



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DELTA JAMES



PAIN

ME A

Murder

mystery she wrote



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PAINT ME A MURDER

A STEAMY SMALL TOWN MURDER MYSTERY

MYSTERY, SHE WROTE



DELTA JAMES

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*Dedicated to My Two Best Friends:
Renee and Chris, without whom none of
what I do would be possible and to the Girls,
who bring joy to my life every single day
To Diet Coke, without which this
book would not have been possible*

*And to my readers who love my
characters and stories every bit as much as I do!
Leave reality behind and
Welcome to My World!*

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PROLOGUE



*W*hoever said life was a mystery to be lived and not a problem to be solved was only half right. Life should always be lived to the fullest but unsolved murders were most definitely both mysteries and problems to be solved.

CHAPTER 1



FIONA

*A*ngel's Rise, Maine

John had come to the end of his tether. They'd found him—bursting into his house, surrounding him, guns blazing. Cursing, he swung out of his study, getting off two shots that hit their marks. The assassins that had come through the side door were down. It was his only means of escape.

Dashing out the door, he emptied his clip, laying down a quick pattern of gunfire. The gun was only going to be helpful in getting out of the house. He didn't have enough firepower to hold them off indefinitely, much less beat them back. No, he had to get clear and lose them in the wilderness beyond his cabin.

The side door was the one that led to a narrow expanse of manicured lawn which fed right into the forest. John ran as hard as he could, grateful that the bullets that whizzed past him missed and slammed into the trees as he made his way deeper into the woods.

They were closing in from both sides and the rear. The only way he had to run was up toward the falls. He tried changing course, but a bullet flew past him like spider lightning streaking across the sky. He dodged back to his original course and hoped that those in pursuit would find the terrain too rough to follow.

Dragging air into his lungs, he could hear his pursuers closing in. He continued to charge up the hill, heading for the cliff. There was no deep pool at the bottom of the falls—only jagged rocks and the fast-flowing river that fell from the towering precipice.

John charged out of the woods, the ground beneath his feet hard and unyielding stone. He tried to avoid the slick, wet rocks closer to the falls and the river far below. He could hear the men closing in. He moved as fast as he could, trying to get to the treacherous narrow path that would lead down to a small grotto behind the thundering water as it...

Fiona Fowler jumped when the timer on her phone went off. She'd been up since three a.m. trying to get her latest book written. "Damn!" She was just about to kill off the victim in her newest book. Poor John Bartleby. He would be killed in the most horrific way in the most beautiful scene she could conjure. It was a good thing life didn't imitate art.

John Bartleby was not a good guy—he was a wastrel and a cheat. His sister, on the other hand, her protagonist, was kind and intelligent and about to embark on the adventure of her life.

But the book had to be set aside—at least for now. She had things to do, and it would just have to wait. She needed to rush down to Holy Grounds, the town's gourmet coffeehouse that had been built inside an old, deconsecrated church to grab a latte for herself and a plate of morning goodies for the girls.

She saved her work and stowed her laptop before rushing down to the barista bar. Fiona had a couple of cold cases from which they could choose: a murder, a disappearing heiress, and the one she hoped they'd find interesting—the theft of Nagisa, the angel said to have created Angel Falls and blessed the first settlement of Angel's Rise. She'd stood vigil on the breakwater for centuries. Made of bronze, weathered over time, and life-sized, she'd gone missing during a dark, stormy night in 1927—the height of Prohibition—and was never seen again.

Fiona raced down the stairs from her loft over her bookstore and ran out to Coach Way, the main drag of Angel's Rise. She looked up along the street and smiled. She was glad her friends would be visiting today. The weather promised to be sunny and cold—at least it would be once the fog burned off. Spring had not yet sprung, but seemed to be venturing out in a gingerly, peek-a-boo way.

“Good morning, Joyce!” she said, entering Holy Grounds.

“Morning, Fiona. We're just putting the last touches on your order. Is this for those friends of yours? The one you solve cold cases with—that's what they call them, right?”

“Right. We get together every other month and take on a cold case. It's my turn. We're going to have lunch at Seraphim.”

“Oooh, fancy! I haven't had a chance to eat there yet. Everybody who has says it's amazing. Isn't the chef some Michelin-starred guy who flamed out in New York?”

“What I heard was Stuart worked for one of the big celebrity chef's restaurants. He earned them a Michelin star while the guy whose name was on the restaurant was off doing some competition for the Food Network. The guy didn't even thank him, so Stuart decided to come open his own restaurant. He saw Seraphim's and said he fell in love with it.”

“God only knows why. That place has been closed for a long, long time.”

“I never understood why.”

“The story was it was raided during Prohibition, but they didn't find any contraband. They were going to do a more thorough search eventually.”

“Was that when Nagisa went missing?”

Joyce nodded. “Yes, so the cops all turned their attention to finding her. The feds got mad and closed the place down. The guy who owned it got killed—some say by one of the gangsters whose booze he lost.”

“You gotta love small towns and their stories. Anyway, I’m taking my friends there for lunch. I’ve got three cold cases to present to them. Nagisa is one of them.”

“Oh Fi, if you could find her—or even what happened to her—that would be amazing.”

Fiona shrugged. “We’ll see. But I have to tell you, those three ladies have a real collective nose for mystery and murder.”

“Aren’t they writers like you?”

“Yes. We met at a reader event, hit it off, and formed the Mystery Writers’ Murder Club.”

Joyce’s daughter came out from the kitchen bearing a handled shopping bag. “Are you sure you don’t want me to put it together for you?”

“No, I have a beautiful tray at home, and it’s easier to carry the ingredients in a bag, but it smells amazing,” said Fiona, reaching for the bag.

“Okay. I put most of it in boxes to protect it, and the fruit I put in plastic containers. You didn’t ask for fresh cranberries, but we got some beautiful ones grown locally in, so I made a cranberry/apple chutney and some cranberry/orange scones.”

“Thanks, Bette. That sounds wonderful,” said Fiona.

“Here you go, Fi. I figured you’d need a strong shot to get you going. I knew you weren’t opening the store until this afternoon. It’s so nice of your friends to be here to celebrate your new book and do a reading from the new book. I know people who have taken the day off just to be there.”

“I hope so. I hope everyone has a good time, and I really appreciate you offering to supply the snacks and coffee.”

“I figured the last thing you needed to worry about was making goodies and running your coffee machine.”

Even though Fiona offered homemade treats and operated a self-serve Keurig for free coffee, she and Joyce did not see each other as competition. Joyce ran a full-service coffee bar and small bistro, and Fiona just offered a serve yourself pod

coffeemaker and homemade scones and muffins. It was done on an honorary donation system, and the proceeds went to the local animal rescue.

“You know me too well,” laughed Fiona, lifting her to-go cup to Joyce and Bette and heading back to her place.

The streets of Angel’s Rise were shrouded in fog as Fiona scurried down Coach Way. Dressed in shumpy clothes, no makeup, and with her hair in a messy bun, nothing about her appearance suggested she had begun to write the vibrant murder scene she’d just finished in her latest wolf-shifter detective novel.

It was said that to even find the small town nestled against the rocky coastline of Maine beneath the benevolent eye of Angel Falls, one had to be already looking for Angel’s Rise, as it wasn’t on the way to anywhere.

Darting down the alleyway that ran between her bookstore and one of the myriad of antique and architectural salvage stores that lined the street, she stopped, looked up the steep stairs that led to her second story loft, and sighed. Taking a long swig of the chocolatey goodness that was her triple shot, extra chocolate with chocolate shavings espresso, she reminded herself that her characters and story were waiting, as was the inventory in the bookstore below. And she still needed to get everything set up for the girls this morning and the reading later in the day.

Trudging up the stairs, Fiona had to stop to catch her breath. She really needed to get in better shape. *‘You’ll need to stop drinking me,’* mocked the delicious liquid in her mug.

Shut up. These days, while the stairs were steep and long, they at least no longer seemed insurmountable. It didn’t help that she was carrying her cup of coffee as well as some of the food she would need for the gathering of the Mystery Writers’ Murder Club. The reader event in Kennebunkport might have been a disaster for some—Sandy Parkinson in particular—but for Fiona, it had introduced her to the three most important people in her life: Lori, Christie and Jessica.

Finally unlocking the door to her loft, she looked around. She had a lot of work to do. Later today, she would be hosting the second meeting of the Club. She had taken a large chunk of her savings and a week from her writing to renovate and redecorate her writer's retreat, as she liked to call it. Neither it, nor the lakeside cottage she had her eye on, would ever rival Jessica Murdoch's place, but she hoped in the not-too-distant future she would at least be able to afford to buy the cottage she'd always wanted—one that overlooked the falls. She would then offer her current living space to other writers who needed a place to create their first or next masterpiece.

She was just putting the final touches on the food—fruit, bagels, ham, lox, and sausage, fresh-made scones and other pastries as well as butter, jam, cream cheese, cranberry chutney, and clotted cream to serve with them. Her Keurig was set up and ready to go, her teakettle was boiling, and she had fresh apple and orange juice as well as Diet Coke.

“Knock! Knock!” called Christie Crofton, opening the door. “God, I love that about these small towns in Maine—nobody locks their doors.”

“Well, we do at night, but during the day, not so much,” rejoined Fiona with a laugh.

“Don't let her kid you,” said Jessica Murdoch, pushing past Christie, “she doesn't lock hers at night anymore, either. Lori's running a little late and wants to know if you need anything. I told her one of us would let her know.”

“Help yourselves ladies, I had some munchies brought in for this morning, and we're going to a great new restaurant for lunch—my treat.”

“You shouldn't have,” said Jessica.

“Oh yes, she should,” said Lori, joining them. She hoisted a bottle of champagne, waving it in the air. “Have you seen your ranking this morning? *Shifted Silence* is sitting at number one in several of the Zon's mystery categories as well as some of the paranormal categories and number 121 overall.”

The fact was, Fiona hadn't checked since the book had come out. There'd been a time when she was absolutely obsessed with rankings, but that time had long passed.

Fiona was shocked. "Are you kidding me?"

Lori opened the champagne with a distinctive pop. "Get me some glasses. Respect must be paid. Not only are the rankings great, but the reviews are glowing. Nothing but five stars."

Fiona shook her head. "Oh my god. I could never have done this without you guys."

"Bullshit!" said Christie. "We agreed to solve cold cases and act as each other's critique partners. Celebrating is way more fun!"

"Lori is right. Where do you keep the champagne glasses? Respect must be paid," laughed Jessica.

Fiona reached up and opened the cupboard above her fridge, where she kept the last four of a set of eight vintage champagne flutes. They poured champagne and spent the morning toasting and snacking without discussing any of the cold cases until Fiona's phone reminded her of their lunch reservation.

They filed out the door of Fiona's home and down the stairs, bracing themselves against the brisk spring air. Fiona grabbed her large leather bag, slinging it over her shoulder, and followed her friends out the door. Leaning into the wind that was rolling in off the sea, she looked to the empty pedestal overlooking the harbor where Nagisa had once stood and vowed that one way or another she would find out what had happened that cold, dark and stormy night.

CHAPTER 2



FIONA

Fiona led the way to Seraphim. It was a short walk, but Fiona thought she'd give her fellow Murder Club members the basics of the cold case she wanted them to consider.

"Disclaimer: the case I have in mind isn't a murder," she began.

"I know we call ourselves the Mystery Writers' Murder Club, but I don't think all the cases have to be murders," said Lori.

"Agreed," said Christie. "I think we take the most interesting cases regardless of whether or not somebody died."

"I agree with Christie and Lori," said Jessica. "I don't think that all of the best mysteries are about murder. I mean technically, last time we solved a missing persons case. It may have turned out to be a murder, but still, it was worth doing."

"I can tell you that solving one case often leads to others. So, whatcha got?" asked Christie.

Fiona grinned. "I'm so glad you guys feel that way. You may not know this, but Angel's Rise was a hot spot for importing illegal booze from Canada during Prohibition. The life-size, bronze angel that looked over the harbor was stolen the same night the local cops and the feds had planned to raid several sites, but just as they got started, the call came in that Nagisa had gone missing."

"Who is Nagisa?" asked Christie.

“She’s the angel that stood guarding the harbor for more than a century,” answered Fiona.

“And they never found it?” asked Lori.

“Nope,” said Fiona.

“Good lord; how did something that heavy get moved?” asked Jessica.

“That’s always been the question. How do you remove something that big from its pedestal and leave no trace of it behind? Some think it had to have been moved onto a boat, but I think the way down to the water is too treacherous.”

“I’m not sure what other cold cases you had in mind, but I think we should look for Nagisa,” said Jessica as she opened the door to Seraphim. Looking around at the crowded dining room, she continued, “I hope we have a reservation.”

“We do,” said Fiona, stepping up to the hostess’ station. “Fowler, party of four.”

“Chef Stuart wanted you to have the private room at the back. It has the best view of the river.”

“That would be lovely.”

The hostess led them to the back room and made them comfortable, giving them menus including a list of the day’s specials.

Once they were seated, Fiona opened her enormous shoulder bag and pulled out a file.

“Ha!” cried Christie. “I knew there was a reason you were carrying that big, heavy bag.”

“I can’t lie,” admitted Fiona. “I was hoping we could solve the one set right here in town. I would love to see her restored to her rightful place overlooking the harbor.”

The door opened and a man in a chef’s coat entered the room, carrying a platter. “Good afternoon. I’m Chef Stuart. Welcome to Seraphim! I have to say, I’ve read every single one of your books, and I think you’re all fabulous. Ms. Fowler, I’ve been meaning to extend a personal invitation to you to

visit the restaurant. I took the liberty of bringing you one of the restaurant's specialties." He set the platter down on the table. "Lobster fritters. The lobster is fresh and local. I think you'll love them. Have you had a chance to look at the menu?"

"Not yet..." started Lori.

"Then please let me bring you a tasting menu of what I consider our best," offered the chef.

Fiona looked at her companions who all nodded. "That sounds wonderful and awfully kind."

The waitress came in and Chef Stuart turned to her. "Tell Bobby to start the tasting menu and bring a bottle of the 2019 Stolen Owl Malbec for the ladies to enjoy."

"Thank you," said Jessica, taking a bite of a fritter. "Oh my god, these are amazing."

Christie narrowed her eyes. "Don't take this wrong, chef, but what is it you want?"

"Christie," cried Lori. "The man is being nice to us, treating us to what sounds like a lovely meal, and I love Malbec wine..."

"And has us in a back room where he can talk to us in private," finished Fiona, biting into a fritter. "Jess is right. These are delicious."

Christie and Lori took bites and agreed.

The chef chuckled. "I'm glad you like them, and I should have known better than to think I could sneak up on this. The fact is, ladies, I bought this building. One of the reasons is because of the local legends surrounding it. When we were doing the major renovations, we found all kinds of nooks and crannies that weren't on the original blueprints. Some of them were in the basement; I'm pretty sure they smuggled booze through here and this was one of their hiding places."

"There have always been rumors about the smuggling."

"Just recently, I discovered another anomaly in the prints, only this one doesn't have any kind of door. It's bricked over..."

“In other words, nobody wanted to open it up,” offered Fiona, taking another fritter.

“How do you know that?” asked Lori, dipping the fritter in the whole-grain mustard and honey sauce that accompanied them.

“If you planned to open it, there would be some kind of door,” answered Christie.

“Do you know how deep it is?”

“Not very. Maybe three feet? Four at most. Probably five feet wide, and about six feet tall,” said the chef. “I was hoping before you leave, you might take a look at the place.”

“You seem concerned,” said Jessica.

“Jess is right. What is it that bothers you?” asked Fiona.

“He’s worried there’s a body,” said Christie.

“Is that it?” asked Lori.

The chef looked a little bit shamefaced. “I’m afraid so. I thought the stories about gangsters and smugglers were exciting, but the reality is that there may be somebody bricked up in there. But I don’t want to call the police in case I’m just overreacting. Would you mind taking a look?”

“Not at all,” said Fiona. “And you don’t need to buy us lunch.”

“It really is a pleasure. I meant what I said. I am a big fan of all of you.”

“Chef Stuart,” said Fiona, “we’ve finished the fritters. How about we go see the place that was bricked up?”

“Would you mind very much? If you ladies think I’m being silly...”

“Not at all,” said Christie. “We’re all mystery writers, and I’m an ex-cop. This is right up our alley.”

“Maybe this will be our cold case. I don’t think the local cops will have a lot of interest, and we do have friends with

the Major Crime Unit,” said Fiona. Jessica had just gotten engaged to one of the detectives on the unit.

Jessica grinned as she stood up. “He does find it amusing that you all now consider him a personal resource for criminal procedures, and Kenny is having so much fun answering forensic questions.”

“Kenny is the best resource—no insult to Thorn,” said Lori.

“Well, ladies,” said Christie, “let’s go see Chef Stuart’s body, or at least the place he thinks may have been used to hide one.”

They followed the chef back through the kitchen and his office and into what had obviously been a place used to keep different kinds of booze. There were now temperature-controlled coolers for various wines, ales, beers, and the like. Towards the rear of the back room made of exposed brick was an arch that seemed to have been filled in until the bricks reached nearly to the very top.

“At first, I just thought it was a design feature,” said Stuart. “I didn’t think much of it. Then I realized the discrepancy in the blueprints, and it’s pushed forward from either side. So, I thought if I opened it up, we could get some more storage back here.”

“So, what stopped you from just ripping into it?” asked Fiona.

“I did use a drill to start a hole. I used a flashlight to peek in and I thought I spotted a kind of shroud. It looked to be dirty canvas, but it was closed up at the top, and I thought I could also see plastic under that.”

“Let’s take a look,” said Christie, picking up a flashlight that was lying on the floor. Turning it on, she peeked in. “I can see what you’re saying, but honestly you can’t unring this bell.”

“Well, he doesn’t have to ‘unring’ it, but that doesn’t mean we can’t open it up just to check to see if it’s a body,” said Fiona. “Anybody got a crowbar?”

“Do you think we should?” asked Lori.

“Here’s the thing—if it isn’t a body, and I don’t think it is...” started Fiona.

“And you base that on what?” asked Jessica.

“Because whatever it is, it’s standing up on its own. It’s not leaning against anything, so unless someone killed somebody and waited until rigor mortis set in...”

Christie shook her head. “No, that wouldn’t work. Rigor mortis takes six to eight hours to fully set in and only lasts about twelve hours. What are you going to do with a body until it’s in full rigor? And then I don’t think you could get him bricked up and the mortar set in that twelve-hour window.”

“Chef Stuart? It’s your restaurant.”

“I’d hate to call the cops to come down here and find out it isn’t a murder.”

“And pretty much anything else is going to be yours,” said Christie.

The chef located and then handed Fiona a crowbar. Using the small end inserted into the hole, they took turns loosening the bricks and pulling them out of the way. The chef changed their order and had food and drink brought down to them. Restaurant staff on break came back to help and move the debris out of the way. There was a growing sense of excitement and camaraderie, as if they were all on a great adventure.

“I owe you all lunch,” said Chef Stuart.

“Don’t be daft,” said Christie.

“We’re having way too much fun,” said Lori.

Jessica shrugged. “I’m with them. The meeting at my house wasn’t nearly this exciting.”

They continued working until they had a large and stable enough opening to take more flashlights and step inside.

Whatever was inside the canvas shroud was life-size but oddly misshapen.

“Chef? Would you like to do the honors?” asked Fiona.

The chef shook his head. “Good god, no. I’m still afraid it’s a body of some kind.”

“Well then, ladies?” asked Fiona.

“This is your hometown and your meeting,” said Jessica. “You do the honors.”

Standing on her tiptoes, Fiona reached up and untied the knot in the canvas bag that enclosed whatever it concealed within. She opened it up and the canvas fell away with a puff of dust and dirt, only to reveal a black covering tightly wrapped and bound with rope.

“What is that?” asked Lori.

“It’s canvas covered in tar. Before the invention of plastic tarps or black plastic sheeting, sailors used canvas covered in tar to protect things from the elements and the sea. Anybody got a knife so we can cut through that rope?”

Chef Stuart laughed. “I have a whole kitchen full of knives. Pete, go get one of the serrated knives.”

“Yes, Chef,” the sous chef said, running back to the kitchen and returning quickly with a knife, which he handed to Fiona.

Fiona began to saw through the rope, handing pieces back to Jessica and Lori, who were holding small flashlights. Christie found a larger floodlight and a kitchen stool to stand on so that the light was shining downwards as opposed to up. Finally, the last of the rope was removed, and Fiona began to unwrap the object.

There was a tingly feeling flowing through her system. Fiona was laughing and shaking as she peeled away the black-tarred canvas. Grinning from ear-to-ear, she pulled on the black tarp, revealing the tops of bronze-covered wings.

“Holy shit,” Fiona whispered.

“What?” asked Jessica.

Fiona pulled the covering down to reveal an aged bronze wing. There was a moment of absolute stunned silence. It was as if someone had cast a spell, and no one but Fiona could move or speak. Carefully, hand-over-hand, she drew down the black, tarry canvas. As she backed away step-by-step, the water-proofed canvas slid down the life-size bronze figure of an angel who seemed to be staring off into the distance, and who had once looked out to sea. They’d found Nagisa.

“Chef? You might want to call the police.”

Chef Stuart grinned. “I’ll tell them the Mystery Writers’ Murder Club just solved another cold case.”

CHAPTER 3



VICTIM

The roar of the tumbling cascade of water crashing down the side of the mountain seemed a fitting accompaniment to Daniel Monkton's flight for his life. The demons that had plagued his psyche had become real. Described as a 'tortured artist' by some in the New York art scene, Daniel had retreated to Angel's Rise to quell the monsters of his past.

Most people outgrew their fear of the monster that hides under the bed, but not Daniel. He was all too aware that such malevolence in the world was real and often took corporeal form. He ran toward the edge from which the water catapulted itself into the rocky pool below. As he climbed the promontory that overlooked the town, he hoped that the angels that were said to rise from the mists of the pool below would be his salvation.

His hopes had been in vain. The angels had turned their backs on him, forsaking him when he needed them most.

He'd been found. He thought his flight from the big city to the small village in the far reaches of Maine would save him, but he'd been so wrong. His next masterpiece was almost finished, but there were those who were trying to suppress his voice, his art. They feared him, and he had begun to believe he could rise up and destroy them. Instead, alone and afraid, he now faced his own demise.



SLADE

Augusta, Maine

So, Daniel Monkton was dead. That presented a plethora of problems Slade Rafferty hadn't been prepared to take on. He'd known Daniel for years, and when he'd called the first time spouting delusional gibberish, Slade had dismissed it as drug-inspired hallucinations. When Daniel had called again, he'd been far more rational. Slade became convinced that someone was trying to harm Daniel—maybe not murder him, but do him harm.

A call to the police in New York had done nothing to make him feel that Daniel was safe. The cops had been dismissive and unwilling to do anything other than write Daniel off as a paranoid junkie. Slade had reminded them that it wasn't 'paranoid' if there were actually people out to get him. The cops dismissed Slade as well.

Slade had done the only thing he could think of: he'd gone to New York and moved Daniel out of his artist's loft and up to Slade's A-frame retreat in the woods above Angel's Rise, where Slade was convinced Daniel would be safe. Only that hadn't been true at all.

When the CO of the State's Major Crime Unit began to lay out the new cases at their weekly meeting, the hair on the back of Slade's neck began to stand up.

"You okay?" asked Thorn Wilder, his best friend, who was sitting next to him at the conference table.

"Yeah. I know the victim," replied Slade.

"Rafferty, did I just hear you say you knew the victim?" asked Andrew Mills, Slade and Thorn's direct boss.

Slade nodded. "Yes, sir. I've known Daniel Monkton since we were kids. Where did he die?"

"Some little hamlet known as Angel's..."

"Rise," Slade completed for him.

Leaning into him, Thorn said, "Don't you have a place up there?"

Slade nodded. “Just outside the village, up by the falls. I have an A-frame. Daniel had been staying there for a few months.” Lifting his hand, he said, “Boss, I’d like to take lead on this.”

“You sure you want to do that? And he’s not family, just a friend?”

“Yes, I think I’m the best one to do it. He wasn’t family; just a friend, and not a particularly close one. I’ve just known him a long time, but to be completely honest, I took Daniel up to my place because he was certain someone was trying to kill him.”

“If you’re feeling guilty...”

“No. that isn’t it at all. I just know more about him. I can get up to speed on all of this, and I know the town and the cops.”

The chief nodded. “Slade, you’ll take point. I’ll have the chopper fly you up there.”

“No problem, chief. I’ve got my go bag. I’ll have the cops cordon off not only where he was killed, but my place, as well. I’d like forensics to fly up with me and get started on the house.”

The first thing Slade did once the meeting was over was get on the phone to the chief of police in Angel’s Rise, Jimmy Langden. Jimmy was a dedicated and good guy to have running a small-town village police department, but Slade suspected he would be woefully out of his depth running a murder investigation.

“Jimmy? It’s Slade Rafferty.”

“Slade, good to hear your voice. Please tell me you’re headed here. Your friend went and got himself murdered.”

“You’re sure it’s murder?”

“Yeah. Ain’t no way this is an accident or suicide.”

“You’re sure? I only ask because...”

“Slade, there’s no doubt. It’s pretty gruesome. When I called your office, they told us to try and protect the body—throw something over him so it was covered but didn’t touch it.”

“He’s up by the falls?”

“Yeah, whoever did it staked him out and then cut him open like some satanic sacrifice. If the press gets hold of this...”

“You think you can put a news blackout on it?”

“I think so. Nobody’s going to want the whackos we’ll get if the news leaks out. But they’re sending you, right? Because I asked for you specifically. I told them you had a place up here, but I didn’t say nothing about Daniel and you being friends.”

“No worries. I told them—full disclosure. I also told them I knew the local cops and it would probably be easier if I was the one assigned to the case. I’m headed out with the forensics team. We’re coming by chopper. We’ll try to land as close to the falls as possible.”

“You should be able to get pretty close. He’s on the east side on the bare rock. I’ve got guys up there and they’ll make sure it’s secure until you get there.”

“Can you get Doc Wallace to try and meet us? I’d like to finish all we need to do before we move him, and then I’d like to get him moved down to the morgue. Doesn’t Doc keep some kind of morgue there in Angel’s Rise?”

“Yep. He has a couple of drawers in his office, and he’s able to do the preliminary postmortem.”

“Good. That will be helpful. Chopper’s here. I need to get my guys and my go bag. We’ll see you when we get there. Can you arrange some rooms for us? It’ll take my guys a couple of days, at least, to clear my house as a crime scene.”

“I’ll let them know. When you’re about forty-five minutes out, radio in, and I’ll meet you there.”

“That’s nice, Jimmy, but don’t feel like you have to. I can do what I need to do and come down and fill you in. We’re going to need to take some of your space.”

“No worries. My people are already getting you set up in our conference room. We’ll have everything I think you’ll need, and if we don’t, we’ll get it for you.”

“Great. I knew I could count on you.”

Slade ended the call, grabbed his go bag, and headed for the roof. He was just walking out when the chopper landed, the large rotors only adding to the force of the wind.

“I always think I’m going to get blown off the roof,” said Kenny.

“Yeah,” said Randy. “It feels like walking into a gale force wind. Sorry about your friend, Slade.”

Kenny and Randy were two of the members of the Major Crime Unit’s forensic team. They were considered to be two of the best in the entire Northeast and Slade was glad to have them on board.

“Thanks. Daniel wasn’t a close friend, but he was a troubled soul and I’d known him a long time.”

“Think we’ll have any territorial issues with the locals?” asked Kenny.

“None at all. I know the chief up there pretty well and he’s grateful we’re headed his way. He’s already getting us a place in his office where we can set up. The logistics should be pretty good. Angel’s Rise is a nice little town, and the people are friendly. But Jimmy—that’s the sheriff—described the scene as looking like a ritual sacrifice of some kind. I think his men can keep their mouths shut, but it’ll unsettle the town.”

Kenny and Randy nodded and followed him onto the helicopter. As soon as they were strapped in, the chopper lifted off. Given they were in a helicopter, the ride was relatively short, fairly smooth, and extremely quiet. The pilot had the coordinates, and as the chief had expected, there was a perfect landing place close to the body. As requested, they radioed in when they were less than an hour out.

“Set down as far away as you can,” said Slade to the pilot over the comm system. “I know this terrain. It’s pretty rugged. Kenny? You and Randy examine the rock between us and the victim first. I want to know how they got up here, and if we can rule out a chopper, that would be helpful. Norm, do me a favor and after you lift off, see if you can find any other places they might have landed.”

“Will do,” said Norm.

Slade had spent time in the military, and he had been around a lot of chopper pilots—owed his life to more than one—but Norm was the best of the lot. Slade was pretty sure the guy could land on the head of a pin if you asked him to. He landed so they would get out on the side furthest away from the tarp covering the body. That way Slade could make a large circle around and leave as much of the rock undisturbed as possible.

The three men stepped back and waited until Norm lifted off.

“You two start a preliminary sweep of the rock; I’ll head over to the body.”

“What are you hoping to find?” asked Randy.

“Anything that’ll tell us how they got up here. Specifically, I want to know if they had a chopper or ATVs up here.”

“Got it,” said Kenny.

Slade nodded to them and headed towards the body, waving off one of the cops who started across. “We need to keep off this rock until my guys have a chance to see if they can find anything.”

“Damn it. We didn’t think of that.”

“How’d you boys get up here?”

“Hiked in.”

“That’ll help. Kenny and Randy will take impressions of your shoes so we can eliminate them.”

“None of us have dealt with anything like this. A couple of us puked, but we managed to mostly do it in the same spot and over the edge. I apologize for that.”

“No need to apologize,” Slade assured him. “I know veteran homicide detectives who throw up at scenes. Looks and sounds like you guys did everything you could do to preserve the scene. Let’s go take a look at the body.”

“I understand he was a friend of yours. I’m sorry.”

“Thanks; I appreciate that.”

The cops had done an outstanding job. Slade had expected the tarp to be secured at four corners by short posts but instead they had erected a tent-like structure that included side flaps that could be zipped open or closed on one side.

Slade pointed towards the tent. “You guys did a great job—way more than I was expecting.”

“Well, I had it in the trunk of the car. I thought it might be a good thing—you know, help to protect it.”

Slade nodded. “The chief is on his way up. You can double check with him, but I think you guys can head back into town.”

“All of us?”

Slade hid his smile. He could hear the eagerness in the young officer’s voice. Helping out on a case like this could help him in his career, and it wouldn’t hurt to have a liaison. He’d need to double check with the chief, but having the kid attached to their investigation would give the chief some relief, as well.

“I was actually thinking it might be helpful to have one guy on the force attached to my team as a liaison. Any chance you’d be interested? I have to tell you that was quick thinking on the tent. You probably helped preserve evidence.”

“If the chief says it’s okay, I’m definitely in. Just so you know, I met Daniel a couple of times, even had coffee with him.”

“That’s not an issue, but again, good thinking on letting me know. I appreciate that kind of straightforward honesty.”

Slade meant what he said. The kid had a good head on his shoulders, and it would be good to have a local on his team. It could smooth over any feathers they might ruffle. In any event, he meant to ensure the kid’s name was in his report.

Slade shook his head and extended his hand. “Sometimes, I’m an idiot. I get so focused on things I forget to introduce myself. Slade Rafferty, Major Crime Unit.”

“Wentworth Henderson. My mother was one of the Wentworth’s of Portland. My friends call me Went.”

Slade nodded. “I get it. Mine named me after a romance hero in one of those historical bodice rippers.”

Once inside the tent, Slade had to stop and take a step back. He’d seen some gruesome murder scenes in his time, but Daniel’s ranked right up there. He’d been placed on what appeared to be a fairly flat rock on the side of the cliff where the falls started to tumble over the precipice. He was spreadeagled with metal stakes driven through his hands and feet. Whoever had killed him had removed his eyes and ears. He was naked and someone had carved some kind of runes or hieroglyphs or something of that nature into his upper torso. His wrists had been slashed and his throat cut.

At the sounds of approaching vehicles, Slade turned to Went. “I need you to tell Jimmy and Doc to walk around where Kenny and Randy are working.”

“Gotcha.”

Slade grinned as Went left to do his bidding. He wondered if he’d ever been that young and eager. Ambitious yes, but like so many, he’d lost his youth and eagerness in a land of sand and heat on the other side of the world.

It didn’t take long for the chief and the doctor to join him. “Doc—good to see you. Thanks for agreeing to do this. Jimmy, thanks for coming. Before we get started, any chance I can have Went assigned to help with my team? I think having a local will help.”

“Well, you’re almost a local. People know you, but I think Went could be of help. His father’s family is one of the founding families and his mother’s family is big down in Portland. But he’s a good kid, and everyone likes him.”

“Thanks. This tent was his idea, and it was a damn good one. I think he kind of took lead...”

“That would make sense. He isn’t the senior officer up here, but he knows his stuff. His nose is always stuck in a book on forensics and the like.” They stepped into the tent and the chief shook his head. “Good lord. I didn’t think it would affect me as much this time.”

“Yeah, there’s no way to get used to that.”

Doc shook his head. “No way to get a good time of death until I get him down from here, but it was recent. He suffered. Everything but the *coup de grace* of his throat was done before they killed him.” The doctor pulled open his mouth. “Yep. They cut his tongue out, too.”

“Went?” Slade called.

“Yes, sir?”

“Any chance you guys found his eyes, ears, or tongue?”

“Nope.”

Slade thought back to various courses he’d taken in folklore and mythology. It seemed to him that whoever killed Daniel didn’t want him to be able to see, hear, or speak in the afterworld.

Went continued, “You want us to start looking?”

“Jimmy, there’s really nothing for you to do. Can you send one of your guys to my place...”

“Already done,” said the chief of police.

“Of course, you did. If you could keep someone there until we can at least do a preliminary search, I’d be obliged. But as long as we have Went and the doc, I think we’re good.”

Slade watched as Jimmy dispersed his men and told Went he’d be working with MCU for the duration and would take

orders from Slade.

“As horrific as this is,” said Doc, “you just made Went’s year. He’s a good kid with a good head on his shoulders. I think you’ll be grateful for the help.”

Slade nodded. “I already am.”

“Sorry about your friend.”

“So am I. I wish I could have done more for him.”

“Don’t be thinking like that,” said Doc. “This kind of evil would have happened whether you’d been there or not. Let’s just be grateful that whoever did it only took Daniel. And let’s pray he’s the only one they wanted.”

Slade nodded. The doctor had just spoken his worst fear—that Daniel would only be the beginning. What the hell had Daniel gotten himself into? Who would want to kill him in such a torturous, horrific manner? Slade might not know now, but he vowed that before it was over, he would find the killer and give Daniel either justice or revenge—and at the moment, he didn’t care which.

CHAPTER 4



FIONA

Fiona couldn't have been happier. Her friends were here to celebrate her newest release, her book was doing great—both in sales and in reviews and they'd solved their second cold case, the theft of Nagisa. Although 'solved' might be a bit of a misnomer. They'd found the bronze statue, but they still didn't know how she'd ended up inside a brick niche.

The press had been called and both papers, the local radio news team, and the editor for *Food and Wine*, who'd come to meet with Chef Stuart about Seraphim, were now in the back room with the Mystery Writers' Murder Club and Chef Stuart.

"What made you look for the statue in the wine cellar?" asked one reporter.

"Chef Stuart noticed a discrepancy in the blueprints and asked if we'd take a look," answered Christie.

"The ladies of the Mystery Writers' Murder Club have already solved one murder, a missing persons case that turned out to be a murder, and have now found Nagisa," supplied Chef Stuart. "Fiona lives here and runs the local bookstore, where she has not only the latest bestsellers, including her own, but vintage books and first editions."

Chef Stuart sounded a bit like Fiona's personal publicity agent.

"But how did it get there?" asked the editor from *Food and Wine*.

“At this point we can only make suppositions, and they won’t help anyone,” said Fiona.

“Will you keep trying to find out?” asked the editor from the local paper.

“I will,” said Fiona. “The case has always fascinated me and now that I know where she is, I’m afraid I’ll be a bit like a dog with a bone. It was lovely for all of you to come, but I need to get back to my bookstore, *Between the Lines*. This afternoon I’ll be doing a reading from my new book, *Shifted Silence*, and Lori Sykes, Jessica Murdoch, and Christie Crofton will also be there to sign books. There will be refreshments, so I hope all of your readers and listeners will come.”

The press, such as they were, was shown out and Fiona and her friends made ready to leave.

“Ladies, I had my staff prepare some food for you to take,” said Chef Stuart. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate you helping me with this, and Fiona, I do hope you’ll figure it all out.”

“I’m going to try. Thanks for everything.”

“You ladies need to meet in Angel’s Rise again. Seraphim would love to have you here. Thank you, again.”

Fiona, Christie, Jessica, and Lori left the restaurant, linked arms, and began to walk back to Fiona’s place.

“I’m not sure I fulfilled my mission to find us a cold case to solve,” said Fiona as she led the ladies around to the rear to sneak back into her loft over the bookstore, as readers seemed to be lining up to get in.

Fiona’s phone rang just as they got upstairs. “Fi? It’s Joyce; it looks like people are lining up...”

“I saw that. Any way we can increase the size of my refreshment order?”

Joyce laughed. “We’d been thinking you had underestimated the crowd, especially with people making hotel reservations. Every place to stay in town is sold out. I

think you've got a blockbuster on your hands. When word gets out about you guys finding Nagisa, I think people will have even more reason to want to meet you. I've still got that key to your back door you left with me. Bette and I will bring the food and get set up."

"That would be fantastic, Joyce. Thanks for all your help."

"Glad to do it. See? I told you that you'd get back to the top of the bestseller lists. By the way, Bette says when you decide you need to hire someone for *Between the Lines*, she has a degree in literature and has read every one of your books at least three times."

Fiona laughed; she had been hoping to hire Bette.

"Seriously, when you gave her the ARC copy of *Shifted Silence*, she was over the moon."

"I loved her review. It was so insightful and very flattering."

"Well deserved."

Ending the call, she spun around to face her friends, who were all grinning from ear to ear.

"Let's all take a few minutes to eat," said Jessica, looking at her watch. "We're not supposed to open for another hour. I suspect it's going to get a bit crazy down there, and after this morning's fun and games, I don't know about you guys, but I need a chance to sit down and take in that we solved a mystery that is almost a hundred years old."

"Not really," said Fiona. "We found Nagisa, and I suppose that's the most important part..."

"But how did she get there?" finished Christie.

"And more importantly, who put her there?" added Lori.

"I can't help wondering if whoever sold the building to Chef Stuart knew it was there," said Fiona.

"It might be interesting to see if we could find out," said Jessica. Gracefully, she sank into Fiona's sofa. "I love your sofa. It is so comfy."

Christie curled up in one of the chairs. “I know. I think Fiona has the best furniture.”

“Facebook Marketplace. I sold just about everything when I had my big crash. I was able to pay everything off. With the settlement from my divorce, I could put a big enough down payment on this place to be able to afford it.”

“It’s just so beautiful and well done,” said Lori. “And you did all the work up here yourself?”

“The downstairs has been a bookstore for more than fifty years, but they went under during Covid. This upstairs was just a regular old attic space. As the downstairs just needed a good cleaning and a better display system, I spent most of the money up here. I had a contractor come in and take it back to the studs, frame the bath, and haul all the debris away. Had an electrician and plumber come in and then did everything else myself. You gotta love the internet. You can find anything there.”

“Well, it’s just lovely,” said Jessica.

“I know. I keep thinking Fiona should do an interior decorating book,” said Lori.

“Funny you should say that. I keep thinking about writing a female detective who moonlights flipping and selling houses,” laughed Fiona.

“Well, girls,” said Christie, glancing at her vintage Rolex. Slapping her hands together, she continued, “It’s showtime.”

Feeling happier and better about the future than she had in a long time, she led her friends outside, down the stairs, and to the front of the bookstore. When they rounded the corner, the enormous crowd burst into wild applause and cheering. Fiona turned to look back at her three closest friends and smiled. Not one time during the dark nights immediately after her ex-husband left had she even allowed herself to dream of something like this.

Very few people would ever know the fear and hell she’d gone through when her entire world had fallen apart after the divorce. She’d realized she had some core beliefs she needed

to address and correct. She'd read a book by an author she greatly admired named Renee Rose. The book *Write to Riches* had been the beginning of her healing and of her ability to climb up from the depths of her anger and despair.

They opened the door and invited the crowd in. Fiona knew that for some it wouldn't have been considered a big crowd, but for her, it was huge. She imagined that the additions of Christie, Lori, and Jessica had added to the turnout, and she wasn't too proud to be glad of it. In that moment, Fiona knew she was on the right path back to reclaiming her spot as a top author. She'd been a solid mid-lister in the past, but every moment when she meditated, she visualized a path that led up—and she could feel her strength returning.

And with it, success and happiness. It was interesting to her that she didn't necessarily envision a new romance or a man at her side, but financial security, acceptance, and respect among her peers as being far more important. If a great man came along, romance might be in her future, but she was going to be damn sure he was worth making the kind of changes she'd need to make in order to have a successful relationship. It was easy to blame her ex-husband's cheating for the breakup, but if she was honest, there was a lot that had come before—some of it her fault—that had led to the cheating, which for her had been the proverbial final straw.

Jessica took the podium they'd set up. "Hey, let's get this party started! Fiona is going to read something from her new, dare-I-say blockbuster..." the crowd applauded and filtered into their seats "...*Shifted Silence*. Then we're just going to mingle. The four of us have tables around the bookstore and books to sell. If you'd like one of us to sign something, we're happy to do that, even if you bought it previously and just brought it in to be signed. And now, let me introduce my good friend and bestselling author, Fiona Fowler."

Fiona had believed that the previous applause was more for her friends than for her, but the cheers and clapping were almost deafening. It was a little bit daunting, but also more incredibly encouraging than she might have thought.

“Thanks, Jess. And thanks, as well, to Christie Crofton, Lori Sykes, and all of you who came today. Your attendance means a great deal to me, and the way *Shifted Silence* has been so well received means more to me than I can say. This book saw the return of Freya York, my wolf-shifter detective. It’s funny, as I thought I’d finished with her in my last book *Shifted Reverie*, but when I sat down to start a new book, which I thought would be a new series, Freya popped up with a story to tell.”

“Yay, Freya,” said an elderly woman in the back, wearing a navy-blue hat and veil.

“We missed you, Freya,” called a woman who could have been in her late twenties or early thirties, dressed all in black except for her purple hair.

Other people clapped and made their agreement known. It was incredibly rewarding, and Fiona could feel the blush rising up in her cheeks.

“I think she missed you, too,” said Fiona with a smile. “So, let’s see, what shall I read?” She took the hard back copy she had and let it fall open. “Oooh, that’s a good spot.”

“The smell of death was heavy in the air. Even someone without Freya’s enhanced senses would have picked up the scent. She drew her SIG, checking to ensure it was ready to fire, and moved towards the smell—the coppery fragrance of blood and death assailing her nostrils as she entered the clearing.

There in the middle of the clearing, on what appeared to be a make-shift altar made of stone, the victim lay spread-eagled, his feet and hands staked to the rock. Blood had poured freely from those wounds when his heart still beat. But it was easy to see it beat no more.

Freya checked the clearing before moving back into the trees, circling around and sweeping the area as she spiraled closer and closer to the victim. Keeping her gun at the ready, she got close enough to examine the body and fought back the urge to vomit. The man’s eyes and ears had been removed. As she looked closer, she saw that his tongue was missing as well.

The body had been carved and painted with ancient runes and symbols of high magic. His wrists had been slashed and his throat cut...”

“Stop!” shouted a man from the far back who’d been standing next to Jessica. “Ms. Fowler, I’m going to need you to come with me.”

Fiona recognized him. It was Slade Rafferty. They’d met at Jessica and Thorn’s engagement party. She also remembered him from school. He’d been a few years ahead of her and had joined the Navy and been recruited to join the SEALs. Like every other girl in their school, she’d had a mad crush on him. Who wouldn’t have—he was dark, brooding, and full of muscles. He’d been an all-star in several sports, but also captain of the chess and debate teams. He was smart, athletic, and his ex-girlfriends all adored him. He hadn’t changed. No, that was wrong; he’d actually gotten better looking.

But why was he interrupting her reading?

“Slade, what is wrong with you?” hissed Jessica.

Fiona smiled. He had no way of knowing how protective her friends were.

“Is there something I can help you with?” asked Fiona.

Slade made his way through the standing section of the crowd, parting them like Moses had the Red Sea as he and his people escaped the pharaoh. Slade made his way to the podium.

“Yes, I’m going to need you to come with me,” he said in a grave voice.

“I’m a little bit busy. All these people,” she nodded toward the audience whom she could see were hanging on every word, “came to hear me finish this reading and then meet and talk with me and three other author friends—Jessica being one of them.”

“I’m afraid this can’t wait. Perhaps your friends could take over for you.”

“What’s going on, Slade?” asked Jessica.

He turned his attention to Jessica, but Fiona could see he was keeping an eye on her as well. “This doesn’t concern you, Jessica.”

“The hell it doesn’t, Slade. Fiona is one of my closest friends.”

Slade barely muffled a groan before turning back to Fiona. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to insist. You can come with me voluntarily, or I can put you in handcuffs.”

Handcuffs, was he kidding? Looking at his face she knew he wasn’t. With everyone watching, the only thing to do was act as if this was all perfectly normal and go with him.

“As much fun as that might be in a different scenario, I think I’ll pass on the bracelets. Jessica, can you take over? I’ll be back as quick as I can.”

Slade led her out the door where Christie confronted him. “I’m Christie Crofton, Baltimore Homicide, retired.”

“Even if you weren’t retired, Ms. Crofton, you would be out of your jurisdiction. I need for you to stand aside.”

Christie stood still for a moment and then looked at Fiona. “Don’t say a word. Not one damn word until we know what this is about and get you a lawyer.”

“I haven’t arrested Ms. Fowler...”

“Yet,” challenged Christie. “But we both know you’re taking her into involuntary custody...”

“He is?” asked Fiona, beginning to believe there was something sinister going on.

“I’m trying to do this with as little fanfare as possible. Now, please, Ms. Fowler, if you’ll come with me.”

Fiona balked. There was a time, not very long ago, when she would have meekly complied. That time was gone.

“I don’t want to go with you.”

Slade sighed. “Your choice. In that case, Fiona Fowler, I’m placing you under arrest on suspicion of aggravated murder.”

“Aggravated? Murder?” squeaked Fiona, her confidence and courage flagging a bit in light of Slade’s charges. A kind of numbness began to creep over her, much like someone was covering her with a shroud.

He reached under his expensive and tailored suit jacket and pulled out a pair of handcuffs.

Christie put her hand on the cuffs. “That won’t be necessary. Fiona will go with you.”

“And I’m the one who makes those decisions, Ms. Crofton, not you.”

Fiona thought her knees might buckle and he’d have to carry her when she heard the handcuffs lock into place around her wrists.

Christie gave him a stink-eye, but otherwise ignored him. “Fi, I’ll be right behind you, and remember, keep your mouth shut. You can confirm your name, address, and phone number, but that’s it. And the minute they sit you down, you affirm your right to legal counsel. Got it? Everything will be fine.”

“Yes. I understand. I’m ready to go with you, Detective Rafferty,” Fiona said. She wasn’t; and she doubted that anything would be fine—maybe somewhere in the future, but she had a feeling that things would get a whole lot darker before she would see light breaking on the horizon.

CHAPTER 5



SLADE

Slade entered the bookstore to get a cup of coffee. His favorite coffee bar was closed for the afternoon, but one of the townsfolk, seeing his disappointment, reminded him that there was free coffee to be had at Between the Lines. He'd been in there once or twice—well maybe more often than that. It was a charming place that offered something a little more special than the large brick and mortar bookstore chains that still existed, although it wasn't the books he'd gone to admire.

Besides, he'd reacquainted himself to the owner, who was now a successful author named Fiona Fowler, at Jessica and Thorn's party. Slade had been attracted to her at the party, but Jessica had warned him off as Thorn had shared stories of Slade's rather rowdy ways. He'd thought about the gathering at her bookstore might be an opportune time to ignore Jessica's warning, especially as he'd had Thorn singing his praises and talking about how Slade had changed his wild and woolly ways.

Being back here, especially as Daniel had been murdered left Slade with feelings of guilt he didn't need if he was going to apprehend his killer. He should have done something more to help Daniel. Slade had felt things were coming to a head with Daniel. Slade couldn't help but think he should have acted on his plan to start trying to talk Daniel into voluntarily committing himself to some kind of in-house therapy. His delusions and paranoia had been increasing instead of lessening, and if Daniel's life really was in jeopardy, a

psychiatric hospital might be the best place for him. But now Daniel was dead, killed in a horrific manner.

Slade hoped that going to the bookstore, getting a cup of coffee, and mingling with nice people not involved in criminal activities might help lighten his mood. Not only had Daniel been viciously tortured and murdered, but there was a part of Slade that felt responsible. Maybe if he'd come last weekend when Daniel had asked him, his friend might still be alive. But Slade had been wrapping up a case and hadn't wanted to give him the time.

I'm so sorry, Daniel. I'll find whoever did this to you and make them pay. Slade made that vow as he entered Between the Lines. He'd hailed Jessica as she left the podium, and she'd made her way through the crowd and joined him. Thorn was a lucky man; Jessica Murdoch was wildly successful, incredibly beautiful, and madly in love with his best friend.

Fiona had taken the podium and was talking to the crowd. Someone really needed to teach her to dress. She was in a pencil skirt that was too big for her and a shlumpy sweater that was at least two sizes larger than her wonderfully curvaceous figure needed. Her hair wasn't in the popular 'messy bun.' It was just a mess. He'd been so focused on admiring the beauty she was hiding, he hadn't been really listening closely, but then her words caught his attention.

"There in the middle of the clearing on what appeared to be a make-shift altar made of stone, the victim lay spread-eagled—his feet and hands staked to the rock. Blood had poured freely from those wounds when his heart still beat. But it was easy to see it beat no more."

What the hell? She was describing Daniel's murder scene. He focused his attention on Fiona's words.

"Freya checked the clearing, moving back into the trees and circling around, sweeping the area as she spiraled closer and closer to the victim. Keeping her gun at the ready, she got close enough to examine the body and fought back the urge to vomit. The man's eyes and ears had been removed. As she looked closer, she saw his tongue was missing as well.

The body had been carved and painted with ancient runes and symbols of high magic. His wrists had been slashed and his throat cut...”

There was no fucking way that the scene she was describing was coincidental. Her book was already published. Slade knew that took time to happen. He needed to shut her down and take her into custody.

“Stop!” he shouted. “Ms. Fowler, I’m going to need you to come with me.”

“Slade, what is wrong with you?” hissed Jessica.

Fiona smiled, which he thought was an odd reaction to having her reading interrupted, especially by a man she knew was a homicide detective.

“Is there something I can help you with?” she asked.

Slade made his way through the standing audience to get to her on the podium. She seemed remarkably composed for someone who was describing Daniel’s grisly murder. He cupped her elbow, which could be interpreted in many ways by a casual observer, but which took her in hand. Should she try to escape, Slade could easily stop her.

“Yes, I’m going to need you to come with me,” he said in a calm, level voice.

The last thing he wanted to do was arrest Jessica’s friend, especially in front of an audience and the press, but there was no way he wasn’t taking her into custody.

“I’m a little bit busy. All these people,” she nodded toward the audience who she could see were hanging on every word, “came to hear me finish this reading and then meet and talk with me and three other author friends—Jessica being one of them.”

She was a cool customer. She’d put him on notice that others were watching and that they both knew her friend. It didn’t matter, he didn’t get bluffed or intimidated that easily.

“I’m afraid this can’t wait,” he said. “Perhaps your friends could take over for you.”

“What’s going on, Slade?” asked Jessica, clearly agitated. As soon as he got Fiona into an interrogation room, he would call Thorn and give him a heads up.

He turned his attention to Jessica but kept hold of Fiona’s elbow so he could keep an eye on her. “This doesn’t concern you, Jessica.”

“The hell it doesn’t, Slade. Fiona is one of my closest friends.”

This is not going to go well. Slade barely muffled a groan before turning back to Fiona. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to insist. You can come with me voluntarily, or I can put you in handcuffs.”

“As much fun as that might be in a different scenario, I think I’ll pass on the bracelets.”

Again, it seemed odd to him that she could make a joke about it. On the other hand, the idea of a naked Fiona Fowler handcuffed to his bed did have some appeal. His cock began to tighten, and Slade chastised it internally. *Down, boy. She’s a murder suspect.* His cock didn’t seem to care. Slade shook his head, banishing the inappropriate thought.

“Jessica, can you take over?” asked Fiona. “I’ll be back as quick as I can.”

Slade led her out of the door and almost made it to his SUV when an older woman with silver-gray hair and the confidence and stance of a veteran cop confronted him. “I’m Christie Crofton, Baltimore Homicide, retired.”

Damn. This is not what I need; some retired cop defending her friend. As Slade recalled, there had been four of them—mystery writers who had formed a ‘murder club’ to solve cold cases. He’d forgotten one of them was a retired homicide detective.

Taking a deep breath, he addressed Christie Crofton in a level, professional voice. “Even if you weren’t retired, Ms. Crofton, you would be out of your jurisdiction. I need for you to stand aside.”

Christie stood for a moment, gave a light nod in acknowledgement that he was right and then looked at Fiona. Hopefully, he'd shut that line of support down.

“Don't say a word,” Christie said. *Apparently not as shut down as I thought.* “Not one damn word until we know what this is about and get you a lawyer.”

“I haven't arrested Ms. Fowler...” he said, trying to defuse the situation with Christie, but still keeping an air of authority with Fiona—a delicate balancing act he wasn't sure he could do as an image of Daniel's mutilated body flashed in his mind's eye.

“Yet,” challenged Christie. “But we both know you're taking her into involuntary custody.”

“He is?” asked Fiona. The numbness from the shock of being taken into custody was wearing off. This could get ugly if he couldn't get her out of here. The people from the press had begun to smell blood in the water and were homing in like hungry sharks. Time to move.

“I'm trying to do this with as little fanfare as possible. Now, please, Ms. Fowler, if you'll come with me.”

Fiona hesitated. “I don't want to go with you.”

Slade sighed. “Your choice. In that case, Fiona Fowler, I'm placing you under arrest on suspicion of aggravated murder.”

“Aggravated? Murder?” squeaked Fiona, her confidence and courage seeming to flag.

Slade felt like a bastard. He didn't want to hurt her. His first impulse was to protect her, but he couldn't do that and investigate Daniel's murder. If Fiona wasn't the killer, it was a safe bet she knew something about the murder. He reached under his well-made and tailored suit jacket and pulled out a pair of handcuffs.

Christie put her hand on the cuffs. “That won't be necessary. Fiona will go with you.”

“And I'm the one who makes those decisions, Ms. Crofton, not you,” he said placing Fiona in handcuffs.

Christie gave him a stink-eye, but otherwise ignored him. “Fi, I’ll be right behind you, and remember, keep your mouth shut. You can confirm your name, address, and phone number, but that’s it. And the minute they sit you down, you affirm your right to legal counsel. Got it? Everything will be fine.”

“Yes. I understand. I’m ready to go with you, Detective Rafferty.”

The fear in her voice was almost his undoing, but he reminded himself that someone as cold-blooded as whoever it was that killed Daniel was most likely a smooth and calculated manipulator.

Slade led her to his SUV and helped her into the backseat, where there were no handles or way to unlock the vehicle. He stepped around the vehicle and slipped into the driver’s seat, started the engine, and was able to pull away from the curb before the press managed to get out the door.

He called the police department. The chief picked up. “Jimmy? It’s Slade. I’ve taken Fiona Fowler into custody on suspicion for Daniel Monkton’s murder.”

The chief laughed. “That’s a good one, Slade.” There was a pause as the chief realized Slade wasn’t joking. “You’re serious?”

“I am. I’m a little worried the press is going to be looking for a story. Is there a back way into the station?”

“Yeah. Coming from Fiona’s bookstore, drive past the station and turn at the corner and then into the alley behind us. We’ll block both ends. You can drive down into our secure parking below the building. We’ll be there to make sure you get in without any fuss; but Slade, I have to tell you, I find it hard to believe Fiona would be involved even remotely in what happened to your friend.”

“Maybe; maybe not. Do me a favor and download a copy of her latest book... what’s it called, Ms. Fowler?”

“*Shifted Silence*. Damn. I’m not telling you anything else.”

“Don’t worry about it. It would have been easy enough to find out. Jimmy, download *Shifted Silence*. I want to make

sure we have it before anyone thinks to pull it down.”

“Will do, but Slade, Fiona had nothing to do with this. I’d stake my reputation on that.”

“I don’t think ‘stake’ is a word I’d want to use at the moment.”

He hung up and completed the short drive to the station. Slade was grateful they weren’t in Portland or Bangor, as the local and national press would have found a way to turn this whole thing into a circus. He parked and Jimmy opened the back door to help Fiona out. If all the local cops, including Went, were as keen on Fiona and her innocence, this was going to be a lot more difficult than he’d first imagined.

Jimmy pulled out his handcuff key and unlocked Fiona’s cuffs, tossing them to Slade. “I don’t think these will be necessary, will they, Fiona?”

She rubbed her wrists. “No. Thanks, Jimmy.”

Jimmy cupped her elbow, running his hand along the underside of her forearm, guiding her into the station and into one of the interrogation rooms. This was going to be a whole lot more awkward than he’d thought, but he would have to trust Jimmy and his men to remember they were cops and to act professionally.

“Can I get you a cup of coffee or something else to drink? Water? Soda?” offered Jimmy solicitously.

Damn. Jimmy knew better. One of the ways to begin an interrogation and get the suspect to relax was to offer them something to make them more comfortable, which meant Slade should have done it. If anyone needed to develop a rapport with Fiona, it was Slade.

“A bottle of water would be nice, Jimmy. Thank you.”

Slade walked to the opposite side of the table, pulled out the chair, turned it around, and sat down, straddling it. “I’d like a cup of coffee, Jimmy. You don’t need to keep thanking him, Fiona. He’s just doing his job.”

“We do things a little differently here in Angel’s Rise, Rafferty...”

So, they were going to last names—that didn’t bode well.

“It’s fine, Jimmy. I’m sure Detective Rafferty is used to a different way of doing things, but I’m sure he will do everything by the book, won’t you, Detective Rafferty?”

“I certainly will. Now, Ms. Fowler, I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“I am respectfully declining to answer anything you ask and would request that you refrain from asking until I have legal representation in the room.”

“Do you have a lawyer, Fiona?”

“One for intellectual property, but between him and my friends, I’m sure we’ll have a good defense counsel here in no time. Jimmy, could I trouble you for a little something to drink and a couple of aspirin? I’m getting a terrible headache.”

“No trouble at all, Fiona. You let me know if I can get you anything else.”

Slade was starting to wonder if the chief of police was going to offer to take him in the back, beat the shit out of him while Fiona watched, and then take the pretty writer home.

“Thank you, Jimmy. I really do appreciate your support.”

Slade shook his head as he left the room. She’d managed to put him in a corner and score points with the local police department while doing so. Fiona had let him know she knew the chief and was grateful for his support. Could she be that calculating and manipulative? Only time would tell.

CHAPTER 6



FIONA

Maintaining her calm had been easy when she'd been shrouded in numbness but something about the handcuffs being locked around her wrists had begun to crack and then crumble that pall. How dare he? It wasn't like she was some dangerous criminal. She didn't know what this was about, but apparently Thorn's buddy, the man that had been wandering the aisles of her bookstore, thought she was some kind of killer. How stupid was he?

Sure, she knew a lot about murder. She wrote about it and crafted fictional stories about it to make a living. But that didn't make her any more of a murderer than he was. She was willing to bet that Detective Slade Rafferty knew a whole hell of a lot more about it than she did. Jessica said he was a SEAL, which meant basically he knew more ways to kill someone than they knew how to die.

Fiona felt sorry for the chief of police. Poor Jimmy seemed out of his depth, but at least he was treating her with some courtesy, which was more than could be said for Detective Rafferty. Her request for an attorney had set him back on his heels, at least, and he'd left her alone in the interrogation room. Fiona wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not.

Finally, Rafferty returned after allowing her to just sit and stew for a while. She recalled Christie once telling her that it was an effective interrogation technique. As Rafferty moved into the room, he looked confused, uncomfortable and even a bit angry. She wondered what could have happened to produce

that particular combination of emotions in a man as cold and controlled as Rafferty.

“Would you like to tell me what’s going on?” she demanded in as confident a voice as she could muster.

“Are you giving me permission to speak to you without your lawyer present?”

“You can ask anything you like, Detective Rafferty; but I retain the right not to answer until I have had a chance to meet with my attorney.”

“Fair enough,” he said, opening a folder and tossing photographs down on the table in front of her, each one overlapping the other. Even glancing at them, she could see they depicted a brutal murder.

Fiona leaned over to shove the photos away, but stopped as she began to really see them. The man depicted was in the same position as the victim in *Shifted Silence*. She now understood why she was here. Seeing the images of what she had so painstakingly described in her book was unsettling—the implications of Rafferty arresting her, even more so.

She leaned closer, shuddered, and then pushed them away. Slade had yet to sit down.

“What’s the matter Ms. Fowler? Don’t like the lighting we used for your work?”

“You can’t honestly believe I did this...”

“By yourself? Probably not, unless you drugged Daniel first. Even then, I’m not sure you’d have been able to lift him up onto that rock or drive those stakes through his hands and feet. Once bound, the rest would have been fairly easy.”

She shook her head. “I had nothing to do with this.”

“So you say, and yet your book describes in vivid detail how it was done. If you didn’t do it, how do you explain it?”

“I can’t, but as you say, I am physically incapable of doing this.”

“By yourself. I am willing to believe you had help. In fact, if you want to tell me who your minions—”

“I don’t have minions.”

“Fine, call them what you like: minions, accomplices, acolytes, sycophants...” he said and started to turn away.

Fiona slapped the top of the table. This was absurd. “I don’t have any of those. I have readers and people who buy my books; that’s it. Oh, and a vivid and prolific imagination, which apparently is a trait you share.”

Rafferty looked down at her. She wondered if his other suspects thought about how sexy he was? Probably not. He’d started to turn away and now turned back. “What the hell do you mean by that?”

“Well, you’d either have to have a great imagination or be delusional to think I’m responsible for this—I was giving you the benefit of the doubt.”

“I do have a good imagination, I’m not delusional, and I’ve been a cop long enough to know the simplest explanation is usually the right one.”

“And the simplest explanation is that I’m some kind of deranged killer who hauled a man that looks to be much larger than I am up onto a rock, spread-eagled and staked him out... then removed his eyes, ears, and tongue before slitting his wrists and throat?”

“Interesting that you know all the details with what appeared to be a casual glance.”

“That would be because I can put two and two together.”

“How’s that?” asked Slade.

“A casual glance did show me he’d been staked out in a spread-eagle position, and you stopped me when I read the part about what had been done to him. Tell me, Detective, did he have runes and symbols carved, painted, and/or tattooed over his chest and shoulders?”

“I don’t think that you’d have seen that with a casual glance.”

Fiona tried to remind herself that Christie had advised her not to talk as had every police procedural she'd ever read or seen on television or film, but she couldn't stand the idea that Rafferty thought her a killer.

“No, but if your killer—and that's someone other than me—was copying my book, which has been out for a few weeks, then he wouldn't have omitted that. In the book, it's a red herring, but I didn't describe the markings in detail so they may be significant to your killer.”

“Where were you...” Rafferty started to ask.

He was interrupted by the door swinging open and the chief of police being pushed aside by Christie as she strode into the room.

“Don't answer that,” she growled. “What part of her invoking her right to counsel did you not understand, Rafferty?” She turned to Fiona, “The lawyer here in town doesn't do criminal cases, but he said he'll call in a few favors and find you one who does and specializes in them.”

“She was voluntarily answering my questions.”

“Was she?” Christie eyed him up and down. “I asked my friends about you, Rafferty, and you have a pretty loose definition of ‘voluntary.’”

Rafferty drew up to his full height and glared down at the former cop. “That was a long time ago.”

“A long time since anyone brought charges, maybe, but who knows what's been swept under the rug?”

“Regardless of whether or not Ms. Fowler is or isn't talking to me voluntarily, you have no right to be here.”

“See here, Slade,” started the chief of police, “Ms. Crofton is a friend of Fiona's, who is a part of this community. Ms. Crofton is a retired homicide detective.”

“Three things to consider, Jimmy: one, she's retired; two, this isn't Baltimore or even Maryland; and three, this is my case and given one and two, Ms. Crofton is out of her jurisdiction.”

“Gentlemen, Christie,” interrupted Fiona, who wanted to try and deescalate the situation. “Let’s all take a step back. Detective Rafferty, Christie is a dear friend and is only trying to protect me...”

“Do you need protection, Ms. Fowler?” he snarled.

Fiona held up her hand to stave off Christie’s response. Christie had gone into full mother-hen mode, which she was wont to do where her friends were concerned. “Christie, don’t. Detective Rafferty is just doing his job.”

“Well, he isn’t doing a very good one.”

This time she raised her hand to try and keep Rafferty from saying something unhelpful. “Detective, Christie is just being a good friend. I rather imagine if you were in a situation like this...”

“And what kind of situation do you think this is?” Rafferty asked sarcastically.

Could the man not see she was trying to help? She was beginning to have the distinct feeling that Rafferty and Christie were having a peeing contest to mark their territory.

“I think that you are trying to find whoever killed your murder victim. I can even see from your viewpoint that I make a fairly likely, if weak, suspect. After all, I described the murder in almost the exact detail in my book. For the record, I had nothing to do with it. And to answer your question, let me ask you this: when was the man killed?”

“How do you know it was a man?” he asked.

Fiona couldn’t help rolling her eyes. Now, he was just being difficult and deliberately obtuse. “Even a casual glance revealed he was naked, and he had dangly parts that women don’t have. So, when did he die?”

“We don’t have an official time of death, but the doctor’s best guess was sometime early this morning.”

“Depending on the time, the only alibi I have is that I was up in my loft over the bookstore working on my latest novel...”

“How’s that coming along?” asked Christie.

“Not bad. I actually figured out...”

Rafferty snapped his fingers several times. “Focus. You were giving me an alibi?”

“Ah yes, alibi. You’ll have to forgive us. For authors, the writing is the most important thing. So, I was in my loft until I went down to Holy Grounds to get a Barbajada...”

“What the hell is a Barbajada?” asked Christie.

“It’s a Milanese hot chocolate-coffee drink,” answered Rafferty. “They make those here in town?”

The chief of police nodded. “Yeah, Joyce’s place down the street specializes in the more exotic and fancy coffees. She’s made real caffeine addicts of us all.”

“As I was saying, I was working on my latest novel and then went to get a coffee and then I was busy getting ready and getting together with my friends. Then we had lunch or rather, we started to and then found Nagisa down at Seraphim.”

“Nagisa?” asked Rafferty.

“The bronze statue that’s been missing since the days of Prohibition?” said Jimmy. “Fiona and her friends found Nagisa in a hiding place—she’d been bricked into a wall down in the wine cellar.” He turned to Fiona and Christie. “Folks in town are pretty excited, and the mayor wanted me to convey not only his thanks but that when she is reinstated, he’d like all of you here to receive the keys to the town.”

Rafferty snorted as he shook his head. “So, what you’re saying, Ms. Fowler, is that you have no real alibi.”

“I spoke to both Joyce and her daughter when I was getting my coffee.”

“Well, Slade, unless you have anything more substantive, I think I’m going to have to insist you let Fiona go, said the chief of police”

“You’re not in a position to do that, Jimmy.”

“I’m afraid I am. You don’t have enough to hold her on. Hell, you didn’t really have enough to arrest her.”

“I never actually arrested her.”

“You told me I was under arrest...”

“Well, you weren’t. I took you into custody on my strong suspicion that you were involved with the death of Daniel Monkton. I didn’t have you booked.”

“Then if Fiona isn’t technically under arrest, you have no reason to hold her against her will,” said Christie. “Come on, Fi. Rafferty doesn’t have enough to hold you. We’re going back to your place.” She turned to Rafferty. “Stay away from her, Rafferty, or I will personally have you brought up on charges.”

“What charges?” Rafferty asked.

“Don’t worry your pretty little head about that; I’ll think of something. And I may only be a retired cop from Baltimore, but I have friends all over and can make your life miserable.”

“Are you threatening me, Ms. Crofton?”

“Not technically. Technically, I’m just offering you a friendly piece of advice.”

Fiona had to give it to Christie; the woman had moxie.

“Come on, Fi; the girls are waiting. They’ve gone to the store and picked up something to make for dinner.”

“I would ask that you not leave town, Ms. Fowler,” said Rafferty.

“Are you serious?” asked Fiona, incredulously.

“As a heart attack,” Rafferty assured her.

Fiona left with Christie, wondering exactly what the hell she was going to do. Obviously, Rafferty wasn’t satisfied with her explanation of her whereabouts. Perhaps it was time the Mystery Writers’ Murder Club turned its hand to solving an open case as opposed to a cold one.

CHAPTER 7



FIONA

Christie and Fiona walked back to her loft. Fiona noticed that instead of people waving to her as they normally did, they ducked their heads the other way and brushed past her as quickly as possible or crossed the street. The third time it happened, Fiona felt herself clench.

News sure spread quickly.

“It’ll be okay, Fi. People don’t mean anything by it, and it’s really more about them than it is about you. They don’t know what to say, and they’re afraid that they’ll say the wrong thing, so they avoid saying anything at all.”

Christie always seemed to know what to say, as did Jessica and Lori. Fiona wished it was a trait she shared with them.

“I understand, and who knows? If the situation were reversed, I might well do the same thing.”

“Never happen,” said Christie. “You are one of the kindest people I know. You’d be more inclined to bake them brownies.”

Christie wasn’t wrong. They headed up to Fiona’s loft. Lori had declared it her ‘artist’s loft,’ as opposed to her apartment over her bookstore because she was too broke to have a second place, which was far more accurate. Although she did have to admit reframing how she thought of it was more inspirational.

They made dinner, drank way too much wine, and completely avoided any and all mention of what had happened

earlier in the day until they were leaving. Fiona didn't bring up the idea that perhaps they should try and solve the murder. It probably wasn't a good idea for them to meddle in an ongoing investigation.

At the door, Jessica stopped and said, "I'll talk to Thorn and see if he can find out anything. I don't know that he can."

"I don't want him placed in a compromising position," said Fiona.

"Why not? I love it when I get him in one," Jessica laughed.

Fiona had grinned and sent her friends on their merry way. Knowing she was too keyed up to go to sleep, Fiona sat down at her laptop and started to type. Poor John Bartleby needed to die so that Freya could once again solve the case. Where was Freya when she really needed her?

The following morning, Fiona decided after only a few hours of sleep that she would treat herself to breakfast at a local diner, The Clam Shell. All of the food was served on dishes made to resemble the interior of a clam shell. It was kind of kitschy, but the food was good. As she opened the door, people looked up and then quickly looked away. There were no available tables and instead of inviting her to join their smaller groups, as they might have done the day before, people looked away.

Taking a deep breath, Fiona reminded herself of Christie's wise words the day before and tried to brush off the hurt she felt. These people knew her, for god's sake; did they really believe she could have done that to someone? When the waitress behind the counter had trouble looking her in the eye, Fiona decided maybe she'd take her food and go back to the bookstore. She had some inventory that needed seeing to.

"Hey, Jenny," she called to the waitress, "how about you package that up, and I'll take it with me. I have some stuff to do in the store and a looming deadline."

Jenny nodded instead of speaking, which was ridiculous—Jenny loved to talk. In fact, she'd talk your ear off if you

weren't careful. Once the food was ready, Fiona paid her bill and headed back to the bookstore, trying hard to keep the tears from streaming down her face. Once inside, she locked the door behind her and took her breakfast into the small office nook behind the counter. She allowed herself one good burst of tears, and then wiped away the traces, ate her breakfast, fixed her makeup, outlined her next chapter, and got the store ready to open.

She opened the store on time and then went back to her nook to write. Normally the mornings of the weekdays were somewhat slower than the rest of the day, and she could get some writing done. But this morning seemed to creep by and passed uncharacteristically quietly. No one came to window shop or even bum a free cup of coffee and a homemade muffin. The charming, antique bell over the door didn't ring once. No one stopped by to shop or to have a cup of coffee. Even the postman avoided her door.

It would seem everyone had heard about her arrest the day before and that this knowledge was having serious consequences for her business and her life here in Angel's Rise. Her pseudo-arrest was apparently far more important in people's minds than her release without charge. There were no two ways about it, she was going to need to clear her name, and she wasn't inclined to wait until Detective Rafferty did the deed.

Her reputation already having taken a severe hit, she called Christie, not just to vent but to sound her out about how to proceed. After all, Christie had been a homicide detective for many years.

“Christie? It's Fiona.”

“Things not going well?”

Leave it to Christie to get right to the heart of the matter.

“They're even less subtle today than they were yesterday. I'm afraid if I don't do something they'll be looking to burn me at the stake.”

“No way,” said Christie, “that was for witches and heretics. They’ll be coming for you either with tar and feathers or a rope.”

Fiona groaned. “That is not helpful.”

“Sure, it is. I didn’t say anything last night because I didn’t want you to feel like I was kicking you when you were down. Sounds to me like you’re ready to fight.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You called me, and not Jessica or Lori.”

As usual, Christie was spot on. She’d known subconsciously that while Christie certainly felt sympathy for her plight, she wasn’t one to ‘oh poor, sweet baby’ her. While Christie might sympathize, she was far more inclined to go into problem-solving mode and Fiona figured being accused of murder was a perfect fit.

“So, tell me Christie-Wan, what shall I do?” Fiona knew Christie loved all things *Star Wars*.

Christie laughed. “I don’t think breaking out the light sabers would work, but if you want to go after Rafferty with them, I’ve got your back.” There was a slight pause. “Seriously, Fi, I’m sure Rafferty is a good cop, but he’s not invested in proving your innocence. He’s interested in catching the bad guy, which will ultimately show him how wrong he was, but the longer this takes, the worse it is for your reputation.”

“So, what do we do? Notice how I included you?”

“I did, and you’d better include Jessica and Lori, too. I think I could take Lori in a fight, but I’m not so sure about Jess. We need to find out who the real killer is and deliver the sonofabitch on a plate to Rafferty.”

“The bookstore is dead as a doornail. I’m going to head upstairs and make use of that gorgeous whiteboard you gave to each of us for Christmas. I know you said it was for story ideas, but I watch enough cop shows to know it is more commonly known as a murder board.”

Christie laughed. “You found me out.”

“I’m going to head upstairs and start piecing together everything I can.”

“Good girl. I’ll call Jessica and Lori and bring them up to speed, and we can all start talking to people...”

“You mean we’ll see if Jessica can use her feminine wiles to get the inside scoop from Thorn.”

“Well, yes, but it’s not like both of them won’t enjoy it.”

Fiona ended the call and ran through her closing procedure. She had to bite back a sob as she ran her receipts report. It was the first time since she’d opened the bookstore that she hadn’t at least broken even for the day. She took a deep breath as she stepped outside, closing and locking the door behind her. She went around the end of the building only to find someone had tacked up a sign blocking her stairs which said, ‘murderer.’ That hadn’t taken long. Fiona pulled it down, crumpled it up, and went up the stairs to her loft.

Opening the door, she tossed the crumpled sign into her wastepaper basket. She pulled off her boots and hung her scarf, coat, and hat on the antique hall tree and then went to fetch the murder board she kept in her small utility closet.

Pulling out the electronic whiteboard and setting it up beside her desk, she took a dry erase marker and began jotting down the things she knew to be true. The great thing about the whiteboard Christie had given each of them was that they could ‘throw’ images, documents, and the like onto it from a computer or smartphone; use it as a standard whiteboard with dry erase pens; or use it as a combination of both.

She thought about what she knew about the victim:

- Name: Daniel Monkton
- Date of Death: Yesterday
- Method of Death:
- Throat and wrists slashed
- Additional markings/torture:
- Eyes, ears, and tongue removed

- Runes and magical symbols carved or tattooed on the body
- Staked out, spread eagled on some kind of rock—altar?
- Suspect: Fiona Fowler
- Why? Similar death detailed in a book she wrote
- Alibi? Not great, mostly alone
- Other suspects? Anyone who read the damned book

She tapped the non-marking end of her dry erase marker against her teeth, trying to recall anything else she'd seen in the photographs. Her concentration was broken when the window that overlooked the main street in Angel's Rise shattered as a brick was heaved through it.

As she was barefoot, Fiona couldn't get to the window fast enough to see who threw it, but figured as she was on the second floor, they had to have had a good arm and good aim. As she made it to her closet to pull on a pair of clogs, the alarm downstairs in the bookstore went off. Fiona ran to her desk and pulled up the store's cameras on her computers. There didn't seem to be anyone inside, but her cell phone rang.

Angel's Rise Police Department showed on her caller ID. Her alarm was supposed to trigger something at the department, and they were to send someone. At least that was working right.

"Ms. Fowler, we've been notified of your alarm going off. Are you in need of assistance?"

Fiona watched on the camera as a second brick sailed through the front leaded-glass window of the store. Shit! That thing was expensive, and she was sure her insurance would find a way to weasel out of covering it.

"Yes, I am. Someone just threw a brick through the window in my loft upstairs and another one through the main front window of my store."

"We'll send someone right away. Can you meet them outside your store?"

Was the dispatcher crazy? “Hell no. I won’t meet them downstairs out in the open. Tell the officers they can come up to my loft and be prepared to show identification. I’m not going anywhere until I know it’s safe.”

“It would be easier if you—”

“I don’t care about easy for you...” Fiona could feel herself starting to lose it. “My being arrested was easy for you, and I’m pretty damn sure I’m now being targeted by some lunatic vigilante or maybe even the real killer, so you can fucking well be inconvenienced. Got that?”

“I didn’t mean...”

“The hell you didn’t. Your department is supposed to protect the citizens of this town. Last time I checked I was still one of them, so kick somebody in the ass and get them over here. Now!”

Fiona ended the call and missed the days when you could slam a receiver down onto the cradle. She could hear the sirens blaring as she slid down the wall of her loft, closing her eyes and wishing the nightmare that had begun yesterday afternoon would just go away. The sound of multiple pairs of feet coming up her stairs told her it wouldn’t be long before there was a knock on the door.

When it came, she looked at her doorbell camera app and groaned. Two uniformed cops and Slade Rafferty stood on her small landing. Was it too much to hope that it would give way and they would all drop to the alley below and break numerous bones? A second, harder knock came. Apparently, it was. Fine.

Fiona flipped her murder board around so that all that was showing was a whiteboard with nothing on it. She walked to the door, careful to avoid the area of the floor with glass shards, and flung open the door.

She pushed past the uniformed officer and stepped into Rafferty’s personal space. “What the fuck do you want?”

CHAPTER 8



SLADE

The dispatcher walked into the chief of police's office, where Slade was sitting with the chief and Went. "We've had an alarm code from Between the Lines..."

"That's Fiona Fowler's bookstore, isn't it?" asked Slade.

"Yes, sir. Per our standard procedure, I called her, and she was not very polite. She said a brick had been thrown through her loft window over her store and then one through the store window. She demanded that I send a patrol car. When I told her they would meet her outside, she insisted our responder come up to her loft. When I told her it would be easier for us if she was waiting downstairs, she got verbally abusive."

"Someone is throwing bricks at her building, knowing she is most likely in one place or another, and you find it odd that she doesn't feel safe leaving her place?" Slade asked as politely as he could.

He was damn tired of dispatchers and service people in general having such thin skin that they couldn't understand people were not going to talk in modulated, polite tones to avoid offending someone's delicate sensibilities.

"She didn't need to use foul language," said the dispatcher in her own defense.

"No, but given that I arrested her yesterday and now someone is throwing bricks at her, I think she's entitled to be a bit peevish with everyone associated with law enforcement, including you."

The dispatcher spun on her heel and huffed off.

“You were a little rough on her,” said the chief.

“Who? Fiona Fowler or your dispatcher? I might agree that I acted too quickly where Fiona is concerned.”

“So, you don’t think she did it?” asked Went, a bit too eagerly for Slade’s liking.

“I didn’t say that, but if she did, she most likely acted alone; I’m not sure she has the physical strength to do that. But this isn’t the kind of thing you do with a bunch of witnesses around. And committing a murder that she details in a novel she wrote that is selling like hotcakes wouldn’t be too smart, and Fiona Fowler doesn’t impress me as a woman lacking in intelligence.” Slade turned to the chief. “If you don’t mind, Jimmy, I’d like to tag along.”

The chief nodded. “That’s fine but remember you can’t enter either her business or her home without her permission.”

“Understood.”

Went followed him out and they rode in Slade’s SUV behind the patrol car.

“You don’t think she did it, do you?” asked Went.

“I hate to admit it, but I don’t. Like I said to the chief, I think she’s too smart to use her own book as a blueprint for a murder unless she’s a narcissistic psychopath and I don’t think she is. But I do think someone used her book as a guideline.”

“Who do you think threw the bricks?”

“Too soon to tell. Could be the murderer; could be some kind of idiot vigilante—murders like this bring out the wackos—or could be some teenagers playing a prank on a dare. But whoever it was, at the very least meant to scare her and at most intended to cause bodily harm or worse. Can you pull up that dispatch call? I’d like to know just how pissed Ms. Fowler is. I’ll take the lead so she can vent her spleen on me.”

They arrived at Fiona’s bookstore/home and headed up the stairs. Slade planned to lead with an apology. The playback of the call had proved Fiona was pretty angry, and he wasn’t sure

she didn't have a right to be. At least from her point of view, the police, or rather he, had acted precipitously.

They had to knock twice, but when she flung the door open, it was obvious she was loaded for bear and in a take no prisoners frame of mind. Once again Slade felt his groin tighten. If he thought she was attractive and a little bit sexy in meek author mode, this smoldering Amazonian had arousal surging through his system. This was a woman upon whom he wanted to loose his full-on alpha male. He wanted to dominate her in and out of bed and would settle for nothing less than complete dominance in the bedroom and being her dominant partner out in the real world. He wondered if Fiona had any idea how incredibly sexy she was.

She pushed past the uniformed officer and invaded his personal space. God, she was incredible. "What the fuck do you want?"

He doubted any of the four of them would appreciate the unvarnished truth that what he wanted was to toss her over his shoulder, take her to her bed, and fuck her silly. Instead, he said, "I was there when the alarm came in and asked if I could tag along."

"Why? Didn't you and your lackey there have enough fun hassling me yesterday? For all I know, Detective Rafferty, you're the one who threw the damn bricks. You look like you have enough muscle to pull that off."

So, she'd noticed his muscles. That was good. He didn't feel as much of a jackass for thinking about her body if she was thinking about his. Maybe that was common ground he could build on. *What the hell am I thinking? I need to focus on the case not on how much I'd like to see her naked.* He was pretty damn sure she hadn't done it, but still, he couldn't rule her out completely.

Slade stepped into her space, making her retreat. "We might want to step inside. I agree with what you told the dispatcher. Somebody throwing bricks at your home and your business makes me think that at the very least, someone is trying to frighten you..."

“What do you think the worst-case scenario is?” she asked as she stepped inside her home.

“If one of those bricks had hit you, it would have hurt you. If it had hit certain areas of your body with enough force, it could have killed you.” She paled visibly. “Let me start by saying that I may have acted rashly yesterday, and you have every right to be angry with me. The chief isn’t too happy with me, either.”

“So, you don’t think I did it?” She noticed the patrolman moving towards the window. “Careful, I didn’t have a chance to clean up the glass.”

“No, I don’t,” said Slade. “But I can’t rule you out as a suspect...”

“Sure, because I wrote a novel that pretty much was the blueprint for whoever did it.”

Slade nodded. “Why don’t you let Went clean up this mess and the one downstairs? Patrolman Jennings, can you go see if you can get something to board up the window downstairs and this one here until we can get a repairman out to do the job properly.”

“I can clean it up...” started Fiona.

“I have no doubt you can, but as you said, you’ve been inconvenienced enough.”

Fiona blushed. Surely psychopathic murderers didn’t blush, did they?

“Your vacuum?” asked Went.

Fiona pointed to the sliding barn door that hid her utility room. “In there. The one for downstairs is in the little office nook behind the cash register.” She turned back to Slade. “I take it you heard my call.”

“Went, before you clean up, I want Ms. Fowler’s home and business processed.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You might want to check the trash can by my desk. I found a banner strung across the foot of my staircase that called me a murderer.”

“Went, process the foot of the stairs as well.” He turned back to Fiona. “I did hear the call. Frankly I wanted to know what we were walking into. The dispatcher was upset, but in my mind, you weren’t all that far out of line. You have every right to be angry.”

“Is this your version of the good cop?”

Slade chuckled. “No. Ask Thorn. He’s always the good cop and I’m always the bad-ass cop.”

“I’ll bet you’re good at it.”

“I don’t know. You didn’t seem very intimidated yesterday. Numb and in shock at first, but then you decided you weren’t taking any shit from me.”

“For the record, I didn’t do it.”

“As I said, I need to clear you, but I don’t think you did, either.”

“What changed your mind?”

“For one thing, I don’t think you’re stupid. I find it hard to believe you’d have copied your own bestselling book. Then there’s the physicality. Daniel wasn’t a small man. I’m not sure you’re even capable of getting Daniel up on that rock, much less everything else that was done.”

Fiona perked up and eyed him speculatively. “That’s not the first time you’ve called him by his first name. Did you know him?”

“Yes. The place where he was staying belonged to me. I thought he’d be safe there. I was wrong. And that would be the third thing. I’m willing to own that I may have rushed to judgment because of my relationship with the victim, something I had assured my boss I wouldn’t do.”

Fiona relaxed. Her shoulders lost their rigidity, and her body seemed to soften.

“He won’t hear it from me.”

Slade chuckled. “That’s good to know, but my guess is the chief will probably tell him. Right now, he’s worried about false arrest charges being leveled at his department.”

She smiled and laid her hand on his arm. “Went, please tell Jimmy not to worry about that, and I’m sorry about your friend, Detective Rafferty. I didn’t look too closely at those pictures, but that must have been quite a shock.”

“Thank you for your understanding and sympathy, Ms. Fowler.”

“Please call me Fiona. When you call me Ms. Fowler, I think back on the handcuffs clicking around my wrists.”

“Only if you’ll call me Slade. Went, go on down and meet Kenny and Randy.” He turned back to Fiona. “They’re the State forensics people I brought with me. Fiona, I don’t think it’s safe for you to stay in your place tonight.”

“I appreciate that, but Angel’s Rise is a small town. If I go somewhere else, whoever did this might try again and hurt someone else.”

Slade nodded. “Agreed. Bangor is about an hour from here. Why don’t you let the State put you up until we can make your place safe again?”

“They could just follow me.”

“We’ll leave your vehicle here and take mine. I’ll make sure no one is following and then we’ll check you in without a name. You’ll be safe, Fiona. I promise.”

“Okay. Let me just pack a suitcase.”

“If you have a purse or shoulder bag you could stuff something into, that would be better.”

“I can do that. Would you mind grabbing the boots by the front door? I’ll wear those.”

“I’ll grab your jacket, scarf and hat as well.”

“Thanks.”

He watched her open a set of French shutter-style doors to reveal a small walk-in closet. She grabbed an enormous, slouchy bag and tossed in some clothing. He went to get her things by the door. Slade put his hands in the boots to ensure no glass had managed to get inside.

Fiona disappeared for a moment deeper into her closet, which he realized must lead to her bath, before she popped back out.

“I’m ready.”

“Good. Went? Let the chief know I’m taking Fiona with me *voluntarily* and putting her up in a *nice* hotel. Give me a call when the bookstore and her loft are secure.”

“Will do, Slade. Have a good evening, Fiona; and sorry about all of this.”

“Me, too, but I’m most sorry for Daniel and those who knew him.”

She pulled on her boots and slipped into her jacket as Slade held it for her, taking her scarf and hat and pushing them down into her bag. Slade was beginning to wonder if it wasn’t a bit like Mary Poppins’ carpet bag—endless capacity and full of all kinds of wondrous things. Slade went out in front of her and opened the front passenger-side door.

“You sure you don’t want me in the back?” she teased.

Slade groaned. “No. Just get in the damn SUV,” he said, laughing.

They headed out of town and passed the time just getting to know one another. Slade was ashamed to admit he didn’t remember Fiona from school.

“That’s okay. You were this god-like senior, and I was a nerdy freshman.”

“I was an idiot back then. I look for a lot more depth in the women I date... when I have time to date. But hey, you would have been closer to Daniel’s class.”

She nodded. “I kept wondering why his name was so familiar. Daniel was a grade above me. He was a sophomore,

but I don't really remember him."

Slade nodded. "That's because Daniel was a goth and a tortured artist. Isn't it stupid how we kept to our groups and never intermixed?"

"In retrospect? Probably, but at the time it was safer. We nerdy girls could worship you from afar and not worry about the cheerleaders killing us."

"Literally. Some of those girls were scary, and their mamas even more so."

"As I recall, most of them thought you were quite the catch."

"Until they found out I wasn't going to take over the family business and that I'd enlisted in the Navy."

"Why didn't you—join your family's business, that is?"

"Because my brother and sister were better suited for it. With me gone, they got the chance they deserved. And I wanted out. I was tired of being Slade Rafferty the Third. The Navy, and more importantly the SEALs, did more for me than running the family business ever would have."

"You didn't come back for your dad's funeral."

"I did, but my mother made it clear I wasn't welcome. She really loved him. I figured if I left it would be easier for her, so I did. After she died, I bought that A-frame not far from the falls. I use it as my get-away place. When Daniel needed a place to stay, I took him there."

"Do you have any idea who did it?" Fiona asked.

"Obviously someone who read your book, but that doesn't narrow the suspect field by much."

"Don't you think they had to be local or at least nearby?"

Slade glanced over at her. "How do you figure?"

"He was killed up by the falls, right?" He nodded. "And they aren't easy to get to from this side of the river. The other side is a national park and has all kinds of trails, but the Angel's Rise side has always been undeveloped."

“Okay, that makes sense, but I get the idea that you’re going somewhere with this.”

“I am,” she said, nodding. “What if the killer bought the book in my store? It’s kind of a longshot as a lot of people download e-books from various sites. I suppose you could ask the online retailers for their records.”

Slade snorted. “That’ll take a warrant, which I can get, but it’ll take a day or two.”

“You don’t need a warrant for my records.”

“Can we look at those tonight? Would you mind?”

“I wouldn’t mind, but it’s a closed system. It’s more secure that way so I can’t access it from anything other than the computer in the store.”

“That’s fine,” Slade said, distracted by what he thought was a shadow behind them that shouldn’t be there. He’d avoided the main highway, preferring to take a back road out of town before getting on the interstate that went to Bangor.

“What’s wrong?” Fiona asked.

“I’m not sure that there’s anything wrong, but I thought I saw something lurking just outside of my taillights. Normally, I’d just dismiss it, but with Daniel’s violent death and the threats to you, I’m not willing to risk it. Ever wanted to ride in a cop car with sirens and lights?”

He could see her grin, even though she was frightened. “As a matter of fact, I have.”

“Then screw stealth, we’ll let ‘em know we’re coming.”

Slade hit the sirens and the flashing lights and floored the SUV, which gave him everything it had. As he recalled there were no streetlights, stoplights, or side roads until they got to the onramp to the interstate. He couldn’t be sure they were being followed, but the hair was standing up on the back of his neck, and he wasn’t taking any chances with Fiona’s life.

CHAPTER 9



FIONA

Slade kept the pedal to the metal as they sped through the night. Fiona knew she should be scared, but she wasn't. There was something exhilarating about flying down the highway with the lights and the siren going. Slade was an excellent driver. Fiona was sure this wasn't the first time he'd ever driven at this speed. His turn onto the on ramp was masterful and smooth and he was in full command of everything. She wondered if he knew how incredibly sexy he was at that moment. The boy who had been a leader in high school had grown into a man who was someone you could look to and count on. She turned around to see if she could see anything as they roared up the entrance to the interstate. Nothing. If there had been anyone back there at all, they'd have broken off the chase before they could be identified.

Once they were on the highway, Slade slowed down and looked over at her.

"Well, you certainly know how to show a girl a good time," she teased.

He looked at her askance and then started to laugh. "You're something else. We get into a high-speed chase, and you just take it in stride like a simple drive to see the scenery. You act like no one threatened you this afternoon."

"Given that it's nighttime and you were driving at an excessive speed, there wasn't much to see, but yeah, I liked the sirens and lights. As for the threats..." She shrugged. "You said you'd keep me safe, and I believe you."

Within short order, they were in Bangor. Slade opted for a two-bedroom suite and dinner in their room.

“What’ll you have?” he asked as they scanned the room service menu.

“If I was trying to impress you, I’d order something swanky and really expensive. But what I should do is think about my diet and order a salad.”

“You don’t need to diet.”

“Oh, but I do.”

Slade shook his head. “Not in my opinion. I’ll bet under that slouchy sweater you have curves that a man could get lost in forever.”

Fiona searched his face, looking to see if he was just teasing her and saw no trace of anything other than honesty and the lust that was flickering in his eyes. Lust? For her?

“I’m sorry if I spoke out of turn. I just think you downplay your looks, which is probably for the best or else you’d be beating guys like me off with a stick.”

“For the record, Slade, I’d never beat you with a stick or anything else. And thank you for saying what you did. It’s nice to hear, and in that case, I’ll have the burger with the bourbon-bacon jam, caramelized onions, and smoked cheddar. Ask them if I can substitute onion rings for the fries.”

He grinned at her. “My kind of girl. What’ll you have to drink?”

“I’d kill for a peach margarita on the rocks, nothing on the rim.”

“That sounds good. I think I’ll have the same but substitute an IPA for the margarita. Why don’t you pick a room and get comfortable while I call in the meal. When they knock, I want you in whichever room you choose with the door locked. If there’s trouble, get in the bath and call nine-one-one.”

“You really do think someone was after us tonight.”

Slade nodded. “I told you I would keep you safe; I mean to keep that promise.”

“Do you always keep your promises?”

He turned, closed the space between them, and said, “Always.” Slade put his hands on her arms and leaned down as if he was going to kiss her, but then thought better of it and stepped back. “I need to call down our order. Pick a room.”

Slightly stunned but in a good way, she did as he asked, pulling off her boots and putting her toiletries in the bath. Fiona looked in the mirror. Two days ago, if you’d told her Slade Rafferty would be attracted to her, she’d have thought you’d lost your mind, and yet here she was thinking that was absolutely the case. *Weird how things worked.*

She followed Slade’s instructions to the letter when their food came. She heard the waiter setting up their food and Slade closing the door.

“It’s all right, Fiona; you can come out.” When she did so, he was holding her chair at the small dining table. He helped her take her seat and then took his.

“Fancy manners for a guy who prefers a burger and beer to lobster and champagne.”

“Yeah, my mother was a stickler for manners, and taught her sons how to treat a lady. It’s probably best that both my parents had passed when my brother came out publicly. They were pretty conservative.”

“Your brother is gay? Did you know? Is that a problem for you?”

“No. You love who you love. Not everyone finds that someone special that you just want to hold hands with and jump into life. Did I know? Yeah. He came out to see me in Coronado and told me. I’d often wondered, but I figured he’d tell me when he was ready. He met a great guy, and they got married two years ago.”

“I’m surprised I didn’t hear about it. Angel’s Rise has a gossip system that is wicked and fast.”

Slade nodded. “I remember. Davy heads up the overseas operation of the business and they live over in Cardiff—that’s in Wales, but you probably know that.”

“I do. It’s one of the cities I’d like to visit someday.”

“I think you’d like it. It’s not as big or flashy as London, but it has great pubs, and there’s lots to do.”

“What do you do in your spare time?”

Slade laughed. “What spare time? That’s not true. I’m not a sailor like Thorn—although I like going out with him. I prefer hiking, fly fishing, and reading.”

“Really? What do you like to read?”

“I was a big Robert Ludlum fan, and I like Sue Grafton and Dan Brown.”

She nodded. “Me too,” she said, taking a bite of her burger.

“Really? I thought you’d read mysteries or romance.”

“I don’t have a lot of time to read so when I do, I want to read something out of my genre. For one thing I worry about other contemporary mystery writers influencing my own writing. However, I do make an exception for the other members of the Murder Club’s books.”

“Yeah, you guys need to keep your noses out of those cold cases. Some of them can be more dangerous than current ones, and I want you to stay away from Daniel’s case,” he warned, taking a long pull from his beer. Fiona said nothing but ate an onion ring. “Do you hear me, Fiona?”

“I’m not deaf, Slade.”

“I mean it.”

“Well, you’re too late. When we get back to my loft, I’ll show you my murder board. I didn’t get very far.”

Slade groaned. “You’ve gotten as far as you’re going to.” She simply smiled at him. “I mean it, Fiona.”

“What are you going to do, Detective Rafferty?” she said in a simpering voice, batting her eyes in an exaggerated

fashion. “Handcuff me to the bed?”

Slade rolled his eyes. “You keep teasing me about my handcuffs, and I’m going to start thinking you’re serious.”

Fiona said nothing and finished her burger. She found Slade to be good company, and he seemed determined to ensure she didn’t fret or fear her situation. There was no way for him to know that she instinctively knew and believed she was safe with him, not because he thought she was sexy, but because that’s who Slade Rafferty the Third was—a protector. He would be the same with anyone he’d promised to keep safe.

When they’d finished their dinner, Slade stood up and said, “It’s been a long day, and my guess is you didn’t sleep well last night.”

“Thus, the margarita.”

“I suspected as much and got you the large one.”

“And here I was thinking you did that so you could have your wicked way with me. Oh shit! Did I just say that out loud?”

“You did,” he confirmed with a grin that was so sexy it should come with a warning label.

“I haven’t had a drink in months,” she confessed. “I think I’m a little tipsy.”

“I think you’re a lot tipsy. Go to bed, Fiona.”

“I thought you thought I was sexy?” she said, trying not to sound hurt.

“I do, but when I’m ready to ravish you, I want you stone-cold sober. Now go to bed, Fiona, before my dick overrides my brain.”

“I think I like the way your dick thinks,” she said and then clasped her hands over her mouth. “Promise me you won’t ever bring this conversation up again.”

“I will promise never to tell anyone else, but I plan to use this as ammunition forever.”

She stood up, pushing the chair back hard enough that it fell over. She started to pick it up and felt the world spin.

“All right, Cinderella, the coach is about to turn back into the pumpkin. Let’s get you to bed.”

With that declaration, Slade moved to her, taking her arm so she didn’t fall, and then scooped her up in his arms, cradling her against his broad chest and striding into the bedroom she’d chosen. Instead of lying down with her, he placed her gently on the bed and headed for the door.

“Aren’t you going to stay?” she asked.

“Not tonight, baby. Like I said, I want you sober, willing, and wanting. Go to sleep, Fiona.”

She would have liked to have said something else but didn’t. Slade smiled at her and then closed the door.

Damn it. Why couldn’t he settle for two out of three—I’m willing and wanting.

Carefully, she got off the bed and went into the bath to remove her makeup and take off her clothes, slipping into the oversized sleep shirt she’d grabbed when they’d left. She headed back to bed, turned off the lights, turned down the covers, crawled in, and was asleep almost as fast as her head hit the pillow.

“Now isn’t the time,” Slade said again, only this time his lips were hovering over hers as she stared into his dark eyes where she suspected a hidden fire lurked.

“I know that, but I don’t care,” said Fiona, pulling his head down to hers.

Fiona knew, even in her dream, that Slade was right, but she didn’t care. All she wanted was for him to take her in his arms and fuck her so hard and for so long that she forgot anyone had used her book as a blueprint for murder.

Slade captured her mouth with his—the intensity increasing as their tongues tangled and passion coursed through their veins. Slade’s body was brawny and muscular, his dick was long and hard, and she could feel it throbbing

between them. Their breath synchronized, and all Fiona could hear was the breathing and the moans that escaped from them.

His hands roamed her body, caressing the sensitive skin of her neck and then trailing down to the curve of her waist. Fiona could feel the heat of his hands and it sent shivers down her spine. He kissed his way down her neck, his lips leaving a trail of fire along her skin, and Fiona let out a soft, shivering moan.

As Slade's lips continued their descent, pausing to kiss the sensitive skin of her collarbone, he cupped her breasts, his fingers gently massaging her skin. Fiona arched her back and pressed herself against him, needy and wanting.

Fiona pulled on him, wanting more of his kisses as her hands slid down and were finally able to grasp the thick, hard length she'd wanted to touch for years. Slade hissed as her hand closed around him.

Her hand stroked him from root to tip. She enjoyed the way his cock twitched in her grasp and his breathing became heavier and deeper as he pushed into her hand. Fiona kissed him, her lips brushing against his, before she slipped her tongue into his mouth to dance with his. Her other hand reached around to cup his ass, pulling him even closer.

He rolled over so that she was beneath him. "I'm going to fuck you—right here, right now, and I don't give a damn if anybody else thinks it's the right thing to do."

"Yes," she sighed and spread her legs, letting him make a place for himself.

"If we do this, you're mine. I won't let anyone else come near you. I'll keep you safe and in my bed; do you understand me?"

"Shut up and fuck me."

His cock was pressed against her entrance, teasing her with just the tip. "Mine, say it."

"Yours."

The word was barely out of her mouth when he thrust into her, making her gasp. Fiona could feel her eyes widening as her pussy accommodated his size and her body softened to accept him. There was a small feeling of pain as he stretched her open and filled her completely.

“Mine,” he said as he grasped her hips and began to pound into her.

Fiona thrust her hips in rhythm to his, meeting his every move with one of her own, her body arching and undulating in perfect harmony with his. The sensation of his cock as he plunged in and out of her was almost overwhelming, and Fiona felt as if she was going to burst from the sheer intensity.

Time and space no longer mattered. There was nothing but the two of them. Fiona threw her head back, moaning as he fucked her hard, his pelvis grinding into hers in a primal dance of dominance and submission. There was no doubt in her mind that Slade was in charge, and she didn't care.

Over and over, he thrust into her body as she tightened around him, every nerve ending sparking as she thought she might explode. And then it happened. Fiona cried out as the orgasm washed over her like the waterfall at Angel Falls, her pussy pulsing around his cock as she came harder than she ever had.

Slade felt it and thrust deeper and harder as he worked to push her even further over that edge.

“That's my girl, give it to me. Let me feel how hard you can come.”

She was beyond the ability to speak. All she could do was make incoherent cries as the pleasure he provided drowned out everything else in the world. Her body continued to tremble from the intensity of her climax as Slade's thrusting became shorter and harder, his cock swelling and twitching as his breathing became harder and more ragged.

He surged into her a final time. “Aw... fuck... yeah...” he groaned, his hips snapping back and forth in a frenzy as he came, filling her with his heat and cum. It was a powerful and

intense sensation that Fiona was sure she would remember forever.

As Slade's body shuddered and convulsed, he gave her his full weight, and Fiona knew this was more than just a dream; it was a premonition of things to come.

"I meant it, Fiona. This changes everything," he said as he groaned and pulled out of her, rolling to his back and pulling her close.

The rest of the night, Fiona slept the sleep of the dead. When she rose the following morning, she could hear Slade moving around the room. Glancing at the clock, she saw it was almost nine. She never slept that late. Rolling out of bed she headed for the bedroom door but hesitated to open it. The dream last night had been intense, but she feared the reality of what lay beyond the door. Even though she feared what might lie on the other side of the barrier, she summoned her courage, placed her hand on the handle, and pulled it open.

CHAPTER 10



FIONA

Sitting in the car, she realized how anticlimactic it had all been. She'd had the most amazing dream and once awake, had been afraid to open the door. But afraid of what? That the dream might not come true? That Slade was lying to her and still believed she was the killer?

The reader event in Kennebunkport had been a turning point in her life. It was as she had been driving home that she'd vowed never to live her life based in fear again. That didn't mean that she acted recklessly or without thought. It simply meant that she did not let her fear of the unknown keep her from trying things—stretching her wings, as it were.

Fiona had grabbed a quick shower, applied minimal makeup, and put her hair up before pulling on clean leggings, a different chunky knit sweater, and her boots. She'd looked in the mirror and decided Slade was right—she dressed to be comfortable, but also to hide her body. There was nothing inherently wrong with it; she just wasn't made like a supermodel. She'd nodded to her reflection. That stopped today.

She'd felt confident and as if she could take on the world, solve the murder, and oh yes, finish the novel she was working on. Everything had been fine until she reached for the door handle. It was all fine and good to tell herself she was strong and beautiful and capable inside the confined space of a beautiful hotel room. It was quite another to walk out into the next room where God's gift to women everywhere was moving around.

In her dream Slade had been dominant, possessive, and nuts about her. That he was dominant wasn't a question, and he'd said he found her attractive, but the dream had only been a dream—or had it been? She pulled herself up, straightened her shoulders, shook her head to clear it of her musings, and opened the door.

Slade was right there. He took her by the upper arms as he had the night before and leaned down—only this time he didn't pull away from the kiss. He pressed his lips firmly to hers and she hoped he didn't hear her moan as she sort of just melted into him. He didn't use his tongue, but the kiss was more than just a friendly peck—there was depth and passion behind it.

“Good morning, beautiful. I took the liberty of ordering breakfast. I ordered an omelet and French toast. I figured if you weren't sure which you wanted, we'd just share. How do you like your coffee?”

“Dark roast with lots of cream and just a smidgeon of sugar—the pink kind.”

“Blech!” said Slade, moving to the in-room coffee machine. “That stuff is nothing but chemicals. You're far better off with the real stuff. Personally, I like treacle, but it's rarely available in hotels or restaurants.”

“That's funny. When I was in England, I encountered treacle and loved it, but I couldn't find it here.”

“It's only in the last couple of years that it's been easier to get here in the States.” He made her a cup of coffee and handed it to her.

“Want to explain what happened when I walked out here?”

He looked confused. “You looked like you could use a kiss and given what happened last night...”

“What happened?”

“You were a little tipsy, and I put you in bed. You sort of indicated you wouldn't have minded my staying.”

She could feel the heat rising in her cheeks. Brave and sassy might be fine for her friends, but she owned a bookstore—she was almost a librarian, for god’s sake.

“Did I misinterpret that?” he asked.

“No; I wouldn’t have minded, but there’s part of me that respects that you were unwilling to take advantage of my inebriated state of mind. And I didn’t mind the kiss at all. I just wanted to make sure you weren’t saying or doing something you didn’t mean.”

He walked back to her and handed her the coffee. He slid his hand under her hair to cup the back of her head while his other hand slipped around her waist. As he pulled her forward, his mouth came down on hers, and pure lust flooded her entire being. There wasn’t so much as a skin cell that didn’t want him. Slade fisted her hair—something she’d only read and dreamed about—tugging her head back so he had easier access to her mouth. His lips moved over hers in an experienced, possessive, and dominant fashion. His tongue came out, and he dragged it across the seam of her mouth, and then it was gone.

She opened her eyes to stare up into the rich depths of his.

“Any questions?” he asked.

“None whatsoever.”

“Good. I’m glad we got that settled. Now drink your coffee. Breakfast should be here at any time. I got a call from Went. The bookstore and your loft are secure. As soon as we’ve eaten, we can head out.”

“Slade? Can I ask you for a favor?”

“Sure. What do you need?”

“I don’t get to Bangor very often. There’s a small boutique that deals with handmade clothing. She always has the most gorgeous sweaters. I’d like to stop in and see if she has anything.”

“On one condition: I get approval of what you’re buying.”

“Seriously?”

“Yep. If you’re going to buy another shapeless garment that hides all that lush beauty, you can drive back and do it yourself.”

She was saved from making a snarky retort by the knock on the door.

Slade pointed to the bedroom. “Back inside. Same rules as last night.”

She complied and heard room service setting up in the other room. “All clear,” he called.

“That looks and smells delicious,” she said. “I think we should share.”

“Fine by me.” Once again, he stood, holding a chair for her.

They ate their breakfast and then headed to the Blue Lagoon Boutique, which specialized in local artisan clothing. It was one of Fiona’s favorite shops, but she rarely bought anything because she felt exposed and ‘seen’ in the things she tried on.

Once inside she was immediately drawn to a moss green sweater with a large shawl collar and deep V-neck. It was knitted out of soft, silky alpaca wool. When she walked out of the dressing room, Slade’s eyes lit up. But when she turned to look at herself in the mirror she wanted to run and hide. It didn’t look bad, but it also left little to the imagination. It was long enough to cover her ass, hitting about mid-thigh, but it clung in all the right spots.

She went back into the dressing room and tried on several other things that weren’t as slouchy as her usual style but not nearly as daring as the moss green one. She came out with the two sweaters she meant to purchase.

“What about the green one?” Slade asked.

“Oh no, I don’t think I would feel comfortable wearing it outside of my loft.”

“Why?”

“It was far too revealing. I mean it wasn’t tight, and the feel of it was marvelous, but it was just the way it showed off some things the world doesn’t need to see.”

Slade came up out of the chair gracefully, walked past her to the dressing room and picked up the green sweater, handing it to the clerk along with his credit card.

“I said I wouldn’t be comfortable wearing it outside of my loft,” she said, paying for her own purchases.

He tucked the gorgeous sweater into her bag. “Fine. Then just wear it, and nothing else, just for me.”

He thanked the clerk and steered Fiona toward the door. When she balked, his hand glided down her back and urged her forward.

When he’d seated her in the car, put her purchases in the back and slipped into the driver’s seat, she said, “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I know I didn’t, but I wanted to, and unless you have strenuous objections, how about just accepting my gift?”

“You really liked it?” she asked.

“Yes. I could easily imagine you in your loft or my A-frame with nothing else on—just you, me, and that green sweater. Although I doubt it would stay on for long.”

Once again, Fiona felt the heat rising in her cheeks. He had that effect on her. As they drove back to Angel’s Rise, she told him about her childhood, about her mother dying when she was young and her father moving them to South Carolina, remarrying, and having another family.

“South Carolina, huh?”

“Yeah, Charleston. Do you know the area?”

He nodded. “There’s a club there that I like. It’s called the Carriage House.”

Fiona looked at him, grinning wickedly. “I’ve heard of it. Never been, always wanted to go.”

“Have you now?” Slade chuckled. “Well, maybe we’ll have to go sometime. Tell me about moving down there—Angel’s Rise to Charleston is a big leap.”

“To be honest, I didn’t like it. I always just felt out of place—like I was an interloper. Don’t get me wrong, my stepmother is a lovely person and really makes my dad happy. I have two younger brothers and they couldn’t be nicer, but I just never felt like I fit in. So, I came back to Maine. After my divorce, I bought the bookstore, and eventually went back to writing.”

“There was a break where you weren’t writing.”

“Yes. I got married, and he thought writing was a waste of time, even though I was making money—enough so that he didn’t have to work, and didn’t. The marriage didn’t last. We got divorced, I lost traction on my writing career, but decided it was what I wanted to do. I met Jessica, Christie, and Lori last year, and the rest, as they say, is history.”

“You know the four of you give Thorn heart palpitations? A bunch of amateur sleuths normally only make things difficult for us professionals.”

“And yet we’ve already solved one cold case and brought a killer to justice, solved the murder at the reader event, found a statue that’s been missing for almost a century, and Thorn readily agrees that Jess was a huge help in solving that murder last year. For a bunch of amateurs, I think we’re doing pretty damn good.”

“Point taken,” chuckled Slade. “Just promise me you won’t get up to anything dangerous without telling me first.”

“I can’t just make an open-ended promise like that. What about when we go back to our separate lives?”

“What makes you think they’ll be separate? I thought we kind of settled that or at least settled that we’d both like to explore that back at the hotel.”

“You mean that silly kiss that made rational thought impossible? That silly kiss that made me mad at you for leaving me alone? Or maybe it was when you scooped me up

in your arms and didn't fall to your knees that made me almost swoon with lust? Yeah. I might need a little more persuading."

That made him laugh out loud. "We are so going to the Carriage House where that snarky wit and sassy mouth will get you into all the most delicious kinds of trouble with me."

Instead of feeling embarrassed or like she wanted to run and hide, Fiona had never felt more free or powerful in her life. She knew exactly what kind of club Carriage House was. It was an exclusive gentlemen's club for those who lived a certain lifestyle, and by exclusive, it meant monied. It was said you had to be a millionaire to belong.

"So have you just visited on a guest pass?" she asked.

He looked at her and grinned. "No. I may not live there, but I am a regular member with all the pertinent rights of a Dom. You could have just asked me if I had that kind of money."

"Yes, but that would have been gauche."

"Sneaky. I'll have to remember that. My mom might not have approved of my choices, but she respected them and knew I'd never get rich as a SEAL. She left me most of the money that was separate from the Rafferty money. I took that and all my disposable income as a SEAL and invested it."

"I wasn't really asking, Slade," she said, not wanting him to think his money was what drew her to him.

He took her hand and squeezed it. "I know that. I was just trying to be open and transparent, and just so you know, I would never think of your writing as a 'waste of time.'"

"Thank you. My goal is to make enough so that I can hire someone to work at the bookstore part time."

"Not full time?"

"Not unless it suddenly gets a lot more successful. I like owning a brick-and-mortar bookstore. I like the feeling and smell not only of new books, but old ones, as well."

"I noticed you had a section for first editions. I was surprised not to see any Agatha Christie."

“Then you haven’t spent enough time in my loft... the first editions of Agatha Christie, Patricia Cornwell, and Sue Grafton are upstairs in my personal collection.”

“No male authors?”

“Oh, I have a couple Dashiell Hammetts, including *The Maltese Falcon*, which I paid way too much for, and several Sir Arthur Conan Doyles.”

“If you could only keep one...”

“Set or book?”

“Set.”

She grinned and shook her head. “Hands down, Agatha Christie.”

“Miss Marple or Poirot?”

“Poirot, I think. I especially loved the books where Christie wrote about the author with the Finnish detective. I often think if she hadn’t died, she might have spun Ariadne Oliver into her own detective series.”

Slade nodded. “I wondered the same thing. Now, there’s a cold case I’d like to solve—where was she for eleven days and what was she doing? I wonder why she never told anyone.”

“I often think she didn’t tell anyone just because she had so much fun with hearing the various theories, but I agree it would be a fun mystery to solve.”

As they drove into Angel’s Rise, Fiona started to tense up. Slade reached over, taking her hand, bringing it to his lips, and kissing it.

“I told you I’d keep you safe. Trust me.”

“I do.”

“Just keep saying that; I like hearing it come out of your mouth,” he said as he stopped and parked his vehicle, coming around to her side to open the door for her.

Not at all sure how to react to what he’d just said, Fiona took his hand and stepped out into a throng of onlookers and

press—none of them friendly. Slade pushed them aside and they headed up the stairs to her loft. She was glad to see the window into the bookstore was boarded up, and the one in her loft had been replaced. She only hoped someone had cleaned up all the glass.

There was a note on her door from Jess:

Thorn told me what happened.

*We came up and supervised the
new window*

installation and cleaned up.

*The window downstairs isn't a
standard size,*

*so they've ordered it. The plywood
will have*

*to suffice, but it's been installed
correctly so it should be secure.*

I'm so sorry this happened.

*Thorn says you're in good hands
with Slade,*

but call me if you need anything.

Love,

Jess

“Good friend,” said Slade, reading over her shoulder.

“The best.”

“Let’s get inside so you can show me your murder board.”

CHAPTER 11



Fiona

Fiona opened the door and vowed to do something wonderful for Jessica. The loft looked amazing. The blinds were open, the kitchen had been cleaned and everything was tidied up. There was even a vase with a bouquet of wildflowers sitting on the corner of the kitchen island.

“This really is a nice place,” said Slade. “I can see why you like it.”

“It’s not very big, but it was the economical thing to do when I bought the building, and like I said, I’d like to be able to rent it out if and when I ever decide to move.”

Slade walked around the space. Fiona thought about how right he looked in it. He ran his hands along the tops of the furniture.

“You have great taste. You’re very tactile, aren’t you?”

She nodded. “So are you.”

“I am. If I hadn’t already decided there was no way you could have anything to do with Daniel’s murder, this would have clinched it for me. I don’t think someone who was tactile could have performed the mutilations.”

“I wrote about them in my book, though...”

“It’s one thing to write about them; quite another to actually perform them.” He walked over to the whiteboard by her writing space. “Love the desk. You have the most

interesting mix of antiques—all over the place in terms of time, but you’ve mixed them skillfully together.” He turned her murder board around. “And then there’s this beauty. Nothing vintage or antique about it. Very high tech. What do you normally use it for?”

“A lot of times I plot books out on it. Well, not plot, but outline.”

“I don’t see anything bookish about it.”

Fiona grinned, walked over to her desk, booted up her computer and hit the app that interfaced with the board. It superimposed her plot over the face of the board, showing key plot points, pictures, inspirational items, and the like.

“Okay, that is too cool for words. Did I mention I’m a computer geek? The techs hate me because I think I know way more than I actually do, and I end up getting in their way.”

“I find it hard to believe you are any kind of geek,” she laughed.

Slade pulled her to him and took her lips in a brief, but intense kiss. “That’s because you only want me for my body.”

It was so easy to laugh with Slade. “That must be it.” She closed down the book outline. “Christie gave all of us one for Christmas.”

“That’s a great gift and top of the line. The one we have isn’t nearly as good, and you’ve done a good job on your murder board.”

“There isn’t much there...”

“It’s the beginning of the investigation. We don’t know much. But I would like to go down and get your store records concerning who bought the book locally. I’ll get our tech guys started on that list and on putting together what we need for a warrant for the major retailers.”

“There are a few other independent brick and mortar bookstores in the area that we could check out.”

“Give me a list, and I’ll have Went call them.”

“A request for that information might come better from me. I’ll have them send it to you or Went, but I just think they’ll say yes faster and make me jump through fewer hoops.”

Slade nodded. “You’re right; you have a relationship with them. Good thinking.”

“Let’s go over what else you have.” He was interrupted by his phone. “Thanks, Went.” He ended the call. “Good news. We can shore up your alibi and officially cross you off the list. Your car’s location parked around back has been confirmed by three different people at three different times.”

“What if I used a different vehicle?”

“You don’t own any other vehicles; we checked the records for car rental agencies; and nobody’s reported a stolen car. Anything else?” he said with a grin.

“Nope. Looks like I’m officially off the suspect list.”

“But I do think your comment about anyone else who bought the book might be on target.”

“Or had some kind of connection with either Daniel or Angel’s Rise.”

“You know there’s something about the scene that keeps plucking at my brain—like there’s something in there that I should remember. I know you and Daniel were behind me in school, but does any of this seem familiar?”

“Not really.”

“Can we use your computer to pull up some of Daniel’s work?”

“Sure.”

Fiona sat down and searched for links that led to his work. Some were glorious abstracts of color and movement. Others were dark and gloomy shapes that seemed to be falling in on each other.

“Daniel had some issues, among them bipolar disorder. I was afraid when I first heard that he’d died at the falls that

he'd killed himself.”

Fiona laid her hand on his arm. “Even if he had, there was nothing you could have done.”

“But he was afraid. He believed people were after him. Look at his work—most of it now seems like a cry for help.”

“And you gave him that. You were not his keeper. If he wouldn't check himself into an inpatient facility or stay on his meds, there isn't a lot that you could have done.”

“You're very kind.”

“Not really. Wait until you get to know me. At best I'm pragmatic. While some of my books have romance or sex in them, not all of them do. I could never write romance for a living; I just don't have the right rose-colored glasses to always see a happily ever after.”

“Then we'll have to get you new glasses.”

Fiona could feel her silly grin widening from ear to ear. “Wait a minute,” she said as something percolated up from her past. “I want to scroll back to one set of paintings that tickled something in my brain.”

She moved back through the paintings to a set of stark charcoal, black and muted gray paintings.

“What interests you in these? They seem pretty dark to me, but I'm no art expert.”

“They're an abstract rendition of the murder and how it occurred back when Daniel and I were in school.”

“Huh? I don't see a man or a rock...” his voice trailed off as, Fiona suspected, he started to make sense of the stark images. “Didn't something happen up there at Angel Falls?”

Angels Rise was a tradition that was said to go back to the founding of the town. There had been rumors of pagan sacrifices and burnings of a wicker man. It had always been a lot of fun and an excuse for the teenagers to have a party with loud music, weed, and booze.

“Yeah,” Fiona said, thinking back and trying to bring up the memory. “I think it was my freshman year. There had always been a dummy or mannequin staked out...”

“Right, with a red slash on each wrist and across the throat. Was it staked out?” he asked Fiona.

“No, I don’t think so, but maybe. Oh god,” she said as the wall she had built to block that memory crumbled, “that was the last night the cops turned a blind eye. That was the year where it wasn’t a dummy. It was an actual cadaver that had been staged. And the wicker man had another cadaver inside. It was awful. I can still remember the smell of burning flesh.”

He nodded. “Not something one forgets unless their mind has blocked it out. I remember my brother bemoaning the fact that the cops had really cracked down and he didn’t get to have his Angels Rising.”

“I remember some of the kids were really freaked out. One of them might have been Daniel. There was a panic and somehow one of the kids was either pushed or fell over the cliff to the rocks below. None of us up there that night was able to volunteer any details about what happened.”

“You should have called the cops.”

“You’re right. We should have, but we didn’t. No one knew about the boy who fell until sometime the following afternoon. Then the animals had gotten a shot at him.”

“The soft flesh; the easy pickings.”

“Right,” said Fiona, nodding. “By then the boy’s body resembled the corpse staked out on the rock, minus the staking out part.”

Reaching over her shoulder, Slade scrolled to the last painting in the series. “Look at that. If we’re right about what Daniel was painting, that could very well be...”

“The boy at the bottom of the cliff.”

“Like me, Daniel left right after high school...”

“I’m not sure he graduated,” said Fiona.

“I think you might be right. What I do remember is his moving to New York City and beginning his life as a painter. He had a couple of mentors and a couple of sponsors and did fairly well. We kept in loose touch over the years, but nothing really until he reached out to me as a cop. He’d gone to NYPD and the FBI, and neither had wanted to hear him. He said someone was trying to kill him; that’s when I brought him up here. His latest exhibition was labeled as a ‘dark masterpiece.’”

“Like you, I’m no art critic, but I did study art in school and from an abstract painting perspective this could very well be Daniel depicting the happenings of that night. I’m no expert but certainly this last painting could be described as dark and evocative of a death at the waterfall.”

“It seems to me that you and Daniel were both at the same party, and that while most of you had been able to push what happened aside, Daniel was not able to do the same.”

“But why would someone kill him now?”

“Because Daniel’s new exhibition is garnering not only a lot of praise but a lot of interest. If that boy was pushed, then whoever pushed him might have wanted to silence Daniel, or maybe someone who knew the boy had been able to block the memory until Daniel’s paintings dredged the memories back up and they snapped. Whatever it is, I believe those paintings, the death of the boy, and Daniel’s murder are all linked together.”

“So, what do we do?”

“I don’t suppose there’s even a possibility that the ‘we’ could become just Went and I, could it?”

“Not a snowball’s chance in hell. My depiction of the staked man must have been some kind of trigger for the killer and now they’re after me as well.”

“Maybe. If nothing else, I think the killer wanted to scare you.”

“Which they did, but it brings me back to, what are *we* going to do?”

“Find the killer, fall madly in love, and have our own happily ever after,” Slade said with conviction.

She pushed her chair back from the desk. “Are we?”

“We are.”

Slade walked up to the murder board and grabbed a red marker and drew a large heart. Inside the heart, he wrote:

- Bring killer to justice
- Fuck each other silly
- Fall madly in love
- Have happily ever after

“In no particular order,” he said.

“I suggest we don’t show that board to anyone involved in law enforcement.”

“Why is that?”

“Because you used a permanent marker instead of a dry erase one.”

“Must be some kind of Freudian slip kind of thing,” said Slade with a shrug. “But Went was the one who told me they had confirmed your alibi so I don’t think it’s all that big a deal. I mean it’s a big deal in general life terms but as far as the case goes, we’re good.”

“But why use my book and then threaten me?”

Slade shook his head. “Who knows? Maybe the killer was triggered by your book or thinks you had something to do with it. For me, my focus is on catching the killer, I’ll deal with the whys once I have him or her in custody, tried, convicted, and settled in a maximum-security prison.”

He was so sure everything would work out, but Fiona wasn’t convinced. The connection between her and Daniel seemed a bit tenuous. She’d known who he was, but they hadn’t been friends, hadn’t even traveled in the same circles, but at least she’d been cleared. Now it was time to go to work finding the real killer.

CHAPTER 12



SLADE

“*I* think the first thing we need to do,” said Slade, “is find out who died that evening.”

“Why wouldn’t the police have made that connection?”

“I don’t think the chief was even on the force at that point, and some of his men probably weren’t out of diapers. Second, whoever was killed at the party wasn’t killed the way Daniel was. It wouldn’t necessarily be the first connection people would make.”

Fiona nodded slowly. “I get it. I have to say I didn’t connect the two until we were looking at and talking about Daniel’s paintings. The easy connection was with my book. I must have pulled that from a distant memory when I wrote that.”

“Does that happen often?”

“What, that I pull things from my past? Most definitely. Sometimes deliberately and sometimes subconsciously.”

“Is that kind of common knowledge among or about writers?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I didn’t know it, but then I know very little about writers and their process.”

“There’s a couple of old sayings about writers. The first is write what you know, and the second is that everything is

‘grist for the mill,’ so I’d say it would be fairly common knowledge.”

“Is there any way the killer could have held you responsible for the kid’s death?”

She shook her head slowly. “I wouldn’t think so. I mean I was there, but so were dozens of other kids. I don’t know why anyone would single me out.”

“Babe, sometimes we’ll never know why someone is singled out. Why Daniel? Does the killer think he did it? Did he or she think Daniel was mocking the kid’s death? Does he or she think you’re making money off it? None of those things may seem rational to you or me, but it may make all the sense in the world to the killer. And then again, the killer may have chosen Daniel for a myriad of reasons or no reason at all. The point is we have to start somewhere and little by little, we weed out all the extraneous information until we get to the stuff that leads us to the killer.”

“That’s weird to me because as a writer I need to know the why before I can even determine the who. Then once I know the who, I can weave in clues and red herrings.”

Slade glanced at his watch.

“That’s pretty. Is it a Rolex?”

He nodded. “It was my dad’s. When my mother passed, my brother and sister asked me if there was anything I wanted. This was the only thing. Well, my father’s watch and my mother’s engagement ring and wedding band. Both of them asked to be cremated and their bands handed down within the family. Generously, my brother and sister said yes.” He clapped his hands together. “I’m starving.”

“I’m not sure what I’ve got in the fridge, but if I know Jessica, there’s something, and probably even something made by her housekeeper, who is an amazing chef.”

“Maybe we’ll have that for dinner. We’re going out for lunch.”

He saw fear flash across her face. “I don’t know...”

“Then it’s a good thing I do. Look, I know that people treated you badly after the pseudo-arrest, but that isn’t going to get any better by hiding up here in your loft. So, we’re going to dinner at that place with the famous chef.”

“Seraphim? I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“I do. Besides, didn’t you find that long-lost angel statue there?”

“Yes, but...”

“No buts about it. I publicly put you in handcuffs and carted you off to jail. I think we need to walk to the restaurant holding hands and get a table up by the window.”

“Don’t you think someone in your office might be worried about you having lunch with a suspect?”

“Did you miss the part where I said Went had confirmed your alibi? You are in the clear, and as far as I’m concerned, you are owed an apology for my precipitous arrest yesterday. What better way to do that than to take you to lunch?”

“If you’re sure...”

“I’ve never been surer of anything in my life.”

That wasn’t necessarily true. He was sure of his growing feelings for Fiona. Granted, he’d haunted her bookstore not just because he liked old books or her free coffee, but to catch glimpses of her. When he’d realized one of the reasons he came to Angel’s Rise was to visit her bookstore, he’d made himself stop coming, which in turn made him miserable. He kept telling himself that a woman like Fiona wouldn’t be interested in a man like him.

He’d hated having to arrest her yesterday, but even more he’d hated that others had been so quick to believe the worst. He hadn’t said as much as ten sentences to the woman, and he’d known there was no way that she could be guilty. True, he’d arrested her, but that had been a knee-jerk reaction to hearing her read a passage in her book that was a bang-on description of the crime scene he’d just left.

“Let me freshen up a bit,” she said.

He almost suggested putting on one of the new sweaters, but decided that might be pushing it, although he wasn't sure he wasn't going to have to give her the occasional nudge to remind her how beautiful and sexy she was. She wasn't gone for more than a few minutes, but when she came back out, he re-thought his position about showing her off. She hadn't changed into the moss green sweater he bought her, but she had changed into the cinnamon colored one with the deep scoop neck, belted in at the waist so that the belt dipped down in the front. She'd added a chunky necklace made of different stones, and gold hoop earrings. She'd also applied some eyeshadow and more mascara. Most men might not have noticed anything other than the sweater change, but Slade had been trained to notice even the smallest details.

“Wow, you look gorgeous. Not that you didn't look great before, but this sweater and the way you have it belted in really shows off those dangerous curves, and I like the necklace.”

The smile she gave him could have lit up the coast of Maine for a month.

“Thanks. I really liked it, and Lori gave me the belt. She's been telling me I dress too much like a bookstore owner and not enough like a successful author.”

“Remind me to buy your friend Lori a drink. Ready?” he said, offering her his hand.

“As I'll ever be.”

“It'll be all right, Fiona. We've got this.”

“I like how you always use the plural possessive.”

“We're a team, aren't we?”

“I suppose we are,” she said, taking his hand and following him as he led her out the door and down the stairs.

At the bottom of the staircase a couple of guys in their late teens or early twenties started to move aggressively towards Fiona until he placed her hand in the crook of his elbow.

“I’m only going to tell you this once, boys: if you bother Ms. Fowler, or I find out you had anything to do with those bricks that got hurled at her yesterday, you and your parents will rue the day you were born. *Capisce?*”

“But you arrested her yesterday...”

“I did so in error, but shame on you for not giving her the presumption of innocence which she was due. I’m taking Fiona to lunch to apologize. Maybe you two should take a moment to do the same before you disappear, never to bother her again.”

Both boys—they couldn’t truly be considered men—ducked their heads, apologized, and then turned and ran.

“You can be an intimidating sonofabitch when you want to be,” she quipped.

“SEAL training 101: if at all possible, intimidate your way out of the situation. I really didn’t think I needed to break out my SIG.”

“You have a SIG?”

“Yep; it has a weight-compensator, target sights, and a custom-molded, palm-printed grip. It also has a larger than normal ammunition clip.”

“Palm-printed means no one but you can fire it, right?”

“You know your guns.”

“Mystery writer.”

Slade chuckled. She really was kind of a nerd, and he thought it was sexy as hell. “That’s my primary weapon. It’s in a waist holster in the small of my back. I have a smaller, non-customized SIG in an ankle holster. So, if you ever need to grab one of my guns, go for the smaller one. Can you shoot?”

“Yeah, and I’m a pretty good shot. I learned for one of my books and then Christie gave all of us shooting lessons. Lori still squeaks every time she pulls the trigger, but she never misses. Christie said if we were cops, we’d qualify.”

He put his hand over the hand he tucked into his elbow and headed down the street. “It’s this way, right?”

“Actually, no.” He groaned and rolled his eyes. “But I was enjoying just walking with you.”

He looked down at her to see a pale blush and sparkling eyes. “Ms. Fowler, are you flirting with me?”

“Why, yes, I am, Detective Rafferty. Is that a problem?”

“Not at all. It’s on the other side of the street, though, isn’t it?”

“It is indeed.”

He checked for traffic and led her across the street and then turned to head to Seraphim. They passed several people and Slade nodded in silent greeting. He found it odd that most didn’t return the acknowledgement.

“That’s odd,” he remarked to Fiona.

“Don’t take it personally. Yesterday they all crossed the road or ducked into doorways.”

“Doesn’t that bother you? I mean I could understand if they wanted to avoid me for arresting you, but you’ve lived here most of your life. They’ve shopped in your store, had you find out-of-print books for them, and drank your coffee, and one idiot cop arrests you and they turn their backs?”

“Not much happens in Angel’s Rise, and if any details about Daniel’s death came out, they could easily jump to the same conclusion as you.”

“But I didn’t know you and was caught up in my emotions about Daniel.”

“Small towns thrive on gossip. Now that I’ve been cleared, and especially as you are making a big show of walking around town with me, they’ll switch from wondering if I killed Daniel to wondering if I’m sleeping with you, but then you knew that when you headed the wrong way when we left my place.”

Slade chuckled. He found he did that a lot with Fiona. “My ruse has been found out.”

“I don’t think you were trying that hard to hide it. You wanted to make sure as many people saw us walking about town and going to Seraphim as possible. When did you make a reservation for a window table?”

He would have to remember that putting anything over on her or keeping her sidelined would be nearly impossible. “Before we left Bangor.”

“Because you figured I’d be scorned by the town. I’d accuse you of trying to play the white knight, but you didn’t want me to know which just means you did it because you truly are a white knight, riding in to save me.”

“Baby, I don’t think for a minute you couldn’t extricate yourself from almost any situation. And if I’m any character in one of those books, it’s the dragon.”

With Fiona laughing, he opened the door and ushered her inside Seraphim. Chef Stuart met them as soon as they entered. “Fiona, how good to see you again, and this must be Detective Rafferty. I understand from Went that our girl has been completely cleared of any and all charges. I salute you, Detective Rafferty, for owning up to your mistake and for bringing Fiona here for lunch by way of an apology.”

Chef Stuart couldn’t have done better if he’d paid him. The chef showed them to a premium table at the front of the restaurant. Once again, Slade held her chair as she sat down. The chef left the table, and Fiona leaned over to Slade.

“Did you write that for him?” she asked, laughing.

“No, but I did let him in on why I wanted the table. I think if it had been for any other reason, he’d have had me seated by the kitchen so the wait staff could bang into me as they went in and out.”

They enjoyed a sumptuous meal, shared more about their day-to-day lives, and found that they had far more in common than they might have thought.

As they began to share a decadent flourless cake with raspberries, Slade confessed, “You do know that the coffee and books were not the only reasons I used to stop by. I was happy just to glimpse you as you glided through the stacks—your fingers grazing along the titles, straightening things here and there. The soft light through the window created a soft, almost ethereal glow around you.”

By the time they left the restaurant, they’d enjoyed another lovely meal and the people who came and went changed from gossiping about Fiona and her role as a murderer to Fiona and her new love interest. The conversation went from *did Fiona kill Daniel* to *did Fiona sleep with the detective*. The answer was no to both, although he planned to change the latter.

Slade walked her back to her staircase.

“I should probably come upstairs to make sure your loft is secure,” he said.

“I think, Detective Rafferty, you’re using my safety as a subterfuge to get me back up in my loft and all alone with you.”

“And if I am?”

She leaned close and whispered in his ear, “Then to paraphrase Mary Chapin Carpenter, shut up and fuck me.”

Slade was stunned for a moment. Every time he thought he had her figured out, she threw him another curveball. Of course, he wanted things to progress in that direction, but he hadn’t expected her to move that fast, and he did want to make sure she was safe.

Fiona was halfway up the stairs when she stopped and turned to look at him. “Coming, Detective?”

He didn’t need to be asked a second time and bounded up the stairs, getting to the landing right behind her. Daniel’s killer could wait. The woman he’d been casually lusting over for almost a year and who had now had his cock on full alert had asked him to make love to her. He and his dick had no intention of telling her no.

CHAPTER 13



FIONA

When she paraphrased Mary Chapin Carpenter, she was feeling sassy and confident, but when she didn't hear Slade's footsteps on the stairs, she began to fret, and the façade began to crumble. He seemed attracted to her. Certainly, in her dreams he was, but he was gorgeous—like step-off-the-pages-of-a-men's-magazine gorgeous. And while Fiona felt she was attractive, she was playing way out of her league.

On the other hand, even if he wasn't interested in having sex with her—which would completely kill her buzz—having him here for the night wasn't the worst thing that could happen. The two bricks being thrown through her window and the continued way some people she'd known for years were treating her had been, at best, unsettling. The brick through her storefront window could be written off as vandalism or somebody trying to let her know what they thought of her. The brick through the window of her loft was something else again. For one thing, it had taken considerably more power and accuracy to throw it up there, and for another, it told her that whoever it was wanted to hurt her.

She doubted one long lunch that had turned into dinner at Seraphim with the guy who had arrested her was going to change anyone's opinion.

“If you've changed your mind...” he said.

Fiona realized her musings must have taken longer than she'd realized.

“No; it’s not that. It’s just that I don’t know if it’s a good idea. I mean, you’re the investigator...”

Slade took the key out of her hand, unlocked the door to her loft, and gave her a gentle nudge to enter before closing and locking the door behind her. Taking her by the shoulders, he turned and backed her into the corner by the front door.

“You stay here. I just want to walk through your loft and make sure nothing is out of place.”

“Won’t you need me to tell you that?”

“Not necessarily. But once I’ve walked through, we’ll walk through together,” he said, lowering his head to brush her lips with his. “Stay put.”

He didn’t draw either of his guns, but Fiona was well aware that he could get to them quickly. Slade moved around the room with a predacious grace that was part panther and part ballet dancer. The way he moved was mesmerizing and Fiona tried to catalog in her mind the words to describe it and him. There was something about Slade that made her think of a predator—fierce and feral—and yet there was also an elegance and grace that seemed to soften the sharper edges.

He checked under the kitchen sink, all of her lower cabinets and her island—her kitchen had no upper cabinets, just open shelving—before moving to other various pieces of furniture. She was beginning to believe he was looking for something like a bomb. Finally, he checked her bathroom and under her bed.

“Looks like we’re good,” he said striding across the floor back to her. “Why don’t you take a look to make sure nothing’s missing?”

“You were looking for a bomb, weren’t you?”

She could see him thinking about how to answer her. “I was looking for anything that might harm you in any way: a bomb, a camera, a listening device. I just wanted to make sure you were safe. Somebody throwing a brick through your second-floor loft when you’re home is, in my mind, a greater

threat than the person who just chucks one through your store's front window.”

“But why would someone be trying to hurt me?”

“Is there any way someone who was at the party could think you or Daniel was responsible?”

“No. I know I was never near that part of the cliff, and I don't think Daniel was.”

“You seem awfully sure about that for something that happened a long time ago.”

Fiona nodded. “Yes, but I am. Because the kid who fell was with his buddies, and they were horsing around by the edge. Most of us stayed away for fear of getting knocked over the side by their rough-housing. Daniel was not one of their crowd. In fact, when I think about it, Daniel always seemed so aloof. He would stay outside the action and just observe. Do you think the person who killed Daniel is the same person who threw the brick?”

“Not necessarily. I have two quasi-theories. The first is that whoever killed Daniel was either trying to hurt you or to continue to throw suspicion and guilt on you. The second is that it's just some idiot making noise.”

“I don't like either, but I think I like the second one better.”

“So do I.” There was an awkward pause punctuated by an even more awkward silence. “Look, Fiona, I don't think it's a good idea for you to be alone up here. Nor do I think it's necessarily a good idea for us to start sleeping together.”

Fiona felt as if she'd been stabbed, if not in the heart, then in her gut. She knew he had a point and knew it was probably best, but it still hurt and somewhere in the back of her mind a little voice whispered, *'you're not pretty or thin enough for the likes of him.'* She couldn't seem to summon the will to fight down that lingering belief that she wasn't enough—good enough, thin enough, pretty enough—to be with a man who looked like Slade.

“You're probably right. I only have the one bed, but I can make up the couch for you, and I've got a screen I can pull out

for some privacy.” She chuckled self-consciously. “My place doesn’t really lend itself to that.”

“You don’t have to go to any trouble. I can be comfortable anywhere.”

“No. I insist.”

Fiona found her spare linens, grateful that one of her two sets wasn’t sitting in the laundry, and made up the couch as comfortably as she could. She pulled an antique privacy screen she had folded into position. Stepping into the bath, she undressed and pulled on her sleep shirt. She came back out and Slade was stretched out on his back, his socked feet propped up on one end.

“I should take the sofa. You take the bed.”

“That’s so not happening,” he said with a smile. “Go to bed, Fiona. Everything is going to be fine.”

“Well, then, good night,” she said lamely as she moved behind the screen and climbed into bed.

Normally, she had no trouble falling asleep. Even last night she had dropped right off, but tonight she couldn’t find a comfortable position. She was acutely aware of the man stretched out on her couch on the other side of the screen. When she felt as if he’d had time to fall asleep and she was still wide awake, she quietly got out of bed to tiptoe back to the bath to grab some melatonin pills and head into the kitchen for a glass of water.

She was standing in front of the kitchen sink, looking out the window and berating herself for her cowardice and insecurity when a set of large, warm, male hands settled on the top of her shoulders. The glass slipped from her hand, only to be caught by Slade’s. The man had quick reflexes.

“Easy. It’s just me. Why are you so nervous?”

“I’m not nervous; I’m just unsettled.”

“Okay, why are you so unsettled?”

“Why? Because someone I barely knew in high school had come back to Angel’s Rise and I didn’t reach out to him.

Because whoever killed him used my book as a blueprint for his murder. Because there are people in this town—my town, where I was born and raised—who think or at least thought I was capable of that kind of horrific act...”

“Is that it?” he prompted gently.

Fiona was all too aware of his masculine presence. The man exuded alpha male energy; she could feel it rolling off him. His quiet voice was deep, dark and sensual as hell. He was every male hero she’d ever conceived of and so much more. She was so far out of her depth it wasn’t even funny.

Earlier, she’d teased him and then chickened out. She was being given a second chance. Would she give in to fear? What was the worst he could do? Tell her no? The way his hard length was pressed against her told her he was aroused. What if he did tell her no? But what if when he gave her an out, and she had taken it, he had thought she was having second thoughts? That could be it, couldn’t it?

Deciding she had little to lose and everything to gain, she turned to face him. “I meant what I said earlier when you were at the foot of the stairs.”

“Did you? Because I don’t want you to feel pressured.”

“I don’t. I want you. A couple of days ago I wanted you because, like every other girl who went to our high school, I wanted to be your girlfriend. But now, I don’t know what tomorrow will bring. I just know I don’t want to pass up this chance to be with you. I chickened out earlier. I lost my nerve.”

“Why? Have you ever had any man sneak up those stairs to be with you?”

“No,” she laughed softly. “I do think you should be awarded the stealthy stair climbing award.”

He backed up to the kitchen island, drawing her with him. “Then why?”

Taking a deep breath, she said, “Because you look like you, and I look like me.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“I’m not some thin, athletic, willowy blonde. I’m kind of tall and gawky and I could stand to drop a few pounds.”

Slade shook his head. “Who the hell told you that?”

“I have eyes, Slade; I can see myself. I just know I want to be with you—even if it’s just for tonight.”

“Then you need glasses. Let me tell you what I see: I see a gorgeous, sexy female with curves I want to explore. I didn’t push you earlier because I’m not looking for a one-night stand. And those willowy blondes? I don’t want any of them. I want you.”

Fiona felt relief wash over her like the gentle waves of the ocean. When she looked into the sincerity of his eyes, she felt like that bold, sassy girl she had once been before she married her ex. She wondered, why did she still believe all the hateful things he’d said when she knew he was a liar and a cheat? Was she going to let him ruin the rest of her life? She had paid a premium to be rid of him. Why would she believe him and not believe Slade? Why was she allowing her ex to wreck any more of her life than he already had?

One more check. “Really?”

He chuckled as he tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear and guided her hand to his fly, which seemed to pulse with life. “Really.”

Slade lowered his mouth to hers, pressing his lips to hers before trailing kisses down her throat, stopping at her collarbones, and beginning the process of getting to know her. He reached down to the hem of her nightshirt, drawing it up and over her head as he left her naked. Her nipples puckered, and she tried to tell herself it was from the chill in the room, but she knew that wasn’t it. She knew it was the heat from the man standing in her kitchen, lifting her up and setting her on the counter, stepping between her legs, and lowering his head to her breasts.

Fiona’s head fell back, and she moaned as he swirled his tongue around her nipples, first one and then the other. He

kissed his way back to the first one, sucking it into his mouth only to use his tongue again before giving her the barest edge of his teeth. Fiona hissed as he laved affectionate attention upon it and moved back to do the same to the other.

He stepped back, his eyes devouring her like a hungry predator—heat and arousal rolling off of him in waves. Slade shook his head. “Damn. Fiona, I want you to wait right here, I need to go down to my vehicle.”

Knowing what he was seeking, she laughed, letting the last of her nervousness go. “Unless you think I have to worry about you carrying an STD, you don’t need a condom.”

“I just had my physical last month, and I was clean. I haven’t even been close to a woman since then, but I want to be safe.”

“There’s no chance that I have an STD, and I’ve been on birth control for years.”

Grinning, Slade stepped back between her legs, fisting her hair and tipping her head back as his mouth captured hers in a hungry kiss. It was as if he had let something wild and feral off the leash and it threatened to consume them both. Fiona moaned into his mouth, her tongue dancing with his.

She slid off the counter and landed lightly on her feet. She began pulling his sweater over his head, her hand reaching for the top of his jeans, unfastening the top button as he lifted her into his arms, sweeping her literally off her feet, never once allowing his mouth to leave hers. He carried her to the bed and laid her down gently, his eyes never leaving hers as he moved to the foot of the bed and crawled onto the mattress.

Slade stared at her body, licking his lips as desire flickered in his eyes. Lifting her leg, he kissed his way from her ankle up the inside from calf to knee and knee to inner thigh. Light, almost chaste kisses, until he reached her sex and wrapped his lips around her clit.

Fiona gasped, arching her back and gripping the sheets as his tongue toyed with her swollen and sensitive nub. Shivers of pleasure flowed through her entire body. He kissed, nipped,

and sucked relentlessly, seemingly focused on bringing her to orgasm. Fiona lost herself to the rhythm of his mouth as his hands explored her body, his tongue flicking and circling her clit, never missing a beat, increasing her pleasure by leaps and bounds.

She could feel the slick of her arousal seeping from her core as her thighs parted naturally to offer him more. Fiona was aching for relief, despite never having been a fan of oral sex before. Obviously, she'd been with the wrong men. The more he toyed with her clit, the closer she got to the edge, but she wasn't willing to give over and come just yet. Her heart pounded in her chest, her breath growing more ragged, and her moans echoed through the loft.

Slade never broke his concentration and continued to pleasure her with his talented lips and tongue. He lifted his head, a smirk playing on his lips as he gazed at her. Fiona could see satisfaction growing in his eyes from his understanding that he was taking her to the height of pleasure.

Reaching out to him, Fiona pulled him back up so that she could kiss him. "I want you inside me before I come," she confessed, needing to feel how incredible it would feel to have that large, hard cock inside her.

She finished unbuttoning his jeans, freeing his cock. It was every bit as impressive in reality as it had been in her dreams. Chuckling, Slade shucked his jeans off and tossed them on the floor. He stretched back down on top of her, lining his cock up with the entrance to her core before surging into her in a single push, filling her completely. Fiona gasped as he began to thrust in and out of her, driving deeper each time.

Slade's eyes never left hers as the two of them found a rhythm and pace that sent tremors of pleasure through her entire body. Fiona's head thrashed back and forth as she writhed in his embrace, her nails coming up to rake down his back. The man knew how to fuck, and he rocked her world in the same vivid manner that he rocked inside her.

He picked up the pace, thrusting harder, deeper, and faster. Slade was riding her hard now, her moans mingling with his

grunts and groans and escalating into cries of pleasure. A powerful orgasm flashed through her, overwhelming her with its intensity as he gave a last, ferocious thrust, driving to the very depths of her core as Fiona screamed in ecstasy. Her pussy spasming as she clamped down hard, her legs trembling as she writhed in his hold, greedily milking his cock and savoring every bit of pleasure she could.

As he held her in his arms, he gave her his full weight, taking the comfort she gave him as he continued to spurt the last of his seed inside her. The orgasm seemed to go on and on, until she was almost begging for it to end, not sure if she could take any more. The little tremors racing through her body afterwards made her whimper, and he continued to move, drawing little mini orgasms from her until at last they were both spent. Slade rolled from her body, drawing her close and falling asleep almost immediately.

Fiona didn't know what the morning would bring, much less the future, but in this moment she didn't care.

CHAPTER 14



SLADE

Slade woke with Fiona nestled at his side. Nothing had ever felt so right. He'd been adeptly avoiding the 'trap' of a relationship for years. He'd given Thorn all kinds of hell about falling so quickly and completely for Jessica even before Thorn had determined who had murdered Gregory Thompson. He muffled a laugh; at least Thorn had never handcuffed his sweetheart.

Normally, he would simply have awakened, slipped out of bed, and left her a note. "That was great, I'll call you," knowing he never would. But Fiona was different. He may have handcuffed her, but he was pretty damn sure Fiona had captured his heart. He was surprised the thought didn't make him want to run for the hills or at least yearn to extricate himself from this situation, but instead his thoughts drifted back to the night before and he began to imagine all the things he'd like to do with and to her. Instead of trying to figure out how to escape, what he really wanted was to burrow back into bed with her.

God, she had been everything he'd fantasized about during the past year. He couldn't remember the last time when he'd lusted after a woman and not followed up on the urge almost immediately. He'd been bitterly disappointed when it seemed Fiona had changed her mind, but he wanted the decision to be hers. He'd planned to try and persuade her, knowing he could be very persuasive. He was willing to be patient, as for once he was playing the long game.

He gently kissed her shoulder as he ran his hand down the side of her body, tracing the sexy figure eight. He slipped out of bed, folded the screen, and put it back in its place. Grabbing his jeans, he stepped into her shower—noting that both the shower and separate soaking tub were large and luxurious. He took a quick shower, dried off, and pulled on his jeans, feeling how constrictive they already were.

Slade found her coffee pods—a good sign that they not only liked the same roast, but the same brand. He made himself a mug and began to look through what she might have for breakfast. He opened the door and had to stifle a laugh. The pickings were slim, to say the least. Given the lack of proper pots, pans, or cooking utensils, Slade surmised Fiona had no interest in cooking, which was fine as he loved to cook.

After scrounging around, he found and pulled out eggs, cooked fajita chicken, chorizo sausage, and cheddar and Monterey jack cheeses in the fridge. He also found an unopened jar of hand-made salsa, unopened whole wheat tortillas in the pantry, and an avocado which was just this side of overripe from a basket which also contained onions and peppers.

Breakfast tacos it was.

He scrambled the eggs and sautéed the onions and peppers before adding the fajita chicken and chorizo sausage. He combined the contents of the two pans, lightly toasted the tortillas and added the mixture to them, topping each taco with a dollop of salsa and a slice of avocado before making two mugs of coffee, arranging the platter with the tacos, and heading back to Fiona.

Fiona was just waking up—still naked with her hair all tousled and falling past her shoulders and down her body, the tendrils wrapping around her nipples. He'd never seen anything sexier in his entire life. He sat the tray on the edge of the table and leaned in to kiss her.

“I’m sorry. I tried to minimize the noise, but I wanted to make you breakfast.”

“I’d like to tell you that it was the empty bed that woke me, but that’s not true; it was the smell of you cooking whatever it is you have on that tray. And the coffee.” She reached for the cup as he handed it to her, taking in a deep breath and exhaling with a pleased sigh. “Coffee, the magic elixir of the gods.”

He laughed. She really was his perfect match. He took a sip from his own mug. “I think I may have uttered the same words to Thorn on more than one occasion.”

“You should know, you can’t wake up all perky and perfect until after I’ve had my first cup of coffee.”

Slade got back into bed with the woman he was almost certain he was falling in love with, sitting with his back against the headboard and pulling her up to sit with him. She snuggled happily next to him.

“Your fridge and pantry are a disaster—well, they’d have to have more in them to be a disaster. I think we may have to go in with hazmat suits to clean them out.”

Fiona slapped at his chest. “It’s not that bad.”

“I should remind you that it’s a bad idea to lie to a cop.”

“Okay. Maybe it is, but I’m not much of a cook.”

“I don’t think you’re any kind of cook,” Slade chuckled, “and before you commit another count of assault on an officer, you should know I love to cook.”

“You do?” she asked, surprised.

“Yes. It relaxes me. There’s something that I like about following a recipe and knowing that if you do it correctly it will give you the desired result. I also get a good hit from feeding people, seeing them enjoy my food... it makes me feel necessary.”

“Your explanation makes some sense, but I never would have guessed,” Fiona said, sitting up and seemingly unaware that the covers had pooled in her lap, leaving her naked and exposed from the waist up. “I would have imagined you diving, surfing, hunting—you know, all that alpha male stuff.”

He reached out and cupped her breast, hefting its weight, rubbing his thumb over it, and smiling as it responded eagerly to his touch.

“I do enjoy those things, but I like cooking, too. When you’ve seen as much violence and death as I have, doing things that serve others becomes far more important. The last several Thanksgivings, I’ve gone into Bangor and cooked and served holiday dinners at the homeless shelter.”

“I love that. I’ve thought about doing it, but never have.”

“Maybe this year we can do it together.” He wondered if she had any idea what a huge step that was for him—committing to some nebulous idea in the future.

Slade kissed her again. He liked kissing Fiona—her lips always parted easily, and her mouth softened, allowing him to taste her, committing her sweetness to memory. There was something about Fiona that made him feel like he was home. Ever since he’d joined the SEALs, he’d had jobs to do, people to save, and people to bring to justice, but he’d never felt home. The closest he came to it was his place up by the falls. The A-frame had become a refuge of sorts, but it had never fully felt like home. He supposed if she was there, it would go a long way towards making him feel like he had finally come home.

Sitting with Fiona cuddled up against him, sharing breakfast and talking about inconsequential things felt right and good and made him feel at peace. But they had a murderer to catch. Slade was smart enough to know that his choices were to include Fiona in his hunt for Daniel’s killer or exclude her, knowing she would do it on her own. Inclusion was safer.

“As much as I’d like to lie in bed with you all day and while away the hours, that isn’t what the State of Maine pays me for and won’t lead me to Daniel’s killer. Why don’t you get ready, and we’ll head over to the police station.”

“We?”

Slade snorted. “Give me credit enough to know that there’s no way you’re not going to try and find the person or persons

who tried to kill you and who murdered Daniel.”

“Why the station?”

“I keep thinking the key to this is whatever happened all those years ago up at the falls. Just a reminder that cold cases are cold because the answer or evidence isn’t easily discerned.”

“Why include me?” she asked as she slipped out of bed.

“For one thing, I like being with you. For another I think if I don’t include you, you’ll just go off on your own or with a little help from your friends.”

“I don’t know why you say that.” Slade scowled at her, and she laughed. Apparently, he wasn’t as intimidating as he thought he was. “Okay, that’s probably true.”

“And lastly, I wasn’t there. You were. I can interpret what they wrote down, photographed, or saved from newspapers and other sources, but you were there.”

“But I didn’t see anything...”

“My experience says you saw more than you think. But if you don’t want to go...”

“I’ll be ready by the time you get the kitchen cleaned up,” she said, heading toward the bath.

“So, I have to cook and do the dishes?”

She grinned at him. “Pretty much. By the way, breakfast was delicious, and in the future, you cook and I’ll do the dishes.”

“Deal,” he said, enjoying the sway of her backside as she went into the bath and closed the door.

God, she was sexy.



“Good morning, Slade, Fiona,” said the chief.

“Morning, Jimmy,” replied Slade, keeping his hand on the small of Fiona’s back. “Went?”

“Yo,” replied the young officer, coming out of the breakroom.

“I need the case number for an unresolved incident that occurred up at the falls a number of years ago. Plus, I’m going to need any boxes of notes, newspaper clippings, and the physical evidence. The kid’s name was...” he turned to Fiona.

“Mike Ray,” Fiona supplied.

“Got it. I made sure you had access to our system. You should be able to enter the name and approximate year, and it’ll pull up what the system finds,” said Jimmy. “That’s an old case; what’s your interest?”

“We think Daniel’s murder and the intimidation tactics someone’s trying to use on Fiona may be related.”

The chief nodded. “Well, Went’s on it, and if you need additional help, just let me know.”

“Thanks, Jimmy,” said Slade before ushering Fiona into the conference room the police had set up for them. “Can you hop on the computer and see if you can pull up the file?” Fiona nodded.

Went joined them after a short period of time, lugging a box of physical evidence. “There are more boxes, and Kenny and Randy are bringing in what they found both up at the site and at Fiona’s.”

“Good. Let’s keep the two cases separate. Cold case on the left as you come in and Daniel’s murder on the right. The conference table is the neutral zone. We’ll start collecting overlapping evidence on it and up on the board. We just need to make sure we label everything, so they don’t get commingled.”

“Got it,” said Went.

“Hey, Slade, we’ve got this stuff from the falls and Fiona’s place. We spent most of yesterday afternoon, evening, and this morning getting everything catalogued,” said Randy.

“The boss called, and they need us to head up to Clayton Lake. Seems there’s been a nasty incident. So, unless you need us...” added Kenny.

“No; you’re good to go. Thanks for your hard work on this case. I appreciate it,” said Slade.

“Then as soon as we get unloaded, we’re going to head to Clayton Lake. But if you have questions, you know how to get hold of us.”

Slade went to help Went with the boxes of evidence kept in the station’s basement. Unlike most cold cases involving murder, it looked like nothing had been done with them since the case had been listed as inactive.

“Doesn’t look like anyone has touched these since they came down here,” observed Slade.

“No. A couple of us talked about doing it on our own time, but the chief said none of us were homicide detectives, and we had enough to do as it is. We’re a pretty small department, and he was right, but I’ve always wanted to.”

Slade nodded. “A good homicide cop never wants to have to declare a case inactive and set it aside. The ones you couldn’t close tend to eat at you.”

“I’ll bet.”

They grabbed the last of the boxes and hauled them upstairs. When they entered the room, Fiona’s brow was furrowed in what Slade believed to be frustration and annoyance.

“What’s wrong?”

“Well, I found the right file...”

“Mike Ray?”

She nodded. “But everything except the identifying information—name, age, gender, et cetera—the last names have all been redacted. And there’s a lot of other stuff that was redacted: witnesses, things relating to his death. For instance, the cause of death is listed as a fall from a substantial height,

but none of the injuries, or bruising, or anything that might have contributed is provided. It's weird."

Slade leaned over her shoulder staring at the screen, taking control of the mouse to scroll down the report. Weird didn't begin to cover it. It looked as if someone had redacted the report to obscure information, including the attendees at the party who were all potential witnesses. What good was the official report when most of the pertinent information had been blacked out? Who would have the authority to do such a thing?

And what was someone so desperate to hide?

CHAPTER 15



SLADE

“*L*et me see that,” he said, sitting down next to Fiona and scooting the laptop closer to him.

“At first the names being redacted didn’t bother me as I figured we were all underage...”

“That’s not something you redact names for. As the case never went forward, it’s not necessarily part of the public record. And the only thing that the medical examiner mentions other than the fall being the cause of death was that the kid who fell had alcohol in his bloodstream.”

“All of us had been drinking beer or those wine coolers and some had been smoking weed. It was fairly tame. I don’t remember thinking anyone was falling-down drunk.”

“According to a ‘female bystander,’ the teen slipped and fell. Another witness—no gender noted—said the kid was horsing around and showing off and just went over. Apparently, several people heard the victim scream as he fell. Others, reportedly, ran to the edge to see him lying at the base of the falls. The family requested that the names of any of those listed as witnesses or bystanders be withheld from the media, which is fairly standard for minors.” He turned to Fiona. “Does that jibe with your recollection?”

“From what I can remember,” she said slowly. “It’s been a long time and honestly the single vague memory I have is of kind of standing away from the rest of the kids and just being horrified.”

“Do you have any recollection of Daniel?”

Fiona closed her eyes for a moment. “I seem to recall he was standing on one of the higher rocks above the kid who fell.”

“Any way anyone could think he’d pushed him?”

“Not any more so than any of the others. You know how high school kids are. The group that was horsing around were the jocks and the cheerleaders. Daniel was a goth; I was a nerd. We didn’t run with that crowd and tended to keep our distance.”

“Who invited you?” asked Slade.

“No one. The party was one of those things that just spreads through the school. I remember being a little surprised Daniel was there.”

“Why were you there? It doesn’t seem like your kind of party.”

Smiling sheepishly, she said, “It wasn’t, but one of the cheerleaders had backhandedly dared me to go. I decided I was going just to prove I wasn’t the little goodie-goodie they thought I was.”

They continued to go through the electronic and paper files as well as the physical evidence, making notes on the whiteboard in the conference room.

Slade looked at his watch to see that it was almost noon. “I think we’ve done a lot on the cold case, and my gut says we need to figure this out first.”

“Agreed, but I don’t see anything else we can glean from these old files.”

“I don’t, either. What do you say I take you to lunch, and then we hit the town newspaper? A lot of times you can find the most interesting things buried in a newspaper’s archives.”

“Sounds good.”

Slade pulled out her chair as Fiona took out her camera, focused it on the whiteboard and took a picture. “Grist for the mill?”

“Kind of,” she said a bit evasively.

After they left the sheriff’s office, Slade took Fiona’s hand in his and walked so that he was on the outside of the sidewalk. He smiled and shook his head.

“What?” she asked.

“I have given Thorn so much crap about the way he always takes care of Jessica—opening her door, holding her chair, et cetera...and now I find myself doing it without even thinking about it.”

“For the record, I like it.”

He grinned. “Good to know. So why take a picture with your phone of the whiteboard?”

“I always worry about ideas or things being lost from something I can’t safeguard. If someone sneaks in there and tries to erase or destroy something...”

“You think someone at the station was involved.”

“Don’t you?” she asked.

“I’m trying hard not to, as I think maybe the chief is the only one old enough to have been a cop back then...”

“But a couple of those officers, including Went, were at the party that night. I just figure if we have a record, we’re better off. And I can transfer it all to my whiteboard when we get back to the loft. We can password protect it so that only you and I can open it. I don’t want to think badly of any of the cops, but there was something really hinky about those files.”

“Hinky?” he laughed, opening the door. “Is that some kind of super sophisticated sleuthing word used by mystery writers?”

“Yes. Yes, it is.”



FIONA

After an amazing lunch at Holy Grounds, they walked down to the local newspaper, Angel's Rise Gazette.

"Fiona? It's so good to see you."

"Hi, Diane, good to see you too. Do you know Detective Slade Rafferty? Slade, this is Diane Bettis, she's the fourth-generation editor-in-chief and publisher of the Gazette."

"Only by reputation these days, although we ran in the same circles in high school," said Diane. "I'm a little surprised to see you with this guy, Fiona. After all, didn't he arrest you for that grisly murder? Any chance you'd sit down with me to give me an exclusive, Slade?"

"I can't comment on an ongoing investigation. As for Fiona and I being together, no one is more surprised and happy about that than me," returned Slade. "Although technically, I only took her into custody. But she's decided to forgive my faux pas and give me a second chance."

Fiona had to hide her smile. She and Diane had never been close friends, as Diane had been known to cut people to ribbons with her sharp tongue while she smiled benignly at them the whole time. But Slade was smooth as silk, and it was obvious he'd learned long ago to deal with the Dianes of the world. Maybe he could teach her.

"Any chance you'd let us do some research in your archives?" asked Fiona. "I promise we won't make a mess, and we'll stay out of your way."

"Normally, I'd require a subpoena to let a cop into the paper's archives—just on principle you understand—but as Fiona is an old friend, and she's decided to forgive you, I suppose I'll let it slide just this once. I can't imagine what you're hoping to find."

"Not sure we'll find anything. Just trying to be as thorough as we can be," said Slade.

"Thanks, Diane. I can show Slade the way to the back."

"I'll need to unlock the storage area. Why the archives? Anything we have on the murder up at the Falls wouldn't be there. It's still an active and ongoing story."

“We think the boy who fell to his death might be connected to Daniel in some way,” said Fiona, shutting up when Slade poked her.

“You mean that old story about the big party? That was so awful. Really spoiled it for the rest of us.”

“I rather imagine it spoiled it more for Mike Ray and his family,” said Fiona.

“Well, of course. I misspoke. It really was a tragedy.”

Sometimes Fiona thought that Diane saw herself as the heroine in some gothic southern romance novel. She could almost envision her holding up a handful of typefaces and saying, ‘I’ll print this tomorrow.’ Fiona had always wondered about how Diane had ended up back at the paper. As Fiona recalled, she had gone to the Columbia School of Journalism, but when her father became ill, Diane had come home, taken over the paper, and never left.

It was interesting to watch Diane watch Slade when he wasn’t looking. There was a kind of covetous, malevolent glint to her eye, quickly replaced by sparkling blue eyes when she thought she might be seen. Diane had also reminded her, when she was explaining how Fiona had misunderstood some kind gesture Diane had made, of a spider coming out from beneath a rock. Now that she thought about it, it was Diane who had all but dared her to attend the party.

“Fiona would never want to come to the party up at the falls,” Diane had said all those years ago. *“She’s much too busy with her little stories and serious studying, aren’t you, Fiona? I wouldn’t want you to feel out of place and end up running home with your tail between your legs.”*

Diane’s words had the effect Fiona figured out years later she wanted them to have—Fiona had taken the dare and attended—feeling every bit as out of place as Diane had intended, especially when she’d turned her venomous tongue on her. But Fiona had stuck it out, refusing to be cowed by the bullying beauty.

“I’m surprised these files seem so unorganized,” said Slade. “As I recall, when you were head cheerleader, you were always so meticulous about where things went.”

“Then you do remember me,” said Diane, preening.

Fiona was proud of herself. She wasn’t the least bit jealous. Slade was clearly only being kind to Diane, but more than that, he had done everything in his power to make Fiona understand he was focused solely on her and on developing something real and lasting. He not only had the hunky good looks of a romantic detective in a mystery book, he had the heart, intelligence, and soul of one, as well. He was her very own perfect book boyfriend brought to life.

“My father left things in quite a mess. It’s on my list of things to do, but with being editor-in-chief, publisher, and not finding reliable help, I just haven’t quite gotten around to it. I was so hoping Fiona might decide to give up her aspirations to being a top tier novelist and come to work for me.”

Fiona could feel Slade bristle beside her. Placing her hand on his arm, Fiona smiled sweetly and said, “That’s so kind of you Diane, and I promise you I did give it some consideration, but given that my latest novel has climbed into Amazon’s Top 100 as well as Barnes and Noble’s Top 25, and may well make the New York Times bestseller list, I think I’ll just keep plugging away.”

She felt bad about feeling a certain kind of glee as her words hit home.

“Well,” said Diane, drawing herself up. “I’ll leave you to it. Let me know if I can answer any questions.”

When Diane left the room, closing the door behind her, Slade chuckled. “She shoots; she scores. God, was she always that insufferable?”

“To girls who weren’t her acolytes? Absolutely. To any hunky or rich guy? Absolutely not. As I recall, there were rumors about the two of you your senior year.”

“Diane and me? Even back then I knew a viper when it slithered my way.”

“I always thought of her as more of a spider.”

“Spider, snake—both to be avoided.”

Hours later they were stiff and sore and had found nothing. It felt as if they were searching for a needle in a haystack. Fiona was frustrated, while Slade was dogged and patient. Fiona wondered if they’d even know the right papers when they found them, and if they did, if they’d be of any help at all.

“This is maddening. It’s why I like writing fiction better. I can just make things up, go back, and revise or even give my characters some flash of brilliant insight. Is this what being a real detective is like?”

“Pretty much—hours of mind-numbing research punctuated by minutes of danger and absolute terror.”

“I don’t even remember what I’m hoping to find.”

“I keep hoping the paper would either have printed the names, or there’d be notes from a reporter or photos. Something that could give us a lead so we could conduct some interviews.” Slade glanced at his watch. They’d been at it all afternoon.

The door opened and Diane stuck her head inside. “I almost forgot you were here. I’m going to close down for the night. I can give you about another half an hour.”

“Thanks, Diane,” said Fiona as Diane withdrew, closing the door behind her. “Where do you want to focus?”

“Got your camera?” Fiona dug in her bag, pulling it out. Slade arranged a bunch of the pictures that they had yet to go through. “Start taking pictures. We can grab something either to eat for dinner or something for me to cook and throw these up on your smartboard.”

Fiona began grouping pictures and snapped away. Like all those before them, they had no names or dates, but these seemed to be of the same time period up by the falls.

“Get these,” said Slade in an excited voice. “These weren’t taken by a pro. They’re blurry and taken at night. The faces are faded, and some are out of focus.”

“A lot of the kids have their backs to the camera.”

“Yeah, but it’s pretty easy to see the make, model, and license plates of those cars.”

“You’re right. The photos don’t look like someone at the party took them,” said Fiona.

“No, they don’t. So, what are they doing here? Why is the paper archiving them?”

“Who took the pictures, and what do they mean?”

“I have no idea, but I think we may have just had one of those flashes of brilliance.”

Fiona had just put her camera back in her bag as Slade shuffled the pictures in with the notes they found in a file when Diane stuck her head back in.

“That’s it, kids. I’m going to need to close up shop, but you’re welcome to come back tomorrow.”

“You were right, Diane. There really wasn’t anything to find,” said Slade as he guided Fiona past Diane.

“I hate to say I told you so,” said Diane as Fiona thought, ‘like hell you do.’ “But I didn’t think you’d find anything of interest. Slade, I really would appreciate the chance to interview you before you talk to any other reporters.”

Slade smiled what Fiona was beginning to think of as his ‘male weatherman with the good teeth’ smile. “I promise you’ll know before we speak to the media at large.”

“Oh, Slade, that would be so wonderful. Perhaps we could go to dinner and discuss some things—you know, in broad terms,” said Diane hopefully.

Fiona almost felt sorry for her—almost.

“Fiona and I have plans. We’re either going to grab something to go or hit the grocery store so I can stock her fridge and pantry.”

The crushed look that flashed over Diane’s face was fleeting and replaced by a brilliant smile.

“That’s fine,” Diane said, tossing her hair. “It was only a business dinner. You two have a good evening.”

Turning on her heel, Diane left them standing in the waning light.

“What’s your pleasure?” rumbled Slade. “Dinner at Seraphim, pizza, or we hit the grocery store and head home?”

Fiona couldn’t help the little thrill that ran through her system at his use of the word home. She also couldn’t help feeling as if they were on the brink of something big. Whether it was solving the cold case, Daniel’s murder, a lasting relationship, or all of the above was unknown—only time would tell.

CHAPTER 16



*S*lade

As he walked along the sidewalks down the main street of Angel's Rise, holding hands with Fiona as the sun began to set, Slade felt as if he were finally where he was supposed to be; not just where he'd been born and raised, but where he belonged.

"We should probably grab one of our vehicles and head to the grocery store on the edge of town," said Fiona happily.

"No. We may head there to pick up some staples, but we're going to that organic grocer right down the street from your place. Then we're going to hit the butcher next door. My guess is the butcher closes first, so that's where we're heading."

They spent the next hour at the butcher where Fiona appeared delighted with the way Slade interacted with the butcher, who was the son of the original butcher who had opened the place.

"I remember your dad teaching me so much about how to handle and freeze good meat and seafood. I know we came in pretty close to closing but if I could get a few things today, I'll leave you with a list to pick up tomorrow."

"That sounds good, Slade. Becky next door has great local produce, but more than that, you're going to lose your mind in her artisan cheese section, and she has fresh pasta."

"You are speaking my language," said Slade.

Fiona laughed. "And you think I'm the geek."

“No, babe,” he said, leaning over to kiss her. “We’re the organic food geeks; you’re the mystery novelist nerd.”

The butcher laughed. “Yeah, when the big chain store came in, I decided if we were going to survive, we’d need to do it with organic meats and seafood of a higher quality.”

After getting some fresh lobster, Wagyu filets, and bacon, Slade left the butcher with a long list of seafood, meat and pork that he wanted to pick up.

“I don’t think all of that is going to fit in my freezer,” said Fiona. “I mean it’s good sized, but I’m not sure that it’ll hold everything.”

“If it doesn’t, we’ll buy a freezer and find a place for it. Please don’t worry. I like taking the time to make things from scratch, and to do that we need the right stuff.”

Next, they went into the organic grocery store, and the butcher’s prediction appeared to be correct. Slade also remembered Becky from school.

“Oh my god, Slade. I heard you’d bought a house,” she punched him in the arm. “How could you think Fiona had killed anyone? She’s one of the nicest people in town. I don’t know what I would have done if she hadn’t raved about the store to everyone. She’s actually one of my best customers when she isn’t so busy writing she forgets to feed herself.” Becky held up her hand, looking pointedly at Fiona. “Pizza and Chinese delivery don’t count. Now Slade, what can I get you?”

“Other than an ice pack for my arm?” he joked.

“Yeah, sorry, not sorry,” she said.

“I have a list of things if you could put them together, I’d really appreciate it. I also need to pick up some things for tonight and tomorrow.”

“Sure thing.”

It was easy to see Becky was enjoying showing off her store and selling her products to someone who really appreciated them. He was able to pick up the makings for a

delicious salad, including field greens, onions, peppers, and cucumbers as well as sundried tomatoes, goat cheese, a loaf of artisanal bread, French butter, and some decadent eclairs for dessert.

Loaded down with what he'd need for the next couple of meals, they headed back to Fiona's. They walked through the bookstore just to make sure nothing had been harmed. As everything seemed to be in its place, they went up the stairs to the loft.

"You know, if we enclosed these stairs and made a separate entrance into the bookstore, you could come and go more securely..."

"Hopefully, we'll be able to catch the bad guys, so I don't have to worry about my security."

Slade stopped her from opening the door to the loft. "Security is always an issue. Even when there isn't an imminent threat. You're becoming a famous novelist, and you're hanging around other famous novelists, and the four of you want to close cold cases. Besides that, you're dating a state homicide cop..."

"Are we dating?" she asked. He hated seeing that look of trepidation in her eyes.

"I don't know what you heard about me in high school, but I can guess. The stories I heard about myself were so far from reality it wasn't even funny. The fact is I don't sleep around—well, not much. Not anymore. I've never lied to or misled any of the women I slept with. And until you came back into my life, I wasn't interested in a relationship. But I hope I'm more than some goodtime guy for you."

The look of relief that passed over her face was almost heartbreaking. Slade knew he'd need to make sure she understood he was in it for the long-haul.

"I'd really like that, but I didn't want to let myself think it and get clingy."

He pressed her back against the door and, still holding two large bags of groceries, he leaned down, capturing her mouth

with his, letting her feel the hunger he'd kept in abeyance all afternoon.

“Now, open the door and let me feed you so I know you're properly nourished.”

Grinning, she opened the door, and they filed in. Her loft was maybe a third of the size of the A-frame, but he knew if the A-frame bothered her because of Daniel or she just preferred the loft, he didn't care. As long as he was with Fiona—had her to come home to—he had all he needed.

While she downloaded the pictures of the photos and documents she'd taken and swept them up onto the murder board, Slade began grilling the filet, basting it in French butter while he made the salad and the aged balsamic dressing to go on it.

He would never let her know, but he'd been more than a little worried when they'd been working throughout the day. Nothing made sense, but it was that very fact that kept him from becoming discouraged. At the end of the day, they'd found hand-written notes, photographs, and a lot of accompanying articles. At least now he felt as though they had a trail, however scant, to follow.

“Babe, dinner's almost ready. Save whatever you need to and come sit down at the island.”

“Why don't you just bring it over here? We can work while we're eating.”

Setting the two perfectly cooked filets on the cutting board to rest, he washed his hands and headed over to her office area.

“Nope. One of the first things you learn if you want to be a good investigator is that you have to nourish your body and let your mind rest. It's amazing the things your brain will put together when you let it work in the background.”

“But Daniel and Mike were murdered.”

“Which means they're dead. We owe them the best we can do, but we don't owe them our lives. We have something we can start teasing away at. Close it up. We'll have dinner, take a

nice long bath and then we're going to fuck like a couple of bunnies."

Fiona laughed, and he thought that not only did he want to hear that song for the rest of his life, but he might die if he never heard it again.

"Twist my arm," she teased.

"If I twist anything, babe, it won't be your arm."

Laughing, Fiona allowed herself to be led to the island where he'd made them a simple but delicious meal. On top of the grilled steak was a dollop of goat cheese that he had mixed with finely cut scallions and sundried tomatoes. He served them with the salad and gently warmed and sliced bread and more of the French butter.

Fiona's laugh was not that of a frothy, light-headed, and spoiled young girl, but the full-throated laugh of a woman who had seen the highs and lows and ups and downs of life and could still laugh at it. The first was like summer sun and lemonade. But Fiona's was far more complex and reminded him instead of well-aged single malt with deep and harmonic notes of barley, spring water, and yeast. You could hear in her laughter that she had experienced both sides of what life had to offer and was content to continue to explore and find all that she might be able to take from it. Slade had always preferred the finessed taste of a fine single malt.

After dinner, he left Fiona to wash the dishes and tidy up the kitchen while he went into her bathroom and ran a nice long bath. She was just finishing up when he'd finished, finding and lighting candles before returning to her, sweeping her up in his arms and carrying her back to the only room in the loft with walls.

He set her down and they hastily removed each other's clothes. Slade helped her into the bath, towering over her like some conquering hero come to claim his prize. His cock was fully erect, and he knew his size was impressive, but he also knew how to use it to bring her as much pleasure as she could stand and then some.

“You didn’t have some cockeyed idea that since it has been a long and somewhat stressful day that you’d play the gentleman and ignore that thing, did you?” she asked in a husky tone.

“Trust me, babe, that thought never entered my mind. The only thing I found stressful about today was not being here where I could have my way with you.”

Fiona splashed him. “Have your way with me? Seriously? I do not write sweet romances where all the good stuff is done behind closed doors. If my characters have sex, they have sex, and the woman gives as good as she gets.”

“Really,” he said speculatively as he approached the tub.

Fiona rolled up onto her knees, letting the water drip from her body as the water danced in the firelight and the full moon shone down through the skylight above the tub. She reminded him of all the tales he’d heard of mermaids and sea sirens enticing men to their doom. But Fiona wasn’t offering him any kind of harm. No. She offered him home.

When he was within reach, Fiona grasped his cock in her hand before wrapping her lips around it. Slade groaned in abject appreciation. They were definitely going to be working more from home from now on. He thought of all the ways and places he wanted to fuck her. When she swirled her tongue around the head of his dick and began licking the underside, he lost the ability to think. All he could do was feel.

Fiona took him deep, swallowing him down so that the tip touched the velvety spot at the back of her throat, then reached between his legs and captured his balls, massaging them gently. Before she could undo him completely, Slade unpinned her messy bun, fisting her silky locks and taking control of her head, making Fiona moan in pure arousal. He stilled her head, steadying it as he began to plunge more deeply and forcefully in and out of her mouth. She responded by licking, humming, and sucking his cock as he made use of her heated mouth.

He felt his balls tighten as the familiar tingle ran up his spine and he pressed her head to his groin as he gave up his cum, shooting it down her throat and into her belly. He

withdrew as he leaned down to kiss her, enjoying the intermingling of their passion on her lips and tongue. He repositioned her and slid into the tub behind her, pulling her back so that she sat between his legs, resting against him.

They bathed each other leisurely with the sponge and lavender smelling soap. He now knew why Thorn often smelled of things other than the scent of masculine soap. And like his friend, he knew he would no longer care. When the water began to cool, Slade stood and stepped out of the tub before helping Fiona do the same.

As they dried themselves, Slade's cock recovered its rigidity and wanted more from the woman who had provided him with so much pleasure before he'd joined her in the hot, soothing water. Slade hauled her into his arms, kissing her deeply, allowing their tongues to tangle and dance before lifting her up into his arms, cradling her against his chest and carrying her back to the bed.

He put her down, turned back the covers and then placed her in bed, crawling in beside her. He stared down at the woman he had begun to believe he would share his life with, stroking the soft patch of hair that covered her sex, tracing circles with his index finger around her swollen clit. Fiona's body came alive with hedonistic arousal, and she moaned when he probed further below, finding her slit soft, ripe, and ready.

Slade used his other hand to slide sensually up her body until he reached her breasts. He fondled them, pinching and tugging at her nipples, even giving them a lovely twist that made her moan with need.

“Slade, please...”

“Yes, Fiona, you have pleased me well and will give me even more pleasure before the morning sun kisses the skies.”

“God, please dial down the romantic rhetoric and just fuck me, will you?”

“You and I are going to have some serious discussions about romance.”

“Fine. Just so long as you get on with it. I feel like I’m on fire. It has never been like this with anyone.”

Slade was stretched out beside her, allowing his hands to roam and explore her body in a more leisurely way than the furious coupling from the night before. He stroked her body from collar bone to knee, stoking the wildfire he knew burned within her. Sucking her nipple into his mouth, he smiled as he heard her sigh. Slade trailed kisses down her body until he was nuzzling her clit before settling himself between her thighs and licking her swollen labia. Her skin quivered in response wherever he touched or kissed.

Wrapping his arms around her thighs, he lifted her sex to his mouth and began to use his tongue in a way that mimicked what he meant to do with his cock. He rolled his tongue into a spear and stabbed her pussy with it, stroking and licking as he nibbled on the engorged flesh that surrounded the entrance to her core. He reached up to play with her nipples again and was rewarded with Fiona moaning and undulating her hips, arching her back to raise her pelvis to his face to allow him to probe her pussy more deeply with his tongue.

CHAPTER 17



FIONA

Fiona's response to Slade's masterful lovemaking made her senses sing and her orgasmic response soar. Every single synapse in her body crackled to life as she tried to clutch at him and force him to move up her body and thrust his cock deep inside her. Slade wasn't having it. He was in full command and instead captured both of her wrists with one hand under her body as he took his fill of the honey she offered.

Quaking at his sensual touch, she couldn't do anything but moan and plead which only led him to chuckle before curling his tongue up to dart inside her sheath, then flattening it out so he could lick the roof of her pussy. Her body had quickly learned his ability to drive her crazy until she was screaming his name.

Fiona's pussy began to tremble as she tried to undulate her hips in a way that would force him to cease this exquisite torture. He brought his thumb up to press down on her clit as if engaging the ignition on a luxury vehicle, and she cried out as the power of her climax overwhelmed her. The orgasm that raged through her body made her shake with its power and caused the proof of her passion to coat his probing tongue as he continued to pleasure her with his mouth.

He nuzzled her a final time, nipping her clit and making her gasp as he slowly dragged his body up hers, until her thighs were parted by his as his cock probed for the opening to her wet heat. Her sheath was still pulsing to the rhythm of the pounding of her blood. His hands held her hips in a way that

allowed him to grasp her ass, holding her steady as he thrust deep inside of her with one sure, powerful stroke.

Fiona's pussy quivered along his length as he drew back and sank into her a second time until he was fully seated. Her breathy moans morphed into a kind of incoherent keening as he slowly stroked within her from root to tip over and over again. The trembling in her pussy magnified as she realized in an abstract kind of way that her body was searching for an even higher promontory from which to fling itself into the abyss of ecstasy.

She spread her legs wider as she wrapped them around his waist as he thrust in and out of her, allowing her to catch his rhythm and move with him. Losing her patience and wanting to feel him fill her pussy with his cum, she clawed at his back, which made him laugh, filling what was left of her mind in a shroud of desire where nothing mattered but this man, his cock, and the pleasure he could bring them both.

"Slade," she whimpered as her orgasm exploded, overloading all her senses—sight, sound, scent, taste, and most of all, touch.

Fiona realized she had to resign herself to the fact that in matters of sex he would dominate and take extreme pleasure in her response. She climaxed far more easily and quickly for him than she'd ever done with anyone else. She'd never experienced the intensity of the orgasms she had experienced in Slade's embrace. She was fairly sure that the completely sore and sated feeling she'd had in the morning would become standard. She was able to let go with him and revel in his lovemaking and realized she wasn't completely happy until he'd taken his own release.

Slade stilled the motion of her hips as he began to pound into her. Fiona cried out, her pussy clamping down, daring him to thrust more deeply and intensely, possessing her in a way that was almost feral. There was something raw and primitive about the way he gave a last, hard thrust, grinding against her as he groaned and spilled himself inside her.



Morning.

She could tell because there was light filtering in from the windows on the front and back of her loft.

She was alone. She could tell that because when she'd reached for Slade, the sheets had been cold. She tried to reason with the panic that said he wasn't coming back, and that she never should have believed him. But that little voice inside her head said she could believe him and that he would have either left her a note or there'd be a text or some reasonable explanation as to why he wasn't with her.

Fiona got up, went into the bath and took a hot shower, letting the pounding hot water and steam work its magic on her body and brain. Pulling on a bra, pair of sweatpants, and an old baggy sweater, she padded over to the kitchen area, smiling as she saw a note attached to her Keurig with a piece of blue painter's tape.

Good morning, gorgeous!

I started to wake you, but you looked so peaceful and happy. There was actually a little smile on your face. I just couldn't bring myself to do it.

Coffee is set up; just push the lid down. Breakfast is a salmon hash. I made enough for both of us. Take the plate with the leftovers, pop them in the microwave and give them 90 seconds. Test to see if it's warm

enough. If not, no more than 30 seconds at a time.

I'll be back as soon as I can. Either work on your book or if you want to work the case, start trying to make sense of and organize the stuff we put on the board. I keep feeling that while we don't have all the information, we're on the right track.

Miss you already,

Slade

As stupid as it was, she had to keep from hugging herself and squealing with delight. It was obvious that he wasn't yet ready to call it love, but then, neither was she. She wondered if it was because one or both of them wasn't sure, or because they were just afraid to speak the words for fear the other one didn't feel the same. Regardless of what anyone called it, it was obvious she meant something to him, and he meant something—if not everything—to her. Jessica had talked about how she'd found her priorities shifting when she'd fallen for Thorn. Fiona realized she could feel that same shift.

Depressing the lid, she opened her fridge and laughed—it had never been this clean nor this organized in all the time she'd owned it. Pulling out the hash he'd left, she stuck it in the microwave and heated as directed. Taking it out, she put a fork in her mouth. Everyone said reheated food never tasted as good as when it was freshly made. If that was true, Fiona couldn't wait to have this again. As it was, it was amazing.

Fueled with food and coffee, she cleaned up the kitchen and started the dishwasher. Her contractor had balked at putting it in, but Fiona hated washing dishes. As she lived

alone, she opted for an eighteen inch one and set it to washing. She grabbed a second mug of coffee and headed back over to her murder board, turning it and her laptop on.

Slade was right; they had a lot of information, but not all of it seemed connected, and it was pretty disorganized. She narrowed her focus to the photos from the newspaper and then looked online for Daniel's paintings, sweeping them up onto the whiteboard. The paintings stirred something inside her—not quite a memory, but more than an imaginary feeling. She tilted her head to one side as if that might improve her perspective.

Sitting down, she studied the photos—again, there was a familiarity about them, but for the life of her, she couldn't put names to faces. Partly it was because the pictures were blurry and faded and partly because she hadn't known most of the people at the party very well. Slade would face the same issues. How the hell were they going to put names to those who had been there when the reports and articles had been either vague or redacted?

As Fiona drained the last dregs of her coffee, she was seized by inspiration. Going back into the kitchen, she made herself a third cup of coffee. As it was streaming into her mug, she went to her bookshelf and pulled the yearbook from her freshman year, cursing herself for not thinking of it sooner. Slowly but surely, she began to compare faces in the book to the images on the murder board. It was painstaking work, but little-by-little the memories began to return, and she was able to assign names to the people in the pictures. She noted anything she could remember about a person under their name.

She looked at the four abstract paintings. Was Daniel trying to tell them something? Was he trying to accuse those he held responsible? Fiona was beginning to remember that the accident had hit Daniel harder than most and that he had withdrawn into the world he depicted even in his earliest drawings. Studying the paintings, she realized they were in sequential order and that if ordered correctly and connected together in a certain pattern, it was easier to make out the

whole from the sum of its parts. It was clear that Daniel didn't believe the fall was an accident.

In fact, it appeared as though Daniel believed it was murder.

Fiona began to refine the assembly of the total picture, taking her clues from the photographs. Even though Daniel's abstracts didn't show people or faces *per se*, the various shapes did follow the patterns in the photos and if you compared them side by side, you could begin to make sense of them. If her theory was correct, she could even assign names to the images depicted by Daniel.

As the list grew, she recognized that several of the individuals shown were now prominent citizens in Angel's Rise, and some of them held significant positions, including Denny Langden, who was the chief of the fire department and Jimmy Langden's son; Diane Bettis; Maryann Howell, who was the town's comptroller; and even Tim Bellamy, the town's mayor.

She glanced at the antique mantle clock that sat on the top of her open shelving. She had just enough time to pull on a pair of jeans and step into a pair of stylish, heeled booties. She'd have to make her coffee downstairs. She left the loft, remembering to lock it, and trotted down the stairs, opening the door and smiling as she saw the truck bearing her new front window heading down the street.

"Hey, Fiona," called Jimmy Langden as he followed her inside.

She turned to him. "Is there something I can do for you, Chief?" she asked, hating how cold her tone was. She wasn't really angry with him; he'd done nothing wrong, but he hadn't done anything right either. He could have advocated more strongly for her when Slade had taken her into custody, but he hadn't. She understood that his hands had been tied, but only to a point.

"I just wanted to apologize for all that's happened. I never should have let Slade arrest you..."

“Technically, he didn’t. He took me into custody for questioning. I understand your position, but I guess I expected more of you.” She shrugged. “And I hate how bitchy that sounds. Feelings aren’t always rational.”

“I get that. Can I still bum a cup of coffee?” he asked.

“Sure. Help yourself. I didn’t have time to make muffins or cookies this morning.”

“Fiona?” asked the window repairman. “I got your window here.”

“Give me a minute to clean out that space, and it’s all yours.”

She hurried to clear the space and was happy to see most of her regulars come by to browse or just get a cup of coffee. Holy Grounds’ coffee might technically be better, but hers was free, and she and Joyce had never felt as though they were in competition.

There was a lot of banging and dust, but after a couple of hours the repair was completed, and Fiona had to admit the window looked as good as new. People came and went, and she made a fair number of sales. She wondered if some weren’t coming in to check on her welfare and if others just hadn’t come to take a gander at the woman who had been arrested. Slade might see it as a big difference, but to most people it was just a technicality.

After the repairman left, there was a lull in the shopping traffic, and Fiona was able to not only get her inventory and sales records caught up to date, but she also had a chance to add to her current work in progress. She realized she hadn’t had a chance to talk to Slade. She called his phone and reached his voicemail.

She left him a message. “I got your note this morning. The hash was delicious. The kitchen is cleaned up. Why don’t I pick up the orders from the butcher and Becky? I had a chance to work on the cold case. I’m pretty sure I made a major breakthrough. I can’t wait to show it to you. It’s really rather ingenious. I’m not sure if Daniel had figured it out, but I think

he was on his way to doing so, even if he didn't know it. Love you." She added the last bit in a hurry, deciding she would confront her fear head on. If he didn't feel that way about her or didn't think he could, better to know now.

Proud of herself for doing the brave thing, she set her phone down and headed to the front door, closing and locking it as well as turning over the open sign that hung on it. She turned off the light and was heading to the side entrance to get to the outside stairs that led to her loft when Diane swung out from between the tall bookshelves and leveled the barrel of a gun at her.

"I'll take that," she said, reaching out and snatching Fiona's phone away. Looking down at Fiona's footwear, she smiled a reptilian smile and said, "The phone call was unfortunate, and the shoes are definitely not appropriate for what I had in mind." She hitched the gun toward the door. "This way. We'll take my Jeep." Diane tossed her the keys. "It's parked right outside. You drive."

Not knowing what else to do, Fiona slid past the gun and prayed she could stall for enough time that Slade would find her. He had to rescue her, right? That's what the heroes in books did.

CHAPTER 18



FIONA

Fiona caught the keys and opened the door, wondering if she could get it closed between them. The muzzle of the gun poked her between the shoulder blades.

“Don’t even think about it. And don’t try anything funny when you’re driving.”

“Where am I going?”

“Head north out of town.”

Not knowing what else to do, Fiona drove out of Angel’s Rise heading north. Dread grew and roiled in her gut. She was pretty damn sure they were headed for the falls.

“Go up to the upper parking area and park at the far end.”

“Why, Diane? I don’t understand.”

“You don’t need to understand. Just do what I tell you.”

Once she’d parked the car, Fiona shoved the keys in her pocket, hoping to delay any escape Diane was planning.

“Hand ‘em over,” ordered Diane. “I’m going to need those.”

“Do you really just expect me to hike somewhere so you can kill me?”

“I figure you don’t have much of a choice. But you’re such a freaking optimist, I’ll bet you’re trying to plan some kind of escape or hope that Slade Rafferty will save you. For the record, I had the same hopes and dreams. I even managed to

be waiting to get into school in Coronado so I could be waiting for him when he and his unit returned.”

“I thought you went to Columbia.”

“Only after Slade made it clear that while he wouldn’t mind fucking me, he had no interest in, as he put it, ‘settling down with a girl from Angel’s Rise.’ Keep moving,” Diane said, shoving Fiona ahead. Fiona stumbled. “God, you’re such a klutz. You know, I was so sure my destiny was to be Mrs. Rafferty and lord it over this town...”

“But Slade didn’t want the family business or its fortune...”

“Yeah, but by the time I realized even a degree from Columbia wouldn’t impress him, his kid sister got knocked up and she married the guy. Then there’s his gay brother. So, I got stuck here. Move it.”

Fiona continued to climb up the slippery slope and sliding rock. Her pretty boots that she’d bought on a girl’s weekend in Portland with Jessica, Christie, and Lori were not the ideal footwear to hike up the side of a cliff. But had she been wearing proper shoes, she might have made better time, and she didn’t want that. Fiona was intentionally dragging her feet, trying to stall and maybe, just maybe, talk her way out of whatever it was Diane had planned.

“I can’t believe you want to hurt me...”

Diane gave a snort of derision. “Why not? When did you ever do one thing for me?”

“What did I ever do to hurt you?” she challenged. “We played volleyball together and tennis.”

“So what? I was the captain of both those teams, and you were the person in charge of making sure we had towels. You were nothing to me. And then when you hit it relatively big as an author before you blew it on your ex, you wouldn’t even let me do an exclusive that I might have been able to use to get me out of here. Why did you stay with that jerk? God, he had a pencil-sized dick and not a clue as to how to please a woman.”

Fiona kept thinking she ought to react or at least to feel something, but she didn't. It wasn't just the cheating that had made her file for divorce. It was all the years she told herself she was happy and that he was a good husband. She wondered if she'd ever been happy. The day of her wedding, she'd driven herself to the little chapel. Fiona could remember as if it were yesterday that little voice whispering in her ear, '*Don't do it.*' She should have listened.

"I'll have to agree with you there. He wasn't much in the romance department."

Diane shook her head. "Do you think I care? I only did it so you could find out. You didn't even bother to find out it was me."

"Honestly, who he cheated with wasn't as important as the fact that he cheated."

Diane rolled her eyes and motioned Fiona forward with the gun. "God; you are such a goodie two shoes. If I'd known it didn't matter, I'd have hired a hooker, taken pictures, and sent them to you."

Fiona stopped and turned to confront Diane. "What the hell did I ever do to you? You're right. You were the untouchable, perfect blonde bitch goddess from hell. You, and your goon squad, also known as our cheerleaders, took every opportunity to bully and harass me. All I ever wanted was to be like you."

"That was never going to happen, and you couldn't take a hint. Even when we were awful to you, you just slunk away and never said anything to anybody, except Daniel."

"I don't think I ever had a conversation with him."

"Maybe not, but he mooned over you. Daniel came from money, did you know that? He was even richer than Slade, but he wasn't right," she said, tapping her head, "up here. But I could have dealt with that. We were dating, and he got angry with me because I was, and I quote, 'mean to you.' First Daniel, and now Slade."

What the hell is she talking about? There had never been anything between her and Daniel. She'd barely known the guy.

"Wait a minute. Are you telling me you think Daniel had feelings for me?"

"He didn't 'have feelings' for you. He said you'd always been kind to him, and he didn't like that I was mean to you."

It made her heart ache that Daniel had thought she was kind. She'd never given him a second thought. Sure, she held a door for him if his hands were full or made space for him in the cafeteria, but Fiona would have done that for anybody.

"Was that the reason you and Daniel broke up right before the party?"

"That was his excuse to go off the deep end and get all dark and gothic and become a tortured artist. When he became the next big thing on the New York artist scene, I went down to see if I could get an interview and maybe rekindle our romance. But he would have no part of it or me."

"So, you killed him?" Even as Fiona said it, she found the idea shocking.

Diane shrugged. "I didn't realize he'd put together exactly what happened at the party."

"What did happen?"

"To that jerk that went over the cliff?" she asked with bored resignation. "He hurt one of my cheerleaders, only no one believed her. He lied about where he was, and his buddies alibied him out. I was so angry. It's not like I planned it, but the jocks had all been drinking and smoking weed. Mike was drunk too and stumbled and slipped over the edge, but he didn't fall. He was hanging onto the ledge by his fingers, only his buddies were too drunk to see he was in danger. I wandered over and when everyone's back was turned, I squashed his fingers with my foot and forced him to let go. I managed to jump back so when his buddies came to see what had made him yell, I came over and screamed. He deserved it."

"But why Daniel?"

“He saw me. I didn’t think he did, but I realized later he was sitting up high enough to have watched the whole thing. That’s why he broke up with me. Then he went all dark and broody and left for New York. Who knew he’d take the art world by storm and become the critics’ darling? Like I said, I went up to see if I could get an exclusive and he turned me down. When I saw those last four paintings, I knew he’d seen everything. I couldn’t let him destroy the life I’ve managed to scrounge together.”

People thought Daniel had mental issues? As far as Fiona was concerned, Diane was deranged and had been for some time, but that probably wasn’t something she needed to point out to her.

“Look, Diane, I get it. We both know men can be pigs. Look at me. I actually thought Slade cared, but after a night of rollicking good sex...”

“He’s great in the sack—I always thought he would be. Do you know we used to have a peephole drilled through the walls so we could see the boys when they were taking showers? Even back then he was hung.”

“Be that as it may, my point is, he left this morning without a word...”

“You told him you loved him; I heard you.”

“Yeah, I said what I said, but you’ll notice he hasn’t tried to call me back so, there’s that. But my point is, I understand where you’re coming from. I have to tell you, if some guy hurt one of my friends? I’d sure as hell step on his fingers and watch him fall. We both know I was just a port in the storm for Slade. He’s not coming back. You and I can go back to the bookstore, and we’ll destroy everything there and upstairs in my loft. No one else has ever put it together...”

“But you did...”

“Yeah, and I’m telling you I get it. It’ll be our little secret.”

Diane seemed to consider all that Fiona was saying. Fiona was starting to believe she might have talked her way out of it when she heard her phone ring. Diane fished it out of her

pocket and looked at the caller ID just as the phone stopped. When the text message dinged, Diane pulled it up and read it.

“Too bad; so sad. Slade says he loves you, too.” Diane looked at her with a mixture of pity and envy. “You know, I really don’t understand what men see in you. I never did, but they keep picking you over me. I hated you in high school, when I bothered to think about you, but I’d kind of got to where I liked you. At least, I fucked your husband, broke up your marriage, and watched as he robbed you blind. You were the only woman I could think of who was worse off than me.”

“I get that. I’m really not much of anything...”

“You weren’t, but you seemed to have got your mojo back. I really can’t leave any loose ends. I did that with Mike and look where it got me. I should have taken care of Daniel a long time ago. If I hadn’t let him live, he never would have created those paintings.” Diane brought the gun up. “Anyway, I’m really sorry it has to end this way.”

CHAPTER 19



SLADE

Rolling out of Fiona's bed this morning and leaving her had been one of the hardest things he'd ever done. He needed to call into a meeting up in Augusta and decided doing it from his girlfriend's loft—wait, was she his girlfriend? No. She was so much more than that, and he needed to man up and tell her that. In any event, he didn't need his boss, Andrew Mills, to know he was shacking up with a woman he'd once suspected was a murderer or even worse, was one of Thorn's fiancée's friends. Jessica, Fiona, and the other members of the Mystery Writers' Murder Club were making a name for themselves.

Regardless of all that, he would have much preferred to spend the morning in bed with Fiona. Instead, he got up, made breakfast, and fixed something for her so all she had to do was punch the Keurig and warm up her breakfast.

The video call opened up. "So, what's the status on the Monkton murder?" asked Mills.

"We think the murder is tied..." Slade started to respond.

"We?"

Might as well grab the bull by the horns.

"Yep, we, as in Fiona Fowler and me. Let me tell you, we need to cut Thorn some slack about Jessica. The women in the murder club are tenacious and smart as hell. I all but arrested Fi, and instead of wanting to kick me in the balls, she's been instrumental in helping me figure this thing out."

Mills hummed noncommittally. “So, what do you know?”

“I know Fiona had nothing to do with either case. We think the Monkton murder is tied to an incident that was classified as an accident shortly after I joined the Navy. Fiona was present at the time but doesn’t have a clear memory other than it was in the same area, and Daniel was present at the party where the incident occurred.”

“What’s your next move?”

“I’m starting to get a hinky feeling about the town’s newspaper editor, so I’m heading over to another town. I thought I’d talk to Ryker McKay. He’s been helpful in the past. I want to do some further research without the Angel’s Rise editor knowing what I’m up to.”

Ryker had been a freelance stringer for the Associated Press. He’d been in probably as many war zones, if not firefights, as Slade and his unit. He was known to be hard-hitting but fair, and had been freelance only, because he wanted to be able to pursue the stories he wanted. He liked answering to no one except himself.

“Don’t you need to keep looking there?”

“No. Fiona and I took pictures. She’s got a murder board back in her loft. By the way, I’m requisitioning one of those for the unit. That thing is slick.”

The head of the MCU chuckled. “You guys and your toys. I remember...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, back in your day you had to chisel it into the stone and dinosaurs roamed the earth.”

“Smart ass.”

“Better than being a dumb ass,” quipped Slade.

“I know Randy and Kenny weren’t there long. Do you need them back?”

“As usual, they did a great job, and all the forensic evidence has been gathered. Boss? Is there a problem? I don’t usually find you looking over my shoulder.”

“Not a problem *per se*, but the Chief of Police made some noise about you dragging up bad memories.”

Slade nodded, even though his boss couldn't see him. “Yeah. One of the kids we were able to identify at that party—only because Fiona recognized him—was the chief's son, Denny. He's the fire chief now. I suspect others at that party are also prominent citizens...”

“Yeah. I thought it might be something like that. Well, keep on checking and let me know if I need to run interference.”

“No. I think I've got this.”

Slade ended the call, hopped into his SUV and headed to Bleak Ridge, which was south of Angel's Rise, hoping that Ryker might be able to provide information that would help him find the link between the two cases and solve both.

The Bleak Ridge Sentinel was one of the oldest weekly newspapers in the state. The damn thing had been on its last legs when Ryker decided to come in from the field and save it. He'd made a deal with its dying publisher to keep it running and to keep it independent of all the large chain newspapers gobbling up small town local papers. For the most part, Ryker didn't much care what people thought of him.

Slade parked in front of the Sentinel and headed inside.

“Slade?”

“Hey, Ryker. How's it going?”

“Not bad. What's up?”

“Can't an old friend just stop by to say hi?”

“He can, but it's not likely if that old friend is also a busy homicide detective. So, what can I do for the MCU?”

“You can let me take a look at your archives. I'm looking for something about an incident that happened in Angel's Rise a couple of years after I joined the Navy. A kid fell. It was classified as an accident...”

“But you have your doubts?” Slade nodded. “Are you interested because you think it’s connected to Daniel Monkton’s murder? Do you think the girl you arrested...”

“I didn’t arrest her.”

“She was in handcuffs.”

“I took her into custody, and she was being difficult.”

“So, you tried to intimidate her. How’d that work out for you?” Ryker asked, laughing.

“You know her?”

“Fiona Fowler? You bet. She’s a renowned mystery writer. Was doing great, married the wrong guy, pretty much lost everything but her new book is climbing the charts. You should make her buy you dinner. The publicity from being taken into custody and then released hasn’t hurt her sales.”

“Well, Fiona is helping me out and we both believe that the old incident and Daniel’s murder are linked. I just want to keep my research quiet.”

“Say no more. Diane Bettis is a bitch on wheels with delusions of being Sally Busbee.”

“Who?”

“Editor of the *Washington Post*. I was in a couple of classes with her at Columbia. The woman has a couple of screws loose, if you ask me.”

“That was my feeling as well.”

“What are you looking for?”

“Not sure. Any chance you or the library have yearbooks from the high school?”

“Doubtful, as it’s *Angel’s Rise*. But as I recall, most of the State’s high schools put their yearbooks online. Let’s see if *Angel’s Rise* is one of them.” Ryker pulled up the site. “Yep. Here they are. Why don’t you sit at my desk and research to your heart’s content?”

“Thanks, Ryker.”

“No problem. Any chance I can get an exclusive?”

“You’ll be my first call.”

“Thanks, Slade.”

Ryker left him alone in his office, and Slade set up his own laptop with copies of the photos and began to compare them to pictures in the yearbooks. It was difficult for him to match any of the photos in the yearbooks to the pictures they found in the police files or at the Gazette. Both source photos were far too blurry.

After several hours, Slade was going through one of the yearbooks when he came to a full stop. It took him by surprise. There on the page devoted to a prom was an image of Daniel decked out in his tux. That alone was enough of a shock, but his date was downright astonishing. He checked the names just to be sure, but Slade had recognized the stylish blonde in an instant. It was none other than Diane Bettis, Angel’s Rise’ newspaper editor. It was too coincidental to not be significant, and Slade didn’t much believe in coincidences.

Looking at the date of the prom and knowing the date of the party, Daniel and Diane would have had to have been dating at the time of the infamous party, or at least right around that time. Diane Bettis had to have known what had happened and more than that, would have to have known what Daniel saw or believed. What if she had been a part of whatever Daniel had seen, and because he’d once had feelings for her, he had remained silent?

Slade printed a picture from the yearbook, thanked Ryker for his help and headed back for Angel’s Rise. He glanced at his phone and realized he had a voicemail message. It had been left earlier and somehow, he’d missed it. He listened to the message and smiled. He was willing to bet that if they put their heads together, they’d figure out the answer. He texted her a simple message “Got your message. Headed home. I love you, too.”

He waited for some kind of response and received none. At first, he wasn’t concerned, but when there was no response

either via phone or text, he became worried. He called the Gazette and got the paper's answering service.

"I need to speak to the editor. I'm Slade Rafferty with MCU."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Rafferty, Ms. Bettis isn't here."

"Do you know where I can reach her or when she'll be back?"

"Not really. She said she'd be out of cell coverage and would be back in tomorrow."

"I can't stress to you the importance of my reaching her."

"I'm really sorry, Detective Rafferty, but I can't tell you anything else. If I knew, I would, but I don't."

"Okay, thanks. I appreciate your help." He ended the call with the paper and immediately dialed Thorn.

"Hey, Slade, you might want to bring Jess a bribe. She is not happy with you."

"Well, hopefully she will be. I need you to ping Fiona's phone. She's not answering, and I think she's in danger."

"Shit. I'll get the techs on it and will let you know what we find."

"Good. I'm headed back to Angel's Rise. I'm going to call ahead for backup."

"We can have armed backup headed your way and will meet you in two hours or less."

"If I'm right, Fi doesn't have that long. I gotta go."

"Anything else?" asked Thorn.

"Yeah, ping Diane Bettis's phone. She's the town's newspaper editor. Call me when you have anything."

"Done."

As soon as the call ended, he called the Angel's Rise police.

"Angel's Rise Police..."

Slade didn't wait for the normal response. "This is Slade Rafferty, MCU, I need the chief now."

"The chief..."

"I don't care. No. Better yet, get me Went."

There was a slight pause. "Slade? Went. What's up?"

"I need armed backup to meet me at the top parking lot at Angel Falls. We'll need ATVs."

"What's happened?"

"I believe... hang on, I have another call. Rafferty."

"Both Bettis and Fiona are up by the falls—the Angel's Rise side."

"Got it." Slade clicked back to Went. "Diane Bettis had something to do with the death of Mike Ray and Daniel Monkton."

"What? Are you sure?"

"Pretty damn sure, and if not, you can all blame me. I think she's going to try and kill Fiona."

"Holy shit, but why?"

"I think she knows Fi has put the whole damn thing together and decided to use the fictitious murder in Fiona's book to kill Daniel and frame Fiona. If Fiona knows, Diane's going to have to dispose of her. She has to be one of the few people Diane believes would move against her. My guess is she's either blackmailed or will blackmail whoever she needs to. Get your people in gear, Went."

"You bet. I'll keep it just to guys who couldn't have been there."

"Thanks."

Slade ended the call and hit the lights and sirens on his SUV. He floored the accelerator and prayed Fiona could stall for enough time. He was going to be damned if the killer denied him and Fi their happily ever after.

CHAPTER 20



FIONA

Fiona stared down the barrel of the gun, not trusting herself to look her killer in the face. The malevolence and level of crazy was clear enough in Diane's voice; she didn't need to see it.

"So why me? I mean, I was never a threat to you. According to you, you destroyed my marriage and with it my career. What possible threat was I to you?"

"But you couldn't stay down, could you? You just had to be the plucky little nerd and write a bestseller and become the talk of the town with your little mystery club."

"I'm not a threat to you."

Fiona knew her best chance for staying alive was to keep Diane talking. Maybe if she said it enough times, she could convince Diane not to kill her.

"You don't really expect me to believe you'd keep your mouth shut, do you?"

She carefully refrained from answering that question. "But how'd you manage it?"

Diane laughed. "I'm a lot stronger than I look, and who would suspect a woman of such a horrific act? Although you did dream it up. I mean it really was the perfect blueprint for murder."

Fiona listened as Diane spoke about the murder in a quiet voice devoid of emotion, wishing she'd taken Christie up on teaching her some kind of ninja kung fu moves that she could

break out. Maybe if she had, she wouldn't be in this predicament.

"The only thing I added," said Diane "was a sleeping pill so I could get him into position. I knew Daniel was up at Slade's place. I swung by, ostensibly to offer him a drink, let bygones be bygones and all that. He drank the laced beer. The best part was I could see he knew I'd dosed him as he started to go down."

It seemed clear to Fiona that Diane had enjoyed herself.

"Even better, I waited until he came to before I slit his throat, which kept him from screaming. Well, he tried, but nothing came out but a strange gurgling noise. The rest was kind of messy, but then I'm sure you knew that from your own research."

"You can't believe you're going to get away with all of this..."

"Why not? I can write an article that insinuates that Slade was too quick to exonerate you as he was sleeping with you. Jimmy Langden isn't going to make a fuss. After all, he's the one who covered up his son's presence years ago. The fact that Denny was completely innocent never occurred to him. You're going to jump because I'm telling you to. I'll write one of those true crime novels like Ann Rule. Fuck marrying for money; I'll make my own."

"You can't be so delusional you think I'll just jump because you tell me too. Why would I do it? Where's my suicide note? No one is going to believe a novelist didn't write a suicide note."

Diane laughed. She was unhinged. "It's not suicide. Don't you recognize your own gun? My story will be that as a newspaper editor with a nose for a story and a passion for justice, I figured out that you and Daniel killed Mike Ray. Then when Daniel threatened to expose you, you killed him. When I got too close to the truth, you forced me to drive you up here. You threatened to shoot me. We struggled for the gun and either you fell, or I got the gun away from you and had to

shoot you in self-defense. But either way, you die, I'm a hero, and I write my own bestseller."

"Yeah, that's not going to happen," said Fiona as she rushed Diane.



SLADE

Slade, Went, and two other officers converged on the park surrounding Angel Falls. Slade jumped out of his SUV.

"I need one of you to stay with the vehicles and make sure nobody escapes in that Jeep. Went, you and one of the others follow me," Slade said as he jumped on the ATV, revved the engine, and took off.

He was glad to hear two other ATVs in close pursuit. What he wasn't glad to hear was the sound of a gun being fired. He pushed the ATV as hard, and as fast as it would go. There was another shot. His gut twisted as he realized the trail had become too treacherous to traverse on the ATV. Frustrated, angry and more fearful than he'd ever been in his life, Slade switched to running and prayed he'd get to Fiona in time.

Slade crested the rise with his heart and lungs burning. Looking towards the falls, he could see Diane and Fiona fighting for control of the gun. They were too close to each other for him to take a shot, and they were grappling very close to the edge. One wrong move and one or both would plummet to their deaths.

"Stay," he ordered Went and the other officer.

Slade's only recourse was to intervene, but he feared if he called Fiona's name or alerted her to his presence it might break her concentration and give Diane the upper hand. He had to respect Fiona's ability to hold her own in a fight with a crazy woman on unstable ground.

Moving with the stealth and grace of an apex predator, Slade closed the distance between them. There was a third

shot, and both women were poised to topple over the edge into the roaring waters of the falls below.

Bright red bloomed on Fiona's chest. There was nothing left to lose. Slade charged to the women, knocking Diane's grip on Fiona loose and making her balance precariously on the ledge before forcing her to tumble off the rock and into the water below, screaming as she went.

Fiona collapsed in his arms as Slade sank to his knees. She reached up to touch his face.

"You came," she said as blood seeped out of her chest.

"Of course, I came. I'll always come for you. Always." As she closed her eyes, he hollered over his shoulder, "Went, get a medivac up here now."

"Already en route. I'll leave Sandy up here with you to direct the chopper. I'll head down to secure the body."

He turned back to Fiona. "It'll be okay, baby. Stay with me."

"I love you, and you love me, too."

"I should have told you this morning. Hell, I should have made you get up and taken you with me."

She smiled up at him, looking far too much like an angel for his peace of mind.

"Next time," she said as her eyes closed.



FIONA

It hurt to open her eyes. It hurt to move. It hurt to breathe. The fact was, it hurt to be alive. But if she was alive, then it was good to hurt. Fiona could hear the beeping of the hospital monitors. Slowly but surely, memory returned with the acknowledgement of pain.

"Easy, baby. You were shot," said Slade gently.

Fiona looked at him. This was bad; even with stubble and red eyes from no sleep, the man was gorgeous.

“Duh, Romeo. I’m pretty damn sure she knows that,” said Lori, making Fiona laugh, which made her hurt.

“Don’t make me laugh; leave,” Fiona managed.

“Ha!” said Lori. “I told you it was her friends she’d want.”

“Not him. You. No offense, but he’s much prettier to look at.”

Lori groaned. “Oh, shit. Jess was right. You’ve fallen for him.”

“Almost literally,” Slade quipped.

An officious-looking woman dressed in scrubs entered the room. “You people have been told. Only relatives are allowed in here.”

“I’m one of her best friends,” whined Lori.

“Out,” said the annoying woman, who was completely killing Fiona’s nice buzz. “No exceptions.” She turned to Slade. “That means you, too.”

“I’m her fiancé,” he said in a voice that was as smooth and warm as melted caramel.

“She wasn’t wearing a ring,” the woman snarled.

“We haven’t had a chance to pick one out. I’m also a detective with the Major Crime Unit, and this woman is under police protection.”

“I don’t know that I believe you,” the nurse said, glaring.

Slade looked at Lori. “Do me a favor and get Thorn. Have him come in here and flash his badge for Nurse Ratchet here.”

“Well, I never,” harrumphed the nurse as she stalked out.

“You’re going to be in so much trouble,” said Lori, looking at Slade before turning to Fiona. “You’re not really engaged, are you?”

Fiona looked at Slade who not only looked pleased with himself, but looked quite content with the way things were

going.

“Just say yes, babe. It’ll be better for all of us,” said Slade, taking her hand. “Besides, I have no intention of taking no for an answer.”

Fiona laughed and winced before saying to Lori, “Apparently I am.”

“Oh my god,” said Lori happily. “I’m going to go tell everyone. Be prepared for the Mystery Writers’ Murder Club Does a Wedding.”

Lori hurried out as Fiona turned to Slade. “Don’t look now, but you’re about to be bombarded. I suggest that as soon as I’m able, we fly someplace and get married... just the two of us.”

“How does Paris sound?”

Fiona perked up. “Really? I’ve always wanted to go to Paris.”

“Then Paris it is. Just the two of us, or your whole merry band of miscreants if you want. As long as you say ‘I do’ when the officiant asks you, I don’t care where or in what language.”

“So how badly was I hurt?”

“Not as badly as Diane, who is very dead and who kept her trophies from Daniel in the newspaper safe. The bullet came as close to your heart as you’d ever want it to do. It did a lot of damage, but nothing serious or life threatening once they got it out. That was about five days ago. I’m not sure.”

“You haven’t left, have you?”

“Would you have left me?”

“Not a chance. But the bookstore...”

“Not to worry, your cohorts have been taking turns. Did you see all the flowers?”

She looked around her room, which more closely resembled a florist shop. “What is all this?”

“The whole town has rallied around you for support. While you were in surgery, there was a candlelight vigil outside and at least thirty people in the church chapel. Everybody, including Jimmy—who has resigned as Chief—wants you to know how much they love you for solving the mystery and bringing Mike Ryan’s killer to justice. Those who were there are finally freed of thinking they should have done something, and Mike can rest easy.”

“Hey,” said Christie, sticking her head in. “Want to take a guess as to whose book just hit the New York Times’ Best Seller list and is sitting at number one overall in Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and every other retailer under the sun?”

“Oh my god!” cried Fiona. “Go get some champagne. We need to celebrate!” She sobered. “Do you think it has to do with the murder?”

“Who cares?” laughed Christie. “Somebody once said there was no such thing as bad publicity, and they were right.”

“I like that,” said Slade. “No celebration for getting married, but the book hits number one, and we need to party.”

“Get used to it,” advised Christie. “We writers live and die by sales.”

“Besides which,” said Fiona, “we’re going to Paris to get married.”

“We are?” asked Christie, beaming. “I’ll tell the girls.”

Christie left and Fiona laughed, accepting that pain was, for the moment, a part of her life. “You should know that you are not allowed to refer to us as ‘girls.’ That’s a girl’s only kind of thing. And it looks like we’re all going to Paris. I’m sorry. We can blame it on the drugs.”

“Like I said, baby, as long as you’ve got a ring on your finger and say ‘I do’ when asked, it’s all good.”

CHAPTER 21



SLADE

*I*t had been a long, hard day. Cleaning up the fall-out from the Mike Ray and Daniel Monkton cases had taken weeks. Normally administration wasn't his thing and his boss hated to waste the time and skills of one of his best investigators sitting behind the desk, but the town of Angel's Rise had asked for his assistance, and Slade had informed his boss that he wasn't ready to return to fieldwork until Fiona was fully recovered.

He had to give it to her friends. They'd done amazing things with the bookstore, the media around her bestselling novel, and the loft itself. Instead of the enclosed stairway, they had arranged for the staircase to be removed and a small, sleek elevator to be installed connecting the bookstore with the loft. No longer would Fiona have to brave the formidable Maine weather to move between her home and the bookstore. While that was nice, Slade was more grateful for the fact that she wouldn't be exposed to any kind of attack. He wanted her nice and safe, especially when he couldn't be around.

The elevator and its door were practically silent. The loft was almost dark, as the only light was coming in from the windows and the skylight. For a moment, he wondered if she might have wandered downstairs, but then he heard the soft clicking of the keyboard as her fingers flew across it. Slade smiled. He was sure there were a lot of men who might find it aggravating not having dinner on the table waiting for their return, but he wasn't one of them. For one thing, Fiona really couldn't cook, so Slade did it all, and she did all the cleanup.

He was fairly sure he was making enough noise to be heard, but from the way she was sitting, he could tell she was lost in a story, and he wouldn't have it any other way. He walked over to kiss the top of her head and withdraw, but she reached out to stop him.

"Don't leave. I missed you," she said, staring fiercely at the computer. "Just a few more words, and I'll be done."

"Want me to fix dinner, or would you rather go to Seraphim?"

"Neither. How about we order pizza? Until it comes, you can sit in the wingback, and I can curl up in your lap. We can tell each other about our days."

"Sounds perfect. Let me go get more comfortable."

"No problem. I'll just get everything saved and tidied up."

Slade opted to grab a quick shower while Fiona ordered pizza. They had fallen into an easy pattern with one another—one that allowed them to work both independently and in tandem. She made him happier than he'd ever thought he would be.

He heard the pizza arrive just as he pulled on soft denim jeans and a t-shirt. He used to like to change into sweatpants the minute that he could, but now button-fly jeans were his favorite attire, not because they were more comfortable, but because he loved the way Fiona liked to unbutton them as she sank to her knees to give him a blowjob.

The soft smile that played on her lips as she took in his attire made him grin and his cock tighten. She was so fucking beautiful, and she was all his. They'd decided to turn the A-frame into a writer's retreat and at some point, they might build a bigger, grander house, but at the moment the loft was their little love nest where they could plan their future. For now, Slade was just busy loving Fiona, and he didn't want it any other way.

They were headed for Paris in a few weeks. The City of Light, and the home of so many artists and priceless paintings. The Louvre only hosted very small exhibitions of

contemporary artists. But after all the brouhaha regarding the murders and Daniel's series of paintings being the key to understanding what had happened, the museum had requested to host an exhibition of those four paintings as well as a smattering of others. One of the curators for the Louvre had flown to New York to choose and personally arrange for and escort them to Europe.

Earlier that day Slade had been shocked to find out that Daniel had left everything to him, including a beautiful penthouse in the West Village. He wanted to talk to Fiona about it first, but he wondered if they might turn it into a getaway for them and their friends. Slade thought Daniel might like to know that while he had painted a murder, he had also painted a happily ever after for Fiona and Slade, and perhaps that was the most priceless painting of all.



Bleak Ridge, Maine

What the hell am I doing here?

It should have been Jessica or Fiona—both were well-known mystery writers with a number of books to their names. Even Christie would have been better. Sure, she'd only written one book, but it had been a smashing success and was now being made into a limited series on Netflix.

Fear and doubt assailed her every thought as she walked along the harbor way, trying to bolster her self-confidence and believe the encouragement of her friends.

“Kick ass and take names,” had been Christie's advice.

“Remember they asked you because they knew you had something to say that others needed to hear,” admonished Jessica.

“I get it; I do. But they're right and you're wrong. You are the perfect person to talk to this group. Your narrative and writing skills are second to none. You have a lot to offer them. Come on, Lori, you used to teach inner-city middle school

kids. A bunch of civilized mystery writers can't be nearly as scary." There was truth to what Fiona said.

She believed that her friends were telling her the truth. The problem was that *their* truth was not necessarily *her* truth, and here alone in the dark, walking along a harbor way complete with spooky piers, a marginally safe walkway, and rolling fog, *her truth* was the only one that mattered.

Every teacher she knew had begun to ask themselves if answering their calling to teach was worth risking their lives. No longer did a teacher have to worry about a disgruntled parent or a kid with a pocketknife; now they had to worry about a student with a semiautomatic rifle and a grudge, a death wish, or a desire to be famous.

The death of her aunt and an incident at a nearby school had clarified her desire to explore another passion—writing. She and her aunt had talked extensively about the things her aunt regretted when her aunt was in hospice waiting for the liver and kidney disease to finally claim her. What stuck with Lori as she'd stood by the graveside was that her aunt's deepest regret was that she had not followed her dream to become an author.

Her aunt Viola had had an offer from a major publisher in her hand when her mother had died and Viola had been called home to care for her younger siblings. Instead of pursuing her dream of becoming an author, she'd done the "right" thing, eventually marrying and abandoning her dreams.

The reading of her aunt's will had been shocking as it left minimal bequests to her own children. Well—shocking to them, but Lori didn't blame her Aunt Viola one bit. Lori didn't much care for her cousins, and when her aunt had required hospice, her children stuck her in the cheapest nursing home they could find and left her there. Lori had found a beautiful facility in the country that had been created and maintained for people at the end of their lives. It was run mostly on bequests left to them. Lori had assumed Viola would do the same.

As her children had squawked and Lori had hidden her smile, the lawyer had raised his hand for silence.

“We need to finish this,” intoned the attorney, “but before I continue, all of you should know that the will is perfectly lawful, and Viola was in full command of her faculties. She left the rest, residue and remainder of her estate to her, and I quote here, ‘beloved niece, Lori Sykes, with the provision that she use it to fund a two-year sabbatical to establish a new career as a successful author.’”

It was hard to tell who was most shocked: Viola’s children, who erupted into threats and accusations, or Lori. She’d thought she was here to pick up a large check to take to the hospice. They’d talked about Lori giving birth to her dreams of becoming an author. They’d even talked about her taking a two-year sabbatical to do just that.

As her cousins stormed out of the attorney’s office, he held her back. “They have no legal grounds on which to challenge your aunt’s will. It’s the only reason they got anything at all. You know she had me liquidate her estate right after you moved her into Return to Eden Hospice in order to ensure she gave you as much money as possible and that there was nothing left for her children to squabble over. I know they’re your cousins...”

“We were never close,” Lori said quietly.

“I can understand why. Viola, who was as much a friend as a client, once referred to them as a ‘detestable lot’ and wondered how they turned out the way they did.”

“You never met my Uncle Raymond, did you?”

The attorney laughed. “I do recall the one time I had to interact with him.”

“What happens to any intellectual property my aunt might have had?”

He smiled. “Viola’s manuscript. I fear it is lost forever. I did go through her house personally to see if I could find it. From her description of your talks, I thought you might like it, but I couldn’t find it.”

“That’s because she gave it to me for safekeeping. It’s in a safety deposit box at the bank.”

“Good girl. Then it would be part of the ‘rest, residue and remainder’ of the estate. May I ask if you plan to do anything with it?”

Lori nodded. “I read it. It isn’t bad, and for the time she wrote it, it’s extraordinary. It’s a great whodunit in the style of Agatha Christie. I thought I’d revise and update it—flesh it out into something new and exciting—and then publish it as a co-write. I’d planned to do it this summer, during the school break.”

“What a lovely tribute to Viola. I think she would have loved that. Before you leave, I have one last thing to give you.” He reached into his desk. “It’s a note she left for you. She handed it to me in the sealed envelope. I have no idea what it says.”

She took the envelope. “Thank you. I think I’ll wait to read it until tonight. I’ll turn on my gas fireplace, pour a glass of prosecco, and toast my aunt’s life while I read her last letter to me.”

“You were expecting the letter, weren’t you?”

“Yes. She often wrote me letters, telling me things that she felt too deeply to express verbally. I cherish them. They, too, are in the safety deposit box.”

That night, curled up in her chair, she lifted her glass and opened the envelope.

My dearest Lori,

As you are reading this, know that I am at peace with my death and now reside in the Kingdom of Heaven.

I left this letter with Arthur to give to you after the reading of the

will. I assume my children are outraged and stormed out of his office threatening to contest it. Don't you worry about that. Arthur and I made sure my wishes would be carried out. I left money in a trust account with Arthur in case they try. They will not prevail.

They say most of those facing the end of their life don't regret so much the things they did as the things they didn't. I have to say, that is most definitely the case with me. My dearest wish is to save you from that. My hope is that you will take the money, which is substantial, take the sabbatical you are entitled to, and give life to your dreams—our dreams really.

Do what I didn't have the courage to do. You have a God-given talent. Don't let it go to waste. Tell your stories, live your dreams—for both of us.

I love you, my darling girl.

Viola

She'd made a promise to her aunt that night to follow their shared dream and used the sabbatical and her aunt's bequest to establish herself as an author. She'd published her first book as a co-write with her deceased aunt. It had been a moderate success and had given her confidence in her ability to create mysteries people wanted to read. Her next book had become even more successful, as had every subsequent book.

When she was invited to speak at the author event in her new hometown of Bleak Ridge, she'd been thrilled. She was riding high on the popularity of her latest novel, her new friends who felt like she'd known them her whole life, and her newest work in progress.

It was as she was trying to write in the corner of the bistro next to the hotel that Antony Cobain, an extremely successful author, had verbally assaulted her, making scathing remarks about her books and eroding her confidence, leaving it smashed and scattered all around her.

Even Jessica's assurance that he was a hack and wrote formulaic and predictable gritty crime novels had done little to restore her belief that she belonged here and had something worthwhile to say. So, she'd gone out for a walk. Cobain was probably tucked into his bed, blissfully unaware that he was a bully. Lori shook her head. Screw that, he was probably rollicking in bed with one or more book bunnies—those gorgeous girls who went from event to event, hoping for a night with a famous author. Lori always thought it was unfair that it was always women looking to snag some sex with a male author. Why couldn't there be some hunky male equivalent for female authors?

Lori stopped and shook her hands, craned her neck, and did her best to shake off Cobain's disdainful words. He wasn't right. He wasn't. She was good at what she did, and her popularity, sales, and readership all said she was moving in the right direction. *So, screw you, Antony Cobain.*

Spinning on her heel, Lori headed back to the hotel. Room service should still be available. She thought about being sophisticated and ordering a bottle of good wine along with maybe a charcuterie board. Screw that. She was going to order

their blue cheeseburger, onion rings and a Diet Coke. Resolved that she was going to ace her individual talk and the panel discussion, she made her way along the harbor walk.

As she began to climb the stairway, she heard a muffled sound...what she thought might be a cry for help, if she was being fanciful. She turned toward where she thought the sound was coming from. The fog was playing havoc with direction, but she thought she saw some movement down on a moonlit pier that overlooked the tranquil bay. It appeared that someone—a man—was fighting for his life. Lori cried out, and the assailant looked towards her, gave a final, brutal jerk to his intended victim, tossing him aside and jumping into a small speed boat.

Lori pulled out her phone to call 9-1-1 and cursed herself for not checking the battery before leaving her room. There was none. Nothing. The phone was dead as the proverbial doornail. Trying to decide whether or not to try and render assistance was far more complicated than it should have been. If whoever was down there was still alive, she should absolutely try to help.

If, on the other hand, he was dead, being first on the scene might not be the best idea. After all, there didn't appear to be any other witnesses, and cops could get really pissy if you disturbed anything. She'd learned that lesson at the event in Kennebunkport.

It made far more sense to simply run up the stairs and try and get help. But if he was still alive, rendering aid might be the difference between life and death. She was certified in CPR. Deciding it would be easier to live with her decision if she tried to help, she ran down to the pier, stumbling and twisting her ankle. Reaching the unmoving victim, she said a quick prayer that he was only unconscious and not dead. Her prayer was not answered when she shifted the man to his back and found evidence of no pulse.

It was only then that she recognized the identity of the victim. It was Antony Cobain and he'd been strangled with what appeared to be the ribbon of a vintage typewriter.

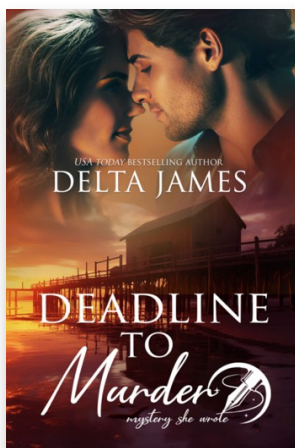


Join Lori and editor/publisher Ryker McKay as they work to find the murderer in **DEADLINE TO MURDER**.

AUTHOR'S NOTE



I hope you enjoyed reading *Murder Before Dawn*. The next book is [Deadline to Murder](#)



A writing convention, a guest list full of secrets, a murder to solve in three days.

Lori Sykes is invited to be the keynote speaker at the writer's convention in Bleakridge, Maine. While walking that evening she witnesses a chilling murder under the moonlit pier. The victim, a renowned author known for his gritty crime novels, had been brutally strangled.

Ryker McKay, a one-man shop, small town newspaper man with a reputation for unearthing hidden truths, is intrigued by Lori's story and the undeniable chemistry between them. He agrees to assist her in solving the murder, recognizing that this could be the story of a lifetime for his struggling newspaper.

As Lori and Ryker delve deeper into the lives and secrets of the suspects, they discover buried rivalries, suppressed scandals, and concealed motives that confirm some deadlines are not meant to be met.

Join Lori, Snowbell, her shrewd cat, and Ryker as they race against time to unmask the cunning and ruthless murderer. Along the way, they uncover shocking revelations

that redefine their understanding of love, trust, and partnership.

Deadline To Murder is a book in the Mystery, She Wrote series. Four mystery authors meet at a book conference and discover they all live in small towns in Maine. After a fabulous weekend together they decide to form the Mystery Writer's Murder Club. They meet monthly at a different house to check out cold cases in the area, write, and relax. They soon discover the only thing more exciting than a good murder mystery book is an actual murder mystery.

If you like fast-paced mysteries with quirky characters, a mischievous cat, and unexpected twists, you're going to love Deadline To Murder.

Read Deadline To Murder and get started on an intriguing murder mystery adventure that will keep you guessing until the very end!

BONUS SCENE



*T*hank you again for reading Paint Me a Murder. I am enjoying writing this series. The next book is Deadline to Murder.

I have an EXCLUSIVE bonus scene for Rafferty and Fiona as a thank you! All you have to do is click the link below or scan the QR code with your phone, sign up for my newsletter, and you'll get an email giving you access!

[SIGN UP HERE](#)



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Dragon Roar

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Masters of Valor (spin off Masters of the Savoy)

Prophecy

Illusion

Deception

Inheritance

Masters of the Savoy

Advance

Negotiation

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Contract

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Release

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Bold

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[Hook, Line and Mystery](#)

Paint Me A Murder

Deadline To Murder

Murder in the Afternoon

Relentless Pursuit (Duet)

To Love a Thief

My Fair Thief

Charade

Club Southside (spinoff Mercenary Masters)

The Scoundrel

The Scavenger

The Rookie

The Sentinel

The Keeper

The Enforcer

Mercenary Masters

Devil Dog

Alpha Dog

Bull Dog

Top Dog

Big Dog

Sea Dog

Ice Dog

Wild Hearts

Stealing her Heart

Claiming Her Heart

Taming her Heart

Finding her Heart

Wild Mustang

Hampton

Mac

Croft

Noah

Thom

Reid

Crooked Creek Ranch

Taming His Cowgirl

Tamed on the Ranch

Co-writes

Masters of the Deep

Silent Predator

Fierce Predator

Savage Predator

Wicked Predator

Deadly Predator

ABOUT DELTA JAMES

Other books by Delta James: <https://www.deltajames.com/>

As a USA Today bestselling romance author, Delta James aims to captivate readers with stories about complex heroines and the dominant alpha males who adore them. For Delta, romance is more than just a love story; it's a journey with challenges and thrills along the way.

After creating a second chapter for herself that was dramatically different than the first, Delta now resides in Florida where she relaxes on warm summer evenings with her loveable pack of basset hounds as they watch the birds, squirrels and lizards. When not crafting fast-paced tales, she enjoys horseback riding, walks on the beach, and white-water rafting.

Her readers mean the world to her, and Delta tries to interact personally to as many messages as she can. If you'd like to chat or discuss books, you can find Delta on Instagram, Facebook, and in her private reader group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/348982795738444>.

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