he said to Gus, "Just that one time."

Unconvinced, Tessa asked, "And you remember her from that one meeting?"

R. J. gave the detective a speculative look. "When someone comes in my store and buys my book and doesn't want an autograph, I remember. It's like a slap in the face."

Gus moved closer to the man. "Did she say anything else about why she was there?"

"No, and I didn't ask."

"Do you remember if you gave her one of the talismans?" Tessa pressed.

R. J. shrugged. "Probably, I give the talisman to most everyone who buys something."

Tessa glared at the man. "You're just telling us that now? I thought you said you only gave them to your special customers."

The shop owner whined, "I thought you were going to try and pin the murder on me. I had just gotten back from my uncle's viewing and, when Javier told me you were at my store, I didn't know what to think."

With a curious look, Tessa said, "How did you know we were there about the murder?"

R. J. winked at Tessa. "I see things. It's a sixth sense kind of thing." His eyes rapidly moved between both detectives. "It's the truth. I didn't kill that girl. I didn't even know who she was until I saw it on the news."

Tessa walked back to the laptop and moved the mouse so the next picture flashed on the screen.

Of the four remaining pictures, the man picked out the same woman from one more crowd shot.

Tessa rubbed her eyes then massaged her forehead with her thumb and forefinger as she contemplated her next move. "Thank you for coming in Mr. Santana. I appreciate you taking your time to help us out," she said.

The man ignored Tessa and looked at Gus. "If you need any more help, you know where I am." He smiled and winked at Gus before he got up and left the room.

Once the man had left, Tessa picked up one of the pictures and stared at Vanessa Carlton.

Chapter Thirty

"What do you think?" Gus asked, as they closed in on their desks.

"I'm having a hard time getting my head around Vanessa Carlton being the perp. All the profiles point to a man." Tessa shook her head. "I remember thinking that something was off with her when I interviewed her but chalked that up to her working all night." She shrugged. "What's your take?"

"Right now, we need to put all our ducks in a row and see if we can make the connection between Carlton and Stratton. I'm certain that the woman doesn't think we know about her so she's not going to leave town." He smiled gently at his partner and shook his head slightly as he looked at his partner and debated the wisdom of what he wanted to say. Compassionately, he said, "Look, I know you're worried about Anna. Go see how's she doing now and I'll hold down things down here until you get back."

Tessa squared her shoulders and fixed her jaw as she fought to keep her emotions from dictating her reaction. She stared mutely at the man who had been her friend and partner for a long time. "Gus..." She stopped and reigned in her emotions. "There's nothing I can do at the hospital...I'd feel useless and obvious."

"Have you had any updates?"

No longer able to suppress her emotions, Tessa said in a shaky voice, "No," as he fought the tears that threatened. "God, Gus, there was blood everywhere. I thought I'd lost her."

"You care about her, don't you?"

"I don't know what I feel right now." She shrugged. "Mostly, I feel numb." She looked in his eyes. "I'm scared," she whispered.

Gus put his arm around her shoulder. "I know you are. That's what you feel when someone you care about is hurt-you're helpless."

Tessa moved away and reined in her emotions. "Tell me about Santana. Do you think he's viable?"

Knowing that any further discussion about her feelings would not happen, Gus nodded. "Right, I believed him when he said the Carlton woman came into his shop. Like you, I find it hard to believe she killed Dana Stratton. We need to find out what kind of vehicle she drives." He lifted one eyebrow.

"It is entirely possible that her shopping at that store is a coincidence." Tessa said, "Maybe she knows who did or is in cahoots with the guy who killed the vic."

It didn't take long for them to find out that Vanessa Carlton drove a two thousand and five Jeep Cherokee. It was dark blue, which well could be the color of the vehicle in the grainy hospital surveillance tape.

All the while, Tessa kept looking at her wristwatch and thinking about Anna and how she was doing. She couldn't get the image of the blood covering the upper part of her body or the look of trust in her eyes. *If I can just make it a little while longer, I can go to her.*

"Tessa?"

She shook her head and cleared her mind. "We know she probably had a money clip from the store, since Santana confirmed she was in his store." Tessa rubbed her forehead, as a headache that had threatened to overtake her ever since she heard about the shooting, was gaining some legs.

"She bought a book that the vic used for references in one of her papers but we haven't linked the two together yet," Gus said.

"They have the hospital in common," Tessa offered.

Gus sat with a thoughtful look on his face for several minutes before he answered. "True, but that was only for one event. We know that the vic was in the garage but, in all the other videos, we never see her actually going into the hospital."

"It's logical to assume that whoever she went with in the garage is the doer." Tessa swallowed hard, trying not to let the headache win.

"I agree. We know Carlton drives a dark colored Jeep."

Tessa closed her eyes. "But, the woman doesn't fit the profile. Besides, she was at work at the time of the murder."

"Do we know that for a fact?" Gus asked. "The mother said she went to work and you think she may have a drinking problem. Maybe she thought her daughter went to work but didn't."

"She was at work. The hospital employee schedule was one of the first things I checked before I interviewed her."

"Then it can't be her." Gus thought for a minute then asked, "If we find the book in the vic's apartment, do you think we'll find Carlton's prints on it?"

The headache was muddling every thought that Tessa had. "I guess that's the next logical step. It just sounds so farfetched to me."

Gus looked at his partner in question. "How can you say that? The vic used the book as a reference and we know that Carlton bought the book. To think there is a connection between them isn't farfetched at all."

The headache that constricted Tessa's brain took full control. "Let's look at this in the morning," she said, as she fought to keep her partner from seeing her pain. "Fresh eyes always work the best."

Gus looked at his partner. It was clear that she was in pain, not that she'd ever admit that to him. "Why don't you go on ahead? I need to check with my bowling buddies about tonight. Carlton will keep for the night. She doesn't know we suspect her and there's no real reason for her to think that we do."

"That's true. I'm sure the news will be focusing on the shootings at the courthouse. The Stratton case is old news by now. They will bury it in the back of the newspaper, if they mention it at all. Besides, didn't Carlton say they didn't get a newspaper?"

Once Tessa left the building, she gulped in the cool air, as she tried to gain her footing on the slippery slope of her headache. Sitting in the Expedition, she sank into the seat as her head pounded. She needed to get home and take a pain killer.

As Tessa navigated her vehicle along the familiar route to her home, a vision of Anna floated past the headache and a smile curved on her face. "Damn the headache...I need to see her again." Flicking the turn signal to the left, she headed toward the hospital.

Chapter Thirty-One

During the fifteen minute drive to the hospital, Tessa argued with herself about the wisdom of going there again. From an earlier discussion she had with Anna's mother, she knew both the parents were there and that Anna was agitated demanding to see Tessa. *I told Anna I'd be back, didn't I? I want to see her.* Getting out of her vehicle, attaching her badge to her jacket pocket, and walking toward the building, Tessa stopped in her tracks. *I need to see her.*

Once inside, a balding man who looked to be in his fifties, asked her from behind a glass window, "May I help you."

Tessa lifted her badge. "Detective Jacoby, I'd like to speak with one of the shooting victims brought in earlier."

"Name?"

"Anna Mikaelson."

The man looked at his monitor before he said, "She's still in exam six."

Tessa frowned as panic began to rise. "The shooting was four hours ago. Why is she still in the emergency room?"

"We're jammed up and are waiting for a bed to open."

"Unbelievable," Tessa muttered under her breath. "Is it ok if I go back and talk with her?"

"She's already spoken with two other detectives...how many does it take?" He waved his hand and said, "Go on. If someone else is there, tell them to leave-one visitor at a time."

#

Tessa walked past a circular desk where nurses, doctors, and paramedics were busy doing whatever it was that they did there. She went straight to the room she had visited earlier. Just as she approached the opened door, she heard Anna's voice.

"I don't need to spend the night, Doctor. I'm perfectly fine. I want to go home. I can take care of myself."

"We'll be there with her," Anna's mother, Sonya, said.

Agitatedly, Anna said, "I don't need babysitters-I need my own bed."

"I'm afraid I can't release you unless I know someone is there with you. Head injuries are tricky enough without adding a bullet into the mix," said the calm voice.

Anna scrunched up her eyes, gritted her teeth, and instantly regretted the action. She held her hand to her head and closed her eyes. When she opened them, she saw Tessa standing outside the door and motioned her in.

Tessa stepped into the small room that was now crowded with a patient, a doctor and three others. She sucked in a breath when she saw Anna again with a large bandage covering the side of her head. "Hi, I was just checking on you." Her reward-a sparkling smile.

Anna looked at her parents first, then at the doctor. "I'm going home with her."

With a look of surprise, Tessa studied Anna's parents for their reaction. Anna's mother looked at her curiously, before she smiled. Anna's father, a tall man, broad of shoulders with the same blue eyes as his daughter-just stared at her. The doctor, a short intelligent looking woman with auburn hair frowned.

Finally, the doctor asked, "And you are?" Her eyes looked at the badge on Tessa's jacket and the bulge of her gun.

With her eyes never leaving Anna, she said, "Tessa...Detective Jacoby...Anna and I are friends." She shrugged and let a small intimate smile meant only for Anna to curve her lips. "I've come to offer my services for whatever she needs."

"Now, wait a minute here," Carl Mikaelson, said. "If Anna goes anywhere, it will be home with us. Personally, I don't think it's wise for her to leave the hospital until the doctor is certain she won't suffer any repercussions from the shooting."

Sonya patted her husband's arm and looked at Tessa. *Now I can put a face on the voice.* "Anna is a grown woman, Carl, and she can make her own decisions. Come on let's go home. I think Anna is in good hands." Her eyes traveled to her daughter, whose eyes were still on the detective. *So, this is the detective that stole Anna's heart.*

Anna broke the eye contact and pulled back the sheet that covered her. "Where do I sign so I can get out of here, Doctor?"

"It's against my advice and you will have to sign a release absolving me and the hospital from responsibility for what might happen if you leave."

"I'm a lawyer and I understand that perfectly. Right now, I want to go home with my friend and that's what I intend to do, so where do I sign." She looked at her father and said, "I'm going to get dressed now so, if you don't want to see me naked, I suggest you leave." A quirky smile crossed her face. "Tessa, you can stay."

The glare from Anna's father had Tessa turning away. "I'll just wait outside with your mother."

Anna crooked her finger and said, "Come here." When Tessa was near she whispered, "I'll feel safer if you're close by." Her voice trembled slightly and she looked away from the intense scrutiny of Tessa's eyes. She focused on her father who was still standing in the doorway. "Please close the door."

When she heard the distinctive sound of the door bolt engaging, Tessa moved closer to Anna before she gently encircled her with a slight hug. "I won't let anyone hurt you again," she said into the blonde hair. "If you think you need to stay at the hospital, I'll stay with you."

"Oh, no, there're only two things I want-you by my side keeping me safe and my own bed." With a sly wink at Tessa, Anna pulled off the hospital gown and heard, to her satisfaction, Tessa's indrawn breath.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Maneuvering her car into the parking garage of the Overlook Apartments, Tessa began to pull into a space marked visitors. She'd seen the advertisements for the apartments, stating that they were spacious and luxurious-and way out of her price range.

Anna pointed to an empty space. "You can use my spot since my car is still at work." For a moment, the events of the last few hours washed over her. *I might never have come home again.*

"Ok," Tessa said, before she turned with a smile at the comment. Her expression quickly changed when she saw a glimpse of horror on Anna's face. "Are you ok?"

Shaking away the previous thought, Anna gave Tessa a tight smile. "I have a headache from hell but, with you here, I'm doing much better."

"Hmm, I've been skirting a headache for a while now. I'm not sure if it started because of the case or what happened to you," she shrugged, "but I sympathize." Tessa didn't realize what she admitted in those few words but Anna's smile set her heart racing. "Let's get you inside and comfortable."

Taking the elevator to the top floor, they exited and Tessa looked down the hallway for seven-o-one. She was surprised to see that there were only two doors, seven-o-one, and seven-o-two. That meant that Anna's apartment occupied one half of the floor. "Wow."

"I take it that's in reference to me and not the hallway," Anna replied, as she watched the expression of awe traverse the detective's features as she stood at the door to her apartment. "You don't have to knock I have a key, remember." Dangling the object in her hand, Tessa took it and put her arm around Anna's waist as she slid the key into the lock.

Once inside, Anna pointed to a door. "I need to take a quick shower and change. Make yourself at home and I'll be right back."

"Do you need any help?" Tessa asked suddenly frozen in place. "I mean are you sure you're steady enough to take a shower?"

"I'll be fine but I'll leave the doors open so I can call you if I need help."

"Ok, I'll be right here if you need me." She watched Anna's retreat. "Hey, don't get those stitches wet."

Anna waved and said, "I won't," as she disappeared inside her bedroom.

It took a lot to impress Tessa and Anna's apartment did just that. The foyer led to a spacious living room that invited the viewer to come in, sit and relax. Comfortable was an understatement and that surprised Tessa. The impeccable way the lawyer dressed made Tessa believe that where she lived would reflect that image-it did not.

As she listened to the water running, Tessa looked around the room. It reminded her of her grandmother's house. The large, deeply padded furniture in Anna's apartment wasn't old but it held the charm of an era that relished in creature comforts. Tessa imagined what it would be like to fall onto the couch and have it engulf her in its comfort.

When Tessa looked up, she saw Anna, fresh from her shower framed in a doorway and it astounded her-she was stunning. The dark blue silk pajamas she wore made her eyes gleam. Even the bandage on her face and head didn't detract from the way her hair shone with just a small amount of curl as it gently kissed her shoulders.

Fumbling for words, Tessa said, "I really like your furniture," and immediately chastised herself for her lame words. *What a dopey thing to say.*

"Thanks," Anna said with a slight smile, as she moved into the room.

Getting a good look at the lawyer, Tessa saw strain reflecting on the beautiful face. "How about you sit and I'll get you something to drink and eat. You can throw me instructions on where things are from the comfort of your chair."

With a look of relief, Anna nodded and moved toward the couch. "Thanks, I'm sorry this isn't the date you expected."

Tessa moved quickly and was at Anna's side before she could catch her breath. She cupped the lawyer's chin and turned her face. Anna's eyes were brimming with tears and Tessa drew her in and held her tightly. "You're safe now," Tessa whispered as she felt Anna's body shake. She had seen the emotion a hundred times over but it had never affected her like this before.

"I'm sorry," sobbed Anna. "I thought I could just put it behind me but I can't. I keep hearing that man's voice calling my name before he shot me."

Tessa pulled back slightly and ran her thumb across Anna's cheek to wipe away the tears-they kept falling. "I wish I could tell you that it will all be gone in the morning but I can't. It will take time."

Anna buried her head in Tessa's shoulder and sighed between sobs. It felt good to have the detective's protective arms around her. Soon her tears began to subside and she lifted her head. "Thank you."

Guiding Anna to the couch, Tessa cleared her throat and said, "Sit with me." Once seated, Tessa shrugged. "I see bodies in all kinds of conditions. Some are gross, others aren't so bad, but I live with all their faces," she said softly. "But the ones you never get completely over are those of the people you know."

"Like the people in my office, who were in the wrong place at the wrong time?"

"Yes," Tessa said absently. "I walked into my sister's house and found her lying in a pool of blood. She had slit her wrist."

Anna's forehead wrinkled as she took Tessa's hand in hers. "That must have been horrible for you."

Tessa looked down at the entwined fingers in her lap, and shook her head. "It was ten years ago and, until recently, I thought I had allowed Rachel to be at rest. Now, I see her face, her body, her blood constantly."

"What happened to make you think of her?"

Tessa closed her eyes. "The Stratton case."

Gently prodding, Anna asked, "What is it about that case that brought back the memories?"

"Rachel, too, was raped but she lived." Tessa looked at Anna with tears edging her eyes. "The sleaze murdered all the others he raped but Rachel was the one that lived. Some said she was lucky." Tessa gritted her teeth. "What eventually killed her was living."

For a long moment, everything was silent except for the gentle hum of a fan. Finally, Tessa said, "I remember being in on the man's interview...his name was Nick Grasso. He wouldn't let us record what he was saying. Instead, he insisted he get some paper so he could write his confession." Tessa closed her eyes as she let the memory wash over her. "At the top of the page he wrote *Rachel* and then kept tracing the letters over and over again. He somehow found out I was her sister and he looked at me with his dark malevolent eyes and said, *never forget my name, Detective, for I'll be back to take someone else you love.*"

Anna swallowed hard. "Was he guilty? Did he get sentenced?"

"He was eventually convicted for murdering the other women. Rachel didn't live long enough to testify ..." Tessa trailed off as she tried to blink back tears. PLOP, a teardrop hit the back of her hand. "He spent three years in jail before someone shanked him in a bathroom. I thought good riddance."

Anna locked gazes with Tessa. Her confession was having a cathartic effect on her after her own experiences of the day. Strangely enough, it was what she needed. "If he's dead, then why did the Stratton case bring back the memories?"

"I'm not sure but something about it did. I've always thought of her when we investigate the death of women, especially the rape victims. I think it was when I stood in the morgue with her parents as they stood by her body, grieving. Suddenly, I missed my sister more than I had in a long time."

Letting go of the detective's hand, Anna's arms engulfed her. "I'm so sorry that you had to go through that," she whispered, as she gently rocked Tessa.

As the two women melted into the other's body, they cried in mutual need and sadness.

Anna holding her in her arms felt right. But for Tessa, her emotions concerning the lawyer were too raw, too new, and she found herself teetering on the edge of happiness-that terrified her. But she no longer felt like she was balancing on a precipice that threatened to let her fall into an abyss that had no escape. In Anna's arms, sharing a common emotion, she felt safe for the first time in what seemed like forever. It was exactly where she knew she wanted to be-where she belonged.

Tessa touched her own cheeks and marveled at the evidence of the tears she'd shed in front of someone else-it was a first. She pulled away slightly. "Right," she said taking a calming breath. "I think we both need a drink. According to your discharge orders, you can't have alcohol, caffeine or anything that's a stimulant." Tessa grinned. "Guess you're getting water. But, since the only restriction for food is that you eat light, you're in luck. I will enchant you with my culinary skills."

Surprised, Anna pulled back further and looked into the green eyes, with a question on her lips.

Before Anna could speak, Tessa said, "Which way to the kitchen?"

"Over there." Anna pointed to a room off to the left.

Anna's eyes widened. "You mean it, don't you...that you can cook?"

Tessa let out a hearty laugh. "I'll have you know that for all my summers during high school and college I was a short order cook."

Shaking her head and then wishing she hadn't, pain ferociously shot through her temple. As the pain receded, Anna said, "No way," as she watched Tessa moving toward the kitchen. She stood up. "*This* I've got to see."

Stopping at the kitchen bar, Tessa eyed the area. Just like the other rooms, it had a homey feel. She turned and, when she saw Anna nearing her, she was at her side instantly before guiding her to a stool. "Take a seat, my dear, and be prepared for a taste of down home cooking."

Again, Anna laughed and, even though the action caused her head to throb slightly, it felt good.

"I'm assuming that, unlike me, you have your cupboards and refrigerator well stocked," Tessa said, as she opened a cupboard and nodded.

Sitting on a bar stool, Anna shrugged as her face began heating up. "To tell the truth, they're only full because I pay a service to do my grocery shopping. There just isn't the time to do it."

Tessa let a wry smile cross her face. "I know what that's like."

Anna let her eyes wander out a large plate glass window. "What happened today made me rethink the importance of dedicating my life solely to my job." She sighed. "Your life can be taken away in an instant, Tessa, with the things on your to-do list that exists outside of work left undone." Turning her face and gazing at Tessa she said, "I don't want to live my life like that anymore." *I want you in my life.*

Tessa silently agreed.

#

After they devoured the meal of tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, Tessa and Anna sat close together on the couch.

"I can't recall ever having such a good sandwich or soup," Anna said, as she bumped her elbow against Tessa. "It's been a long time since anyone cooked for me. Thank you."

Tessa's heart was thumping so hard that she was certain Anna would hear it. The sexual energy that was flowing between her and Anna was hard to resist, yet she knew she had to separate her emotions from her actions. There would be time to make love-this wasn't it.

Anna's phone rang and she reluctantly answered it when the caller ID identified it was her mother. "Hi, Mom," she said in a strong voice that belied the pain she felt.

"Are you resting?"

"Yes, Mom. Tessa made me a scrumptious meal and we just finished eating."

"You need to rest and not stay up all night."

"I'm not going to, Mom."

"But, what if your detective friend gets called away, who will be there with you?"

"If she does, I'll call you, promise. Goodnight, Mom, I love you."

Hanging up the phone, Anna lifted a shoulder and smiled. "Mothers."

"You're lucky she cares," Tessa said softly.

"What about your folks?"

Tessa looked away from Anna's intense gaze. "Just like your parents, they live about an hour away," Tessa said. "They kind of blamed me for Rachel's death, which didn't surprise me. I never could measure up in their eyes," she whispered.

Anna caressed Tessa's cheek, as she saw the look of sadness in her face. "I wish I could take your pain away," she said softly, before she gently pressed her lips to Tessa's soft mouth.

Their kisses were sweet and tender and lingered long after they parted. Smiling fondly, Anna let her fingers trace the lines of Tessa's face before they splayed and slid through her hair. "I'm glad you're here but, if you do need to go, I'll be fine."

"Sorry ma'am, you're stuck with me...at least for tonight anyway," Tessa remarked with a lopsided grin.

Anna's eyes bored into Tessa's looking beyond the attempt at humor and what she saw satisfied her. "Thank you, Detective Jacoby. I accept your kind offer."

Pulling Anna into her arms, Tessa's mouth hovered over Anna's until their lips gently touched again. The explosion Tessa felt in her body was powerful as their kisses turned more passionate.

Responding in kind, Anna relished the feeling of their tongues touching before dueling for superiority. She could feel Tessa's passion and that ratcheted hers higher. When her hand snaked under Tessa's shirt, she was surprised that the detective pulled away.

Anna's husky voice, laced with sexual need said, "What's wrong? I thought you wanted me."

Tessa untangled her body and stood up. "I do."

Confused, Anna asked, "Then why did you stop?"

Tessa crouched and sat back on her heels in front of the lawyer. "I think you're supposed to restrict physical activity," she said with a grin. The vision of a naked Anna in the hospital found its way between her thighs. She sucked in a breath and her voice lowered as she took Anna's hands in hers. "We are both suffering from exhaustion, headaches, and tension. When we make love, we both need to be able to take the time to show each other how we feel." Her eyes searched Anna's that suddenly gleamed with understanding. "Just like you said the other day, I need to be able to give you one hundred percent of me and I know that's what I want from you, Anna. Right now, we both know that's not an option." Tessa traced a finger down the pale right cheek of the lawyer with a tender smile. "You look gorgeous, by the way. Have I ever told you that?"

Anna cupped Tessa's cheek with her palm. "No, not in words, but you have very expressive eyes."

Tessa chuckled and saw tiredness draining the last bit of energy from Anna. "Well that's good then because I was never one for small talk. I can see that you're all in so let's get you in bed."

Anna didn't protest, as she meekly allowed Tessa to take her to her room. Once inside, Tessa felt like the room was familiar to her, but perhaps the woman at her side provoked those feelings. "Why don't you go to the bathroom and I'll get your meds and be back to tuck you in."

Anna gave her a lingering look as she headed toward the door. "Will you stay with me...in here for the night? Please."

Tessa smiled slightly and nodded. "I told you, Anna, I would protect you. And for the record, I don't want to be anywhere else."

As Tessa left the bedroom, Anna whispered, "For the record you didn't need to enchant me with your cooking skills. I was already under your spell from the first moment I saw you." With a happy sigh, she headed for her bathroom. Content that for tonight, at least, Tessa was going to be by her side.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Tessa woke with a start from a dream she could almost touch, only to have it completely fade away. Sweat saturated her t-shirt and underwear as she pulled the blanket tightly around her. Her eyes tracked to the digital readout of the clock by Anna's bed. The muted red seemed to flicker before her eyes focused and she saw it was four-thirty. For a few minutes, she allowed herself to look at the woman peacefully sleeping a few feet away from her. A faint smile tracked on Tessa's lips as she threw away the blanket. She moved to kneel beside the bed before reaching out to touch Anna's silky hair. She stroked it tenderly.

Anna's voice, foggy with sleep, whispered, "Hey, you must be cramped in that chair." Anna lifted the blanket and sheets in an invitation. "Why don't you get in here beside me?"

Tessa hesitated before she climbed in beside Anna. The action engulfing her in the scent and warmth of the woman, "Can I call someone to stay with you before I go to work?"

Anna wrapped her arms around Tessa's body. "Nope, I'm going into work too. Before you say it, I feel fine and I owe it to those who fared worse than I did. Can you understand that?"

For a second, Tessa wanted to argue the point but she didn't-she would have done the same. In the cocoon of Anna's bed, she felt herself relaxing. "Yeah, I understand completely. Now, close your eyes and let's get a few more hours sleep. I'm pretty sure we both need it."

Anna smiled as she placed a small kiss on Tessa's neck. "Hold me." When Tessa spooned against her, she sighed in contentment.

Tessa didn't flinch or feel any other emotion but happiness. This is where she wanted to be and a part of her hoped it would never end. *If I'm lucky, it won't.*

#

Two hours later, Tessa returned to her home after she and Anna ate breakfast. Anna had promised to either call someone or take a cab to work.

Once she had showered and dressed, Tessa sat in her favorite chair with a cup of coffee and contemplated the night before. It was a night she didn't think she'd ever forget-Anna-the name washed over her and she smiled. She tried to pinpoint when she realized that she cared for the woman on a level that was foreign to any other relationship. *Perhaps it was at first sight.* Anna instilled a sense of belonging in her and she no longer felt lonely. She felt a tingle of fear at the prospect of having a serious relationship with Anna but relaxed her shoulders and chased it away-she was no longer afraid of commitment. She smiled. It was comforting to know someone cared about her.

She remembered the first time she met the lawyer and her confusion and the hesitation she felt at her immediate attraction. When she overheard the woman talking about Anna being a womanizer, she recalled how she felt both relieved and saddened. Even if she didn't believe it, a small part of her did and it was stupid of her to give any credence to the gossip-Anna deserved better.

For Tessa, there had never been a forever in her life and the thought made her tremble.

#

Getting off the elevator, Tessa looked around the room that housed police detectives. She arrived later than usual and saw other detectives moving about the area. So she was surprised when Captain Flynn came out of his office toward her.

"Good morning," Tessa said.

"We need to talk," the dark haired man said.

"Ok, what about?" she said slowly, wondering where the conversation was going.

"About yesterday and the shooting. How are you doing?"

"It's all good, Cap. Anna had a head wound that required some stitches and, believe it or not, she's back at work today.'

Captain Flynn frowned. "Does she know that the office is off limits while Mike and his team do their investigation?"

A deep fissure developed between Tessa's eyebrows. "Yeah, I told her." She shrugged. "She seems to think that she could get her files and work elsewhere."

The captain saw the worried look on his detective's face. "That's how it usually works."

I should call and make sure she's doing ok. Distracted, Tessa said, "Yeah, you're probably right."

Before going back to his office, the captain looked at Tessa "When Gus gets here I want to see you both in my office."

Tessa nodded and watched the man walk away. "What now?" she murmured before taking the seat at her desk.

#

When Gus reached his desk, he slammed the newspaper down. "Did you see this?" he gruffly asked.

Tessa had only seen Gus angry a handful of times and she wondered what had set him off. She asked, "What?"

Gus picked up the paper and read, "*A reliable source reported that R. J. Santana, owner of Magical Knowledge, and Occult Wisdom, was being questioned in connection with the Dana Stratton murder. When contacted, the store owner refused to comment. Our source told us that Santana is an integral part of the investigation. Captain John Flynn, head of the homicide division would neither deny nor confirm the allegation.*" Gus slammed the paper back down on the desk. "Who the fuck is leaking this information?"

Looking at the sweat glistening off Gus's head, Tessa took a deep breath and, keeping her voice steady said, "Maybe it was Santana."

Gus's mouth turned downward. "Give me a break, Tessa. The man is scared of his own shadow. He'd never do this because he'd be afraid I'd come after him."

Unable to stop her words, Tessa said, "Maybe that's what he wanted. You're kinda touchy about him, Gus. Why is that?" She looked at the man and swore she saw steam rising from his bald head.

Gus was rounding his side of the desk and invading his partner's space, when the captain said, "Jacoby, Barrett...my office now." He pointed his finger at Tessa and said, "You're lucky."

Tessa winked at her partner. "Maybe if you play your cards right, you can get lucky, too."

Gus growled.

#

Tessa and Gus entered the captain's office and saw two other detectives, Brett Buckley and Andrea James, already there.

"Sit down everyone," the captain ordered. "I've called you all in here to discuss the Stratton case. Jacoby, what do you have so far?"

Glancing at the other two detectives, Tessa flipped open her notebook and said, "We interviewed a shop owner, who said he regularly gives out the money clips like the one that was found at the scene. He called it a talisman, not a money clip. Late yesterday, he identified Vanessa Carlton as someone who was in his shop in February and bought something there, his book, *Herbs, Spells, and Potions*. The Carlton woman indicated to the store owner that the book was for a friend. The body was found with one of his talismans in a lot across the street from where Carlton lives with her mother and son."

"Did the crime unit find anything in the victim's vehicle?"

"No, it was clean," offered Gus.

"What about the video from the hospital parking garage? Was there any luck in getting a look at the driver or license plate?"

"Cho got as much as he could from the video. The quality was poor at best," Gus said.

"This case is high profile and we all know what that means. The press is all over it so we don't want to bring someone in for questioning unless we have concrete proof," the captain said.

"Buckley and James here have just finished a case, so I've assigned them to assist you with the case."

Tessa set her jaw and frowned. "Why? Once we run down a few more leads and they all point in the direction we think they will, I'm confident that we will be able to make a solid case against the Carlton woman."

Captain Flynn focused his eyes on Tessa. "What's your problem, Jacoby? In the past, you've begged me for help and now you get it and you don't want it."

With eyes narrowing and looking at the captain through the slits, Tessa leaned forward. "Are you taking this case away from me?"

The two new detectives looked at Tessa then at the captain waiting for him to chew the lead detective out for her defiant tone. Gus's eyes looked at his partner, shook his head, and sighed. *Here we go again.*

The captain said, "No, I'm giving you more eyes." *I'm taking the shooting of her friend into account. Otherwise, I'd kick her butt for speaking to me like that.* He looked at the detectives and gave them a brief nod. "That's all."

#

Buckley and James followed Tessa and Gus out of the captain's office.

"What do you need from us?" Brett Buckley asked.

Tessa stopped, turned around, and fixed the man with her gaze. "First, I'll get you up to date, and then we can discuss where to go next."

Brett Buckley, a retired football player who was huge, cleared his throat and took a step toward Tessa. "I saw that article in the paper this morning...any idea who the leak is?"

"Not yet," Tessa said, as her focus switched from Brett to his partner, Andrea James, who was a slender, good looking blonde woman.

Gus said, "It's good to have more help...right, Tessa?"

"Yeah, sure." Tessa sat at her desk and tried to figure out what was going on inside her head-it wasn't the case or the two young detectives-it was Anna. Looking up, she eyed the new additions to the Stratton case. "Why don't you two grab a cup of coffee and meet us in interrogation one in about fifteen minutes. By then, I'll have copies of the murder book and we'll get you up to speed."

When Buckley and James had left the area, Gus looked at his partner. "How's Anna?"

"She's good...even going in to work today."

"Really. Wow, that's a fast recovery. Are you sure that's a wise move?"

"I tried to change her mind this morning but she was insistent. One of the paralegals is picking her up." Tessa got up and briefly looked at her partner. "I'll make copies and meet you and the others," she said, as she quickly walked away.

Gus's curious eyes followed her. *Now, that's interesting. It almost sounds like she spent the night. Wait 'til Helen hears this.*

#

Tessa arrived in the interrogation room and saw only her partner there. "Where are the others?"

"They'll be here. What's gotten into you?" Gus asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Tessa let her reply hang as she dropped two folders onto the table.

Gus stood looking at his partner, as he incessantly stroked his moustache. "What's going on with you?" he asked with uncertainty. "I know this case has gotten to you and I know why. But there's something else going on. Care to share?"

Tessa chuckled. "Give it a rest, Gus."

"What, can't your partner worry about you?"

Tessa's voice softened. "When there's something to tell you, I will."

"Fair enough," he said, just as the other two detectives entered the room with coffee cups in hand.

Pointing to the table, Tessa said, "There's a folder for each of you. You'll find all the case information, including photos and a transcript of all the interviews we've conducted. Take your time to look them over and then we can go from there."

"You want coffee?" Gus asked Tessa.

"Yeah, thanks." Gus hadn't been gone long before Tessa said, "I need to make a quick call."

When she passed Gus who was going back to the room, he said, "Where are you going?"

"Bathroom, I won't be long," Tessa said over her shoulder as she kept on going.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Entering the bathroom, Tessa bent down to see if anyone else was in the room-no one. Safely ensconced in a stall with the door locked, she pulled out her cell phone and dialed.

"This is Anna Mikaelson."

"Hi, how are you feeling?"

"Better but the headache is lingering," Anna said.

"I was afraid of that. Did they let you back in your office?"

"They let me in for ten minutes so I could get all the files and materials I need. They've set us up in an office a few doors away."

"You should have taken the rest of the week off."

Anna let out a soft chuckle. "Who would put the bad guys away, if I did that?"

Tessa smiled, and then laughed. "Me."

"I have a short hearing this morning then I'll go home and work from there."

"Your folks are going to be with you, I hope."

"Well, since my main protector has to work, I guess they'll do." Anna laughed. "I already called them and they're going to meet me here so we can get my car home."

When she heard someone pushing open the door, Tessa felt bereft-she had to break her connection with Anna.

"Look, I've got to go. I'll call you later, ok?"

"I'll look forward to it," Anna said.

Closing her phone, Tessa took the first semi-relaxed breath of the day. Anna had that effect on her. She shook her head and let out a low, derisive chuckle. *What's wrong with me? I'm sneaking around calling my...what...girlfriend.* "Yeah, my girlfriend," she whispered-it felt right.

#

When Tessa returned to the interrogation room, she put on her unreadable face as she dropped into a chair. She looked at the two new detectives with hooded eyes, as they worked through the case file.

"We need to keep everything that goes on in this case between us," Tessa said. "As both Gus and Brett pointed out, the newspaper this morning, with its article about R. J. Santana, didn't do us any favors." She closed her eyes and reined in the anger that the leak was causing her. "Carlton indicated that she didn't get the newspaper so we've caught a break. Unless she was lying, she didn't read the article and hasn't run."

"Do you think her running is a possibility?" Andrea asked.

Tessa folded her hands on the table and looked at the woman. "It has been my experience that, when people feel safe, they tend to get careless. We haven't positively concluded that Carlton is the perp. But from what we found out yesterday, it's a distinct possibility. Saying that, I think Carlton has felt safe but with that article, I think we need to move with deliberate speed."

"Any idea who leaked the story?" Buckley asked again.

Gus shook his head. "No telling how they found out."

Andrea's eyebrows met. "Who else knew you interviewed him?"

Tessa looked at the woman and regarded her question. "About questioning Santana?" Andrea nodded. "Only everyone who was working around here or visiting yesterday afternoon."

"Didn't the article say that you considered Santana an integral part of the investigation?"

"I believe it did."

"Then it can't be a casual observer. It has to be someone with intimate knowledge of the case and the witnesses."

Great deductive skills. "I like the way you think, Detective. Would you like to explore who that person might be for us?"

Andrea smiled. "Yes, I'd like that," she said, before looking at the file again.

As both detectives continued to peruse the contents, Tessa watched them with a critical eye. They were both young but they had solid reputations as conscientious in their jobs.

Getting up, Tessa listed on a white board: two-thousand-five Jeep, *Herbs, Spells and Potions*, R. S. money clip, medical knowledge, opportunity, knew vic, and motive.

When the two young detectives finished examining the folder, they looked up.

"As you can see from the file, the perp left little or no hard evidence to go on. We have the marks on the body, the money clip, some fibers that turned out to be threads from a cheap towel, and mold that trace tells us is common lichen that comes from the ground, trees, or rocks." Gus said.

"Could they trace it to a particular area?" Andrea asked.

Tessa shook her head. "No," she said, before she let out a sarcastic laugh. "They only do that on television shows that have big budget labs."

Turning to the whiteboard, Tessa pointed to the words *money clip* on the list and looked at her partner.

"You'll find nothing about this case is straightforward," Gus said. "To date, our best lead is the money clip that came from a store that Vanessa Carlton visited. She purchased a book there that the vic used as a reference for a report she wrote."

She put Stratton, Santana and Carlton's names next to the money clip. Next to the book, she wrote, Santana and Carlton.

Gus nodded. "I checked out the DMV and found that Carlton drives a dark colored late model Jeep, which is like the one that is on the hospital garage footage."

Tessa wrote Carlton next to vehicle and said, "We know she has medical knowledge and the ME thought that the perp could have used a scalpel. The trainer also has medical knowledge." She wrote the names next to *medical knowledge*.

"What we don't have is motive and opportunity," Gus pointed out.

"We need to tie one of these people to the vic," Buckley offered.

Tessa gave the man a half smile before she said, "We need to go back to the vic's apartment and see if we can find that book."

"We can do that," Andrea said. "Does the search warrant include it?"

Gus nodded. "Yes, it covers everything in her room."

"I'll find out who the professor is for the class that she wrote the report for. Then, we can have him or her come in for questioning," Tessa added.

"If the Carlton woman is the murderer and dumped the body in a lot across from where she lives, doesn't it stand to reason that the murder took place nearby too?" Brett Buckley thought aloud.

A pencil tapping on the table was the only sound in the room. Tessa pondered the remark, then said, "We need to get a topographical map of the surrounding five miles of the body dump site and see if there's any densely wooded area that is easily accessible, yet secluded. The only other clue we have, and it's a shaky one, is the moss found on the body. The area should be dark, wet, and secluded."

Detective James frowned. "That's like looking for a needle in a haystack. What if the moss is erroneous?"

Tessa eyed the woman. "It could be but it's something that we need to check out. Let's first see if we can link them together. We need to find a connection. If we don't, then we've hit another dead end. The woman's son could have taken the money clip and put the money he found in it—that would be a plausible defense against the money clip at the scene." She softly bit her lip then said, "My gut tells me we're looking at Vanessa Carlton as the killer but we can't discount the others just yet."

Gus shrugged before he stood up. "Let's see if we can find the evidence to connect them."

#

An hour and a half later, three of the detectives met again.

Tessa asked Andrea, "Did you find the book?"

"We had to have the super open the door. The book was in one of her desk drawers." Andrea smiled. "I gave it to the crime scene guys for fingerprints and told them to put a rush on it."

Tessa looked at the woman and let a small smile curve her lips. "Good thinking."

Gus entered the room. "I checked again and Carlton was definitely working the night of the murder. I have a name of someone who can verify whether or not she was there and am waiting for a callback."

"So right now, we can't place her in the Jeep that we saw in the surveillance video." Tessa placed a question mark next to Carlton's name under opportunity.

A tech from the crime lab appeared in the door and motioned for Andrea. "I thought you'd want this as soon as I got it," the tall skinny man said holding out a piece of paper.

"What do you have, Ed," Andrea asked as she took the paper.

"I got her prints from the state database. Every medical professional, who applies for a license, is fingerprinted."

Andrea looked at the name on the paper and smiled. "Thanks, Ed, this is exactly what we need." With a serious look, Andrea reentered the interrogation room. "You can put Carlton's name next to *knew the vic*. They found her prints on multiple pages of the book."

"That leaves motive," Gus said, as his eyebrows knitted.

Tessa looked at each person in the room with a serious expression. "Does anyone here think we have enough to bring Vanessa Carlton in for questioning and possible arrest?"

"Not yet," Andrea said. "She has a pretty solid alibi."

Looking at her watch, Tessa let her jaw flex slightly. "She works nights, so I expect that she's home now. I want you two,"-she pointed at James and Buckley-"to go stake out the home. They don't have a garage. They park their vehicles behind the house. Check out whether she's there or not and then update me."

Gus added, "I remember seeing some sort of shed in the backyard." He thought for a moment. "If she is the perp, we have to hope that she didn't see that newspaper article and decided to run."

"We can do that," Andrea said. "Anything else?"

"If you see her vehicle at the house, stay there. If she leaves, stick to her like glue. Gus and I are going to meet with the professor that the vic wrote the paper for." Tessa bit her lip. "Maybe by then we will have confirmation that she was at work that night."

"Be patient," Gus said. "Patience leads to convictions."

Chapter Thirty-Five

Tessa and Gus sat in the office of Professor Chelsea Vincent, as the woman reviewed the paper Dana Stratton wrote. The woman was heavysset, with black hair that was showing gray, pulled tightly to form a ball in the back of her head.

"Such terrible news about Ms. Stratton," the woman said in a high pitched voice. "She had an open mind that asked thought provoking questions." She took off her glasses and tapped them against the paper. "I remember reading this and musing about how agile her mind was-she had true insight into what alternative medicine is all about." The professor shook her head again. "Such a terrible loss."

Tessa didn't ask her questions immediately. She wanted to be sure to frame her question so that the woman would independently refer to Vanessa Carlton's involvement. "Are your students left to their own devices to find sources or do you suggest where to find information? Or perhaps you have professionals who can help them."

"I have been teaching for almost forty years. In that time I've cultivated friendships with many health professionals who I know I can count on to help my students."

"Is there anyone in particular for this type of research that you tell your students to call on?" Tessa asked in a flat tone.

"The Dean of Nursing at St. David's, Wendell Buxton did interact with several of my students for this particular assignment. I do believe that Ms. Stratton availed herself of that assistance."

Tessa nodded. "Do you know if she worked with anyone particular at St. David's or did she just get help from the dean?"

"It is my understanding that Dean Buxton assigns various nursing staff members to guide my students." Chelsea Vincent picked up her glasses and put them back on. "If you want to know more you'll have to ask him."

"Do you by any chance have his number handy?" Gus asked.

The professor opened a notebook, ran her eyes down a list, and then neatly wrote the man's phone number on a post-it. After handing Gus the slip of paper, she looked at the detective, then at her watch. "If that's all, I do have a class in five minutes."

"That's all. Thank you for your help and making the time to speak with us." Tessa handed the woman her card. "If you think of anything else, please give us a call."

"I shall."

As the two detectives walked away, Tessa said, "That woman said the vic was open and receptive." She shook her head. "I wonder if she realizes that attitude can get you killed."

#

Seated at his desk when Tessa and Gus entered his office, Doctor Wendell Buxton rose to greet them.

"You must be the detective I spoke to on the phone," he said to Gus.

"Yes, we're Detectives Barrett and Jacoby."

The man, who had handsome good looks and what appeared to be a fit body, smiled and motioned for them to sit. "What can I do for you?"

Gus gave the man a friendly smile. "We understand that Professor Vincent gave your name to her students for help with their research."

"Yes, she often sites me as a resource for her students on many health care issues. I'm happy to help out our future nurses and doctors."

Gus said to the man, "Did some ask for help on alternative medicine a few months ago?"

The dean pursed his lips and nodded. "I believe three of her students contacted me."

Leaning forward in his seat, Gus asked, "Do you help them directly or point them in some other direction?"

"I have a list of my nurses, who expressed an interest in helping students."

"Do you assign a nurse to a student or is it up to the student to contact them?"

"I pair them up. It depends on what shift the nurse is on and if they have the time to help. Most of the time, they can accommodate the students but occasionally they can't."

"Do you have the list of the nurse/student pairings for the alternative medicine assignment?"

The man did a few clicks with a mouse and a screen came up. With hazel eyes that moved from one detective to the other, the man furrowed his brow. "Why would that be of interest to you?"

"We're investigating a crime," Tessa said.

The dean frowned as his eyes scanned the screen. "What kind of crime?" he asked. "Does this have to do with the Stratton murder?"

Gus captured the man's attention with a piercing stare. "Yes. We are investigating all aspects of her life and anyone she may have met over the last few months. Consequently, we need to know who helped Dana Stratton on the alternative medicine paper she wrote."

Smoothing his thick, black hair back with his fingers, the man appeared visibly shaken. "I can't believe one of my nurse's would be suspected of murder."

In an impersonal tone, Tessa said, "No one is saying that, Dean Buxton. We are merely trying to find out what and who the victim was involved with in the months prior to her death."

The director looked at Tessa and frowned-he didn't like her tone. "I see."

"Will you give us the name of the nurse that helped Dana Stratton?" Gus said in an even voice.

Wendell pulled open a drawer and took out a notepad. "Let's see," he said, as he ran a finger down the computer screen. "Here it is. Vanessa Carlton was the nurse." He looked up at the detectives for any sign of recognition-he saw none. "She's one of my finest nurses and has helped out numerous students."

"Do you have a phone number for her?" Gus asked.

"Five-five-five-eight-nine-six-two." The director flicked the mouse and went to another page.

"Thank you, Dean Buxton," Gus said as he got up. "Oh, what shift does she work?"

"Nights."

"Would you object with our speaking with her at the hospital, if we can't catch up with her now?"

The dean looked at Gus then at Tessa. "I can't have you disrupting our patients."

"We won't do that," Gus said. "We'll wait until she has a break."

"You don't think Vanessa had anything to do with the murder do you?"

Tessa shook her head. "All we want to do is speak with her and find out if she knows anything that might help us find the perpetrator."

"I see," the doctor said nodding.

The detective laid her card on his desk. "I expect you to keep *this* conversation confidential." Tessa accentuated the comment by fixing the man with a hard stare. "If you think of anything else, give us a call."

Wendell watched the detectives leave his office and picked up his phone.

#

"You have a ten?" Gus asked Tessa as they entered the hospital elevator.

"Yeah."

"Want to wager on how long it takes him to call Carlton?"

Tessa grinned. "He already has." She pulled out her cell phone and was surprised that there was a signal in the elevator. She called the stake out team. "Be ready to roll," she said.

Andrea James replied, "She just left the house and is getting into the Jeep."

"Stop her and bring her in for questioning. We'll meet you back at the station."

Chapter Thirty-Six

Vanessa Carlton sat in a small interrogation room with the calm of the innocent. Occasionally, she let her eyes flick to the large plate glass window where she suspected someone was watching her. When the door opened, she looked up and saw the two detectives that she spoke to the day after her son found the body. With a bored expression, Vanessa looked at them. "I don't appreciate you people blocking my driveway then telling me I need to come down here. As I told you, I don't have anything to add to what you already know."

Tessa dropped R. J. Santana's book onto the metal table, causing a hollow metallic sound to reverberate off the walls of the small room. "Want to tell me why your fingerprints are on this book we found in Dana Stratton's apartment?"

The calm exterior of Vanessa remained intact as she coolly looked at the book where a black substance made the fingerprints visible, and shrugged. "So, I gave her a book. What difference does that make?"

Tessa's eyes narrowed. "It means you lied to us about knowing Dana." She watched the woman's face and body for any type of reaction-there was none.

"*Lied* is rather harsh, don't you think. My son found the body of someone that I had helped with a school project and I didn't see the need to share that information with you. Since I didn't kill her, it would only cloud your investigation. Surely, helping someone out isn't a crime." Her eyes went from one detective to the other. "Is it?"

"Tell us about your relationship with Dana," Gus said, as he flipped through his notes. They knew from listening to the tape of the earlier meeting with the Carlton woman, her lie was one of omission, rather than by statement.

"Dr. Buxton regularly asks for volunteers to help out students from Restin U. Alternative healing methods is a field that I am interested in. I've done extensive research on the subject and I thought I could be helpful to a student. For the record, over the years I've helped numerous students."

"And one of them was Dana Stratton, right?" Tessa asked.

"Yes, she had an open and inquisitive mind. I bought that,"-she pointed to the book on the table-"because it had some very informative information on what Dana and I were discussing." Vanessa stopped for a moment, and then added, "I didn't want to lend her my copy."

Tessa rubbed her chin and contemplated her next move. "You drive a Jeep?"

"Yes."

"Did you drive it to work the night that the murder occurred?"

Vanessa pulled her head back slightly and frowned. "Of course I did. How else would I get to work?"

Narrowing her eyes again, Tessa asked, "And, you were at work Sunday night a week ago?"

"Of course I was."

"Have you ever used the drug Pavulon?" Tessa asked.

"No, what kind of drug is it?"

As she contemplated her next move, Tessa fixed the woman with her eyes. A minute later, Tessa closed her folder and said, "I'll have someone take you home."

Vanessa stood up, placed her palms on the table, and, in a low voice, said, "If you continue to harass me, I will lodge a complaint against you."

#

Gus watched as the metal doors of the elevator closed with Vanessa Carlton inside. "She certainly is one cool cucumber."

"If she is the murderer, she certainly didn't give herself away," Tessa commented, as they walked to their desks. "I guess that puts us back to square one. Damn, I was certain she was the doer."

"Me, too," Gus said, as he picked up his ringing telephone. "Barrett." His eyes opened wide as he listened. "Are you sure?" A smile crossed his face. "Will you come to the station and make a statement about that?" He winked at Tessa and gave her thumbs up. "Thank you, Ms. Grier." Putting the phone down, Gus looked at his partner. "That was a nurse that works with Carlton. She told me that, shortly after ten the night of the murder, Carlton called and told her that she had a sudden family emergency and would be late. She asked if the woman could cover for her."

Tessa's face filled with a grin. "Gotcha."

#

After she returned home, Vanessa finally let the memory she'd been suppressing take hold and blossom.

The girl had been so open to new ideas. Vanessa had never met anyone like her and the attraction was instantaneous. Many mornings they would meet for breakfast after Vanessa got off from work. Their conversations were wide and varied.

At first, they spoke of holistic medicine and its approach to healing not only the mind and spirit but the body as well. The idea that it could be intermingled with conventional medicine fascinated Dana. She spoke of her desire to become a sports medicine doctor and her strong conviction that the mind plays a critical role in health. Vanessa lamented about physicians who often overlooked their patient's mental state in their diagnosis.

Soon their conversations moved to a more personal level. Vanessa would ask the young girl provocative questions about her inner feelings, life experiences, deeply held beliefs and her inner most thoughts. No subject was off limits. The response she got from the student was always honest and succinct. The questions Dana asked her were often flirtatious and many were sexual in nature. The more questions the girl asked, the more interaction they had. It wasn't long before Dana captivated her.

Long after Dana completed her paper, she still wanted to meet the nurse for breakfast. At first, they would only meet once a week, then it was twice, and before long, they were meeting three times during the week and once on the weekends.

Vanessa found herself dreaming about the girl and, at night, often would sit outside of the gym where Dana had basketball practice and wait for her to come out so she could get a glimpse of her. She bought night vision binoculars so she could see Dana up close-she was stunning. Sitting in the highest, darkest corner of the gym, she attended the home games and saw Dana's prowess on the court. It was then that she knew she was in love. The girl was magnificent and Vanessa knew they would be together forever.

#

The Thursday before the murder, Vanessa was working a double shift. She was surprised when Dana came up to the desk where she was sitting and knocked lightly on the counter. Certain that it was someone who wanted her assistance, Vanessa looked up with a blank stare. When she saw Dana, her eyes crinkled in the corners, as she gave the girl a genuine smile.

"This is a wonderful surprise," Vanessa said in a low voice.

Dana held up a bag that contained a deli sandwich. "I was hoping you'd like to share this sandwich with me."

Looking at her watch, Vanessa said, "I'd love to. I just need to get someone to cover the desk for me." She fished in her pocket and pulled out her car keys. "Why don't you go wait in my car."

She shrugged. "It will be quieter there and more private. It is on level three near the door. All you need to do is push the open button and it will wink at you."

The basketball player readily took the keys and, with a wave, and a wide grin said, "I'll be waiting."

They sat in Vanessa's car and listened to softly playing music. While they shared a chicken basil sandwich on artisan bread, they talked quietly. Once finished, Vanessa smiled before she leaned over and tentatively kissed the girl on the lips. When Dana responded, Vanessa deepened the kiss and soon they were passionately exploring each other's mouth.

The alarm sounding on Vanessa's watch had her reluctantly pulling away. "I need to get back," she whispered. "Can we meet in the morning for breakfast?" she asked, as she stroked Dana's cheek.

Dreamily, Dana drew in a deep breath and smiled. "I'd love to have breakfast with you."

Vanessa gave the girl one more fervent kiss but it didn't stop there. Soon their hands were exploring each other's body. The nurse's fingers gently slid inside Dana's jeans and found she was hard and wet. "Oh, God," Vanessa moaned, as her fingers moved through the wetness and began pinching and stroking the girl's elongated clitoris.

When the metal door leading to the hospital slammed, both women immediately moved apart. "I don't want to leave you," the nurse said. "But, I need to get back to work."

"Please," Dana said, in a voice thick with passion, "touch me again."

Gladly complying, Vanessa slid her hand back inside the girl's jeans and smiled when she felt her two fingers slide effortlessly inside Dana. Vanessa watched the girl's face as she began pumping her rhythmically as she thumb rubbed the clitoris. It didn't take long for Dana's breathing pick up before she let out a guttural moan of satisfaction. Dana opened her eyes, pulled Vanessa in, and gave her an intense kiss.

"God, Vanessa, no one has ever made me feel like that," Dana said.

Pulling away, Vanessa smiled at the girl as she stroked her cheek. "I really need to get back."

"I know," Dana said as she gave Vanessa one last kiss. "I'll see you in the morning."

Once the two exited the Jeep, Vanessa watched as the girl climbed into her car and gave her a slight wave before she drove away.

The next day at breakfast, Dana was distant.

"What's the matter?" Vanessa asked, as she reached across the table and stroked Dana's hand.

Pulling her hand away, Dana said in a shaky voice, "Last night was a mistake. It won't happen again."

"No, you can't mean that, Dana. We have a connection. I know you felt it. I could tell by the way you kissed me and touched me." Vanessa whispered, "You were wet for me."

The basketball player stood up. "Like I said, it was a mistake, a terrible mistake. I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong impression. It won't happen again."

Vanessa watched as the girl left and felt a devastation that she never thought possible. "I have to get her back. I just have to," she said softly, before she stood up, put a ten on the table, and left the restaurant with a heavy heart.

The next day she lurked outside Dana's classes and in the shadows at shoot arounds at the basketball court. She did not intend on letting Dana Stratton walk out of her life.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Vanessa spent the majority of the following Sunday watching Dana. Hiding in the shadows, she overheard a conversation Dana had with the basketball coach about her sister being in labor. When she heard that the sister was at St. David's, she smiled.

Quietly leaving the gym, Vanessa hurried to her car and called her work.

When Trudy Grier answered, Vanessa lowered her voice and said, "Tru, I've had a sudden family emergency. Can you cover for me for a couple of hours while I straighten things out?"

When the woman agreed, Vanessa drove in the direction of the hospital. Parking on a side street where she knew there were no surveillance cameras, she waited for the green Honda to drive by. All she wanted was to talk with the girl. Nevertheless, if Dana didn't cooperate or threatened to call the police, she had to cover her tracks. She knew there were operating cameras in the garage, so she got out of the Jeep and put pieces of cardboard over the front and back license plates.

When she saw Dana's car approaching the garage, she waited for it to go by before she followed. Vanessa's vehicle was just rounding a corner when she saw the basketball player getting out of her car. Pulling alongside her, Vanessa lowered her window and said, "Hi." Her heart skipped a beat when the girl smiled, before her expression became one of annoyance.

"Hi," Dana said. "I can't talk. My sister is about to have her baby."

"Yeah, I know," said Vanessa with a smile. "Can we talk?"

"Not now. I've got to get inside."

"I've checked and your sister has a way to go yet. She's only dilated to three." With her eyes searching Dana's face, Vanessa said, "Please, get in so we can talk. We'll just drive around the

block then I'll drop you off right back here. It will only take a minute. I promise you won't miss a thing."

Dana's face crunched into a frown as she raised her hands. "Fine," she said. "I can give you a few minutes." She walked around the Jeep and got in.

Vanessa, keeping her eyes fixed ahead as she drove her Jeep out of the parking garage, flexed her jaw, and took a quick look at the girl sitting next to her.

"I don't want to lose you as a friend," Vanessa said, as she watched the headlights carve out her route.

"We can't be friends ever again," Dana said quietly.

"Why not?" Vanessa said, dampening her anger.

"I'm not a lesbian."

"Well, you certainly reacted like one," Vanessa countered.

Dana whispered, "That was a mistake."

With those words, all the pent up anger Vanessa felt toward the young girl began to simmer, before it erupted. "Why won't you listen to me?" The nursed slammed hard on the steering wheel. "Can't you open up that mind of yours and hear what I'm saying," Vanessa screamed. "ALL I WANT IS TO BE YOUR FRIEND!"

The basketball player edged against the door. "I need to get back to the hospital. You said we wouldn't be gone long and it's already been ten minutes. I don't want to miss the birth," Dana said, with a slight tremor to her voice.

When the vehicle came to a stop at a light, Dana tried to get out but the door wouldn't open. "Let me out!" she demanded.

"Not until we get this resolved," Vanessa said, as she continued driving forward. In all the scenarios that Vanessa imagined, the one she didn't want to follow seemed to be exactly what she would do. All that she needed was in place-she had used it all before. If Dana would not be her friend, then she would have to take actions to prevent her from leaving and finding someone else to love.

Vanessa glared at the girl as she pulled her vehicle into her mother's driveway. She stopped when the car reached the backyard. From under her seat, she pulled out a gun and pointed it at the girl.

"If you want to see your sister's baby, you'll do as I say." Vanessa's cold voice commanded, "Get out of the car."

She led Dana to a rather large shed at the back of the property and, once inside, she said, "I wanted us to make up and to be friends again but you're so stubborn you can't see past your nose. For your information, no one, man or woman, has ever kissed me as passionately as you did. For god's sake, Dana, you came all over my hand. You're a lesbian, so get used to it." Vanessa pointed the gun to a filthy mattress on the floor. "Lay there, face down," she ordered.

"What are you going to do?" the frightened girl asked.

"Do as I say, Dana, or you'll be sorry," the nurse said in a threatening tone.

Trembling, Dana did as instructed.

You try to move and I'll put a bullet in your head. Now, put your hands together behind your back," Vanessa said.

"I'll do anything you say, just don't kill me," Dana said with a trembling voice.

With the girl in a passive mode, Vanessa easily bound her hands together behind her back before she tied her ankles, too. When Dana began to struggle, the nurse became enraged. "You can't get away," her crazed voice screamed. Ripping at the girl's clothes, she flipped her over and pulled at the remnants until the body was lying completely naked on the mattress.

"I use to hide in here when my drunken husband wanted to fuck me."

Dana sobbed uncontrollably as she pleaded, "Let me go. I won't tell anyone. Please, Vanessa, let me go."

The tears and the words did nothing to dissuade her from the course she was determined to take. Since the girl wouldn't willingly give her what she wanted, Vanessa would take it. Just as the father of her son had, Dana Stratton would pay for leading her on only to cast her aside.

In a voice that was so different from the one she was used to, Dana heard Vanessa say, "Tears, how touching. Did you really think they would persuade me now? To be perfectly honest, it's too late for such a display of emotion."

Trembling, Dana sobbed. "Why?" she asked, as she searched eyes that were now foreign to her.

Vanessa let out a maniacal laugh that filled the small area.

"Why indeed." A hand slid effortlessly over a tear stained cheek before fingers covered with exam gloves pinched the skin. "Because I can."

Dana begged, "Please, don't."

"All I ever asked you for was recognition of my love." A finger ran along the curve of the athletic body. "You gave me none. You cast me aside and now you must pay."

The memory of the moment she took Dana Stratton's life made Vanessa nauseous. She looked out the front window and saw a police cruiser blocking the drive way. "Shit! What do I do now?"

Chapter Thirty-Eight

"We're at the house," Andrea James said into a mic. "Two uniforms are here, too. Shall we take her?" the detective asked.

"No, wait for us...we have the warrant."

Arriving at Mary Bertram's house, Tessa and Gus got out of the Crown Vic, before they joined the other two detectives and two other officers. "Any movement?" Tessa asked.

"We did see someone pulling the curtain back from the downstairs window."

"Could you identify who it was?"

"All we saw was the curtain move," Brett offered.

Tessa nodded. "Ok, then we'll go get her."

Tessa and Gus had gone part way up the driveway when the front door opened and Mary Bertram, clutching her grandson, walked out the door. Behind her was Vanessa with a handgun to her mother's head.

"Get out of here or I'll kill them," she screamed. "I swear I'll do it."

Holding her hands up with the palms toward the angry woman, Tessa said, "We don't want to see anyone get hurt, Vanessa. All we want to do is talk to you."

Vanessa jammed the gun hard into her mother's cheek-the woman cringed. "Do you really think I'm that stupid? If you all don't leave immediately, I'll kill her first, then him." She moved the gun slightly to point it at Joey.

"Vanessa," Tessa said in an even tone. "You really don't want to hurt your mother or Joey...do you?" When the woman remained silent, she added, "Put the gun down so we can talk."

Enraged, Vanessa screamed as she pulled back the hammer of the gun. "GO!"

In a low voice, Gus said, "She's gone over the edge. There's no telling what she'll do. I think there's a good chance that she'll pull the trigger.

Tessa allowed her eyes to move fractionally to where Brett Buckley was quietly sneaking up on the deranged woman. "Vanessa, I'm sure we can work this out. If I come up there, will you let your mother and Joey go-I'll be your hostage instead."

"That's some sort of trick," Vanessa screamed.

"No it isn't. I don't want to see them get hurt." Tessa held her breath as Brett was on the other side of the screen door. In one fluid motion, the detective pulled the gun up. A bullet shot from the gun lodged in the porch ceiling. Tessa let out a sigh of relief as she and Gus ran toward the porch.

Gus took control of the woman that Brett had already handcuffed. "Good work," he said to the taller man.

Vanessa screamed, "No, you can't do this to me, I won't let you."

In a calm even voice, Tessa said, "Vanessa Carlton, you are under arrest for the murder of Dana Stratton. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to have an attorney present during questioning. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed for you. Do you understand these rights?"

"You can't do this," Vanessa screamed again.

"Do you understand your rights?" Gus asked.

"You'll be sorry," Vanessa struggled against the restraints. "I'll make you all pay for this. Let me go!"

Tessa moved closer and took the nurse by her shoulders. "Vanessa, look at me." When the woman's brown eyes looked at her, the detective said, "Do you understand your rights?"

Vanessa looked at the detective. Regaining her previous persona, she said, "Yes, I want a lawyer."

#

Andrea and Ron took Vanessa in their vehicle to book her. Gus and Tessa did a preliminary sweep of the area noting everything they observed. Once they opened the door to the shed, they let their flashlights cut a narrow path into it. The beam focused on the mattress that was stained with what they surmised was the vic's blood, along with the strong odor of the bleach. After a few minutes, when their sense of smell was acclimated to the bleach, they caught a different odor-decomposition.

Tessa looked at Mary Bertram, who was now standing on her small back porch, with her hand protectively around Joey. "Do you think she knew?"

Gus leveled the older woman with a look then turned to his partner. "I don't think so. She looks genuinely shocked and the fear on her face when the gun was at her head isn't something you fake."

Walking toward the porch, Tessa stopped at the bottom of three steps. "Mrs. Bertram, is there anything we can do for you?"

With a trembling voice, Mary said, "I can't believe it. I didn't know who she was. She certainly wasn't my daughter. What happened to her?"

"I wish I knew," Tessa said softly. "When you're ready, we need you to come downtown and make a statement."

"I need to make arrangements for Joey first."

"I know."

#

Once Vanessa Carlton was booked, Tessa and Gus met her in an interrogation room.

"Do you have anything to tell us?" Gus asked.

The woman looked at him with vacant eyes and said nothing.

"We can help you, Ms. Carlton," Tessa added.

Through gritted teeth, Vanessa said, "I told you I want a lawyer."

"Ok, if that's what you want, but you should know that, if you talk to us now, we might be able to give you some leeway. Once you have a lawyer then there's nothing we can do for you."

Vanessa's eyes squeezed into slits as she glared at the detectives. "You two really do think I'm stupid? Do you think I'm going to say anything because you say you can help me? Get real." Her lip curled as she snarled at the detectives. "I'm not saying anything more until I get a lawyer."

#

"They found a body under the floorboards of the shed," Brett said, as he stood in front of Tessa's desk with Andrea James.

"Any identity?" Gus asked.

"All we know right now is that it's a male. The ME said he was probably in his late twenties early thirties."

"Did the criminalist find anything else?" Tessa asked without looking up.

Andrea cleared her throat before she spoke. "Apparently, the wooden floor was saturated in blood. They found a syringe and scalpel wrapped in an old rag. There was a gun on a shelf, along

with the biggest dildo I've ever seen. We also found the vic's cell phone and her torn clothes." When Tessa looked up at her, she said, "We found a drawer full of pictures of Dana Stratton in the woman's room. Some of them were torn into pieces and others had pentagrams over her face."

"Any clues as to why the pentagram?" Tessa asked.

"From what Westcott in the crime lab told me, they found numerous books on the occult, astrology, and paganism. His best guess for now is that it was used as a symbol of protection from the forces of evil." Andrea shrugged. "I'm not sure if that's a good take on it or not. If it was for protection, the vic certainly didn't get any. I don't think we'll ever know."

"You're probably right." With a rare smile filling her face, Tessa added, "Couldn't have done it without you two. Thanks."

From his desk, Gus's eyes snapped open and he looked at his partner with genuine surprise. As the two other detectives walked away, he fixed Tessa with an intense gaze.

"What?" After successfully disengaging her eyes from those of her partner, she said, "Well..."

Gus's bushy eyebrows lifted. "What have you done with my partner?"

Tessa flicked her gaze back to her desk. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said, as her defenses began to gather around her.

Gus laughed low in his throat. "Love agrees with you."

Tessa looked up with a passive expression on her face as she raked a hand through her hair. "Give it a rest, Gus."

The partners stared at each other as if they were in a standoff. Tessa was the first to look away. She grabbed a pen and scribbled her name at the bottom of the report that she had just printed out.

"Here," she said handing the papers across her desk. "They need your signature." She winked at her partner and said, "This case is as good as over. I'm going home."

Just as Tessa was putting her gun in its holster, Andrea James came up to her desk. "Good, you haven't left yet," she said.

Irritated, Tessa said, "What now?"

The young detective placed an envelope on Tessa's desk.

Picking up the white envelope, Tessa noticed it was sealed. "What's this?"

Andrea said, "The name of the leak."

Tessa's eyes narrowed and turned suspicious. "How did you get it?"

Andrea made a small nervous laugh. "It is on the up and up. Nothing illegal." *My uncle is an editor at the paper but she doesn't need to know that.*

Turning the envelope over, Tessa tore it open, took out a piece of paper and read the name. Lifting her eyebrows, she said, "I should have known. Is this just hearsay or do you have proof to back it up?"

The woman slid a small silver voice recorder across Tessa's desk. "Listen for yourself."

Once she located the play button, Tessa listened to a voice that she recognized relate facts about the case that no one but a certain few knew. Her eyes then tracked to the young detective, who stood expectantly by her desk. With a genuine smile, Tessa said, "Care to share your source?"

Andrea shrugged. "Can't do that."

Tessa nodded. "You did good, Andrea. Thanks."

Once Andrea left, Gus said, "Who was that on the recording?"

Tessa put the piece of paper on her partner's desk. "I'm going to put an end to the leak permanently."

After reading the name, Gus said, "Holy shit, I hope I don't have to arrest you for murder," as he watched his partner walk quickly away. "Hey, wait for me."

#

Tessa knocked on the door before she and Gus entered the office. A startled district attorney, Herb Meyers, looked at them and said, "I thought you arrested the Carlton woman. Do you need an additional warrant?"

Without a word, Tessa pressed the play button and watched the man's reaction as he listened to the conversation. His eyes grew wide in disbelief before they focused on the detectives. "Where'd you get this?"

"Not relevant," Tessa said.

"Confidential informant," Gus added.

Herb looked at the two detectives as anger flickered across his face. Picking up his phone, he pressed one button. "Please come into my office."

The DA, Tessa, and Gus all turned their attention to the door when they heard a soft knock. Beverly Paycheck, looking confused, entered the office. "Yes?"

Herb looked at Tessa. "Will you play that again?"

Tessa delighted at the look of horror that crossed Beverly's face before she scowled. "Where'd you get that? That was a private conversation. I will sue you for invading my privacy!"

The DA's eyes appeared to flame with anger. "How dare you leak confidential information you gained in this office!" The man's red face turned to the detectives. "May I have the recorder?"

Tessa nodded and handed him the small device.

"Thank you for bringing this to my attention. I'll handle it from here."

#

As the partners neared the police station, Gus said, "Why do you think she did that?"

"Revenge."

"Why?"

"She wanted to get back at me."

Gus stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. "For what?"

"I stole her girl...at least she thought Anna was her girl." Tessa chuckled. "I have it on good authority that she never stood a chance." Tessa squared her shoulders and said, "I'm going home," before she walked away.

Gus stood outside of the police department with his mouth wide open and his eyes bulging. "What the hell was that all about? More importantly, who's that woman in my partner's body?"

#

Pumped, Tessa let the Expedition barrel down the street, as the bass from her music reverberated off every surface. For all intents and purpose, the Stratton case was over. Once the crime scene investigators cataloged all the forensic evidence and she handed it off the DA, her involvement would be over until the trial. She had heard someone saying that the defense was going to go with an insanity plea, but she didn't see how that would stand up.

The fact that Vanessa Carlton covered up her license plate and had acquired Pavulon to render the victim helpless showed premeditation. She was certain that it would be difficult to find a psychiatrist who would say that the woman was mentally unfit when she committed the crime. She did consider that it would take a depraved mind to do what the woman did to the girl's body.

Tessa also knew that for the right amount of money, expert witnesses were more than willing to testify in favor of whichever side was paying them.

The icing on the cake, finding out that Beverly Paycheck was the leak. Tessa smiled as she speculated that the woman was cleaning out her desk at that very moment. "I can't wait until I tell Anna." The notion that she was going to share some anecdote of her day with another human being had her grin growing wider still.

When she pulled into the parking garage for the Overlook Apartments, Tessa felt a giddiness that she found odd yet, appealing.

Anna.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Tessa shifted her weight from one foot to the next as she stood outside Anna's apartment waiting for the woman to answer the door. When she heard the rattle of the knob, her body tensed before releasing pleasurable feelings.

The door opened and Tessa stared, captivated by the woman standing in front of her. "Hey."

Dressed in a pair of tattered jeans and an oversized t-shirt, Anna gazed at the detective before she smiled. "I was hoping you'd come."

The two women stood staring at each other. Neither was able to speak or move. The shrill ringing of a phone, that quickly became insistent, broke the spell.

Anna motioned for Tessa to come inside. "Let me get rid of whoever that is and then I'll turn the damn thing off."

As Tessa stepped inside and heard the door close gently behind her, her old fears of commitment-of letting someone else inside her space-clawed its way through her emotions for acknowledgement. She stiffened her back and refused to let those feelings control her.

When Anna found her still standing by the door, she laughed. "You can go farther than that, Detective.

"Are your parents still here?"

"No, I sent them home an hour ago." She let two beats pass before she said, "I was hoping you'd take care of me tonight."

"Pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?" Tessa took a step closer and opened her arms wide. Their kisses were warm and filled with promise. As they deepened, each woman let their hands explore the others body. Tessa pulled away.

Confused, Anna asked, "What's the matter?"

"I want you so much I can hardly breathe sometimes." Her fingers gently touched the bandage on Anna's head. "It might be too soon."

Anna reached out and pulled Tessa back to her body. "I don't want to wait any longer. I saw the doctor today and she said I was good to go," she whispered, before kissing the lips that she could no longer resist.

Tessa sank into what Anna offered for it was what she wanted too. Pulling away again, she smiled. "Shall we take this into the bedroom?"

#

Tessa couldn't believe how intense the feeling was just holding Anna's naked body. As the woman slowly undressed her only minutes before, she felt small, eruptions of orgasm sweep through her body. She gently led Anna to the bed and, once she was lying down, Tessa covered Anna's body with hers as her thigh parted Anna's legs-she was so wet.

"God, how I've wanted this," Anna whispered, as she began grinding against Tessa's thigh. When Tessa did the same, she groaned, "Not yet."

With her green eyes darkening with arousal, Tessa lifted her hips and her fingers slid effortlessly through the wetness. Her fingers pinched the engorged, elongated clitoris and Anna responded with a cry. "You like that, don't you? Tessa purred.

"Yes," Anna's husky voice replied. "Please, Tessa, I need more."

Tessa's lips began a slow journey toward her fingers. When Anna moaned as Tessa took a hard nipple into her mouth, she looked up and smiled. She wanted to touch and kiss every part of the body she craved ever since they first met. When her lips surrounded Anna's clitoris she heard her groan in pleasure. Anna tasted exquisite as her tongue made long, lapping strokes-Anna grew wetter. Tessa took the hard clit in her mouth and began sucking in time with her fingers that had delved deep inside.

For her part, Anna was lost in sensations that threatened to overwhelm her completely. She lifted her hips for more contact. Never before had she felt so aroused-Tessa's relentless tongue and fingers took her to heights she never imagined were possible-her body was ready to explode. "I'm going to come," she cried.

Tessa stopped her onslaught and made her way up to Anna's lips while her fingers remained inside. The kiss was deep and wanting. She pulled back slightly. "Not yet," she whispered before her lips latched on to a swollen nipple. She sucked it deep into her mouth and let her tongue brush over it in a never ending movement that had Anna clamping down hard on the fingers inside her.

"Please, Tessa...please, I need to come," cried Anna breathlessly.

With her center resting on Anna's thigh, and her mouth on the lawyer's lips, Tessa slid two more fingers inside and began rhythmically moving in and out. She felt the walls tighten even more around her fingers, as her thumb stroked the still swollen clit. For her part, Tessa ground her clitoris against Anna's thigh and was soon matching Anna's hips as they moved.

Soon, both Anna and Tessa were crying out as each orgasm they felt took them higher. With one final push, Tessa's finger took Anna to the edge, before dropping her into a spiral of unadulterated joy.

For a long time afterward, they held each other while they shared secrets and whispered words of love and comfort.

Tessa could no longer deny what her heart had tried to tell her for so long-she loved Anna.

As if she heard all of Tessa's thoughts, Anna opened her eyes, looked at Tessa and smiled. "Do you know that I've fallen in love with you?"

Tessa kissed her lips. "I know the feeling."

Cupping her hand over the curve of Tessa's jaw, Anna pulled it closer before she kissed Tessa's lips. Then, with caresses that lingered long after her lips had moved on, the lawyer began her loving assault on the detective's body.

Epilogue

Tessa paced the corridor outside of the courtroom where the trial against Vanessa Carlton was to begin. The selection of the jury was over and once, the lawyer's opening statements finished, the trial would begin in earnest. Bob and Fran Stratton, along with their daughter, Sara, and her husband approached the detective.

Bob held out his hand and Tessa shook it. "Well, Detective Jacoby, the day is finally here. I want to again thank you for all your support over the last year."

Feeling her face warm, Tessa replied. "I'm the first to testify, so I'll be able to stay in the courtroom for the proceedings. Of course, I can't be here every day but I will do my best."

Fran Stratton, moved closer to Tessa and gave her a hug as she whispered, "Thank you."

"You're welcome. We should go inside now."

#

For an hour, the people in the courtroom sat restlessly waiting for the judge, along with the attorneys, to appear. Tessa saw Mary Bertram sitting behind the defendants table and wondered

how she had fared over the last year-mostly, she wondered about Joey. When Sara Macintosh nudged her, she turned to the woman.

"Why is this taking so long?" Sara asked.

"Since the lawyers aren't here, I suspect they're all meeting in the judge's chambers." When Tessa saw the look of confusion on the woman's face, she smiled. "Nothing to worry about this happens all the time. There's probably something one of the lawyers want included or excluded."

Sara nodded and said, "Thank you."

A short time later, the lawyers entered the courtroom, followed by Vanessa Carlton. It wasn't long before the bailiff said, "All rise," and the judge entered the courtroom through a pocket door.

The judge, Emily Grafton, a slight woman with gray hair, struck her gavel and the buzzing in the courtroom stopped. "Mr. Konstanza, do you wish to speak to the court at this time?"

Medium was the word that could sum up everything about Edward Konstanza. He was of medium height and build and his hair wasn't too short or too long. His outward appearance belied his prowess as an excellent defense attorney. "Yes, Your Honor."

"Proceed."

"Your Honor, my client wishes to change her plea to *guilty by reason of insanity*. As I presented in chambers, three well known and independent psychologists have interviewed Vanessa Carlton and all agree that she is mentally unstable now and at the time of the murder. The district attorney's psychologist also came to the same conclusion."

The judge turned his attention to the district attorney. "Do you concur, Mr. Meyers?"

Herb Meyers stood up. "Yes, Your Honor. We have met with Mr. Konstanza and have worked out a plea deal." He handed a paper to the bailiff for the judge. "Ms. Carlton, pleading guilty to murder by reason of insanity, will be incarcerated at the Wellington State Hospital for treatment. At which time when the doctors feel she is able to cope, she will be transferred to prison for no less than sixty-five years."

"And your client agrees to this, Mr. Konstanza?" the judge asked.

"Yes, Your Honor."

"Show the jury in," the judge said.

#

Standing outside the courtroom, Tessa stood silently as she watched the Stratton family, all dressed in the same t-shirt that said around a basketball *reach higher to win*, cry and hug each another. The detective was at peace and no longer found other's suffering difficult to watch.

Anna's love had taught her how to allow the good moments become her focus. There would still be murderers and dead bodies but now she knew that it all was part of the grand scheme called life. With Anna by her side, she could face all her past demons and put them to rest. As for her family, she found forgiveness but the wounds were too raw to make any type of permanent contact-yet.

Anna had told her. *"That will all change in time. You need to let it go. Just as I found out with Devon, we can't change what's happened, we can only move forward. Maybe you can start a new page with your family."*

Thinking of Anna made her smile and she pulled out her phone. When she heard the voice she knew she would always crave, she breathed in deeply-she had found *home*.

End

If you like or dislike my story, please let me know at <mailto:erinoreilly@msn.com>
