

Dwindling Sands

The Hourglass Killer Series: Book One



LR Potter

Dwindling Sands
The Hourglass Killer, Book One

By LR Potter

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This book is dedicated to my wonderful support system - my husband, my mother, my boys, and my circle of close friends, who all said, "Of course, you can." A special thanks goes to my editor and friend, Carolyn, who routinely and alternatively either

kicked me in the pants, patted me on the head, or challenged me on not being "Captain Obvious." Without her and a lone black jeep, this book would not have been written.

Dwindling Sands

The Hourglass Killer Series Book One

*Never seek to tell thy love,
Love that never told can be;
For the gentle wind doth move
Silently, invisibly.
I told my love, I told my love,
I told her all my heart,
Trembling, cold, in ghastly fears.
Ah! She did depart!
Soon after she was gone from me,
A traveler came by,
Silently, invisibly:
He took her with a sigh.*

William Blake

PROLOGUE

The Angry One sat quietly simmering. His rage burned a hole in the pit of his stomach. He'd been generous with her...and patient. Oh, the patience and restraint he had shown. He'd watched her flit around town, throwing herself at nameless men. She didn't know he watched her, that's what made it... interesting. If it would've been any other girl, he would have just taken what he wanted. Women were very gullible creatures. Usually you just showered them with a little attention, look deep into their sad, miserable eyes, listened to their pathetic little tales, and bam - you had them; but not her. What did she think was so interesting or unique about her that a man, a real man would want anyway?

But deep inside he did want her; he craved her. She was like an infection in his blood which made him burn. She, with her sad eyes filled with longing...but for someone else, always someone else. She made him want to devour her. She consumed him. He wanted her like no other and she overlooked him like he was nothing. Nothing! He had tried to allow things to happen in a natural way, but continuously and recklessly she tossed his advances aside. Now was the time. Now was his time.

Satisfaction made his lips curl into a twisted smile. Slowly, he reached forward and flipped the hourglass upside down and watched the sand begin to trickle down into its base. The Angry One grinned devilishly and thought of the words of William Shakespeare, "Defer no time, delays have dangerous ends."

CHAPTER 1

Gasping, Tess jerked awake knowing something was wrong, but not knowing what it was. She listened intently, straining to hear what had disturbed her sleep. She peered into the inky darkness, struggling to see beyond the dark shadows. Silently, she slid her legs to the side of bed and inched her body over its edge until both feet were planted firmly on the floor. She leaned towards the nightstand and eased open its drawer. Because of the darkness, she had to feel around the bottom of the drawer until her hand closed around the familiar handle of her 9mm handgun. With the ease and confidence which comes from a repetitive action, she located the safety on the weapon and clicked it off as she continued to listen intently. The loud pounding of her heart and thunderous whoosh-whoosh of her blood as it pumped in the ears made it almost impossible to hear anything. Taking a deep but silent breath, she let it out slowly to calm her frazzled senses.

There it was again, a creak in the floorboards right outside her open bedroom door. On trembling legs, Tess stood, held her arms out in front of her, locked her elbows, and with practiced ease, raised and pointed her weapon. Slowly, and again being as quiet as she possibly could, she began to move forward, one foot in front of the other. Stealthily, she moved towards the door, inch by agonizing inch, the strain being so overwhelming it was almost unbearable.

Suddenly, hearing a sound to her left, and in what would be considered a rookie move, she immediately turned her head in that direction. Before she realized her mistake, a fist shot out from her right and connected solidly with jaw, sending her crashing to the floor and her gun skittering away from her. Like the cartoon characters she'd watched as a child, she literally saw stars, real stars, and her ears rang. Struggling to pull her rattled mind together, she tried to understand what was happening and how best to overcome it. Before she could get her scrambled brains to function coherently, she felt something solid slam into head and then after the initial excessively loud ringing in her ears, there was nothing. No light, no sound, no anything.

Tess Champion bolted straight up in her bed startled as panic coursed through her body. Drenched in sweat, she struggled to breathe and her chest hurt from the frenzied pounding of her heart.

She glanced anxiously around the bedroom mumbling to herself, "It's only a dream, it's only a dream..."

With unsteady hands, she lay back down, pulled the covers up to her chin, and waited for her body to stop shaking. When would the nightmares end? It had been over six months since the attack. Grabbing her thick red hair, she yanked it impatiently away from her face. She winced at the pain the motion caused her scalp. At least that was a pain she understood, one that made sense. She sickened herself. She was a police detective. She'd been trained to kill people and yet she did not feel safe in her own home. What was wrong with her?

While most people probably would have felt the most victimized by the incident itself, for her, it was her inability to prevent it. In her line of work, she'd often heard the victim ask if they were somehow to blame or if they could have prevented the situation in any way. She'd never fully appreciated their dilemma until now. Had she somehow brought this onto herself? How could she, a law enforcement officer, have been such easy prey for her attacker? Outside of the pride issue of being attacked, she lived in constant fear of not knowing who her attacker was. This point effectively robbed her of any feelings of safety and security. Calming her breathing and commanding her arms not to raise the covers over her head, Tess thought again, like almost every night since...of that night.

Initially, confusion had cobwebbed her mind when she eventually regained consciousness from the hit on the head. Wanting to aid her throbbing head, she attempted to move her hands up to apply pressure to it, but was startled to realize she couldn't. Her mouth was dry and she wanted to lick her lips but again, she hadn't been able to. Her brain being so idled, she didn't understand at first why she was naked on her bed with her arms bound together and raised above her head. She attempted to lower them, but found they'd been tied to her headboard. Slowly, as her mind began to come into focus, increment by slow increment, she realized her feet were spread-eagle and tied to the posts at the end of a bed, effectively rendering her helpless. With as much strength as she could muster, she strained against the bonds. From the sustained hit on her head, any and all movement caused it to pound continuously like the snare of a bass drum. She struggled to adjust her vision, and was alarmed as the realization hit her that something was bound tightly over her eyes. The inability to see was the most frightening thing of all. She struggled to gather her wits and tried to calm herself. Hoping she wouldn't hyperventilate from breathing too fast, she kept telling herself to breathe in and out, in and out.

She was totally helpless and exposed. Again, she struggled in the darkness to make sense of her surroundings. Was she still in her own home? In her own bed? She wasn't sure. She wondered how long she'd been unconscious. Then shockingly, the thought had come to her; where was the attacker? She didn't have to wait long for the answer to that horrifying question, because suddenly she sensed someone standing at the foot of the bed. Terrified, she again strained against whatever had her bound to the bed in such a grotesque manner.

From the shadows, she heard someone quietly whisper, "Tess."

Oh, my God! It was worse than she had imagined. HE KNEW HER NAME! She listened intently, straining to identify his voice, his shape, his smell. But no matter how she tried, she was unable to draw a decisive answer. Grabbling with her memory, she struggled to remember her police training, but her mind was blank, she couldn't remember. Panic inundated her body again as her mind refused to function properly. Come on, Tess, she told herself, you can do this, you can do this.

She felt the end of the bed give under the weight of the stranger as he knelt on its edge. Startled, she jerked away in reflex. In what would normally be considered a loving gesture, the stranger ran his hands slowly up her bare legs in a gentle and almost reverent way.

"You are so beautiful, Tess," he whispered.

Goosebumps immediately rose on her skin where he'd touched her. Her stomach rolled at his touch and presence, and she pleaded with herself to calm down and pay attention, to try and absorb any type of detail. She remembered having read that when one sense was taken away, the remaining senses became more acute. As she tuned in to those other senses, she inhaled sharply and caught a faint whiff of woodsy

cologne which clung to her attacker.

He slowly moved further up onto the bed as she struggled in vain to get away from him. She attempted to scream, knowing she'd find release in that, but found he'd not only blindfolded her, but had wrapped tape around her head, covering her mouth.

"Shh, Shh, Tess, calm down. I'm not going to hurt you," he continued to whisper in that eerie way.

He shifted forward until his knees were in the apex of her legs. The leg of his pants brushed the very heart of her body. The sheer invasive quality of that intimate touch had her shivering in fright and panic. She shivered as he slowly moved his hands up over the taunt lines of her stomach and allowed them to linger on her bared breasts.

After leaning down to place an intimate kiss on one of her breasts, she heard him whisper huskily in satisfaction, "Ah, so beautiful. I've wanted you for so long and tonight...I will finally have you."

Not being able to see anything made what he did even more frightening. Her body recoiled at his touch and actions. As she struggled against him, he leaned into her and began to trail kisses down her neck and then back to her breast. Tess couldn't deal with his intimate violations in her mind and had stopped struggling in near defeat. She lay with silent tears pooling behind her blindfold.

He ran his lips and tongue along her body, continuing downward until he was at her most intimate core. She didn't know how she would ever endure this torment. He defiled her body and there was nothing she could do about it – nothing. She was powerless to stop him and she again struggled to control her stomach as it rolled in revulsion. She tried to mentally psych herself away from that place, from that room, from that bed.

She'd been almost successful in blocking him out of her mind when he startled her by rising. Jerking her head in his direction, she listened intently over the sounds of the air conditioner and hum of the refrigerator to gather his intentions. She heard the sound of a belt being unfastened, of a zipper being slid down, and then the rustle of clothing being removed. This series of actions had sent yet another wave of panic through her entire body. Wildly, she'd thrashed her head side to side in an attempt to dislodge her blindfold. But her efforts had been fruitless. She felt the bed again sag under his weight as he knelt yet again on its edge. Running his hands up her body, from her shins to her breasts, he gently and carefully placed his naked body on top of hers. She attempted to close her mind to the violation her body was about to endure.

The realization of the inevitability of what was about to happen to her had her sadly and slowly rolled her head side to side as the tears not absorbed by the cloth silently ran down her face and across the tape surrounding her head and mouth. The tape grabbed and pulled at her hair with the movement and she welcomed the pain. Gently, he placed his hands on either side of her tape-encircled head, effectively stopping her movements, before leaning down to place a kiss on the tape covering her mouth.

"Come on, Tess, there's no reason to cry. Let me show you what it feels like to make love with someone who truly cares about you," he whispered raggedly.

He began sliding his hips side to side suggestively over hers. The intimate touch of his body against hers made her gag behind the tape and she was unable to prevent the shudder that rocked her body.

She struggled to angle her body away from his in any fashion and again attempted to scream to no avail against the tape on her mouth. Seemingly patient and uncaring with her attempts to dislodge him, he lowered his face into the crook of her neck, ran his tongue along its length as he continued to rub his body against hers. The coarse bristles of his chest hairs made her nipples harden. She was furious at her inability to control her body's own involuntary response. Slowly, he slid his hands down the sides of her body and then under her bottom in an effort to hold his place on top of her. So tightly had he pressed himself against her, she was able to feel his pulsating hardness.

As he continued to rub against her and whisper words of want and need, slowly Tess began to feel a change in him, both mentally and physically. Instead of the gentle lover, he became angry and his movements became less smooth and more frustrated. She didn't understand what had happened to cause the changes.

With anger and firmness in his whispering and ragged voice, he said harshly, "Tess, you need to stop

resisting and do it like the whore I know you are.”

He began to roughly grind the lower part of his body more intently against hers. Tess became truly terrified as she felt his frustration and anger soar to new heights. It'd been at that point she wondered if she would make it out alive.

Growing steadily impatient, he suddenly reached up and slapped her hard across the face, stunning her with both its violence and the sheer unexpectedness of it.

“You will do as you are told, you filthy slut!” he whispered, startling her.

She didn't understand the change in him. In an effort to have her life spared, she'd decided to take what he gave, and slowly nodded her head, she became perfectly still in surrender; however, as before, she was unable to prevent the involuntary shudders which ripped through her body.

Instead of her accession helping the situation, he became even angrier. “What is the matter with you, you little whore? You don't know how to take a real man? I'm gonna show you a real man!” he's whispered harshly. Confusion filled her as she tried to make sense of his tirade when he drew back and slapped her again. Tess saw blinding light explode behind her blindfold as her head snapped to the side from the force of his blow. She felt blood run from her nose and drip down onto her neck. Inside her soul, she felt a little piece of herself die away. She knew what little hold the stranger had on his sanity was quickly slipping away.

In a sudden and unexpected movement, he moved away from her and lifted himself off the end of the bed. Startled, but continuing to lie perfectly still, she strained in vain to hear what he was doing.

She heard him mumbling to himself, “Filthy whore, wouldn't know a real man if he fell on her.” He laughed quietly at his own perverted humor. “I wouldn't soil myself with a tramp like you. You make me sick,” he said slowly in his eerie whisper, enunciating each word. “No matter how many men you disgrace yourself with, you will never be enough to hold a real man,” he whispered.

And then just as quickly as it'd begun, it was over. She heard the same series of motions from before, but in reverse. First the slide of material over skin, then the zipper, and finally, the belt being fastened as he quickly put his clothes back on. She heard footsteps walking quickly away. She lay for a long, long time straining to hear his return, panic flooding her at the tiniest sound.

Eventually, through the material of her blindfold, she could perceive the gray morning light as it filled her bedroom. In sheer exhaustion from having her body tensed constantly for so long, she turned her still-taped head and blindfolded eyes into her pillow and sobbed.

As always, when Tess thought of that night, she strained her memory, struggling to uncover who'd attacked her. But night after night, he was evasive to her. And while she didn't know why, she was sure she knew him, there was something about him that was familiar to her in some way, but no matter how she struggled to bring whatever it was to the forefront of her mind, it just wouldn't come.

To add insult to injury, when she'd failed to show up for her shift at the police station, and after not being able to reach her, someone had called her twin brother, Carter, to check on her. He was the one to find her, naked and still tied spread-eagle to the bed. Carter finding her that way was almost as humiliating as what the attacker had done. He had gently untied her, pulled the covers over her stiff, cold, nude body, removed the tape from around her head, and held her, rocking her while she cried.

It wasn't until later that Tess realized the attacker had taken something else from her; a thin, silver charm bracelet with half of a “best friend” charm attached which had been given to her by Dane Carver, someone she'd dated throughout high school and college. And while the relationship had ended horribly, she'd never taken it off. She wasn't quite sure why the attacker had chosen that particular item to take, as the only value it had was sentimental. Having that bracelet ripped off her wrist was almost as violating as what he had done to her body. It had been yet another thing which belonged to her and her alone that he'd taken.

Realizing she wouldn't be going back to sleep yet again, she rose and performed her nightly ritual of going from room to room checking the doors and windows to ensure they were still secured. As she went through the house, she unconsciously glanced around to ensure her nightlights still burned bright. She wouldn't ever be held in darkness again. After one more lap through the house, she went back to her room, got back on her newly replaced bed – one without either a headboard or a footboard, and with her

weapon clutched in her hand, she lay back down. She stared at the ceiling and waited for morning to arrive.

CHAPTER 2

Detective Contessa Louise Champion – known that way only by her mother – rose before the dawn to the mouthwatering aroma of her preset coffeepot brewing. She grabbed a cup before the pot had completely run through its cycle, stood at her kitchen window, and leaned against the sink's edge looking at the mountainous view before her. Blowing across the coffee's surface before taking a swallow, she savored the almost biting taste of the Colombian-roasted beans. This was her favorite time of day, the time when everything had, in a way, reset itself...a do-over almost.

Moving to her bedroom, she quickly showered, dried her curly red hair, and dressed. She knew the quicker she got those things out of the way, the sooner she could get back to her coffee. She also knew it wouldn't be long before either her mother or her brother – or both – called as they did every morning. As if on cue, Tess heard the jangle of her house phone.

"Good Morning," Tess said with more enthusiasm than she actually felt.

"Good morning yourself," she heard her brother, Carter, say with an obvious grin.

Carter Champion was born a mere ten minutes before her but always – through words and deeds – assumed the older brother role. And even though he'd been married for over a year now, he still found the time to meddle into her affairs. Most times, Tess didn't mind her twin involving himself in her business – or watching out for her as he put it, as it was nice to be connected to another person.

"You are way too chipper this morning. I've barely finished my first cup of java," he said with a mock growl.

"You know what they say about the early bird," she said with a grin.

"Fails to eat because the worms are smart enough to stay in their beds," he jested.

"So, Carter, did you really call me this early to complain about how early it is?"

"Nope, just checking up on you. How are you...seriously?" he asked.

"Fine, never better," she said in an emphatic tone.

Silence filled the phone line for almost a minute. Finally, Carter sighed and said, "I wish you were here so I could see your eyes when you tell me that. I still don't understand why you had to move to Aurora to work. With your marks at the academy, you could have worked anywhere. I wish...well I wish you would have just stayed here at the Denver PD with me. They loved you here as a rookie..."

"I...I needed a change, Carter. We've been through this a hundred times already. Give it a rest... please!" she said in a way only a sister could to her brother.

"Well, if you change your mind..."

Interrupting him as her phone's call-waiting feature beeped, "Listen, Cater, I've got to go, I've got another call. I love you and will talk to you soon."

Clicking the receiver on the phone, the call transferred to the new caller.

Without any preamble Tess answered, "Good Morning, Mother."

"Good Morning, dear. What took you so long to answer the phone? Is everything all right?" Elizabeth Champion asked.

"Sorry, Mom. I was on the phone with Carter," Tess said, rolling her eyes.

"Oh good, I'm glad he's checking on you also. You can never be too careful you know," her mother said in a mothering, or as Tess thought, smothering way.

"I know, Mom, you're right."

"I don't know why you didn't come back home to Fountain to work. This is your home and will always be your home," her mother said for the hundredth time since Tess had joined the force.

Tess remained silent, refusing to repeat herself on this subject.

“Oh, you’ll never guess who I bumped into the other day...Dane Carver! He helped me carry my groceries to the car. He was always such a good boy. If only...”

And there’s your answer, mom, Tess thought, fuming. Her mom could be so insensitive, but really, it wasn’t her fault. She didn’t know what happened all those years ago. But come on, the man was married now.

“This is my home. I’m...happy here,” Tess said, completely ignoring the rest of her mother’s conversation.

Her mother sighed heavily before saying in a small voice, “It was just so much to take all at once: your father dying; you dropping out of college and going to live with Carter; and then well...the other thing...”

Tess cringed at her mother’s words – again, words she’d heard a hundred thousand times before. She definitely didn’t want to talk about ‘the other thing’ this early in the morning.

“I know, mom. I know it was hard for you and I’m sorry. But this really is best...for everyone,” Tess replied dully.

“Well, if you’re thinking about Dane’s feelings, I know for a fact he’d love to have you here. Why, he asks about you all the time,” her mother said.

Tess felt the old, familiar catch in her chest. “Listen, mom, I really need to dash or I’ll be late for work. I love you and will talk to you soon.”

Tess replaced the receiver without giving her mother a chance to respond. Vaguely now, as if far off in a distant dream, she remembered standing at the window earlier thinking this was a ‘do-over’ day; but really, it just wound up being the same day it’d been for the past ten years. Sometimes she felt as if she lived in the movie, Groundhog Day, where the same day gets played out over and over...it was excruciating and tiring. With a deep sigh, Tess pushed away from the counter and grabbed her purse and keys.

The sun had barely cleared the Rocky Mountains’ rugged ridgeline when Tess arrived at the Aurora, Colorado, Police Department. As she passed through the doors, she put a hand up to ensure her unruly red curls were still caught up in its elastic holder. She would need her hair off her neck as the July heat grew in intensity over the course of the day. She caught her reflection in the mirrored glass of the station house’s door. She gave her olive green pantsuit, which drew in at her trim waist with a button on the side, a quick once over. The suit was one of her favorites as it complimented her red hair and stunning cat-like green eyes. While her shift didn’t actually begin until later, most of those who worked at the Aurora PD were accustomed to her working strange and extended hours. They seemed to understand this was how she dealt with what happened. She was glad to be able to finally walk through these doors without having to wince when her fellow coworkers gave her their pitying half-smiles of encouragement. God, she hated that. She hated that everyone knew about her attack. She’d been private all her life and now that the vilest and most degrading thing had happened to her, she had to endure everyone knowing every single detail. It was so humiliating. But in this town and this police department, everyone always knew everything about everybody.

Tess sat at her desk in the office she shared with her partner, Anthony Delgado, and began going through the call-sheets from the night before. Being the middle of the week, there’d not been too many things listed. Buckley Air Force Base was situated in the middle of the city and because it was primarily a training facility housing mostly young airmen and airwomen, it had a huge impact on the City of Aurora. A lot of what the Aurora PD processed involved incidents with the young trainees from the base. Not too many weekends went by when they weren’t called in to investigate a bar fight, a lover’s spat, or other alcohol-related incidents. Such was life in a military town, she thought.

She glanced at her watch and saw it was almost time for Anthony to begin his shift. She and Anthony had been partners since her arrival to the Aurora PD. He was the product of an Italian mother and Hispanic father. With those genes, it was no surprise that both his hair and eyes were nearly black. He was an extremely good-looking, and worked to keep himself in shape. The ladies loved Anthony Delgado and there was a constant stream of them that floated through his life. He was a good guy, a great partner, and surprisingly a very humble man. After her attack and with much resistance from her, he’d slept on her

couch for a week. Tess had always known that she could safely place her life in his hands. Fortunately in this town, the need for that didn't happen too often.

Right on time, as was his norm, Anthony sauntered into the office, as he never merely walked anywhere. Anthony's sense of style was a usual topic of conversation in the precinct. Today, he was fashionably dressed in an Armani charcoal suit, lavender dress shirt, corresponding tie, and Italian loafers. She didn't know how he could dress so well on a cop's salary. He leaned towards her as he passed her desk to lightly place an affectionate kiss on her head and carried on to his desk, positioned directly across from hers. At first, his displays of affection had bothered her until she realized it was a cultural thing for him and not a come-on. Never in a hurry, he sat down and studied her. He looked over her suit and gave her a lift of his lips and a small nod of approval.

"Well good morning, you glorious creature. Tell me, what's going on today? Are you still giving the government all of those free hours?" he said in his impeccable English, grinning.

"Not all of us need as much time to primp as you do, Anthony," she said, grinning at him. "The only thing I see on the call-sheets was another stolen vehicle. That's beginning to become a problem. You might take a look at it when you get a chance," she said.

"Will do," he said, as he began checking his emails.

Tess smiled at him. There weren't too many things that bothered Anthony Delgado. The exceptions were crimes against women as he was highly protective of them, again, another cultural thing. Two months after she'd been attacked, he'd been involved in a hit-and-run, which had resulted in a three-week stay in the hospital for him. They had been working a string of burglaries which had all been tied to the Oakwood Shopping Plaza. Every night for two weeks they had staked out the area. On their last night, Anthony had walked across the street to grab them some coffee when out of nowhere, a black SUV had come around the corner and hit him, knocking him several feet in the air. The SUV never slowed or stopped. Tess didn't think she would ever get that image out of her mind. He'd looked like a as he'd hit the ground, albeit, a very well-dressed ragdoll. When they'd finally located the SUV, it had been reported stolen the night before and wiped clean. Anthony's hit-and-run was still an open case. Around eleven, Tess's phone buzzed indicating an inside call. Absent-mindedly, she answered while reading over a report of the stolen car. "Champion," she said into the receiver. Tess smiled when she heard Kyra's voice. Kyra Samuelson, her best friend, single-handedly ran the Aurora PD. She was the Executive Assistant to the Chief of Police. That wasn't her real title, but one that she deemed appropriate, and no one argued with Kyra; at least not successfully. Kyra was beautiful - a tall blonde with striking blue eyes. What made her stand out, however, was not her looks, but her self-confidence. Kyra knew what she wanted and then usually got it. She was compassionate, strong, and very capable. She was an asset to the department and as a friend.

"Good morning, Tess," Kyra said in her always-chipper voice.

Tess grinned and said, "Only you would call at eleven and think its morning."

"What? I've been working since five. You don't think those city workers can find the jobsites on their own, do you?" she replied jokingly. "Somebody has to hand them the 'men-at-work' sign and show them where to put it."

Laughing, Tess quipped, "I've met that crew; they need the 'men-at-work' sign so they can remember what it is they are supposed to be doing."

Tess could hear Kyra laugh on the other end of the phone. "I agree, not a woman among them, either. I should look into that, I'm sure there's got to be some kind of discrimination going on there."

"I don't know about discrimination, I just think that, unlike men, women are just too smart to work that hard out in the hot sun," Tess countered.

"Hey, Dominic and I are going to Sandusky's Pub tonight after work. Do you want to meet us there? Its thirty-nine cent wing night," she said, trying to entice her, saying the last sentence in a sing-song voice.

Dominic Wyndom and Kyra had been a hot item for a few months and seemed to be going strong. Tess had met him long before, and while he'd shown interested in her, she'd firmly dissuaded his advances. It wasn't anything personal on his part, he just reminded Tess too much of Dane Carver. They

were about the same build, had the same dark hair, and stunning blue eyes. But it wasn't exactly his resemblance to Dane which had bothered her; it was more that they had that same confident, aggressive nature. It hurt her heart at first to even look at him or be around him. Eventually, he'd begun dating Kyra and Tess had become a thing of the past. Tess was happy for both of them, they seemed very happy together. And she liked Dominic, just not for herself.

"Well, since you're going for cheap wings, then I'm in. You know I'm a lowly-paid government worker while you are dating the owner of the biggest construction company in Denver," she replied kiddingly.

"Hey, before you try to gain my sympathies and weasel out of paying for your own dinner, I'm going to let you get back to your lowly government job. We'll meet you there at seven, okay?" she replied in her usual, easy manner.

"See you then," Tess replied with a smile and hung up the phone.

Tess turned back to her desk and again studied the stolen vehicle report. This was not the first report of stolen automobiles they'd received. She thought she'd run a search into other police databases in the surrounding towns to see if they also were seeing a rise in this particular crime. She looked over at Anthony while he pecked away at his computer. She always smiled at how he worked. His desk was always tidy and neat. The pens were in the holder and there were never any loose papers on his desk. His desk looked like his person, neat and well-thought out.

When her shift ended, Tess jumped into her blue 4Runner and headed home to change for her dinner plans. Pulling up in front of her tiny, white, wood-planked house, she sat for a minute as she felt the familiar rush of irrational fear assault her. Taking a deep breath, she got out of the SUV and headed for the door. She paused before sticking the key in the door's lock. This is so stupid, she thought. These panicky feelings made her so angry. She opened the door and as always, did a thorough search, looking under beds, behind shower curtains, and so on. The only reason she'd agreed with her Chief about seeing a psychologist when recommended to her, was so she could get over this stupid fear. So far, it hadn't worked. It was better, but it was still there.

Tess arrived at Sandusky's Pub a little before seven. She slid into a booth and ordered a drink while she waited for Kyra and Dominic to arrive. Her mind continued to drift back to the conversation she'd had with her mother earlier; specifically regarding Dane Carver. Ahh, Dane Carver, the bane of her existence, the biggest hurt of her life. It irritated her how often he was in her thoughts. She'd loved him so much it'd hurt, and it still did. When their relationship ended, she had been devastated; broken and defenseless – just like she felt since the attack. It was no wonder he plagued her now. She learned from Dane Carver how to put things into a glass box – separated from herself – and while she always knew it was there, she could somewhat distance herself from the pain. That lesson had served her well in dealing with her attack, as well.

Reaching up, she pulled her hairband from her hair and shook it free while glancing idly around the pub. Sandusky's was a typical sports bar with different types of sport memorabilia placed strategically around the room as well as displaying multiple televisions playing every type of sports activity. Idly, she looked to the back of dimly-lit pub and saw someone who somewhat familiar to her. It took her a moment to realize it was Dominic. She didn't know how Dominic and Kyra had beaten her here. She rose, reached down to grab her drink, and started in their direction. Tess smiled to herself as Dominic placed his right hand on the wall and leaned into Kyra. He slowly moved his hands down and placed them intimately on her face before leaning forward to place his lips against hers. The smile on Tess's face faded and was replaced with a red flame of fury. She was shocked; the woman he was kissing was not Kyra. She turned back and threw a twenty on the table to cover the tab and walked to the door.

As she exited the door of Sandusky's, she ran straight into...Kyra and Dominic. She was stunned, to say the least. "What...how...what?" she said unintelligently.

"What's the matter, Tess? Is everything okay?" Dominic asked perplexedly.

"Uh, yeah, everything's fine," she stumbled. "I just thought, I thought, I saw..." she couldn't finish. She was confused. She'd been so sure it'd been him in the bar.

"What, Tess, what did you see?" Kyra asked, concerned.

"Nothing, it was nothing, never mind. Let's just go back inside," she said quickly.

As they walked back towards the table she'd just vacated, the man she'd seen at the rear of the bar walked towards them. She was stunned, the resemblance was startling. Before she could think any more than that, the stranger drew close to them and said, "Hey, big brother, what brings you down to this neck of the woods?"

Dominic's body tensed upon seeing the stranger, but he stretched out his hand and said, "Hey, Thom, how long's it been?"

"Apparently not long enough," came the odd answer during their handshake. Lost in his own contemplation, and then realizing that he had temporally forgotten Tess and Kyra, Dominic turned and said, "Hey, Thom, this is my girlfriend, Kyra, and her friend, Tess. This is my little brother, Thom. He is an attorney in Denver," he said, in explanation.

Both women looked at each other after the awkward exchange but took Thom's proffered hand. "It's nice to meet you, Thom," they acknowledged in turn. Tess was stunned at how much they looked alike. Up close you could see the differences, but you could certainly tell they were brothers. Where Dominic's hair was a little long, Thom's hair was cut professionally short and both brothers shared the same striking blue eyes. Tess felt so foolish. Dominic was in love with Kyra, anyone could see that. He'd never cheat on her. What was wrong with her? She was so ashamed.

So lost in her self-reprisal, she hadn't paid attention to their conversation when Dominic obviously repeated, "Thom wants to join us - is that okay with both of you?" he asked, looking specifically at Tess.

"Of course, please join us," she said distractedly. As they sat down, Thom and Tess ended up on the same side of the booth across from Kyra and Dominic. Tess hoped this wasn't a fix-up initiated by Kyra. She was not ready for that yet. She had barely begun to stop jumping every time she heard a sound.

Thom looked across at Dominic and Kyra. "So, Dominic, where have you been hiding this beautiful woman?" he asked, nodding towards Kyra. "Why haven't you brought her around sooner?" he asked, smiling.

It was becoming somewhat obvious that Dominic was not pleased to have his brother joining them for dinner. "Because, little brother, I like to keep my business private," Dominic said, uncharacteristically stilted.

Thom just grinned, not in the least offended by his brother and didn't even acknowledge the slight given. He then turned his attention to Tess. "So, Tess, tell me, where have you been all my life?" he asked in mock sincerity.

Jutting her chin towards the back of the bar she mocked with a smirk, "Probably right behind the girl you had leaned against the wall back there."

Thom was momentarily speechless then gave her a wolfish smile and said, "Oh, you saw that did you? She's...an old friend I haven't seen in a while. Enough about that, let's talk about you...do you work or are you independently wealthy, I hope?"

"I'm a detective with the Aurora PD," she answered.

"Wow, that's interesting," he said.

"Not as much as you would think," she said, grinning.

"What...police work's not correctly portrayed on television?" he quipped.

Again she laughed and said, "That would be a resounding NO."

"So tell me," he said, leaning conspiratorially towards her and looking around, "Is it true that police officers have quotas on the number of tickets they have to write?" he smiled.

"Oh no," she quipped, "we don't have quotas any longer, we are allowed to write as many as we like."

Thom let out a hoot of laughter at Tess's quick comeback. "Let me ask you a question," Tess asked, just as conspiring. She continued at his nod. "Is it true that sharks refuse to eat lawyers out of professional courtesy?"

Putting his hands over his heart, he said laughing, "Ouch, that hurt."

As they continued their senseless banter, the waitress stopped to take their order. She was in her early twenties, pretty with dark hair and movie star lips. "Hey, Thom, I haven't seen you here in a while.

Where've you been hiding lately?" she asked, practically drooling.

"Hey, Miranda, it has been a while," Thom answered with a sparkle in his eyes.

After Miranda had taken their order and departed, Tess turned to Thom and said teasingly, "Another old friend?"

He waggled his eyebrows at her and gave her a thousand-watt smile.

"Okay, you two, I think that's enough," Dominic said a little stiffly. Both Kyra and Tess turned to look at him quizzically, surprised at his tone, but he refused to meet their gazes. She glanced at Thom and he lifted his brow in an, I don't know what his problem is either, gesture.

Tess watched Dominic for the rest of night. As a detective, reading people was her bread and butter and Dominic was acting so strange. But as she watched though, his behavior was only altered between him and his brother. He acted the same as he always had to her and Kyra. She liked watching Dominic with Kyra. He was attentive and affectionate but in a casual way, not in an obscene way. She was almost envious. She was also aware of Thom sitting next to her. Every so often his leg would brush up against hers as they sat in the booth, and she wasn't entirely comfortable with it; however, she couldn't find fault in his behavior otherwise. She saw that Dominic watched Thom like a hawk all evening long. She thought it was very sweet of him to be concerned about her as he knew this would probably make her uncomfortable.

They did not linger once dinner was done and Thom insisted on paying the tab. "It's the least I can do for barging in on your evening out," he said, good-naturedly. He shook hands with Dominic and hugged Kyra. "You give me a call if this guy is dumb enough to let you slide through his fingers," he said with a grin. Dominic rolled his eyes at his brother. He turned to Tess and said, "How about you and I shake off these two old fogies and hit the town?" Tess saw Dominic immediately stiffen at his words.

"I don't think so, but thanks for the offer. And thanks for dinner," Tess said a little awkwardly.

Thom faked a hurt look and then grinned at her. "I'm going to let you go for now, but eventually you will come to me...they always do," he said.

Later, as Tess lay looking up at her ceiling, she thought about Thom Wyndom. He was different than most of the men she met. He had an obvious soft side to him. Not that the softness made him any less manly, in fact, it made him even more appealing to her. Tess compared Thom to his brother and even to Dane, and she found she liked him – liked the gentleness he exuded. He felt...safe. Yes, that was the feeling she got. For the first time in a long time, she closed her eyes and didn't dream. In fact, she didn't open her eyes again until the alarm blasted her out of bed. She awoke the same way she'd fallen asleep – with Thom Wyndom on her mind.

CHAPTER 3

Tess sat quietly with her hands tightly clasped together staring intently at the pattern of swirls which outlined roses on the wool rug in the waiting room of Dr. Kendra Michaels. She hated coming here. She hated having to think repeatedly about things which already plagued her night and day. She wasn't sure how talking about her childhood could possibly help her forget. And that's what she was after, what she wanted more than anything, was to forget. But week after week, here she came, at the direction of her boss, learning to cope with such a difficult life experience, as the psycho-babble went. She wanted to feel normal, whatever that meant. She wasn't sure she knew anymore what normal was. She could vaguely remember what being whole felt like, but that was a very long time ago.

She had learned how to play the game when she was around other people. She never let the cracks which encompassed her show to the outside world. In the beginning, she had lost it and those around her had grown scared and smothering. They walked around her on eggshells, looked at her with such pitying eyes, and whispered behind her back. So she had closed that part off and when asked, she would tell them she was doing fine.

But lately, it was getting harder and harder to keep the cracks from showing. Dr. Michaels, her psychologist, would have said it was a breakthrough, but to her, it felt like failing. The Band-Aid she had worked so hard to secure over the open wound of her soul was being ripped off; it left her feeling raw, bleeding, and hurting. After what had happened in college, she'd been determined to be in control and never again be that young, stupid, naive girl. And in the space of one night – thanks to her attacker, all her fight and bravado had been stripped away and she had been left as garbage...what's left when all the good is gone.

"Detective," the pretty, dark-haired receptionist said in her receptionist voice, "the doctor will see you now."

Tess nodded to her before walking into the doctor's office. Dr. Michaels had been referred to her by Carter, who, along with her boss, had thought it would help her 'cope.' Tess eyed the thin, gray-haired woman uneasily and gave a half-smile in her direction as she took the seat proffered.

"Good morning, Doctor," she said.

"Tess, welcome. How many sessions will this make?" Dr. Michaels asked in a voice which said she knew Tess was counting down.

"Seven. Only three more to go, then I will be cured," Tess said with a slight smile. She had to hand it to the older woman, she was astute.

Giving her a small smile in return, Dr. Michaels said, "So, what would you like to talk about today?"

With a wave of her hand in the doctor's direction, Tess answered flippantly, "It's your show."

And that's how most of the sessions went with them. Dr. Michaels pushed and prodded, trying to glean any helpful or useful information, and Tess trying equally as hard to keep it from her.

Towards the end of the session, Tess blew out a breath from between her teeth and said, "Do you really think these sessions are necessary? I mean, I was attacked, it rocked my world for a bit, but I'm over it. What more could you possibly tell me that I don't already know?" Tess asked glibly.

Ignoring her glibness, Dr. Michaels began, "Okay, let's see what I know, okay? For the past seven weeks we have delved into you and your family's histories. I think I have a pretty good picture of what helped you become the woman you are today. It sounds like you had a pretty solid upbringing. And for the most part, during your formative years, there appears to be no psychological barriers between yourself and those who surrounded you. How am I doing so far?" Dr. Michaels asked, not really looking for an answer.

She continued in her run-down analysis, "You seem to be able to secure strong attachments to other people; however, you have since established a pattern of keeping almost everyone at arm's length. I see you accomplish this behavior in a plethora of ways: through humor, sarcasm, and avoidance. It's important you realize that these barriers are a defense mechanism you have put into place in order to protect yourself mentally. Now usually, these types of barriers are fine and do what they are intended to do, but in your case, due to the attack, it has caused you to isolate yourself from the very people you need. So in effect, it has become a hindrance and no longer a help. At this time, it is extremely important that reach out to others for support and help and draw others to you, not push away from them. Do you think you can try to do that?" she asked.

Tess hesitated as she thought about how best to answer the doctor's question. "I think that I am open when it's appropriate," she said evasively.

"Okay, let's give it a try, shall we?" she said in a tone which said she was going to prove her point to the contrary. "Why don't you tell me what happened when you were in college."

"Nothing..." Tess began, when immediately Dr. Michaels lifted her index finger and waggled it from side to side in a no-no sign. Tess began again, swallowing and looking down at her hands, and said, "I dated someone pretty seriously and it ended so I decided to leave college and go into the academy like my father and brother," she recited and looked up to see if she had gotten past the doctor's scrutiny.

"And..." the doctor said in a tone which told her she had not passed the scrutiny.

Again, Tess looked down at her lap, took a deep breath, and then let it blow out. "I was hurt and couldn't deal with it so I ran," she said with slow, measured words.

"Better. Now tell me, how did that hurt make you feel?" Dr. Michaels inquired.

“Feel...” Tess gave it careful thought before answering. “Alone, abandoned, unwanted, vulnerable, weak...” she trailed off.

Dr. Michaels asked the next question as if she was on the path to a breakthrough. “Now, without giving it too much thought, tell me how did being attacked make you feel?”

Tess’s insides became like jelly and she didn’t want to answer. She felt that if she did, all the walls she had successfully built to maintain control would fall. “Angry, angry, and angry,” she said, stiffening.

“Anger is a nice emotion to cling to; however, anger is usually only the tip of the iceberg, I want you to look deeper and tell me what lies under the surface,” she encouraged.

Once again, Tess cautiously paused to consider before answering, as her heart started to pound and her hands began to sweat, she blurted, “I feel like it’s my fault. That somehow I allowed him in or gave him permission in some way,” she said, taking several deep breaths.

Tess looked over at Dr. Michaels and was surprised to see her smiling at her. “There you are. That is what we’re looking for: truth and honesty. Not for me, but for yourself. Now, I need you to understand that being sexually assaulted can be an extremely traumatizing event and it is not uncommon for many to blame themselves for the attack. My point is that what you are feeling is completely normal and you are not the only one to have ever felt that way. I promise you that no one - and especially not your family - believes you are to blame for what happened. And I bet, if you asked them, they would tell you that. Give them a chance, Tess, and give yourself a break,” she ended with a tender smile.

Tess told her that she would try on both counts. But deep down inside, she knew she wouldn’t and couldn’t do as she asked. She had already lost too much to the attacker. She was not going to risk opening herself up to more hurt.

CHAPTER 4

After her appointment with Dr. Michaels, Tess headed back to the police station. She was glad for once Anthony wasn’t sitting at his desk as she contemplated her session with the doctor. She admitted to herself that it had scared her. She compared her insides to the Hoover Dam and she had been carefully erecting a wall between the hurt and the outside world for a long time. Now though, she could feel a little hole forming in that dam. She was afraid she wouldn’t be able to stop the flow once it started.

Impatient with her, Tess reached for the call-sheets from the night before; listed again was another stolen car. This was steadily becoming a challenge. She made calls to the Department of Motor Vehicles to get the Vehicle Identification Numbers, or VINs, from the stolen vehicles. Next, she called the victims of the stolen cars. She made detailed notes and began looking for a pattern or place the vehicles might have intersected. At around mid-morning the phone on her desk rang. “Champion,” she answered.

“Hey, little sister,” Carter said with a smile in his voice.

“Hey, yourself. It’s about time you called me. I’m feeling very neglected by you,” Tess said with a smirk as she’d just talked to him that morning.

“Okay, smarty. I’m going to be down your way around lunchtime. Do you have time to eat with me today?” he inquired.

“I’ll make the time. How about Mexican?”

“Sounds good, I’ll see you around noon. Oh, just because you’re a smartass, you’re buying.”

He hung up before she could answer. My big brother, what was he up to today? she thought. She wondered if it had to do with needing to see her eyes, she rolled her eyes at the thought. She knew she’d be getting the third-degree at lunch. He always wanted to know the whys and what-fors. But, on the other hand, he had always been there when she needed him. So she guessed it was a good trade-off.

She saw her brother already seated in their favorite Mexican restaurant when she entered. While they were twins, they were not identical in any way. As petite as she was, he was just as tall and husky. Even after all these years, he still possessed his fullback size from his high school football days. The only thing that really connected them as twins was their hair and eye color. While he’d waited for her, he’d taken his

suit jacket off and slung it over the back of his chair. When she entered, he was studying the menu and running a hand through his short, auburn hair. He rose when she got to the table and gave her a long bear-hug. "Hey, little girl, you look good."

Looking down at her turquoise-blue suit, she replied, "Thanks, Carter. It's so good to see you. I've missed you... really missed you," she said, sitting down across from him as he handed her his copy of the menu. Because he had already decided what was best for her, he'd ordered her water with lemon. She smiled a little to herself. They placed their orders quickly and once the waitress departed, he reached across the table and grabbed both her hands in his.

"How are you?" he asked gently.

She'd found it didn't matter if she tried to mask things with him. Since they were twins, he'd always been able to read her so well. But, old habits died hard, so she replied, "Fine," but began again when he sat staring at her silently.

"Well... I will admit, this has been kind of a tough day...week. But I'm managing okay," she answered truthfully.

As always, he watched her intently to ensure what she was telling him was true. "Have you been keeping your doctor's appointments?"

"Yes, dad, I have," she said, sarcastically grinning.

He reached up and brushed a strand of hair off her face as he said, "I know you think its overkill, but what you went through was traumatic and with the kind of work we do, our heads have to be screwed on straight."

"I know you're right, but I'm glad I only have three more sessions," she groaned.

"So what's been happening this week that's made it so tough?"

She couldn't help but think of Dr. Michaels's parting words to her about striving to be more open, so carefully she began, "I'm still very uneasy in my house, I'm not sure I can stay there for much longer. I just don't feel secure. And that makes me mad at myself all the more. I don't know why I let what happened bother me so much. It wasn't as if I was badly hurt...just knocked around a little. But I still feel so... vulnerable," she ended on a quiet note, looking down.

"Of course you do, anyone would. Tess, honey, it wasn't the beating that did you in, it was the stealing of your right to decide... the right to say yes or no. That's what makes you feel vulnerable. Someone came into your home... your domain, and took every one of your inalienable rights. Do you want to come and stay with me and Jade for a little while?" he suggested gently.

Lifting her green eyes to his matching ones, she told him, "We've already been through that. And you know Anthony would kill me if I moved in with you and didn't give him a chance to play the hero and camp out on my couch," she said with a forced grin. "I'm really okay, just still spooked," she told him.

Hesitantly, and watching Carter with guarded eyes, she said softly, "Mom mentioned she saw Dane Carver the other day. She said he asks about me all the time. I...can't seem to get him out of my mind. I don't know what's wrong with me and I know it's stupid, but I...I miss him," she ended on a vulnerable note, looking up at Carter to see if he would judge her for her total lack of good sense.

"Tess, I love you, and I know I don't have to tell you what a bad idea it would be for you to contact him," he said gently but firmly. "I couldn't stand to see you hurt like that again. Dane Carver is a good guy and I think he may have his life together now. But you know he's married so there's nothing good to come from you calling him," he said with softness.

"I know, I know and I won't. He's just been on mind. Kyra is dating someone who reminds me of him so it's like he's in my face all the time," she said with a grimace.

"Well, things happen for a reason, honey," he said sincerely.

"Wow. That was deep. I bet you had to dig way down in your cliché bag for that tidbit," she said, grinning up at him.

He grinned back at her and they began to eat. They talked and laughed throughout the rest of lunch and she was sad for it to end. They had always maintained a close relationship and it had gotten even closer since their father had passed away a few years prior. As they said goodbye, they hugged each other

good and tight and he pressed his lips against her forehead.

CHAPTER 5

The Angry One again sat silently simmering. What to do, what to do, he contemplated. He had followed her to her little luncheon today and was sickened by her display at the restaurant. She let that other guy touch her...pull her body suggestively up to his in a shameless embrace. He could tell the guy was not some random loser, but someone she was intimate with, someone she told her secrets to. He thought they had a connection. But now he wasn't so sure. He bet she banged his brains out! It made him angry to think of her with someone else. How could he make her see that he and he alone was what she needed? She made him so angry, he thought as his lips tightened. Throwing herself around like the slut she was. She was no better than all the other whores. He had to make her see that she needed him, but how to do that?

He silently sat strumming his fingers on the table. He was angry because the one time he tried to show her his love, she cried and pretended like she didn't want him, when he had gone out of his way to make it easy for her. Come on, she knew what game she was playing. He smiled to himself as he thought about how easy it had been to get into her house. She was a cop; she had made it easy for him. And then she wanted to act like it wasn't her idea for him to break in. Oh, she had enjoyed it, but it left him feeling...unfulfilled. It had been so good for her, but he couldn't - no, not couldn't - hadn't been allowed to gain his release. Damn whore! He would show her, oh yes, he would certainly show her what a real man was all about. He smiled as he decided how to get the release he desired.

Idly, he picked up the hourglass and shook the sand until every grain was in the bottom, and then contemplatively, he turned the hourglass the other way. Time, he thought, is not on your side.

CHAPTER 6

At midnight, Christina O'Hara sat on a barstool in a bar situated closest to the college. She knew a lot of the kids in the bar and while she normally would have gotten up to dance, tonight she just wasn't in the mood. Things had not been going so well for her. Her grades were slipping and her parents were riding her bootieus maximus - how was that for college words, Mom? You need to grow up, Christina. You need to pick a direction, Christina. We will not support you forever, Christina. God, she was so sick of hearing the same old speech over and over from them. They probably were tired of repeating it and most likely just used a tape recorder with the same message that they played to her when they called. She usually tried to avoid their call on the night she was going out because it was such a downer, but she really needed them to send her some money, so she had sucked it up and listened to the speech...again.

She continued to sit on the barstool and began drinking shots of tequila. What was she going to do with her life? She really didn't know. She had both an older sister and brother, and they were successful with two-point-five kids, living in the suburbs. But was that what she wanted? She just didn't know. Some friends of hers called to her from across the bar but she just waved them off.

She continued to drink until the bartender cut her off. Just as well, at this point, she would barely be able to stumble her way back to the dorm. She slid off the stool and staggered to the entrance door of the bar. Even though quite drunk, the night air outside the door cooled her skin quickly and she shivered. She pulled her light jacket a little tighter around her body. As she turned around the corner of the bar, she heard someone call, "Tess?" She turned and before she understood what was happening, someone punched her hard on the side of the head.

Christina gained consciousness slowly. Her head was slamming on the inside and she tried to keep it

very still. Slowly she opened her eyes. Her head was fuzzy from all the alcohol and she grew afraid when she realized she was naked and both her wrists and ankles were bound and tied spread-eagle to a bed - a bed in a room she did not recognize. She screamed when she saw a man standing naked at the foot of the bed.

She began begging him, "Please don't hurt me."

He just smiled. Slowly, he climbed onto the bed and began to run his hands sensually up and down her body. Christina shook her head side to side as he repeatedly called her 'Tess.'

"I'm not Tess, my name is Christina."

But he ignored her, and with moans and quickened breath, he began to rub himself up and down her body, making her abundantly aware of his arousal. He kissed her breasts, lingering to trace their rosy tips with his tongue, and moved up to her neck, burying his face. When he tried to kiss her mouth, she bit him. He jerked away and slapped her hard across her face and she screamed. He smiled bigger as she screamed.

In an eerily calm voice, he said, "If you will calm down, you will begin to enjoy the ride, I promise."

Leaning up on his haunches, he reared back, aligned himself with the entrance of her body, and slammed himself brutally into her, and continued slamming himself in and out. He closed his eyes as he concentrated and maintained an evil, twisted smile on his lips.

She couldn't stand it any longer and she began yelling obscenities at him. "You can't be much of a man, you asshole, if this is how you have to do it to get off. You have a little dick and can't get a woman off any other way than this. You are a sick bastard. I hope you rot in hell!"

These comments seemed to have their desired effect because he stopped suddenly and she immediately lost her false bravado and became even more afraid.

"You dirty little whore. You need to watch your filthy mouth," he screamed at her before punching her in the face. "I'll show you a real man." Before she understood his intentions, he wrapped his hands around her throat until she began to gasp for air and he began to pound himself even harder inside her body. She struggled against his hands, trying to suck any air into her lungs, but he was too strong. She heard him groan in pleasure right as she finally, mercifully blacked out.

CHAPTER 7

The next morning, Tess was working steadily at her desk when Stan McGywer, Chief of Police, called her into his office. Stan McGywer, who had been called 'Mac' since he had first enlisted in the Marines, appeared to be crusty, tough, and overbearing; but really, underneath he was a teddy bear. "Mornin', Tess. What's going on with you today?" he inquired gruffly, looking up at her over the rim of his drugstore-bought reading glasses.

"Hey, Mac, not a lot, we got another report of a stolen car. I thought the first ones might have been some of those young airmen going for a joyride to blow off some steam, but now I'm not so sure," she replied, leaning against his doorjamb.

After a moment's hesitation and obviously getting to the point of the meeting, he asked, "Are you still going to the shrink as requested?" She silently nodded her head. "Good, good, you need to keep going. Listen, I got a new case assigned to us, but I want to make sure you are good to work it and take the lead. Now let me tell you, first and foremost, it will not reflect negatively on you if you can't. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Tess was struggling to decipher Mac's hidden agenda but couldn't quite figure it out, so hesitantly she said, "I think so, Mac."

"A woman's body has been found in the downtown area. It was dumped in an alley off First and Sandalwood. The CSI Team is already headed that way. I have to warn you that the preliminary reports say this is a rape-murder case. Are you ready to tackle a case like this? I mean, it's not exactly what happened to you, but it could have been and this is where my hesitation lies. Are you good for this case?"

he asked.

A little frustrated that he would doubt her abilities in any way, she replied without hesitation, “Absolutely, I’ll call Anthony and have him meet me there right away.”

When Tess arrived at the scene, there was a bevy of activity going on. She looked around and saw that she had beat Anthony there. She decided to walk around a little on her own while she waited on him. She didn’t immediately walk to where the woman’s naked body was lying. But instead she began walking around the perimeter of the scene, trying to determine how the victim had ended up here. She looked at the entrance of the alley to the other end to see which direction the killer would have most likely come from in order to place her body this way. The alley was littered with an assortment of discarded items, and newspapers blew heedlessly through it. The alley itself was narrow and enclosed by tall buildings on each side. At the opposite entrance sat a commercial dumpster. It was filled to overflowing with materials torn out of someone’s renovation. The killer would have probably carried the body from the opposite direction which passed the dumpster due to it providing more seclusion.

Eventually, she ended up at the yellow crime scene tape. As she did, her intentions initially were to hunch down, supporting her weight with her ankles; however, as she was lowering herself, what she saw temporarily shocked her and made her stumble forward onto her knees: there was a sea of red hair sprawled out from the body. After a moment’s hesitation, she swallowed hard and pushed herself back up off her knees. Getting a grip on her emotions, she began to examine the body and its immediate surroundings. The body was that of a young girl, who couldn’t have been more than twenty-one or twenty-two years old. She was laying face-up with one arm bent across her stomach. The skin on her body was pale and her clouded, soulless eyes were looking straight up to the heavens. Her face was scrubbed clean and severe bruising marred its perfection. Tess felt her stomach tighten in revulsion. How could anyone do that to this young girl? What could she have done in life that would warrant this? She was just a baby, for God’s sake. Pity washed over her for this young woman and she knew that just like ripples in a pond, this was going to affect so many people; her friends, her family, and those in the local community.

While lost in her contemplation of the body, Anthony arrived looking around the scene. He walked up behind Tess where she was hunched and gently placed his hand on her shoulder and came down to the crime scene’s level. Even though the sun was bright, he pulled off his sunglasses in order to get an unobstructed view of her face. He leaned closer to Tess and whispered, “You okay, kid?” She nodded and tensed, a little annoyed at his question.

“Morning, Detectives,” Aaron Moss, a crime scene tech, said in greeting.

Whenever Tess saw Aaron Moss, she smiled a little to herself as he reminded her of a middle-aged Harry Potter; right down to his round, black-framed eyeglasses.

“Good morning, Aaron. Were you able to make a tentative ID on the vic and time of death?” she questioned as Anthony stood behind her.

“The time of death is tentatively between midnight and four a.m. She didn’t have clothes, shoes, or a purse. There doesn’t appear to be any unusual identifying marks such birthmarks or tattoos. I don’t think she was a pro; she has nicely manicured nails and good teeth. She looks like she probably worked out regularly so that would certainly point her away from the streets. The only items found close to the body were odd, to say the least,” Aaron informed her. He continued upon getting a questioning look from Tess. “We found an hourglass, and a poem, which had been placed under the hourglass,” he said.

“An hourglass, like a glass that sand runs through?” Anthony asked.

“Yeah, strange, huh? The poem was a little creepy also. I mean, I guess not in the context of finding a naked body with its throat cut in the middle of the city,” he said in the tone of someone who was used to dealing in the horrifying aspects of life on the force.

“What’d it say?” she asked.

Aaron pulled out his notes and read aloud, “The sands of life run quickly through the hourglass’s slope; and while some try to staunch its flow, there really is no hope! For death is sure, we are told and no one knows the hour; love fades as blood flows, the hourglass holds the power!”

“You’re right, it is a little morbid. Did the poem sound familiar to you?” He shook his head

negatively. "Have you determined a preliminary cause of death?" she continued as she made notes on her notepad.

"Well, at first glance you would think it's having her throat cut, but I'm not sure. You see these markings around her neck? I think she might have been strangled and then had her throat cut after. We'll know more once we get her to the Medical Examiner. It's obvious she was hit several times in the face as there's a lot of bruising and swelling there. She had a lot of bruising around her genitals and her breasts. So she either enjoyed very rough sex or was raped. Again, we'll know more once we are able to exam her more thoroughly. It looks like she was probably tied up. See the bruises around her wrists and ankles?" he asked her. Subconsciously, Tess rubbed the wrist on one of her own hands, although the bruises had faded away many months before.

"There's not any blood here so I will assume she was killed somewhere else and then moved here," she observed out loud.

"Yeah, it's really clean, there is no way you could cut someone's throat, even if they were already dead, and not have any blood. Also, she is really clean, even around the cut area. Someone took the time to tidy her up before dumping her," he narrated.

Tess looked around the scene and the businesses that were in the immediate area. "Okay, Aaron, thanks. Please send me a copy of your report and the ME's report, also. Anthony and I'll begin canvassing the neighborhood to see if anyone saw anything. Who knows, maybe we'll get lucky. Hey, please have the lab run her prints first so we can try to identify her, okay?" she asked.

"Will do, Detective," Aaron concurred.

Tess and Anthony split up and walked from business to business in the downtown area talking to store owners, hoping someone had seen something. If they had, no one was talking. She wasn't surprised that no one had seen the body dumped, as most of the downtown businesses closed usually no later than six pm. The killer couldn't have picked a better spot for dumping a body in a public place. She hoped once the victim was identified, she could begin working from that point.

When they finished canvassing the area, they returned to the office to see if anyone had reported a missing person fitting the victim's description. Tess couldn't help but think this could have been her. She wasn't sure why she had been spared, but she had never felt luckier.

As with most jobs, in law enforcement you never actually are able to work just one case at a time. Specifically, you worked what is hot at that moment. It seemed to Tess the bulk of what she did was to move from fire to fire. It would be nice to have the luxury of starting one task and working it through its completion. But that wasn't how it was done. While she waited on reports regarding the rape-murder case, she was notified the information she'd requested in reference to the owners of the stolen vehicles was ready for pick up at the courthouse. She decided to go ahead and pick it up now during the lull in the other case.

She loved going to the old historic courthouse with its arches and huge clock. She loved the old rustic smell of the building with its artifacts proudly displayed in giant wooden and glass cases. The halls were always clean and shiny from being buffed daily by the inmates housed in the jail. As she moved down the halls, her shoes made a resounding click-click-click as she walked. She had almost reached the registration office when someone grabbed her arm and gently turned her around.

Before Tess hardly had a chance to see who it was, Thom Wyndom was pulling her in for a quick hug and smiling said, "Hey, Tess! What are the chances of me running into you here?"

Tess disengaged herself from his embrace awkwardly and smiling at him said, "Well, let's see... I'm a cop and you're an attorney. I would have to say pretty good."

With both his lips and his eyes he smiled at her hugely. "You're a funny girl. Let me take you to lunch today, it'll be my treat. Please say yes?"

He was just as charming as Dominic, but in his own way. They must have given their parents a run for their money. Tess smiled and debated briefly about the soundness of having lunch with Dominic's brother when it was obvious that Dominic had some sort of problem with Thom. But in the end she

thought, why not? It was only lunch, not like they were making a lifetime commitment or anything.

With just a little hesitation and ignoring the fluttering of nerves, she said, "Okay, but first I need to collect some data for a case I'm working. Can we meet back here in say, thirty minutes?" she asked.

"Sure. While at lunch, I expect a full accounting of your case. Is it anything I might be able to add some billable hours towards?" he inquired, smiling.

Tess smiled with mirth at his statement "Nothing that glamorous, I'm afraid, just stolen vehicles."

The thought ran through Tess's mind that it was odd running into Thom after having just met him. What were the odds, as he had pointed out? Probably, she told herself, she'd seen him numerous times in the courthouse, but as she didn't know him, she hadn't paid any attention. Although she doubted many women wouldn't have paid attention to Thom Wyndom. He was just as striking as Dominic but in a more finished way. While Dominic owned a construction company and had a somewhat more manly quality about him, Thom had a polished professional look with his designer suits and highly polished shoes. Dominic had a more aggressive manner about him, whereas Thom felt...easy. Yes, that was the word. He was comfortable to be around. Not many men put her at ease, but he did. He was very relaxed and non-threatening and she liked that.

They ended up in a small bistro located across from the courthouse. From the onset, Thom proved to be extremely charming. He was a smart, confident, and funny man. Tess enjoyed herself and didn't feel the least bit awkward or uncomfortable. It was very... uncomplicated. They talked about the preliminary chit-chat people talk about when first getting to know someone. He had nice eyes that crinkled in the corners from always smiling. He looked into her eyes when she spoke and it made her feel...special. What was not to like about that? He talked about how grueling law school had been and how many hours he worked as an attorney. He asked about her job with intelligent, interested questions.

"You know, Tess, you probably don't remember, but we've met before. Let's face it, that beautiful red hair is hard to miss," he said, smiling as she reached over and punched him good-naturedly.

"Really? I don't remember meeting you, I'm sorry," she said.

He gave her an injured look which had made her laugh. "Wow, you really know how to wound a guy, Tess. Why don't you just pull out your gun and shoot me next time?" he said, laughing.

"Don't tempt me," she countered. "I seriously don't remember meeting you. Where were we?" she said asked.

"I've actually seen at several nightclubs, but one night I was at Navedo's on Tenth and you were there. I will admit it was dark, but it wouldn't have mattered, you blew me off so fast I felt the wind in my hair. Besides, I would've had to take a number. Apparently, Miss Champion, you're very popular and unattainable," he said, grinning at her.

"Yep, all popular and unattainable, that's me," she said mockingly.

"Well, while I have you in my grasp and have your undivided attention away from all your many admirers, how about you and I catch a movie this weekend?" he asked.

Tess felt her stomach muscles clench at his words. "Listen, Thom, I think you're a great guy, but I don't...don't..." she hesitated.

"Don't go to movies...don't like being seen with extremely good-looking men...don't like men?" he asked her jokingly.

Tess's smile did not reach her eyes. Bowing her head, she said quietly, "I don't...date," she said, knowing how crazy it must sound to him.

"What? Are you married, 'cause I gotta tell you, I personally don't have a problem with that," he joked again, making light.

Again she hesitated, "Thom, believe me when I tell you, no matter how lame it sounds, it really is me and not you," she tried again.

"Wow...that does sound lame," again he smiled at her, softening his words. "Listen, whatever it is certainly can't mean that two people can't sit side-by-side and watch a movie with limited physical contact," he quibbled.

"No, I guess not," she said hesitantly. "Okay, I'll tell you what, I'll go, but we go Dutch, and it's not called a date," she said, bargaining.

“Sold,” he said, smiling even bigger.

CHAPTER 8

The Angry One sat grinning in satisfaction. All this time, he'd not known. He got excited just thinking about what happened the night before. He'd been so angry at Tess and had decided to do what he always did when he became frustrated. He went to the downtown bar after midnight where all the young college girls hung out and waited. He knew he would find plenty of girls coming out who would be less than sober. Girls were so stupid. They went around like they were invincible or something, but he knew better. He knew what evil lurked in the hearts of men. He grinned at his own cleverness.

A little after midnight, a cute little redhead had come out of the bar. At first he'd thought it'd been Tess, but not for long. She was a little taller, but he could use his imagination. When he started out, he was just going to take her and show her what a real man was, and oh, how she was going to love it! But then an interesting thing happened, something that made it even more exciting. He still got hard just thinking about it. He had grabbed her quickly from the bar, because she was stupid and came out alone. Haven't they ever heard of the buddy system? he smirked. He threw her in his car and went up to his private place. She started to fuss so he assisted in helping her get in the mood by knocking her around a little. She'd been quiet for a little while and he was really getting into it. She was a hot little number with her smooth skin and perky breasts. But then she opened her stupid little mouth and started saying stupid things and dampened his mood. So he'd wrapped his hands around her throat until she shut up and began squirming around under him. Oh that was so exciting. And then while she jerked around, the feeling was even more intense. He came just as her eyes had rolled back in her head.

After he had caught his breath, he had grinned and climbed off the girl. He stood back at the end of the bed and thought of Tess. He wondered what she would think if he began strangling her during sex. His smile had grown bigger. She would hate it! She was such a control freak. The next time, he was not only going to finish what he started, he was going to wrap his hands around her throat until she knew who was really in charge.

As he had stood looking at the girl, a new thought occurred to him. He was going to get Tess's attention and in a big way. He picked up the girl and headed into the bathroom.

Afterwards, he had gently washed the girl clean. He liked that, too. Girls could be so dirty. Strangling her during sex had been the most fabulous thing he had ever experienced! How had he not ever known? It had been so intense. He had “helped” girls through sex before, but holding someone's life in your hands while you proved your manhood was the ultimate high. He could barely wait to do it again. And he knew that one day he would do it to her...the sands were pouring for her.

CHAPTER 9

The next day, Tess received the reports from the lab tech at the ME's office and hungrily read over them. They'd been able to LIFT viable prints from the victim and identify her. While they were able to conclusively say she'd been raped, whoever it was had used a condom and had left no sperm. They'd checked her body carefully but every section of her had been wiped down with a cloth. The fibers from the cloth were the only thing they found on her person. There'd not even been anything under her fingernails. The reports included pictures of the bruising around her neck. As the bruises had darkened, you could make out thumb and finger markings. The cause of death was strangulation. The cut on her neck had been completed postmortem.

The victim's name was Christina O'Hara. She was college student who'd been out with friends the night before. She'd left separately from the other girls she was with and they'd assumed she'd been picked up by someone. Her clothes and other personal items had not been recovered as of yet. Tess asked

Christina's friends if the hourglass meant anything to them, but they'd all said no. She placed a call to Christina's parents, but from what she could gather in the midst of their grief, they knew nothing, either. They were flying in to retrieve their daughter's body. Tess took a deep breath and tried not to dwell on the emotions involved in the case. In police work, emotions could get you off track and could make you miss something important.

Tess leaned back in her office chair, ran her hands through her hair, and wondered about Christina O'Hara. Did she know her attacker? Was it some random guy she'd picked up and things had just gone too far? What was the purpose of the overkill? She was already dead, why cut her throat? Where were her clothes? Why take them? Christina's friends had said she'd always worn a necklace with a small St. Christopher's medallion attached. But she wasn't wearing it when her body had been discovered. Why didn't she have anything under her fingernails in some sort of defense? Again, did she know the killer? Was she restrained before she had a chance to defend herself?

Tess couldn't help but draw parallels between what happened to Christina O'Hara and her own attack. When she'd been attacked, he'd knocked her out and tied her to the bed. She bet the same thing happened to Christina. And just as her attacker had taken her bracelet, she bet the killer had taken Christina's necklace and medallion. An image of the poor girl's body laid out in the alley popped in Tess's mind. She could still see her red hair fanned out from her head.

Were the two cases related, her attack and Christina's? It was an unnerving thought. No, she had to stop thinking like that. The possibility they were related was slight. She wondered to herself if her boss had been right to question her ability to work this case. She grew irritated at herself. She was not this person, this weak creature who could not separate herself from her job. No matter what had been happening in her own life, she had always been able to keep it separate. Come on, Champion, she said to herself, pull yourself together. Not every case is about you. Not every attack relates to yours. Get a grip and work the case in front of you. Everyone will think you have lost it and that they were right to be hesitant about allowing you on this case.

As she was mulling over Christina's case, Kyra stopped by her desk. "Hey, Tess, what's up?" she asked.

Glancing up into Kyra's face, she smiled and said, "Not much, just thinking about a case. Hey, thanks for inviting me for wings. I had a good time."

"I'm glad." Kyra hesitated before continuing. Tess braced herself as she sensed that Kyra had an ulterior motive for this visit. "Listen, I'm worried about you being on the O'Hara case. It wasn't that long ago that you were...you know."

"I'm fine, I promise. I'll admit that it has bothered me some..." There was a short pause as Tess realized she had said too much and quickly changed the subject. "Hey, guess who I ran into yesterday at the courthouse?" At her inquiring look, Tess continued, "Thom Wyndom. He was there on a case. We had lunch together. He seems like a nice guy. I think we are going to the movies together. Not as a date, but just out, you know," Tess said.

Kyra hesitated and eyed her closely. "Are you ready for that?"

A little frustrated at having to justify her decision, but knowing Kyra had her best interests at heart, she replied, "It's not a date. I was very clear that it wasn't a date and he agreed."

Again Kyra hesitated before asking softly, "Did you tell him about the...attack?"

Good intentions or not, this was very irritating, and so she answered a little more forcibly, "No, I don't know him that well. It's not really any of his business. I'm telling you, we are only going as friends."

"I just don't think it's a good idea. We don't really know him and you saw how Dominic was towards him. When I asked him about his reaction to Thom, he clammed up and wouldn't say anything. It was weird, I tell you," Kyra said.

"Well, it's only a movie. If he starts being weird, I won't see him again," Tess replied curtly. Kyra reluctantly let it go and waved as she went back to her own office.

Later in the day, Tess and Anthony were looking over a spreadsheet they'd made regarding the stolen vehicles in categories: Type of vehicle stolen; Stolen from what location; and Owner's information.

The phone on her desk rang and she absently reached over and answered it. "Champion."

"Afternoon, Detective, this is Lewis. I wanted to let you know that we found your vic's belongings over in a dumpster not far from where the body was dumped. I am sending them over to the lab for analysis," he informed her.

"Hey, Lewis," she began and then hesitated, looking up to see Anthony listening to the call. She shifted her body a little away from him and continued uncomfortably with her words faltering slightly. "Can you tell me if a necklace with a St. Christopher's medallion was found in her property?" She heard him shuffling through some papers before answering.

"No, I'm not seeing anything listed like that. I can have the crime scene guy go back and double-check just to make sure it wasn't overlooked, though," he said.

"Yeah, I would appreciate that, Lewis. Will you have the lab send me a report?" she asked.

"Always do. I'll see you, Tess," Lewis said with a smile in his voice as he hung up the phone.

Tess turned to Anthony, "That was Lewis; he said they found Christina O'Hara's missing clothes and such."

Anthony watched her closely and asked. "What's up with necklace?"

Guardedly, she answered while looking down at the papers on her desk, "It wasn't found with the other items they located so they'll have someone look further in the dumpster to see if they missed it."

"And..." he prompted.

"And...nothing. She had a necklace that she never took off and now it is missing," she said, again looking back towards the spreadsheet, sounding more irritated than the conversation warranted.

Anthony studied her face and gently asked her, "What am I missing here, Tess?"

She debated about not saying anything but knew he would not relent. Hesitantly and feeling the crack in her wall expand, she said, speaking softly, "It just... just reminds me a lot of my own attack. I'm not sure why, but there are things which are similar."

Anthony looked at her quizzically. "What things, exactly?" he prodded.

"The victim was bound before being raped, her medallion was taken, and she...had red hair," she finished on a quieter tone.

"Okay, so the cases could be related. I want to know what the real issue is here. Why are you being so guarded?" he asked, watching her closely.

"I'm not..." she began before she was cut off by Anthony.

"Tess, you could be right and the cases could be related. In fact, this could be a good thing, in a way. We might be able to find out through this case who the bastard is," he said gently but firmly. "The thing that bothers me about this is you felt the need to try and mask your insecurities with this case from me. I'm your partner and these are the things I need to know from you. You have to know that I'll do everything I can to ensure nothing like that happens to you again," he said kindly.

"I was afraid you'd think I was losing my edge and couldn't be trusted to work this case - or any case for that matter. That you would look at me as...as the weak link," she said, looking down anywhere but in his eyes.

Reaching over and placing his hand on top of hers, he said reassuringly, "Tess, I think with what happened you are allowed to feel vulnerable for a little while. And noticing similarities to cases makes you a good cop not a weak one. And while you might hate it, I do feel protective of you. Being vulnerable doesn't make you weak, Tess, just human." He reached over and hugged her gently before stepping back and lightly punching her in the arm.

"Oww! What was that for?" she asked, smirking as she rubbed her arm.

"For not having any faith in me...that hurts," he said kidding as he placed his hands over his heart.

CHAPTER 10

After work, Tess drove home contemplating her movie night with Thom. Even she wasn't going to call it

a date. She did have to admit to herself she was just the teeniest bit excited and she hadn't felt that in a long time. Men still made her nervous...not men, so much as being afraid of not being able to control them. But Thom was different to her. He touched her in a way...moved her in a way she hadn't felt in a long, long time. It wasn't a physical thing, although he was gorgeous - again she thought to herself, he felt...safe.

As she got out of her car and walked across the lawn to her front door, she was smiling; but the instant her key went into the lock of the front door, that old familiar panic welled up inside her again. Get a grip, she told herself for the hundredth time. And today, she further told herself she was not going to check under the beds and behind the shower curtain...but she did. She hadn't been able to get into the shower without checking. For her own sanity, she told herself that the reason she checked wasn't because she was afraid, but because it was just the sensible thing to do.

She dressed casually in jeans, a neon peach T-shirt, and tennis shoes. She didn't want Thom to get the impression she was trying to impress him in any way. As this wasn't a date, they had agreed he would not pick her up at her house, but rather they would meet at the movie theater.

She saw Thom standing in front as she approached. It was surprising how good he looked in just jeans and a polo shirt. His amazing blue eyes shone so bright against the darkness of his hair. He had a goofy grin on his face as he fanned two movies tickets at her. Unable to help herself she returned his grin.

"What'cha got there, Counselor?"

With a smirk, Thom handed her one of the tickets. Tess eyed him curiously and looked down at the ticket, Precinct 71, was printed across the top.

"I thought you'd enjoy seeing how real police work is done," he said trying to contain his mirth.

"Oh yes, by all means. I don't know why I spent all that time at the academy when I could have just come here and learned by cliff-notes," she said with a laugh.

As Thom had purchased the tickets, Tess thought it only fair she buy the popcorn and sodas. Thom conceded, but obviously didn't like it. Tess handed him his soda, grabbed the popcorn and her drink, and headed towards the theater. Thom put his free hand protectively against her bent elbow to 'guide' her. Picking a seat high up, he ushered her into the row, while he sat on the outside - again in the same protective manner. Tess smiled at his behavior. His momma had taught him well.

The police drama Thom had picked made her laugh in the way the movie glamorized some elements of police work. She smiled at the way the officers both drew and held their firearms. We don't really shoot with our hands tilted to the side; well, only if we wanted to miss, she grinned to herself. When the movie depicted a dead body laid on the ground fully clothed, Tess couldn't help but compare it to the naked body of Christina O'Hara's. In the movie, the body looked normal like everyone else's; however, a real body doesn't really look the same when it's dead. Other than stating the obvious...it's lifeless, unnaturally still, and colorless. There is nothing glamorous about death.

Overall, she enjoyed movie time with Thom. When the movie ended, she and Thom headed out through the milling throng of people. When they finally got outside, he rocked back on his heels and turned to smile at her, his blue eyes crinkling at the corners.

Hesitantly, as if unsure, he asked, "Would you like to go across the street and grab a bite to eat? I'll let you pay again, if it makes you feel better," he flashed an impeccable all-American boy smile.

She wasn't really sure why, but after a moment's hesitation, she agreed.

They had to wait outside until a table was available. Even though it was the middle of summer, once the sun went down, the temperature did also. A slight breeze blew across her skin and she shivered. Automatically, Thom moved close to her with the intention of placing an arm around her to warm her up. Tess immediately froze and swallowed quickly before taking a quick side step away from him. He lifted puzzled and insulted eyes to her. She closed her own eyes; she'd known this was a mistake. Her stomach knotted and she hated herself for being such a coward. Thom was not a threat...or at least she didn't think so. But a little voice she tried to ignore said in her head, but what if he is? She gave him a small smile and wrapped her arms around herself to ward off the chill.

Thom waited until after the waitress had given them a menu and had taken their drink order before asking, "Okay, Tess, what's the deal?"

“What’s the deal about what?” she countered slowly.

“I’m just trying to figure out what’s going on. I mean, do you have a specific aversion to me personally or is it all men?” he asked.

With her face flaming, she said, “I don’t have an aversion. I’m just...careful.”

He looked at her contemplatively. “And you’re careful because....?”

A little frustrated, she said, “Listen, Thom, there are things I’m not ready to discuss with you. I mean, I hardly know you.”

“Well, that’s true. But you won’t ever know me if you won’t talk to me,” he said. “What could be so bad that you feel you can’t discuss it? What, did you hack your last boyfriend into bits and throw him into a shredder?” he said jokingly, trying to ease the tension.

Dane Carver popped into her mind and she smiled, “No, but I sure wanted to.”

Seeing she wasn’t going to elaborate any further, Thom continued, slow and measured, “Okay, I’m not going to ruin our non-date date by pressing you. But I hate that you’re uncomfortable around me. But, I will take you at your word and assume it’s not really me you have an aversion to, as because hey, it’s me,” he said with a mocking grin. Then with more seriousness than she’d ever heard him use, he said, “I just need for you to know that I wouldn’t ever intentionally hurt you,” he said gently.

Tess became extremely uncomfortable with the direction the conversation was heading, so trying to alleviate the seriousness of the moment, she answered, “Wow! That was deep for movie night, don’t you think?”

Thom looked at her for a long time before he spoke. “One day, Tess, you will trust me, I promise.”

The rest of evening passed uneventfully, and soon she was lying in her bed thinking about its events. She hadn’t wanted to tell Thom about what happened to her. No matter how stupid it was, or what Dr. Michaels had said to the contrary, she blamed herself for the attack. Had she been a stronger person, or a smarter person maybe she wouldn’t have been attacked. A small part of her felt she deserved what happened to her because of past sins. She liked Thom as a friend - okay, maybe a little bit more than a friend, and she didn’t want him to think of her like that: weak, defenseless, and tainted, because that’s how she saw herself. Once he knew what that man had done to her, he would be disgusted and that would be the end. She wasn’t ready for the end just yet.

The way she saw it, her situation was a catch-22; on one hand, she wanted a normal relationship with a man; but on the other, she was too afraid of the rejection she might face to proceed. And she couldn’t help but think of the attacker’s parting words: “You will never be enough to hold a real man.”

The next morning, Tess was sitting quietly at her desk, drinking a cup of coffee and staring off into space while contemplating her musings from the night before. After a few minutes, she shifted her gaze and was startled to see Anthony seated across from her at his desk, eyeing her intently.

“What?” she inquired; surprised to see him as she hadn’t heard him come in.

“What’s wrong, Tess?”

“Nothing’s wrong...” she hesitated, feeling the crack in her glass box expand even further, before continuing. “Can I ask you something from a man’s point of view that is totally girly?” she grimaced as she spoke.

“You can ask me anything, you know that,” he replied gently and encouragingly.

She twisted her lips and looked down at her coffee mug. “Do you think men will look at me differently because of...what happened?”

He sat quietly for a long minute and she eventually she looked up. Rising, he came around her desk, gingerly spun her in her chair until she faced him, and hunched down to her level. He took her mug from her stiff fingers, placed it on her desk, and placed her hands in his. He hesitated while he got his thoughts in order.

“Tess, I want you to listen to me, okay? What happened to you was not your fault. Any man worth his salts is going to know that and it will not change his feelings about you. You are still the same

beautiful, intelligent, confident woman you were before. Don't let what happened make you start doubting that. And while I can't imagine how hard it has been or will be, you have got to try and put it behind you. You have to decide to not let him have that power over you," he said lightly but firmly.

Suddenly feeling overwhelmed and wounded and struggling to reign in her emotions, she said, "I've been trying to let it go, but... I can't. I know it's stupid but I don't know how to let it go. I want to, God knows I want to. I'm afraid I won't ever be the same again. I'm afraid I won't ever feel safe again. I'm afraid I'll...be afraid forever," she whispered.

Anthony pulled her close to him, leaned his forehead against hers, and closed his eyes. "Oh, mi amor, I'm so sorry he hurt this way. I wish more than anything it hadn't happened to you. But please know that the things you feel are normal. It wouldn't be normal to just resume life as if it didn't happen. You are a very special woman and any man would be honored to have you," he told her sincerely in a low voice. Tess just nodded, not sure that she believed him.

CHAPTER 11

It was later in the week Tess and Anthony finally caught a break in the auto theft/chop shop case they'd nick-named Auto-Chop. After having received numerous theft reports almost daily, they finally had a viable lead. One of the owners of a stolen vehicle had reported his car was LoJack-equipped. This was helpful as when a vehicle is stolen and has a LoJack transmitter hidden in it, it helps to track and locate a vehicle quickly. Tess and Anthony couldn't believe their good luck. Somehow, the thieves had really messed up and now maybe they could get some resolution for their case. All of their previous leads had failed to pan out, so both of them were excited to finally have something solid. The vehicle manufacturer said it would take about thirty minutes for the system to activate and then it would be able to pinpoint exactly where the vehicle was located. With moments to spare, the system located the vehicle in a garage in the warehouse district on Grove Street, which was located on the outskirts between Aurora and Denver.

It was mid-morning when they arrived at Grove Street. They slowly drove through the warehouse district to ascertain what they were up against, if anything. The warehouse district ran from one end of Grove Street to the other, and what once had been a thriving and profitable area was now mostly deserted. The warehouses still lined the street, but it looked like a ghost town. The area had an ominous feel to it due to most of the buildings being abandoned, and the neglect was obvious by the numerous broken windows and busted-out walls in many of the buildings.

Anthony and Tess decided to park their unmarked car at the northernmost point of the street in a side alley and sat and watched the comings and goings of those in the vicinity. The sun was shining bright and it was almost blinding as it reflected off the metal sidings of the warehouse buildings. The heat bounced off the large structures in waves and if you listened, you could hear the wind as it sucked the walls of the buildings in and out. Surprisingly, there was little traffic coming up or down Grove Street. Anthony and Tess had an unobstructed view of the garage in question. As they watched, they occasionally saw vehicles going in, but fewer came out. They surveyed the building carefully, checking for a lookout or scout but didn't see any. Maybe the business had been in operation so long the thieves thought they were undetectable and did not feel the need to have that safeguard in place.

As the day drew on, the shadows of the buildings darkened the alley and over time, most traffic had ceased. Anthony and Tess decided to leave their car and walk around the edifice which housed the garage. Staying close to the sides of the building, they completely encircled it. During their journey, they discovered that while the garage had no back entrance, it did have two entrances on the front of the building.

Anthony and Tess thought there was no time like the present and decided to go into the garage and check it out. They knew if there really was a chop-shop operation in the garage, things could get ugly quick and so in preparation, each unclasped their weapons and clicked off the safety. As casually as possible, they strolled into the garage by the first of two open bay doors. Upon entering, they were hit with suffocating, stale heat and could hear the buzz of metal on metal as car parts were being removed

from their parent vehicle for resale later. On one side of the garage were stacks of tires and rims of varying sizes. On the other side were shelves holding both parts and equipment. In the middle of the building were three bays with automobile hydraulic lifts. There were many cars obviously being stripped of their parts and pieces by half a dozen different people. At first, no one was aware that Anthony and Tess had entered the warehouse due to the excessive amount of noise. Eventually, a young white guy with a shaved tattooed head, who was leaning over the engine of a car, glanced in their direction, obviously startled to see them. He slowly straightened, licked his lips, looked around to see if anyone else had noticed them, and slowly began edging backwards.

All at once, there was mass chaos as the bald thug whistled out an obviously pre-arranged warning to the others in the garage. Everyone working on the floor glanced in their direction and there was a clanging of tools hitting the concrete floor. Anthony quickly drew his weapon and at the same time shouted to Tess to secure the second bay door in an effort to bottleneck the exodus. He whipped back around and began yelling for the thieves to get down on the ground. Tess turned and ran to the second set of bay doors and pulled the chain hanging beside it to lower the garage door. She worked as quickly as possible and could hear the pounding of feet running in several different directions. She heard a car engine start and she turned around quickly and drew her weapon. As she did, a black car began moving quickly towards her, squealing as the tires strove to make purchase with the concrete. She immediately lifted her weapon and began shooting, aiming for the windshield. Because of the acoustics in the building, the shots sounded like cannons going off. The windshield shattered into huge chunks as her bullets hit their desired target.

For the briefest of seconds, she turned her head in Anthony's direction and then she felt something slam into her head. She had barely enough time to jump out of the way as the black car came barreling towards her. Her intention was to lift her weapon and shoot again into the car, but suddenly she felt woozy and uncoordinated. She heard the black car bust through the closed garage bay door. She had to keep blinking as something wet began running down into her eyes. She was startled to look down and see blood dripping on her shirt. She was stunned and couldn't actually comprehend what had happened. Then she felt a burning sensation on her scalp and she began to feel faint. No, no, not now, she thought. She looked wildly around, trying to find Anthony to ensure he was safe. Somewhere in the distance she could vaguely hear him yelling something but the ringing in her ears made it impossible to understand what he was saying. She saw him at the other end, holding several guys at gunpoint, the men lying face-down on the concrete floor of the building. She began to walk towards them but her legs seemed uncoordinated and before she got more than a few feet, she stumbled and fell as darkness surrounded her.

Tess was jostled as the gurney she had been placed on was being lifted to its full height. Her first thought was for Anthony's safety. She strained to sit up but had been strapped down. She looked around wildly until she saw him talking to the other responding officers.

There were blue, white, and red lights flashing from several police cars; their colors even more pronounced as they reflected off the metal buildings. Anthony looked up as the medical technicians began wheeling her towards the awaiting ambulance. He immediately excused himself and headed her way. The techs waited at his call to them. He smiled as he advanced towards her.

"Did we get them?" she asked, a little woozy.

"Most of them," he said, smiling down at her as he grabbed her hand. "Hey, thanks for catching that bullet for me, I would've hated to have ruined my suit by falling on the dirty concrete," he gently teased her. On a more serious note he asked, "How are you feeling?"

"I think I'm fine, I just have a headache," she said, as she again tried to lift her hands to touch her head but couldn't because they were strapped down. "I don't have a bullet hole anywhere important do I?" she asked hesitantly, trying to make light of the situation.

"No, I've been telling you for years how hard-headed you are and today my point has been proven," he said, grinning down at her. "Your head deflected a bullet." He started his sentence off in a joking

manner, but his face grew pensive as he thought of what could have easily happened. In a familiar gesture, he leaned his forehead down on her forehead, closed his eyes and gave a silent thanks to all that was holy.

"As usual while you are off napping, I'll be here working, cleaning up the loose ends," Anthony said back in a lighter tone.

"Please don't call my brother, he will kill me," she begged him.

"I'm sorry, but I had to. If I hadn't, he would have killed me. And then what would all the lovely ladies do?" he teased. She groaned as the medical technicians began lifting her up into the ambulance. "Besides, it's high time I met the brother you hold in such high esteem. I'll finish up here and then I'll meet you at the hospital," he told her.

CHAPTER 12

Tess arrived at the hospital and was rolled to the emergency room entrance. The medical technician rolled her on through to a curtained waiting area to wait for a doctor to check her injuries. She wrinkled her nose at the strong smells of disinfectants and focused to control the rolling in her stomach. She gingerly reached her hand up to apply a little pressure to the bandage on her head and winced. She remembered when she had been at the academy and had been accidentally hit with a beanbag round in a training exercise; this wasn't any more painful than that. She didn't want to be vain, but she knew she was going to be black and blue for weeks. Why couldn't she have been hit where she could cover it up?

She wasn't there long before she heard her brother asking for her. He was directed to her area and she turned her head towards him when she heard him gasp. She followed his gaze down to her once-white, blood-stained shirt. She immediately began shaking her head.

"No, Carter, I promise it's not as bad as it looks," she said quickly.

"My God, are you sure you're all right?" he asked, walking quickly to the side of her bed.

"I'm fine, Carter. I wish Anthony wouldn't have called you. It's nothing but a scratch, the bullet just grazed my head," she assured him. "You know how bad head wounds are. Just blood and blood and some more blood. I think my elbow hurts more from the fall than my head does."

"Tess, what am I going to do with you? When Anthony called..." he trailed off with a grimace.

"I know, I'm so sorry," she said. "I feel like all you do lately is come and rescue me," she told him.

"I'll gladly keep on doing it, but really...I need a break," he said with a smile.

"I guess I don't have to tell you not to call mom?" she begged.

"Because I think you've been under enough stress, I won't call myself, but I think you should. If it was one of us, you would want to know, right?" he countered.

She nodded in agreement and then winced as the sudden movement caused a slamming sensation in her head. Carter immediately went to find a nurse or a doctor for her. As she lie there waiting with her eyes closed, she knew she had been so lucky. One inch either way and she would have bought the farm. She didn't even know how she had gotten shot but figured Anthony would be by later to explain everything that happened. She closed her eyes and relaxed for the first time in a very long time, glad that her brother was there to take care of things and that for once she didn't have to be on guard; it was comforting. It wasn't long before the stress of the past six months caught up with her and she drifted off to sleep.

Tess found herself floating along the Arkansas River on a round float, made from the inner tube of a tire, with both her dad and brother. The weather was surprisingly cool for such a bright day. She and Carter were laughing at how their mother was afraid of the dark and it was too bad that she hadn't come with them on the trip down the river as the sun was shining so bright. Up ahead they could see the rapids quickly coming their way but they were not afraid. Their dad was with them and he would never let

anything bad happen to them. But as they drew closer to the fast rushing waters, Tess looked over and she noticed that her dad appeared to be asleep. She moved her float closer to his. She smiled as she thought of all the ways she was going to tease him about being so old that he couldn't even stay awake to navigate down the river. When she reached out her hand, her heart began to pound and she was suddenly afraid. She laid her hand on her dad's and it was cold. She tried to shake him but he wouldn't wake up. She looked at the river and saw that they were almost on top of the swiftly-approaching rapids. She shook her father more urgently now, but still he wouldn't wake up. She began to yell at him to wake up and help her because she was so afraid, but still he did not respond. No matter what she did, her father remained still.

She looked frantically around and on the bank of the river she saw a man in the shadows. He nodded his head in her direction like he knew something she didn't - and it filled her heart with fear. She stared at the man, trying to figure out who he was and what he could possibly know about her. As she reached the rapids, she looked down and noticed, for the first time, that her hands were tied to the float and no matter what she did, she could not get her hands free. She struggled against the bonds and then she saw the stranger again; he was in the water standing in the middle of the rapids, beckoning her to come to him. She struggled to paddle away, but no matter what she did, the water kept moving her towards the stranger. Her heart was pounding and she couldn't catch her breath. She begged him to let her pass so she could get help for her father, but he just laughed and told her that it would not be enough...she would not ever be enough.

Tess jerked awake, feeling trapped and confused. She sat up too quickly and her head began to pound. Her hands were restrained and she couldn't figure out why. Fear flooded her at the restriction, and as she sat up in the darkness, she saw a stranger standing with his back to her. Being stuck somewhere between her nightmarish dream and being away, she became afraid and whimpered. She began trying to scurry up to the top of the bed, digging her heels into it, her fear making her movements clumsy. Anthony, who was sitting beside her holding her hand, jumped at her movements, saying over and over, "It's okay, it's okay." As she watched with horrified eyes, she saw the stranger turn around and she could finally see his face...and then she was even more confused; the person she saw was...Thom Wyndom. She'd been so sure it'd been...been...who? The attacker? She shook her head to clear it of her confused thoughts and immediately groaned as pain ricocheted in her head. She must really be losing it. Maybe she was having a delayed reaction or something.

As she continued to keep her eyes on Thom, Tess shook her head to purge it of the dream. She struggled to calm her pounding heart and her ragged breathing. Anthony had moved until he was sitting on the bed, holding her in his arms, whispering reassurances and comfort to her. Thom stood helplessly at the foot of her hospital bed not sure what to do. With the cobwebs of her dream flitting through her mind, and while she knew it made no sense, she lowered her head as tears began streaming down her face. Anthony held her and rubbed his hands up and down her back until the tears ceased.

Calming, she pulled away from Anthony, mortified that he had been a witness to such an embarrassing display. As she pulled away she saw Thom still standing at the foot of the bed. She'd forgotten about him and her face reddened. Yeah, she was sure she'd made such a great impression on him. She bet there'd be no more movie nights.

"Sorry, Anthony, I don't know what came over me. It must be the stress of everything," she said, wincing at the pounding in her head. She tried to squint her eyes to keep the light from aggravating her headache.

"Ah, mi amor. What can I do? Do you want me to get you a nurse or some more meds?" Anthony asked solicitously.

"I do have a headache, could I get some aspirin and a glass of water?" she asked.

"Of course, I'll get the nurse and be right back, okay?" He brushed a piece of her tangled mop from her face, careful not to disturb the bandages covering her temple, and leaned forward to press his cool lips to her forehead, and then he was gone. She looked up and saw Thom and with an embarrassed shake of her head, looked down at her hands. She cringed as she felt him move to the side of the bed, sit down, and

reach for her hands.

"This is certainly one way to get attention, Red," Thom said with tender humor.

"How...why...how did you know I was here?" she asked, still embarrassed.

"I have a friend at the courthouse who told me all about a beautiful red-haired detective who'd gotten shot today." A small shudder ran through him as he continued softly, "I wasn't sure what to expect when I arrived. I didn't know if you would be dead or alive...and I was surprised at how much that mattered to me," he broke off as he realized how that must have sounded to her.

She remained silent, still too vulnerable to assist him and even more embarrassed when she realized that tears were running down her face and dripping onto his hands that held hers. He gently moved forward and mimicked the actions of Anthony by pressing his lips to her forehead.

"What is it, Tess?" Thom asked softly.

She shook her head, "It's nothing, just a bad dream. I'm sorry, it's stupid," she said, still looking at their interlocked fingers.

"I think when you've been shot at, you're entitled to both a good cry and to act any way you want," he said, tipping her chin up with his fingers so he could look into her eyes. "I'm just glad you're okay." He gently rubbed his thumbs across her cheekbones. He continued to look into her eyes and slowly moved forward and pressed his lips delicately to hers.

Her breath caught in her throat and she could feel the old fear rising in her. She remained perfectly still and waited until he drew back from her. Desperately, Tess kept trying to shove her pain and hurt back into the box, but the box seemed to be almost too small now. She knew in her heart that he was trying to comfort her and would not understand why what he was doing would freak her out. Fortunately, she didn't have to respond as Anthony and the nurse walked in and Thom was forced to move away from the bed.

CHAPTER 13

The next morning, Tess slowly woke to find Anthony lying next to her on her hospital bed. He had wrapped his arms around her in a comforting embrace and his face was relaxed as he slept. She gently untangled herself from him and sat up, struggling to be as still as possible so as to not wake him. A thought occurred to her and she quickly looked around the room but there was no one else in the room. She lay back down and meant to close her eyes only for a minute, but she felt so... safe.

She felt Anthony stretch beside her and she slowly opened her eyes. He was staring at her and giving her his lady-killer smile. "Good morning," he said.

"Is it still morning?" she asked.

Anthony looked at his thin, gold watch and nodded. "It is, but just barely."

"What happened yesterday? I don't really remember anything beyond my eloquent departure to the concrete floor," she said in embarrassment.

"Not a lot to tell that you don't know. We were right and it was obviously a chop-shop and we were able to recover a lot of stolen vehicles. Unfortunately for most of the owners, their cars are now in pieces," Anthony finished with a yawn.

"What happened to Carter? The last I remember he left me in the emergency room to find a nurse," she said.

"He was with you in the emergency room when I arrived, but you were out like a light, thanks to all the cool drugs they pumped into you. They decided to have you stay overnight for observation. I told Carter I would stay and eventually convinced him to go home and get some rest. Your brother is a good guy, I was happy to finally meet him. Your friend, Thom, arrived a little before visiting hours were over. But that you already know," Anthony relayed.

"Yeah, I do remember that," she said reflexively.

"How are you feeling this morning?" he asked.

"I'm fine, really. Please don't worry. It's just a scratch," she assured him.

"Kyra told me to let you know that she and Dominic came by last night to check on you. I must say that Dominic wasn't happy about finding his brother here. What's the deal with the two of you anyway?" Anthony asked.

"Thom and I are just friends," she answered thoughtfully.

"Well, he seemed overly concerned about you and stayed until they kicked him out. He was very concerned about how frightened you were last night. I take it he doesn't know about what happened before?" he asked.

She just shook her head negatively.

"Well, if you're thinking about moving forward with him, I think you should tell him before things get too deep. You know what I mean?" Anthony said as he pulled her close to him and rested his head on hers.

Later that afternoon, after an excruciatingly difficult phone call to her mother, Carter came to pick Tess up and take her home. They argued for a long while about where she would go, but in the end, he relented and took her to her own house. Tess was tired and needed to be alone for a while. While the bullet grazing her head had not been life-threatening in itself, mentally, it had somewhat rocked her already fragile world. She needed time to begin to rebuild that dam. Carter stopped and picked up her pain prescription and walked with her into her house. Thoughtfully, he went through the house and checked to make sure it was secure. And while he really didn't want to leave her alone, in the end he acquiesced and left.

CHAPTER 14

By the end of the week, though still black and blue, Tess was back to her normal routine, and after much internal debate had decided to cancel her session that week with Dr. Michaels. There was no way she could go there and expose herself emotionally again. So, promptly at seven a.m., she walked in the police station and went to her desk. She was happy to be back to work and ready to resume her normal life. She had been surprised at the outpouring of flowers, cards, and phone calls she'd received during her time at home. Dominic and Kyra had stopped by almost every night and brought her dinner. And while Thom had not stopped by, he'd called; but she'd not answered nor returned his calls. She wasn't sure yet how to proceed with Thom Wyndom, so in true Tess fashion, she just ignored the situation. Anthony had been a permanent fixture when he wasn't out covering work for the both of them. Even Mac, her boss, stopped by and told her not rush back, but to take whatever time she needed.

Tess sat down and began going through the mountains of paperwork of which there seemed to be an inexhaustible supply. She went through her emails, took care of what she could, and deleted those not needed. She was almost through her long list of emails when she stopped cold. Her heart began to pound, her hands trembled, and she sucked in a deep breath. In her list of emails was one from Dane Carver. She had not had any contact with him for almost ten years, not since their breakup. She hesitated before opening the email, but curiosity won out and she hit the enter key to open it.

Tess, I heard about your accident from your mother and hope you are recuperating well. I'm glad it wasn't anything more serious than it was, but I can't help but think about how horribly it could have gone. This is the hardest part of what we do in law enforcement. These types of situations make you really step back and re-evaluate things and people in your life. I know I have told you in the past how sorry I am about what happened all those years ago, and I still truly am. I think of you often and sometimes wish things would have turned out like we had dreamed. You probably don't know this, but you saved my life back then and unknowingly gave me direction. I hope this is not inappropriate but I still miss you and will love you always. You take care of yourself and if you ever need me, I am only a phone call away. Dane

Tess sat silently contemplating Dane's message as she impatiently wiped a betraying tear that managed to escape her eye. She had purposely avoided all contact with him since their breakup. He'd hurt her so deeply that she couldn't face him. The more she thought about it, the angrier she got that he would send an email like this one. He had no right to tell her how he missed her and still loved her. She had spent ten years - ten long years - striving to get past him and she still suffered because of it. He obviously hadn't had that much trouble with moving on - he'd gotten married.

The hardest part of reading the email was that initially, a small part of her wanted to open up like a flower opening its petals to sun, and drink in all the goodness and light of his words. But following swiftly right behind came the harsh realities which were like a shoe coming along to unknowingly crush the petals into the dirt. Tess very carefully and deliberately deleted the email.

Anthony came in not too long after and pressed his customary kiss on her head en route to his desk. He gave her a huge smile and said, "Welcome back, little one."

"It's good to be back. I'm ready to work; what do we have going on today?" she inquired.

"Not a lot. We need to follow up on Auto-Chop and the O'Hara case is fast going nowhere. The killer certainly didn't make it easy for us," Anthony said.

"Okay, what do we need to do with Auto-Chop?" she asked.

"You know the case isn't just a chop-shop case any longer. The minute that bastard pulled out a gun and shot an officer, it was bumped up to attempted homicide. We've been interviewing the guys we rounded up from the garage, but so far, no one is talking. Did you happen to get a look at the shooter?" he asked.

"No, not really, by the time he was coming at me, I shot his windshield and the feathered glass blocked my view. What about the car? Can we get them through the car?" she inquired.

"We found the car abandoned the next day and it had plenty of fingerprints in it. So the lab is busy with that but it will take time."

"Did they ever find that necklace with the medallion from the O'Hara case?" she asked.

"No, it wasn't in the dumpster where the rest of her stuff was found. I did go to that bar, you know the last place anyone remembers seeing her at, and looked around to see if maybe she had lost it before she left...was taken...or whatever happened," he answered.

"Okay, I say let's work on the attempted homicide first and then re-examine the O'Hara case," she said as Anthony nodded his head in agreement.

CHAPTER 15

Kyra called Tess early in the day and told her- not asked - that they, along with Dominic, were going to Sandusky's Pub for dinner. They all needed a night out, she'd said. So here Tess sat again waiting on Kyra and Dominic with a pitcher of beer on the table. She couldn't get the email from Dane out of her mind. She thought that by deleting the email it would somehow, by some miracle, be deleted from her brain, but that wasn't the case. It rattled her more than she wanted to admit.

Tess saw Kyra and Dominic enter the pub and begin walking back to the booth. She watched as Kyra leaned her blond head and whispered something in his ear. She watched Dominic smirk at her then swatted her on her bottom playfully. Tess quickly looked away from their playfulness enviously and told herself to get over it; easy to say, not easy to do.

They ordered their food and Dominic and Kyra tried to get the conversation going, but Tess was struggling internally and was unusually quiet.

"Everything okay?" Dominic asked Tess.

"Yes, I'm fine," Tess gave her pat answer.

Kyra was not that easily deflected, however. "Spill it. What's going on? Did something happen at work? You were fine when I talked to you earlier."

Tess glanced up and looked at Dominic and then back down at the napkin she was demolishing in between her fingers. She didn't know if she felt comfortable enough around him to talk about things in front of him. But she also didn't think Kyra would leave it alone, either.

"I got an email from Dane Carver today," Tess said simply and deliberately nonchalant. The silence at the table was palpable and caused Tess to glance up to make sure Kyra had heard her. She was surprised to see Dominic's dark expression. She didn't know Kyra had discussed her past with Dane with him and she didn't think she liked it.

"Wow, that's a shock! What did he want?" Kyra asked.

Again glancing at Dominic, Tess said, "He just wanted to wish me well on my recovery."

"Well, I guess that was nice of him. That was all, there was nothing else?" Kyra persisted.

"He had some other pleasantries in there, but that was pretty much it," Tess said evasively. There was no way she would ever tell anyone what was in the email. She didn't want to think about it anymore, either.

"So, Dominic...how is work?" Tess asked in deflection.

"Work is good. I manage not to get shot on my job," he told her, smiling.

"I may need to look into that line of work, I think," Tess grinned back.

Almost hesitantly, and being overly nonchalant, Dominic said, "I was...surprised to see Thom at the hospital. I didn't know you two were dating," his tone indicating his disapproval.

"We're not dating, we're just friends," she said, almost angry that she had to defend herself; although why she was this passionate about the argument, she didn't know.

"Oh, well good. Thom is my brother and I love him. But there are things you don't know about him. I just think you should be careful," he said guardedly.

Tess didn't answer but on the inside she resented Dominic trying to tell her what to do. She already had Carter to do that for her and she didn't need anyone else doing it. Suddenly, Tess was tired. It'd been a long day.

When she felt an appropriate amount of time had passed, she bade them goodbye and headed for home. She pulled into the drive and saw Thom's car parked in front of her house. She slowly and pensively got out of her car and headed to her front door. She saw him standing on her small porch, leaning on the railing, with a bouquet of yellow roses in his arms. He smiled tentatively at her as she approached him.

"Counselor, this is a surprise," Tess said.

"Hey, Red. I've been worried about you and decided to come and check on how you are for myself," Thom said, holding the flowers out to her.

"Thank you, they're lovely. I'm fine, really. Everyone is making a big deal out of nothing. It was hardly a scratch," she told him, taking the offered flowers.

"Do you mind if I come in for a little bit? I would like to talk to you, if that's okay," he asked a little hesitantly, obviously very unsure of himself.

They walked into the house and Tess went forward turning on lights as she went. "Do you want anything to drink, or maybe something to eat?" Tess offered, walking into her living room and setting the flowers on the side table.

"No, no, don't go to any trouble, I really just want to talk to you for a few minutes," he said distractedly rubbing a hand over the back of his neck.

Waving a hand indicating they should sit on the couch, Tess asked, "Okay, what's up?"

Thom licked his lips nervously while he tried to get his thoughts in order. "Tess, I think you're fantastic. You're both beautiful and funny... my favorite combination, I must say," he said with a quick grin which soon faded. "Tess, when I heard you'd been shot...and then seeing you lying in the hospital, it... well, I don't mind telling you, it scared the hell out of me. You've become important to me and I want to... I don't know... explore these feelings I have. But I get the feeling you won't let me and I'm not sure why. I know you told me it's not me, but something else. I need to know what I'm fighting against. Will you tell me?"

To say Tess was taken aback was an understatement. She looked at him like a fish out of water not

sure how to proceed. It was her turn to lick her lips and swallow the lump in her throat. The glass box containing her pain and hurt was not only cracking, it was starting to split open. She stared at him for long time before answering. She decided to just put it out there and let it roll where it would. She was tired of trying to hold everything inside.

Now unable to look at him, she dropped her eyes to the braided rug under her coffee table and told him in a very unemotional and clinical tone, "About six months ago, a man broke into my house and... attacked me - attempted to... rape me." She paused over the last two words, seemingly trying the words on for size. She gave a shake of her head, surprised she'd gotten the word 'rape' out of her mouth and continued. "While he wasn't...successful, he still left his mark. I know it must seem silly, but I'm...still afraid," she ended haltingly, still not looking up.

Thom sat very still, trying to absorb what she'd told him. Eventually he slowly reached out his hand and placed it over hers. "Tess, I'm so sorry. I had no idea. What a terrible thing. Did you know the person? Was he apprehended?" he asked softly.

"No, that's the worst part, I don't know who it was or where he is," she said, still looking down.

"Tess, look at me," he commanded her gently. But she was too afraid of seeing the revulsion in his eyes to obey him. He lifted her chin just as he'd done at the hospital and looked deep in her eyes and said, "I don't think it's silly you're afraid, you should be cautious. But Tess, you don't have to be afraid of me. I won't hurt you like that. Can you believe that?" he asked.

"I don't know," she whispered.

Thom leaned forward like he had in the hospital and lightly pressed his lips to hers. She immediately stiffened and he drew back.

"I'm sorry, Thom, I like you and if it had been a different time, there is nothing more I would like than to explore whatever this is between us; but I don't think I can right now," she finished quietly.

Thom sat next to her for a long time not saying anything. Finally turning to her he said with determination, "Tess, I'm sorry but I don't accept that. You are going to have to learn to trust me and get used to me being in your life. I won't take no for an answer," he said gently but firmly. He lifted his hands to her face, again looked into her eyes, and moving very slowly so as not to startle her, he inched his face closer and closer to hers until his lips were gentle and soft on hers. He continued to hold her face to his, even when he felt her go rigid again. He continued placing soft kisses against her lips until he felt her tears spill over onto his hands - he let his hands drop. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

With her glass box of pain lying shattered on the floor, and with tears streaming down her face, she quietly sobbed, "What happens next, Thom? What happens when you want to take it further than just a stupid kiss? What happens when I freak out when you try to take my clothes off? Will you be able to handle that? What happens when you start thinking about what that monster did? About how he ripped off my clothes and ran his vile hands over my body. What then? How long before you won't be able to take it anymore?" she ended brokenly.

Again, Thom sat for a long time in quiet contemplation, taking the time to put his thoughts together, "I don't know what will happen. I can't offer you any guarantees. I only know I want to try. You're worth it... we're worth it."

Tess rose stiffly to her feet and walked to the window, putting her back to Thom. "I was hurt one time before and I barely survived it then - and I was whole. I don't think I'm strong enough right now to survive it again," she said quietly.

Thom rose and came up behind Tess and gently placed his hands on her shoulders. "Let's just take it one day at a time. If it gets to be too heavy for either of us, we'll go from there," he said persuasively. Tess remained silent with her back to him. He gently placed a kiss on the side of her head and pulled the door shut behind him as he left.

CHAPTER 16

The Angry One paced to and fro in front of his desk. He could feel his anger welling up inside of him. Why was he not enough for her? Why did she always think of the other? How could she not see that she needed him? The fates of life were screaming at her to pay attention and kept pointing her in his direction, but still she resisted. He had done everything for her. He knew that she secretly wanted him but was too ashamed to admit it. He had tried to help her over own insecurities by alleviating any guilt she could have had about wanting to have sex with him. He had taken control but was she thankful? No. He tried to show her that she was not just another woman to him by cutting the throat of the other red-headed girl. Didn't that prove his love for her? Still, she continued to ignore him. Well, he was tired of being ignored! He had run to her side during her time of need and what did he get for his troubles? Nothing. She was too busy whoring around to pay much attention to him. Well he was certainly going to show her.

It was time to really get her attention. She needed to turn to him. She needed to be made to see that he was what she wanted. She needed to quit being so skittish and bring herself to him; but how to get her to do that? He immediately thought about the other girl and he smiled. Yes, that's what he would do. It was both satisfying to him and would again bring her attention back to him. His heart began to pound in anticipation of the excitement that was coming his way. He sat down at this desk, leaned forward in his chair, and again flipped the hourglass. Time can heal anything, he thought, but not if you're dead.

CHAPTER 17

Maggie Benson was tired. It had been a grueling week; school all day and then clinicals most of the night. She knew in the end it would be worth it, but right now it was a killer. She was glad that tomorrow was Saturday and she would have the whole day to stay in bed and do nothing, blissful nothing. All her life, all she had wanted to do was help people. While a lot of the kids she went to school with floundered in their decisions for the future, she had always known she wanted to be a nurse. Her mother said it was a calling and Maggie thought she was right.

Maggie left the hospital at two-fifteen a.m. when her shift ended. The last bus was at two-thirty and if she hurried she could just make it to the bus stop. But no matter how fast she tried to go, she was too late. She could see the taillights of the bus pulling away as she rounded the corner. Damn! Now she was going to have to walk the fifteen blocks to her apartment. It certainly wasn't the first time and probably wouldn't be the last. Her biggest complaint about the walk wasn't the walk itself, but toting the thousand pounds of school books in her backpack. Okay, she smiled to herself, they didn't exactly weigh thousand pounds, but it sure felt close.

Maggie pushed her dark hair out of her face and walked through the night making sure to stay in the well-lit areas. Her mom had taught her from a very young age about being safe. She had gotten about halfway home when she started getting an odd feeling like she was being followed. But every time she turned around, the streets were empty. She must be more tired than she thought. She kept walking and as she did her mind kept wandering to the schoolwork she was going to be forced to work on all day Sunday. She rounded the corner of the last block before her apartment building when suddenly someone came up from behind, and using her backpack as leverage, swung her around. Because of the weight of the backpack, the turn made her lose her balance and she fell. Before she could get back to her feet, someone was placing a cloth over her face and she sucked air into her lungs involuntarily in surprise. Within seconds, Maggie Benson was unconscious.

Maggie was cold. When was her landlord going to fix the heat? Last winter, she had almost frozen to death. Slowly, Maggie became aware of her surroundings. Immediately, she remembered being pushed down and having the cloth placed to her face. She tried to sit up but found she was tied to a bed and she was naked. She twisted her head side to side trying to see where she was and if there was any way out of it. As she looked frantically around the dark room, her gaze landed on a man sitting in a chair at the corner of bed watching her. He smiled when he saw she had spotted him. Slowly, the man rose from the

chair and walked purposefully to the bed.

CHAPTER 18

Anthony called Tess at home before she'd even finished her first cup of coffee. She'd lain in bed wallowing in her own sappiness for as long as even she could stand before his call. There'd been another body discovered at the Adobe Palace Apartments. He told her to meet him there pronto. She finished getting dressed, took a minute to look up the address and then headed out.

She arrived at the Adobe Palace Apartments just a few minutes after Anthony. She looked around to get an initial feel for the place. While the complex certainly wasn't upscale, it did appear to be well-maintained. She could see a body with a drape over it in front of apartment number two, along with several police officers, and the CSI team.

As was her norm, she walked around the area before going over to the body. In her mind, the body was the finale. What happened before the end was what was important. While the establishment was called apartments, they were actually a series of duplexes shaped in a "U" pattern with three sets of duplexes on each side and two sets in the middle. The exterior of the buildings, per their name, had a stucco exterior painted someone's perception of the desert, a kind of orangey-brown color. There were lots of arches and wooden accents on the buildings to further perpetuate the Santa Fe decor.

Tess glanced around and saw clusters of people standing around watching the proceedings. This was certainly different than the last crime scene which had been in a more deserted business district. She wondered who'd discovered the body and if it'd been found before the children in the duplexes had gone outside. For their sake, she sure hoped so. No one needed to have that image in their mind, especially kids. Once she'd completed her perimeter search, she headed to where Anthony and the body were.

When she arrived, Anthony and Aaron Moss, the crime scene tech, were talking, but stopped when Tess walked up. "Good morning, fellows. What mayhem do we have going today?" she asked.

Anthony turned and smiled at her, "Good morning, Tess."

Aaron Moss began repeating the information he'd giving Anthony prior to her arrival. As he spoke, he moved the drape covering the body. Tess hadn't realized she'd been holding her breath until she let it out and gave a silent sigh of relief when she saw the girl did not have red hair. But the girl was familiar to her for some reason. Where had she seen her before? She didn't think the girl was someone she knew personally, but someone she had seen somewhere. But where?

"The body is similar to the last vic with no clothes, purse, or shoes. This woman does have a tattoo of angel wings on her ankle. She has even more bruising around her neck. She doesn't have any bruising or any other markings on her face. There is trauma to her genitals and bruising around her wrists and ankles. Like the last victim, her throat is cut and she appears to have been wiped clean. According to the landlord, she doesn't live in these apartments. And lastly, as with the other body, there's an hourglass with the same poem underneath. That's really all I know at this point. Maybe we can get more after we examine her," Aaron reported.

Before Tess and Anthony split up to begin canvassing the neighbors in the other apartments, Tess asked him, "Did the victim look familiar to you?"

"No. Why?"

"I think I've seen her somewhere, but I can't remember where," she answered.

Apartment number two, where the victim had been placed, was vacant and had been for over two months. As with the other victim, if anyone had seen anything, no one was talking. They hoped once the victim could be identified they'd have a better chance of solving the case.

When Anthony and Tess arrived back at the station, Tess was surprised to see a flower arrangement sitting on her desk. Anthony teased her and she smiled uncomfortably. She reached towards the colorful array of wildflowers and pulled out the card. It was signed simply, Thinking of you, Thom. She still wasn't sure she could have a relationship with him. He was the first person since the attack - really since Dane - that she'd even contemplated having a serious relationship with. Tess just knew that eventually

Thom would tire of the game and would just want a nice, normal relationship with a nice, normal girl.

For some reason, an image immediately flashed through her mind; it was the night she had met Kyrá and Dominic at Sandusky's Pub, the first night she'd met Thom. She remembered looking to the back of the pub and seeing Thom leaning in to kiss a girl. It was the same girl! She was sure of it. The girl she'd seen Thom kiss that night was the same girl she'd seen this morning at the crime scene. She immediately sat forward in her chair. Anthony looked up and gave her a quizzical look.

"I remember where I saw the victim. It was at Sandusky's Pub," she told him. She stopped short of telling him about Thom's involvement. For some reason, she felt hesitant to bring him up in connection to the dead girl.

"Are you sure?"

Tess nodded, "I saw her only for a second, but I'm sure it's her."

Tess flipped through the case file on her desk until she found a photo taken at the scene that morning. She stared at the girl lying face-up, staring at nothing.

"I'm gonna go to Sandusky's and see if anyone remembers her," she told Anthony.

"Do you want me to come with you?" He asked. Trying to sound more casual than she felt, she told him no.

Tess walked the two blocks to Sandusky's Pub. As it was the middle of the day, there weren't too many people inside, just those needing a quiet place to spend an afternoon. Due to having a lull in customers, the pub was only staffed with two employees, a bartender and a waitress during this shift. She walked quickly to the bar and showed the bartender the black and white crime scene photo of their victim, but he said he didn't remember her. She asked the waitress but she said she didn't, either. Tess figured she had two options: she could either wait to talk with the night shift staff from the pub, or go ask Thom. And while she really wanted to get her information from here, she knew where she had to go.

CHAPTER 19

Thom Wyndom had an office on the east side of town on the fifth floor of a bank building. As Tess stepped out of the elevator, she couldn't help but compare the differences between the sterile offices of the police station to the opulence of Thom's offices. The lobby was painted a light peach shade which gave the room a soft, serene feel. All the furniture was pale and oversized. It felt like money...big money. Tess approached an attractive young woman who sat at the reception desk. The woman looked up and smiled in professional courtesy.

"May I help you?"

"I need to see Thom Wyndom," Tess answered.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No, please tell him that..." Tess hesitated, unsure about putting things in an official capacity, "Tess Champion is here to see him, please."

The young receptionist walked to a set of double doors and rapped quietly. From inside, Tess could hear a low voice rumble. The receptionist stuck her head inside the door and spoke in hushed tones. After a brief hesitation, the receptionist turned and motioned for Tess to follow her into the office. Tess walked through the doors and saw Thom already standing up and coming from around his desk, which was covered in papers.

"Tess, this is a great surprise," he said, smiling, reaching for her hand and leaning in to kiss her on her cheek.

Tess felt a little guilty for the reason of her visit when she saw the true pleasure on Thom's face. I should have just called him, she thought to herself.

"Hey, Thom," she said, stepping away from him. He frowned a little when he felt her pull back.

"Nice digs. I can see why you have to put in all those hours now," she said with a strained smile.

"Come and sit with me," he said, indicating an oversized couch.

She followed and sat down next to him, but not close enough to touch accidentally.

“So, what brings you here?”

“First, thanks for the flowers, they’re beautiful. And I was going to say you shouldn’t have, but after seeing your office, I think you should have sent a bigger arrangement,” she teased in order to get over her awkwardness.

“You’re welcome. I woke up this morning thinking of you and wanted you to know, that’s all,” he replied smoothly.

Taking a deep, steadying breath she said, “Thom, I need your help with something. Do you remember the night we met at Sandusky’s Pub with Dominic and Kyra?” At his nod, she continued. “Do you remember when I first saw you, you were kissing a petite, dark-haired girl?”

Immediately Thom reached over and grabbed one of Tess’s hands. “Tess, I promise it didn’t mean anything. I’m not involved with anyone else. She was just someone I went out with couple of times, it was nothing,” he supplied quickly, misunderstanding the purpose of the question.

Tess reached around and pulled her file with the photo towards her. She hesitated and debated about how best to bring up the girl’s demise. This was someone he knew and no matter how he tried to downplay it, she might have been important to him. Slowly, she put the file down and turned back to a perplexed Thom. And surprising him, she grabbed his hands within hers.

“Thom, this morning, a body was found at an apartment complex in the city. I’m not sure, but I think it’s the same girl you were with that night,” she said softly.

“What! Are you sure?” he exclaimed.

“No, not totally. I’m sorry, but you’re the only one I know who might be able to identify this woman. Will you look at a crime scene photo of the girl to see if you know her? I could be wrong and I hope that I am,” she said, looking at him, trying to read his expression. It was difficult because as an attorney, he was used to playing things close to the vest.

At his nod, she again turned and grabbed the file. She flipped it open and handed the photo to Thom. The black and white photo shook a little in his hands as he looked at it. He sat for a long moment staring at the young woman in the photo before answering.

“It’s Maggie. I can’t believe it. What a shame. What a waste,” he said, almost to himself.

“Do you know her last name?” Tess prodded gently.

Thom gave a little nod of his head as he remembered Tess sitting there, lost as he was in his own reflections of the woman.

“Benson. Maggie Benson. She’s a nurse, or is going to school to become one. I met her one night in the emergency room when I fell while cycling and had to get stitches. We dated a few times, nothing serious...” his voice tapered off as he became lost in his own thoughts, still finding it hard to comprehend.

“I’m so sorry, Thom. Do you know anything about her? Where she lived, where any of her family lives?”

“Not really. Usually, we met wherever we were going. She told me once that her mom told her to always be safe and since we hardly knew each other...” he trailed off.

Tess couldn’t help the little glitch she felt as she observed how much this seemed to bother Thom. She didn’t think she could be so shallow as to be jealous, especially in these circumstances. She quickly looked away before Thom could read her expression.

“What hospital did she work for?”

“Northside General...” again he trailed off. “Listen, Tess,” he said, handing the photograph back to her. “I have work to do, if there’s nothing else...” again he trailed off.

Tess stared at him opened-mouthed as she realized that he was giving her the brush-off. She was shocked. She’d never seen this type of behavior from him. From Dominic yes, but not from fun-loving Thom. She didn’t quite know what to make of it. So she stood, put the photo back into the file, and turning, said in her best official tone, “If there’s anything else, I’ll be in touch.”

She turned to leave when Thom grabbed her arm and turned her to face him. “It’s not what you think, Tess. You just took me by surprise, okay? While I wasn’t seriously involved with Maggie, I was

involved and it bothers me just the same. I just need to be able to process it on my own. I'll call you later."

"Don't worry about it, Counselor. One more question if you don't mind. Can you tell me where you were this morning between two and six a.m.?"

Thom gave her a long, measured look, ran his tongue over his teeth in exasperation, and said, "I was at home...alone." He slowly turned and walked back to his desk and sat down heavily. "Anything else...?" he asked coldly.

Tess turned and walked out of Thom's office. What was her problem? He had every reason to be disgusted with her; she was certainly disgusted with herself. He'd just surprised her with his attachment to the other girl and she hadn't expected that. It had wounded her. She wanted to trust him and as stupid as it sounded, he had somehow abused her trust. She had tried to tell him that she wasn't ready for...anything. And this just proved her point.

Tess made her way back to the office where Anthony was still seated at his desk. He smiled when she walked in and sat down. "Any luck?" he asked.

"Yeah, the vic's name is Maggie Benson and she worked at Northside General Hospital," she told him woodenly. "Listen, Anthony, there's something I need to take care of, do you mind going to the hospital and getting her personal information?" she asked while pretending to look through papers on her desk.

"Of course. Now tell me, what's the matter?"

"Nothing, there's just something I need to do, okay?" She looked up and saw the stubborn tilt of Anthony's chin. She took a deep breath and said, "Listen, Anthony, I just need a little time to sort through something. We'll discuss it later, I promise okay?" Narrowing his eyes at her curtness, he slowly nodded his head, and walked out of the office. Well, two for two, she thought as she picked up the phone and dialed.

CHAPTER 20

Tess sat again in Dr. Kendra Michaels's waiting room. This time, however, she wasn't angry for having to be here...she was desperate. She didn't know what was going on with her psyche, but she really needed to find out. Her total overreaction to Thom had proven that. So here she sat, staring at the same swirls, surrounding the same roses, on the same carpet.

"The doctor will see you now," the receptionist said.

Tess nodded and entered into Dr. Michaels's office.

"Tess, I can't begin to tell you how surprised I am to hear from you. To be honest, I didn't think you would be back after the last visit. Tell me, what can I do for you?"

Instead of sitting, Tess walked over to the huge window which showcased a fake waterfall falling over fake rocks. "I've been thinking about what you told me at our last session, about pushing people away and I think you could be right. I've met someone who I think I could possibly have a relationship with, and who I think wants to have a relationship with me. But I find the harder he pursues, the more roadblocks I put up."

"What kind of roadblocks?" Dr. Michaels asked.

"When it comes to physical contact I push him away. I thought at first it was due to the attack and maybe that is part of it, but I think I push him away mostly because I'm afraid he has the power to hurt me."

"Wow! That is a breakthrough. What other roadblocks?"

Tess paused for a long time before answering, knowing what she was about to reveal was troubling.

“I keep identifying this man with my attacker.”

“You mean as a safety valve?”

“No, I mean when I see my attacker in my mind, and in my dreams, it’s him.”

“Could this man be your attacker?” Dr. Michaels asked quietly.

“No, of course not; or at least I don’t think so. How could he possibly be? Thom is a great guy. He’s funny, smart, and caring. He’s incredibly gentle. I just have a problem and I don’t know how to fix it. I’m afraid if I keep on going the way I’m going, I won’t have a chance to be...well, whole again. I’m afraid, I’ll see every man I attempt to date as the attacker.”

“Tess, being sexually attacked affects people on several different levels: there’s the obvious issue of self-image; it affects how we relate to people, specifically in dating and sexual relationships; but more importantly to you, there is a loss of control. You were already dealing with feelings of lost control and then it was forcibly taken from you again. Now you continuously strive to find ways to be in control. Unfortunately, there is no one who can break that cycle... but you. You have to decide to take control of the things you can, and allow others the same right.” Dr. Michaels said smiling gently at her. “As far as seeing your new love as the attacker; for a long time you will have to deal with what we call ‘triggers.’ These triggers can be caused by people and/or things both connected and seemingly unconnected to your attack. You have to look within yourself and see what the two have in common. Who knows, your new love may hold the key to finding your attacker.”

Tess shoulders sagged at the weight of her words. She didn’t know if she was strong enough to do what was required.

CHAPTER 21

Tess left Dr. Michaels’s office no better off than when she arrived there. She didn’t know what to do from this point on. She was tired of the constant struggle. She wanted to be free of the barriers, free of the insecurities; free of being afraid every minute of every day. As she was driving home, she saw the sign for Ernie’s Bar & Grill and decided to stop. It certainly had to be better than going home and conducting her daily security checks.

She sat down at the bar on the end away from everyone else and ordered whiskey on the rocks. She sat and sipped the drink until it was gone and ordered another...then another until she had a nice collection of empty glasses sitting in front of her. By the time she was drinking her last drink, her face was resting on her arm on the bar. It was now getting pretty late in the evening and the crowd was starting to increase and the music’s volume grew louder. As she lie there wallowing in her own self-pity, she felt someone sit down on the barstool next to her but she didn’t turn around and she didn’t lift her head off her arm; it just wasn’t worth the effort.

“Hey, little lady, can I buy you drink?”

Tess turned her liquor-heavy head on her arm to look at the person speaking to her. A man in his late thirties with blond hair peeking out from under a cowboy hat sat next to her. She shook her head at the blond-haired man. She turned her head back away from him effectively shutting him out of her thoughts; out of sight, out of mind. He tapped her on the arm again and asked her to dance, and this time she didn’t even turn her head in this direction, but only again shook her head. Eventually, the man moved on and left her in her self-imposed isolation. When the bartender announced last-call, Tess struggled her way off the barstool and staggered towards the door.

The air outside was cooler than when she had arrived and she’d left her jacket in her car and she shivered slightly. After she’d taken a few steps, the blond-haired man from the bar slipped up next to her and placed his arm around her shoulders.

“Where are you running off to? It’s way too early to call it a night,” he said with a slight southern twang.

Tess didn’t have the mental fortitude to deal with “Blondie” tonight, so instead of answering him,

she just shrugged his arm off her shoulders and again began walking towards her car. She weaved as she walked and she tried to focus on putting one foot in front of the other without stumbling. She'd finally made it to her car when suddenly she was grabbed from behind and quickly turned around until her back was pressed up against her car. "Blondie" had both of her arms pinned to each side and he was pressing his body up against hers. He leaned in and placed his lips against hers harshly. Intense panic raged throughout her body and she was momentarily stunned. She shook her head in an effort to clear her booze-clouded mind and she began to struggle and move her head side to side to evade his mouth.

In the onslaught of the attack, panic had overwhelmed her; but suddenly, anger turned the panic into pure, hot rage. Her mind quickly became clear and she knew what she had to do: self-defense 101. She relaxed herself in an illusion of surrender and when his mouth found hers, she allowed him to kiss her deeply. While engrossed in the kiss, he unpinned her arms and stepped away from her in order to lift his hands to her face, it was at that moment Tess brought her knee up hard and quick. "Blondie" fell back onto the ground, groaning in pain. Tess immediately turned back around and frantically tried to unlock her door to get into the relative safety of her car but her fingers were uncoordinated and shaking. Before she could get the door open, "Blondie" was back up and had shoved her into the side of the car.

"You bitch!" he screamed. He grabbed a handful of her hair and slammed her head into the car. Before she could clear her idled brain, "Blondie" was being lifted away from her and thrown to the side. She turned to see Dominic Wyndom leaning over the other guy. "Blondie" immediately turned around and limped back into the bar.

Tess leaned wearily onto her car. She was so stupid, so very stupid. She looked up to see Dominic watching her warily.

"You're bleeding," he said, reaching up to wipe the blood from her cheek. She winced when he touched it. "Yeah, that's gonna leave a mark, I'm afraid," he said in a soft, joking voice. More serious, he said, "What are doing out here, Tess? Were you with that guy?" With a shaky sigh, she just shook her head no.

Without speaking, she turned and again tried to unlock her car, but Dominic reached over and grabbed her car keys from her. "For God's sake, Tess, you're a cop. You know better than to drink and drive. Come on, I'll take you home." He grabbed her arm and began walking her to his truck.

"What are you doing here, Dominic? I didn't know you hung out here at Ernie's," she slurred, struggling to get her thoughts in order.

"I don't, but it's late and I happened to see your car as I was going by and wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Well I'm glad you did. I don't think I could have handled him by myself. Thanks, Dominic."

"Tess, why do you come to places like this? You have to know the type of men who come here. It's not safe," Dominic admonished her.

"I know, you're right, it was stupid," she said as she leaned her face against the cool glass of the truck's window.

Dominic pulled his truck into her driveway and as he did, she heard him swear. Sluggishly, she lifted her head up and looked to see what Dominic was up in arms about. She turned her head towards her porch and just like before, Thom was on her porch leaning against the railing. Oh this night just kept getting better and better, Tess thought, groaning to herself. Dominic got out of the truck and walked around and helped Tess out of her side. Together they walked to the porch. Thom stepped away from the railing, watching them with condemning eyes.

"Well, I was worried that you might have been upset after our last conversation. I guess I didn't quite understand the lay of the land, so to speak," Thom said, his voice filled with implication.

Tess sighed and pushed her hair out of her face, "It's not like that. Dominic was just giving me a ride home."

"Not that it's really any of your business. What are you doing here, Thom?" Dominic asked in a harsh tone.

"I had some personal things to discuss with Tess, and again like you said, not that it's any of your business," Thom said just as harshly.

Tess stepped towards the porch and Thom, and as she neared, she heard him gasp. "Oh my God, what happened to your face?" Immediately, he turned to Dominic. "What did you do?" Thom instantly began to advance on Dominic but Tess grabbed his arm.

"It wasn't him, Thom, it was someone else. Dominic just happened to be there to lend a helping hand. That's all." Thom slowed his advance, shook his head, and turned briefly towards Tess. He gave her a measured look, clenching and unclenching his hands into fists in an effort to maintain his temper.

"Listen, Tess, I think I'm gonna leave for now and we'll talk later, okay?"

"Wait, Thom, don't go..." Tess trailed off. But Thom was already walking towards his car.

"Tess, let's get you in the house, okay?" With dejection rolling over her in waves and her shoulders slumped, she walked up to the door and unlocked it.

"Thanks for the lift, and well, everything. I guess it would be asking too much to keep this just between us?" she asked, turning to him.

"We might be able to work out something." There was something in his tone that made Tess feel uncomfortable. Man, did she have too much to drink.

"Okay, well thanks again. I'll see you later, goodnight," she said, shutting the door firmly and leaning her forehead on the door. She slowly slid the bolt into place, turned, leaned her back against the door, and slid down until she ended on floor.

CHAPTER 22

The Angry One drove while rage stabbed at his belly like a red-hot poker. What was it going to take with her? Why did she feel the need to humiliate him with her disgusting behavior? Time and time again, he had watched her degrade herself and allow other men to possess her body and spirit. He was going to have to put a stop to this. Apparently he was not clear enough in what he wanted.

As much as it pained him, he now knew what he had to do. She would be hurt by it, he knew, but there really was no other way. He had no choice in this, but it was for her own good. Maybe this time she would pay attention.

CHAPTER 23

Tess awoke the next morning with a pounding both in her head and at her front door. She couldn't get her mind to concentrate long enough to understand what she was doing on the floor of her entryway. Gingerly, she opened her eyes and then shut them just as quickly. She decided to just stay where she was for a little while longer. But then the pounding on her front door started again.

"Tess, hey, it's Anthony. Open up the door. I need to talk to you."

Tess moaned in agony as it felt as if someone had hit her in the head repeatedly with a sledgehammer. She wished they would have just finished the job. She slowly stood as Anthony began pounding on the door yet again.

"Okay, okay, give me a minute," she muttered as she finally got her feet up under her and stood up to unlock the door.

The minute she opened the door, Anthony was walking through, obviously in high emotion about something.

"Tess, what's going on? I've been trying to reach you all morning!" As he spoke he turned around and finally really saw her for the first time. "Oh my God! What happened to you? Who did this? Are you drunk?" he walked towards her as he spoke.

Tess struggled to bring herself together. She tried to bring some saliva into her mouth but was unable to produce any. She reached up and brushed her hair out of her face. While doing so, her hand accidentally brushed her cheek which had been slammed onto the car and she winced at the pain. She looked at Anthony with bleary eyes and grimaced. She hated to think what she must look like.

“Hey, Anthony, listen, can you give me a minute? I need to...freshen up a bit.”

Anthony didn't answer her; he just turned around and went further into the house. Tess stood where she was for a moment trying to decipher his actions. Eventually she heard him in the kitchen, obviously putting coffee in the machine.

She turned and went into her bedroom. She stripped off her clothes, got into the shower, and turned the water on as hot as she could stand it. She stood in the stinging spray for a long while trying to get her muddled mind to function. It wasn't that she didn't remember what'd happened the night before; she just didn't want to think about it right now. She wondered what time it was and why Anthony was here so early. It couldn't be that late, could it? Did she oversleep and Anthony came by to check on her? She knew she was not going to be able to avoid him forever and just like Ricky Ricardo said to Lucille Ball in every episode of 'I Love Lucy,' There's going to be some 'splaining to do.

Tess emerged from her bedroom in her bathrobe and a towel wrapped around her head. She'd thought about delaying further by getting properly dressed, but didn't think Anthony would appreciate that. When she walked into the kitchen she felt an odd tension radiating from Anthony. He was facing away with his back to her, standing absolutely still, and staring out her kitchen window. There was tenseness in his stance and it made her apprehensive but she didn't know why.

Tess padded over to the counter, grabbed a cup from the cabinet, and poured herself a cup of coffee. Anthony waited until she sat and took a couple of sips of her coffee before he walked to the kitchen table and sat in the chair closest to her. He swallowed several times and at first wouldn't meet her gaze. Tess grew suddenly very afraid. She put her coffee cup down and leaned back in her chair to somehow put some distance between herself and whatever was going on here.

Seeing her movement, Anthony lifted sorrowful eyes to her and leaned forward, grabbing her hands gently in his big ones. He began to speak and then stopped, obviously not sure what to say. Tess didn't question him, but remained perfectly still, trying to maintain control of herself as she could feel panic starting to creep over her.

In the softest voice she'd ever heard him use, an almost parent-to-child-like tone, he began, “Tess, I have something to tell you and it's bad. There is no easy way to tell you so I will just come out with it, okay?”

Tess slowly nodded her head without saying anything, apprehension flooding her body.

“Tess, its Kyra. She's been... murdered. We think it's the same person who killed the other two girls. Tess, I'm so sorry. I know what she meant to you.”

Tess sat stunned beyond comprehension staring blankly at Anthony. Her body was numb. She didn't realize she'd been holding her breath until she had to suck in air for her screaming lungs. Suddenly, her stomach rolled and she jumped up and just made it to the sink in time and began vomiting. Anthony leapt up and moved her hair away from her face. She vomited and vomited until her body was simply dry-heaving. She turned on the faucet and rinsed her face and mouth. She stood just as still as Anthony had with the exception her entire body was trembling. Turning, her trembling legs folded and she slid down the cabinet front until she was on the floor as sobs ripped through her body. Anthony reached for her while she was sliding down but couldn't stop the momentum. He followed her down and ended up on the floor beside her, holding her while she cried.

Tess cried for the loss of a life taken away too young. She cried for the loss of a daughter to a mother. She cried at the injustice of someone thinking they had the right to destroy something so beautiful. But mostly she cried for the terrible loss she personally had; the loss of one of the pillars in her life. She'd been there for her since almost the beginning. She'd held her hand when she cried over past love. She'd supported her even when she hadn't believed what she was doing was right. She had been her best friend and she'd loved her.

Tess cried until there were no more tears left. She knew she would eventually have to ask Anthony what'd happened, but she just wanted to live in denial. If she found out the facts, then it became real and she didn't know if she could deal with that.

Anthony helped her off the floor, but instead of putting her back in her chair, he lifted her, and carrying her to her room, he laid her on her bed. He kicked his shoes off and lay down beside her, pulling

her in his arms and holding her silently for a long while.

Eventually he began to speak. "I got a call this morning around five. The responding officer knew it was Kyra immediately and called the Chief. She'd been raped and killed just as the other two girls, but she'd been beaten worse. Her face was almost unrecognizable from the swelling. It couldn't have happened much before she was found as there was very little bruising," he stopped speaking but continued to rub his arms up and down her back.

When she didn't respond, he asked, "Okay, now are you going to tell me what happened to you?"

She slowly shook her head.

"It's not important now," she said dully.

Tess felt as if someone had a fist inside her chest, squeezing her heart in an attempt to crush it. She didn't know if she had the strength to endure this anymore. There'd been too much lately. As selfish and unfair as it was, she was hurt and angry that Kyra would be lumped in with those other girls. She was unique and special. Tess's mind rebelled against her being one of them, when she had been one of us.

Tess knew with a certainty she had to be very careful with her response to this. She knew everyone would be watching her reaction to make sure she didn't crack. She could almost feel the powers that be trying to rip her case, this case, away from her. She wasn't going to let that happen. Slowly and carefully, she reached inside herself and began to reconstruct her glass box. She was going to find Kyra's killer and she was going to make him pay. Yes, rage felt so much better than pain...and more manageable.

Slowly, Tess sat up and moved a little out of Anthony's comforting embrace. His need to protect and comfort her made her feel vulnerable and unable to begin building the walls necessary around her emotions to deal with this situation. So she began putting distance between them, both physically and mentally.

She swiped her unruly waves out of her face and turning to Anthony said, "Does Dominic know?"

"I'm not sure. The only thing I was told was the Chief was going to Kyra's parents' house this morning. I'm not sure if anyone thought to notify Dominic. Was the situation that serious with them?"

"I don't think it was marriage-serious, but they may have been heading that way."

"Do you think he could have had anything to do with this?" Anthony asked.

"No, he's not like that. I think he loved her." Tess didn't add that she had just seen him last night at her house. He certainly didn't look like he was on his way to kill someone.

"I think I need to go see him. I would hate for him to find out from anyone else," she said.

"Do you want me to come with you?"

Tess shook her head, "No, I think this is something I owe to Kyra. Can you let Mac know I won't be in today?" she asked.

"Of course. Do you want me to stay here with you? I don't think you should be alone. I don't know what's been going on, but I'm worried about you."

"There's no need, I'm fine. I just need today to get myself together and take care of a few things. I'll be in tomorrow and we'll start working this case." She paused as a thought occurred to her. "Was there an hourglass and poem at the location of Kyra's...scene?" she couldn't bring herself to say murder.

"Yes, the killer conveniently makes it easy for us to tie all the murders together."

CHAPTER 24

It took Tess a while to convince Anthony to leave her. While she was thankful to have him in her life and appreciated his concern, she knew that she wouldn't be able to hide her true emotions from him for long. She needed him to leave so she could face her loss alone and be free from overprotective eyes. It made her feel guilty to think that way about him, but the true realities of life had taught her to keep emotional things tucked deep inside...hidden.

Once he left, she lay back down on her bed and thought of Kyra. She'd come into her life at a time when the only constant was change. In a world that had shown Tess how very dark it could be, Kyra had arrived and shown her the opposite end of the spectrum with her bubbly lightness.

They'd met when Tess was first promoted to Detective at the Aurora PD. Kyra had met her at the door and immediately taken over. She showed Tess around and told her all the local gossip with who to know and who to avoid. She'd taken her around town and helped her furnish her small house. They'd gone to parties, events, and local bars. She was the only one who knew exactly what had happened with her relationship with Dane. And if she didn't quite understand her undying attachment to him, she never judged. She would just wrap her arms around her when she cried, and rejoiced with her when she was happy.

Tess remembered one Christmas she'd scouted the stores trying to find just the perfect gift for Kyra. She'd finally wound up in a small retro store in the downtown district. In amongst the tied-dyed shirts and eight-track players, she'd found a gold pendant with a mood stone in the center. She'd thought it was fitting because no matter Tess's mood, Kyra could always make her feel better. Kyra had loved the necklace and had never taken it...off...

Tess sat up with a start and her heart began to pound. She jumped up off the bed and called Anthony. He answered on the first ring.

"Hey, honey, is everything okay?" he asked in a gentle tone.

"Anthony, do you know if they found Kyra's mood pendant? You know - the one she always wore? It was gold with an oval mood stone in it," she said in a rush.

Anthony paused as he thought, "I'm not sure. I don't remember that being mentioned, but I will call and check on it. What are you thinking? That the killer is taking souvenirs?"

Tess was almost gleeful in her response, "I do think that. I think this proves that my attacker and the killer are the same. My attacker took my bracelet and the killer took Christina O'Hara's necklace. We will have to check on Maggie Benson's belongings, but I bet you will find she was missing something also."

Saying Maggie Benson's name immediately reminded Tess of Thom and how they had ended things. It made her feel sick to her core to remember the night before. What had she been thinking? And what must he think of her now? She bet he was glad to be rid of her and glad he hadn't devoted too much energy into the relationship.

"Tess, are you still there? Are you okay?" Anthony broke into her thoughts.

"Yes, I'm fine," she said in a voice unreflective of her words.

"I'll check the property list when it comes in from the ME's office and call you back, okay?"

"Sounds good. Thanks for everything, Anthony."

Tess didn't know how to fix her relationship with Thom or if she had any right to try and draw him into her life right now. It really wasn't fair to him. Her heart ached for both Kyra and for what might have been with Thom. He had been so good, so gentle, and like a potter at his wheel, he had begun to remold her heart in a small way. She swallowed hard at her losses.

Tess knew she could not put off any longer what she had to do, so she got up, dressed in jeans and top, and called Dominic to ask if she could see him. Since it was close to lunch, he asked her if she wanted to meet at an Italian eatery not far from where his office was located. She told him she'd rather just come by his office first.

"Is everything all right, Tess?" he asked in a troubled voice.

"I'll explain everything when I get there, okay?"

Tess arrived within the hour to Dominic's office. While Dominic actually had a very posh office in downtown Denver, he currently was using a jobsite trailer as his temporary office on the worksite. It was small and cramped with only the most basic amenities. He stood up and came around from behind his cluttered desk to greet her when she arrived.

"Well this is a surprise. Ouch! Your face looks painful. I'm so sorry that happened."

"I have no one to blame but myself," she replied absently, temporarily forgetting about her bruised, swollen face.

"Dominic, can we sit down for a minute?"

"Of course, is everything okay?" he asked as he directed her to a small couch opposite his desk.

"No, not really," she said, hesitating. She didn't know where to start, how to tell someone that

someone they...loved, she guessed, was dead.

He watched her silently but watchfully.

"Dominic, I'm so sorry to tell you this...but something has happened to Kyra. She was killed last night."

Dominic sat very still for a very long time, not even blinking. He just stared at her and his emotion was extremely hard to read. Finally he said softly, "How was she killed?"

"I don't know if you need to know the details, Dominic, they aren't pleasant."

"I think I need to know," he said with extreme calm.

"She was raped and beaten, then strangled," Tess said as she reached for his hand.

Dominic gently shook her hand off and stood, running his hand through his hair while turning his back to her. She immediately jumped up and wrapped her arms around him. "I'm so sorry. I know how much she meant to you. How much she meant to all of us," she said on a sob.

Dominic turned around to her and grabbed her tight in his arms and held her close as he repeatedly took long, deep breaths in an effort to calm himself. "I don't know what to do. I don't know how to handle this, I'm not prepared," said the man who was so used to being in control.

His body began to tremble and Tess just hugged him all the closer. She rubbed her hands up and down his back in the comforting way Anthony had done for her.

Slowly he pulled back and looked down into her face then shockingly bent his face and began to kiss her deeply and thoroughly. To say Tess was stunned was an understatement. She didn't know what to do. She knew he was hurting and was seeking comfort in any way he could. But this was totally unnerving to her and it felt so disloyal to Kyra. She slowly pulled away from him and swallowed.

"I'm so sorry, Tess. I don't know what I was thinking. I'm just so upset over Kyra. Please forgive me. I don't think I could stand to lose both of you on the same day," he said brokenly.

"No, its okay, its okay," she muttered, again pulling him close to her. She took a deep breath and forced her body to stay close to his.

Eventually he got a grip on his emotions and said, "Tess, I appreciate so much you coming yourself to tell me, but I think I need to be alone for a while. Would that be all right?"

"Of course, I understand. I'll find out the funeral arrangements and let you know. Please call me if you need anything, okay?" She gave him one last hug and left quietly.

On the drive home, she let out a deep sigh. She was bone-weary tired. The stress of having to be strong was wearing on her and her shoulders sagged as she drove. She felt the tears streaming down her face and eventually had to pull over when her vision became impaired. How would she survive without Kyra? She could feel the dam she had built crumbling brick by brick.

Once Tess had gotten herself back under control, she knew there was one more stop she needed to make. She called Jackson Manning at the ME's office and asked if it would be okay for her stop by the morgue and he reluctantly agreed. She drove slowly, not in any hurry to arrive. As she drove, she mentally began bracing herself for this difficult task. While she knew it would be devastatingly hard, she felt she owed it to Kyra to say a proper goodbye and secure as much information as she could in order to find her killer and avenge her death.

She arrived late in the afternoon and the sun was already starting to find its way to its nesting place behind the Rocky Mountains. She looked into her rearview mirror to see what damage she could repair. Her hair, as usual, was in complete disarray; wearily she combed her fingers through it. The whites of her eyes were red from crying, causing the green pupils to look extra-green, but there was nothing she could do about that. The swelling and bruises on her cheek were extremely evident, but again, there was nothing she could do about that, either. So she sat for another minute, took several deep breaths, and dug within herself to find inner strength and calm. She slowly opened her car door and wavered slightly as the burden she was undertaking fell solidly on her shoulders.

Jackson Manning met her in the lobby and walked with her to where Kyra was laid. Once inside the ugly, sterile room, he looked at her expectantly before he moved the sheet aside that was covering the body. She gave him a shaky nod of her head and then suddenly she was looking at the lifeless remains of Kyra Samuelson. Tess couldn't stop the gasp which escaped from her lips. What she saw was even worse

than anything she could have imagined. Momentarily, she thought she may have made a mistake in coming here, but she straightened her shoulders and began to take inventory of the body.

Kyra face had been savagely beaten, as was evident by the bruises that now covered her face. While there was no longer any swelling, there were multiple cuts and abrasions on her face. Some of the cuts had some sort of pattern to them, like the killer had worn a ring or something while she was beaten. The most startling thing she noticed was, that while it was obvious she had been strangled, her throat had not been cut like the other girls. For some reason this made Tess happy as this detail made her different from the other victims. She stared in silence for a long time, afraid to speak in case she broke down again.

Finally, she asked, "Jackson, did you find anything we can use?"

"There wasn't much of a difference between her and the other victims besides her throat not being cut. We did find an abrasion which was on the back and sides of her neck where it looked like something had been torn from her neck, like a necklace maybe, although we didn't find one at the scene. Another difference was when the body was discovered, her face was covered by a white scarf."

Tess looked up at him sharply. "That sounds like the killer knew her, maybe felt guilty."

Jackson just shrugged his shoulders. "I leave the speculation to you. I can only tell you the facts."

All of a sudden, Tess's body grew stock-still as the impact of his words hit her and she paled. Her assailant had placed a white scarf over her own eyes during her attack. She felt sick to her stomach. She couldn't make sense of the information. Why didn't the aggressor kill her like these other girls? Was her attacker and the killer someone she knew? She grew suddenly very afraid. Tess thanked Jackson for allowing her access to Kyra and requested he send anything he found to her; he consented.

CHAPTER 25

When Tess pulled into her drive, she got the strangest sense of déjà vu, standing on her porch again was...Thom. She heaved a huge sigh and leaned her head on her steering wheel. She felt emotionally drained and didn't think she could handle one more thing. As she opened her car door, she saw Thom begin making his way towards her. She stopped about halfway, practically hyperventilating, and put her head down in defeat and waited for the next onslaught of pain.

When Thom reached her, he pulled her into arms and gently rocked her side to side. "Oh, baby. I'm so sorry, I heard about Kyra." At his words of kindness, she weakly melted into him, accepting his strength, his warmth, and his saneness. They stood that way for a long time neither saying anything. Eventually, they turned and walked arm and arm into the house.

Tess led him into her living room, turning on lights as she went. She sat down on the couch and waited for him to join her. She turned to face him when he sat down next to her. She looked into his beautiful face with his dark hair cut professionally short, his shockingly blue eyes, and his smooth, square jaw. She slowly reached up and almost put her hand on his face, but then losing her courage, she let it drop. Thom reached over and gently picked her hand up, brought it up to his lips, and placed a tender kiss on it.

"How are you holding up, Red?" he asked her as he pushed some fringe away from her face.

"I'm fine," she gave her standard pat answer and then thought better, "well, maybe not fine, but I'm surviving. I went to see your brother today to tell him about Kyra. I didn't want him to find out by reading a newspaper or something. I also stopped by the morgue to see...to find..." she swallowed convulsively, "How did you find out so quickly?"

"I went to your office looking for you and Anthony told me about Kyra. I wish you would have waited and not gone to the morgue by herself, that had to be so hard for you," he paused then asked casually, "So how did Dominic take the news?"

Tess couldn't quite understand the inflection of his tone. It sounded almost like he didn't think Dominic would be that upset or something.

"He took it as well as can be expected. Listen, Thom, about last night it wasn't what you thought. I

wasn't with Dominic. I...I..." she hesitated because she didn't want to admit to her own stupidity. "I was upset when I left your office because of my extremely bad behavior so I stopped and had a few drinks. I probably drank too much... anyway, some guy slammed me into my car after I kneed him in his groin, he..." she was stopped by Thom yelling.

"What do you mean you kneed some guy after he slammed you into your car!" he demanded.

"It was stupid. I was stupid. Anyway, Dominic happened to come by at the right time and knocked the guy off me and..." she was interrupted again by Thom yelling.

"What do you mean knocked the guy off of you? My God, Tess, did you let your department know what happened? Maybe it was the same guy who attacked you before!"

"No, I don't think it was the same guy. I honestly didn't have time to do anything because of... everything. Thom, I'm so sorry about yesterday. I don't know why I overreacted the way I did. It was senseless, unprofessional, and undeserved on your part. Of course you would be upset. Maggie was someone you knew and she died a terrible death. Who wouldn't be upset? I wish I could give you a good reason for my behavior but I have no defense," she said, swallowing back her shame.

"I'm sorry, too. It just took me by surprise. While I'm glad Dominic was there to help you, I have to tell you that you need to be careful with him. There are things you don't know about him."

"What is going on with you guys? That is exactly what he said about you."

"Tess, I won't tell you who to see, but please just be careful, okay?"

"Is there something specific I need to be careful about?"

Thom looked at her for a long time before answering. "Many years ago, when Dom and I were just little kids, we would spend summers with our grandparents in Kansas who owned a working farm with hundreds of head of cattle. Even though we weren't allowed, one of our favorite things to do was to climb into the grain silo. What little boy could resist a thing like that? The summers in Kansas can be unbearably hot and the grain was always so cool to the touch. It was almost like swimming when you jumped into the silo." Thom gave a small smile at his memory.

"One summer, Dom and I hopped in and began jumping around and throwing the grain up towards the ceiling of the silo and having a good ol' time. While we were in there, the ranch hands came to get feed to fill the troughs. When they pulled the lever at the bottom to open the chute for the grain, it became like an inverted tornado and Dom got sucked down very fast. Once they closed the chute, it slowed his descent into the grain but it became like quicksand. I was sitting on the edges of the silo watching him as he struggled not to be sucked down in the middle of the grain. He began yelling to me to help him, but I couldn't move. I was terrified. I was only a little boy and was afraid to let go of my handhold. He kept yelling and yelling for me to help but I couldn't move. He finally got help from one of the ranch hands who heard him. From that point on, Dom changed and was never the same. He blamed me for not helping him and told everyone I refused to help him, but it really wasn't like that."

"How awful for both of you. I can see how that would make you afraid, but I'm not sure how that applies to my relationship with him."

"He's just not the same, and he developed such a cruel streak."

"Thom, come on, I know Dominic. He's one of the greatest people I know. I would never use the word 'cruel' in the same sentence with him," she said emphatically.

"Just tell me you'll be careful," he reiterated.

"I will be careful, but this is a hard time for him and I have to be there for him. He was there for me after... you know, and I owe him this."

"Do they have any leads as to who may have done this?" he asked.

"No..." she hesitated before adding carefully, "but I need to tell you that whoever did this to Kyra was also the one who murdered Maggie." She looked uncomfortably away as the name brought back all the shame from the day before. Tess looked down at her hands and took a deep breath.

Thom sat still for a long time not saying anything as he absorbed the impact of her words and actions. Very slowly, in a replay of earlier actions, he placed his hands gently on her face and leaned in, tenderly placing his lips against hers. This time she didn't pull away but leaned into him and let him deepen the kiss. Tenderly, he swept his tongue over hers and absurdly at such a time, she felt a tiny flicker

of desire course through her veins. Involuntarily, she leaned into the kiss, wanting to explore the sensation she'd not had since... Abruptly he pulled away and leaned his forehead against hers as he struggled to gain control, breathing deeply.

"I won't say I'm sorry, Tess."

Tess sat quietly with her forehead still leaned against his and her eyes closed, trying to draw her emotions back into order as they felt all over the place. The past few days had been so dramatized and emotion-filled that it was nice to be still and know that he actually still wanted her; even after he'd seen her at her worst, he'd persevered.

Later that night, as Tess lie in bed, she determinedly shut her mind off of Kyra and let her mind drift instead to the kiss she'd shared with Thom. While she wasn't quite at ease as she might have been in the past, she thought it'd gone particularly well and she had hope for the future. She was starting to develop strong feelings for Thom, but deep down inside, she had a sinking feeling, waiting for whatever was going to go wrong, to go wrong.

She was lying on the sparkling sands of the beach, listening intently to the sounds of the surf as it pounded on the shore. The sun was warm and bright, and because of the brightness, she'd placed a towel over face to shield it. As she lied there, lost in the enjoyment of the ocean's sounds and smells, she began to feel the water lapping at her feet. Then it quickly moved up to her knees, then her thigh, until eventually it was up to her neck. She struggled to scoot away from the water, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't seem to get far enough away. She was momentarily frightened as she couldn't see what was around her; then she remembered she had placed the towel over her face. She quickly removed it from her face and then was further frightened as she realized she was again in her bedroom tied to the bed, and the towel she now held in her hand was a white scarf. She strained to see around the room and spotted the stranger standing, facing the window. Slowly, the stranger began to turn around. Her breathing became shallow and quick, as she could see the stranger more clearly than she ever had. Once he finished turning she would know who he was. The stranger moved with exasperatingly slow movement and she didn't think he was ever going to get in a position where she could see him. But finally, he was almost centered to her and then he kneeled on the bed and whispered her name, "Tess." She knew that voice. But where had she heard it before? She was so afraid, but knew if she strained her eyes she would finally know who it was. But then she didn't know if she wanted to know, knowing instinctively that it would hurt way down deep somehow once she found out, so she closed her eyes tight. The silence made her open her eyes slowly and she gasped, the person who came into view...was Thom.

Tess sat up with a start with her heart pounding. As she realized where she was and that she was alone, she slowly lowered herself back down. Why would she think Thom was her attacker? What had Dr. Michaels said about that, something about her new love leading her to the attacker? What did that even mean? What was it that made her identify Thom, whom she was beginning to care about, with something that, in its heinousness, had completely altered the course of her life? Was it because she had let the kiss move forward even though she didn't know if she was ready for that? Could she actually attempt to have an intimate relationship with him? If asked tonight, lying on this bed with trembling limbs, she would have to say...no.

CHAPTER 26

The next morning, Tess dressed with care and did her best to conceal the bruising on her cheek. She was happy to see the swelling had reduced considerably. She was eager to get to work and begin trying to make sense out of this case. She immediately went to her desk and began going through any hot items and checked her emails while she waited for Anthony to come into work. As she was sifting through mountains and mountains of paperwork, Carter called her.

"Hey, sis, just calling to check on you. I've tried to call several times, but you never answered. Anthony called me yesterday and told me what happened. I'm so sorry, honey," he said sincerely.

"It's been difficult. We are going to try to put the pieces together today; I'm just waiting on him to come to work," she replied, choking back emotion.

"Listen, I have to tell you Anthony is very worried about you. He said there's been some strange comings and goings with you."

"I've had a lot of things going on all at once and it's been a little overwhelming. And I will admit that I haven't handled it all that well," she confessed.

"I know you are really busy today, but I would appreciate it if you would meet me for lunch today... there're some things I think we need to discuss," he said, somewhat cryptically.

"Is it anything I should be worried about?"

"I would prefer to discuss it in person, okay? I promise its nothing bad...just informational."

Tess glanced at her watch, "Can we meet at about one at the Mexican restaurant again?"

"Of course, wherever you want," he agreed quickly, "I'll meet you there."

As Tess got off the phone, she was momentarily perplexed...Carter had let her make a decision? That in itself made her a little afraid of whatever it was he wanted to discuss. She didn't have time to ponder for long as Anthony strolled in shortly after. He walked by her desk but instead of just leaning in and kissing her on her head and passing on to his desk as usual, he stopped in front of her and pulled her to her feet. He inspected her face, checking her injuries, and then pulled her in close to him. "I have been so worried about you. I'm glad you're here today. Is there anything I can do?"

"I'm better today, I promise. After I went to see Dominic yesterday, I went to the morgue and saw Kyra; it's really bad, isn't it?"

"Oh, baby, I wish you would have waited and let me go with you. That's hard to take - seeing someone you love like that."

"I appreciate it, but I was fine and it was something I needed to do. I did find out a couple of things, though. Jackson Manning told me that the killer had covered Kyra's face with a white scarf. I don't know if you remember, but when I was attacked, he tied a white scarf around my eyes. Also, he told me that Kyra had abrasions on her neck as if something had been pulled off of it...like a necklace. Anthony, I think the killer is someone I know...but I don't who it is," she said in a rush.

"Wow, that's a lot to absorb. But before we get too far afield, let's get all of our information together and start back again with the original case and move forward, okay? I'll secure a conference room and we can set our information up in there."

Anthony got a room assigned to them and they began to set up their mini task force room. They set up a portable whiteboard and began to apply pictures of the victims. As per their assumption, they put Tess's photo first, followed by Christina O'Hara, Maggie Benson, and finally, Kyra Samuelson. Under each photo they listed particulars of each crime, including any known missing items, and the location of where the body had been found. When the information was written down, they noticed a peculiar anomaly; the addresses. Outside of Tess's addresses, the others were in number order and all the address related in some way to sand: First and Sandalwood; Apartment number two, Adobe Palace; and finally, Third and Red Clay Drive. They weren't sure what this meant to the killer, other than his obvious obsession with the hourglasses.

They made a list of people they needed to interview, friends and family members of the victims, and divided the list. They agreed to meet back in the morning to compare notes.

CHAPTER 27

Tess beat Carter to the Mexican restaurant this time and ordered her own water with lemon – wishing it was something stronger. She was a bit apprehensive about Carter's cryptic reason for wanting to meet her for lunch. She was lost in thought and did not hear his approach until he reached down and brushed a kiss on the top of her head before sitting down across from her. Immediately upon sitting, he looked up,

actually seeing her for the first time. The opening smile he had on his face quickly vanished as he took in her battered face from the bar incident. She had almost forgotten about it in the scope of everything else.

"Oh my God, Tess, what the hell happened?" he asked angrily.

She reached a hand up to her face self-consciously. "It's nothing, and I was just stupid. Carter, I really don't want to talk about it as I don't come out very good in the telling."

He studied her, trying to discern her words and actions. "Tess, I have to tell you that Anthony and I are very concerned about you. What, with Kyra's death and everything else you've gone through. How are you coping with all of this? Did you go see Dr. Michaels?"

"I won't lie and say everything has been easy to deal with, because it hasn't. I am struggling with a lot of personal things, but I think I'm okay. I wish Anthony didn't feel the need to call you about every little thing. He worries too much and then causes you to worry unnecessarily," she said with annoyance in her voice.

"I disagree with you. If it wasn't for Anthony I wouldn't know half of what goes on with you. And dammit, Tess, I'm your brother and I love and worry about you. But you're right, Anthony shouldn't be the one to call me as you are an adult, but you should call me because I'm your brother."

She nodded in concession. "Okay, now that we have that out of the way, what is it you need to tell me?"

Carter eyed her very carefully before answering. "There are some...things I think I should have told you before, but felt I needed to protect you from. But now I'm not so sure I was doing the right thing. So I've decided to come clean on everything and allow you to be the adult you obviously are and deal with it yourself," he paused hesitating, struggling with the part that still wanted to protect her. "This is about Dane."

Of all the things Tess thought Carter would want to talk about, Dane Carver was not one of them. "What about Dane?" she asked with a slight catch in her voice.

They were interrupted by the waitress and Tess had to wait for what seemed an enormous amount of time before their order was taken, the waitress to leave, and Carter to continue talking. Studying his hands as he wiped the condensation from his iced water glass, he said, "I think there are two things you should know; first is that Dane and his wife divorced many months ago..."

Before he could continue onto the second thing, Tess, through gritted teeth said, "What do you mean, several months ago? Just a couple weeks ago you told me not to contact him because he was married. You lied to me?" she finished in an accusatory tone.

"I was trying to protect you and besides, you said you weren't going to call him anyway," he paused again to regain his calm and took several deep breaths before dropping the bigger of the two bombs. "There's something else I should have told you a long time ago. Please understand I did what I thought was best for you, okay?"

She watched him with carefully guarded eyes.

"A few years ago, Dane and his wife had...a child...a son," Carter said, each part slow and his voice grew lower with each word as if the softer the words, the less sting it would impart.

Tess could not catch her breath. Of all the things she thought he would say this was not it. Carter was the only other person, outside of herself, who knew what this would mean to her. She swallowed convulsively and focused on remaining calm while she took on the impact of his words...Dane had a child, a son...with someone else. If her heart was not pounding so hard that it hurt, she would have thought it had broken entirely in two. While she'd been struggling to just get by day to day after their breakup, and he'd kept trying to tell her of his undying love, he'd gotten married and had a child.

Again the reality of Carter's words had the same effect that Dane's email had had on her. At his first words she could feel the petals begin to open and then with the last ones, they were again crushed into the dirt. She had completely forgotten Carter sitting across from her until he reached over and took her hands in his. "Are you okay? Are you angry at me for keeping this from you? Please know that I did what I thought was best for you. I didn't want you hurt by him again."

She lifted hurt eyes to him and said in a voice not entirely convincing, "It's okay, I know you did what you thought was best. It just...stings..." she paused as her voice caught in her throat and she

struggled to swallow the huge golf ball that had become lodged there. "Carter, if you don't mind, I would rather not talk about it right now, okay? I promise I'm not mad at you; I just need time to be able to deal with it. But not here, all right?"

Slowly he nodded his head. "I love you, Tess, and wouldn't intentionally hurt you for anything."
"I know."

CHAPTER 28

When Tess was seated in her car after her lunch with Carter, she breathed a huge sigh of relief. It'd been excruciatingly hard to sit through lunch and act normally. Carter had no idea the impact his words had on her. She'd pretty much been able to somewhat move on from Dane because she thought he was out of her reach. And while in her heart, she knew she couldn't ever be with him, she wanted to...oh how she wanted to. The child was an entirely different subject and not one she ever let herself dwell on, either in the past, or now.

Slowly she was able to bring herself under control and relaxed the death-grip she had on her steering wheel. She knew she had to put this aside for now. There would be another time to try and sort through her feelings regarding Dane Carver, but for today, solving and avenging Kyra's murder was her top priority. She looked at those on her list she needed to interview from the murder cases. She had taken Kyra's family and friends, and Maggie Benson's. The reason she'd purposely chosen to take Maggie Benson's list was two-fold: one, to again keep Thom somewhat out of the investigation in some misguided sense of loyalty, and two, because she thought she owed it to Thom due to her behavior regarding his relationship with the other girl. She looked at the list and realized she would need to see both Thom and Dominic Wyndom today; for some unknown reason, that made her anxious. She decided to save them for last as both were in their Denver offices, two birds and all.

She went first to Kyra's parents' home as she knew them and figured she would get the hardest ones out of the way first. She arrived at Pete and Glynnis Samuelson's home to find numerous cars parked in their drive and on their curb. She braced herself for what was to come and slowly got out of her car. She had barely made it up the sidewalk trimmed with multiple colored flowers, when the door opened and Glynnis Samuelson came out and met her with a hug and tears. Tess was reminded of where Kyra had gotten her beautiful features from as Glynnis still had few lines on face. And although her hair was now completely snow-white, her blue eyes still had the power to shock you with their vibrancy. They held each other for several long minutes, both understanding the grief of the other. They finally broke apart reluctantly and Glynnis led Tess into the house where there were wall-to-wall Samuelsons.

Tess quickly went through the room, stopping to chat and offer condolences, and eventually made her way back to Glynnis's side. "I know this is not the best time, but is there someplace we can talk privately for a just a few minutes?"

Glynnis didn't answer but guided Tess to her master bedroom at the very end of the hall. They entered and Glynnis shut the door, leaning wearily against it. Slowly, like she had aged a hundred and fifty years, she moved towards Tess and they both sat down on the bed. Tess took her hand in her own and asked, "How are you holding up?"

"It's been a strain, not only because of what has happened, but it's just so hard to try to be upbeat and helpful to everyone else when all I want to do is curl up on my bed and wallow in my own misery. But I'm sure after the funeral is over in two days, I'll wish I had all these people back with me," she said, smiling wearily.

"I promise I won't keep you, but we are working as hard as we can to find Kyra's killer and so I have just some preliminary questions to ask you, okay?"

Glynnis nodded her head.

"First, do you know if the necklace I gave Kyra for Christmas a couple of years ago - you know the

one with the mood stone in it - is here?"

Glynnis thought carefully but slowly shook her head. "I can't remember the last I saw Kyra without it and I don't remember seeing it when we were picking out clothes for her viewing."

Tess almost grinned to herself at having been right about the necklace. Instead she continued to look at Glynnis and asked, "Do you know of anyone who would have wanted to hurt Kyra?"

Glynnis took a long time before answering, "I'm not sure really, and I probably shouldn't even say anything, because it's not something I know, but just something I thought was odd," she stopped, hesitating. Tess nodded at her encouragingly to continue. "I know you know Dominic, what is your take on him?"

Tess gave her a perplexed look, "He seems nice and he seemed to adore Kyra."

"That's what I thought at first too, but now I'm not so sure."

"Why do you say that?" Tess inquired.

"It's nothing major or overt, it's the little things. Sometimes I would catch him looking at Kyra so oddly, like he wanted to possess her. No, not even that strong, just something was off," again she paused before deciding to continue. "I just thought he was too aggressive and controlling."

Tess stared at her for a long time in contemplation. "I know the numerous times we talked about their relationship, Kyra always felt it was moving in the right direction. Do you know if he was ever abusive to her?"

"Oh no way, you know Kyra; she would have hit him in the head with a frying pan and buried him in the backyard," Glynnis replied with the first hint of a smile.

Tess smiled too at the thought. Had she missed something between Kyra and Dominic? She couldn't imagine that Kyra would have stayed with anyone who was remotely abusive towards her in any way. She had never really questioned it before as she was merely a person on the sidelines of their relationship. She and Kyra had been friends, so ergo; she and Dominic had been friends also.

She thanked Glynnis for taking the time to speak with her and promised to be at the viewing the next day.

For some reason, visiting Maggie Benson's family made Tess nervous. Before she departed the Samuelson's, she'd called Martha Benson and asked if she could come by and she agreed quickly. The neighborhood Maggie Benson's mother lived in was quite different from Kyra's family. Kyra's family lived in a moderate income neighborhood where all the lawns were well manicured, not by professionals, but usually by the homeowners. Martha Benson lived in a low-income neighborhood in what would normally be called the "low-income housing." The series of apartment buildings were run down and not well maintained. What yard there was had grass only where the occasional seed had landed.

Tess knocked softly on Martha Benson's apartment door and waited. Before long it was opened a crack by a heavyset woman with dark hair streaked with gray. She had a cigarette sticking out of the corner of her mouth, giving her a harsh, beat-down appearance.

"Yeah?" the woman demanded as she opened the door with the security chain still attached.

"Are you Martha Benson?" Tess continued at her nod, showing the woman her badge. "I'm Detective Tess Champion with the Aurora PD's office. Can I come in and talk with you for a few minutes about your daughter?"

The door shut momentarily and the chain was removed and then it swung open. Martha Benson indicated for Tess to continue to the couch as she turned and locked the door. The living room was small and bare but clean. It smelled of many years of cigarette smoke as the stench clung to every surface.

Tess sat down and waited until Martha Benson sat also. "Ms. Benson, I am one of the detectives in charge of your daughter's case. First let me give you my sincere condolences, I know this is a hard time for you and I hope to help bring justice for your daughter."

Martha Benson gave her a cold stare, and with a snarl on her lips, she said in a distrusting tone, "No justice gonna bring my baby back."

“You’re right, but even so, I don’t think it would be fair to Maggie for her murderer to remain out there enjoying life and that’s why I’m here. I need to ask you a few questions, okay?”

Martha Benson snorted her consent.

“Can you tell me if you know anyone who would want to hurt Maggie?”

“No, who’d want to hurt my baby? She was an angel. All her life all she want to do is help people. It was a gift, I told her. She gave and gave and look where it got her. It be a shame, I tell ya.”

Almost perversely, Tess asked, “Can you tell me if Maggie was dating anyone in particular?”

“Well, there was this one feller. He was a good looking feller, tall with dark hair. My Mag-pie sure did like that boy. She used to say his eyes reminded her of the sky. But I think they’d already stopped seeing each other. I think he hurt my Maggie, but she loved him anyways.”

“What do you mean, hurt her?” she asked with a quickening.

“He made promises to my Maggie and then like all those uppity guys, decided he was too good for my Maggie. Said he found someone better. Now who could be better than my Maggie? Nobody, that’s who,” she finished by blowing streams of smoke out of her nose.

“No, I’m sure not. Do you happen to know the name of the man she was dating?” she asked, even though she already knew with a certainty.

“Naw, she never tell me that. Hey, can you tell me when they gonna return my baby’s necklace? The one with the angel wings on it?”

“There was no item like that found at the scene; is it missing?”

“My Maggie never took it off, said it was a good luck charm. Not that it did her no good.”

“If it turns up, I’ll ensure it gets brought back to you, okay?”

Martha Benson nodded her head.

Tess stood up and thanked the woman for her help and left the apartment complex. She had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. She couldn’t help but remember Thom’s reaction to Maggie’s death. The death of a girl he barely dated, he’d said. She went back to her car and began the drive to Denver. She set her eyes towards the Rockies and took a deep breath. The next two interviews would not be easy. Professionally she knew she should’ve had Anthony interview them as he did not have a personal relationship with either of them. But she felt she owed both Thom and Dominic.

CHAPTER 29

As she drove toward Denver, Tess decided to visit Dominic first as she wasn’t ready to see Thom yet. She was still unsettled from her visit with Martha Benson. She turned into the business district and followed her Global Positioning System (GPS) until she came upon Dominic Wyndom’s building. She knew Dominic was successful, but if his building was anything to go by, he was extremely so. His building was set apart from all the others in the area due to its elegant architectural design. It was as tall as a two-story building with sweeping arches and alcoves. It had three columns which gave the building a Greek design feel.

Tess walked up the steps and entered the lobby of his building. The inside was even more impressive than the outside. There were huge squares of marble on the floor with smatterings of design option materials set up in elegant and organized stands. There was a mammoth-sized desk made out of a dark wood like mahogany or teak. It was impressive, to say the least. She walked up to the desk, gave her name, and asked to speak to Dominic. She was escorted to an office in the back. As with Thom, when she entered, he got up and came around his desk to greet her with a quick hug and kiss on the cheek.

“Hey, Tess, how are you holding up?” he asked sincerely.

“I should be asking you that question. I’m doing okay. I need to ask you a few questions regarding Kyra, but first I wanted to tell you that Kyra’s viewing is tomorrow from five until nine. The funeral will be the next day at Canyon Valley Cemetery at eleven.”

“Thanks, Tess, I don’t think anyone else would have thought to tell me and I didn’t want to burden

her family with phone calls.”

“It’s the least I can do.”

“Here, let’s sit,” he indicated a plush couch situated in the corner of his office.

“So, tell me what’s going on? Have you learned anything? Do you have any leads into her death?” he asked with anxious eyes.

“Not a lot, but we are really just starting and it’s a process. I need to ask you a few questions in that vein, if you are up to it,” she asked.

“Of course, I’ll do anything to help catch whoever did this to Kyra,” he said emphatically.

“Do you know of anyone who would have wanted to hurt Kyra?”

“Of course not, she was a lovely person. Although, I must admit, we hadn’t dated very long so I really didn’t know all the people she hung out with.”

Tess found his answer a little peculiar as she thought they were a lot more serious. “I hate to ask and I’m sorry about this, but can you tell me where you were when Kyra was killed?”

“Tess,” he smiled a little wryly, “you know where I was...I was with you.”

“I know, but after you left, where did you go?”

“I went home. It was late and it had been a...frustrating day, so I went home. I don’t think I saw anyone though,” he said, a little exasperated at having to explain his actions to her.

“I’m sorry to ask but I have to, okay?” she said, feeling uncomfortable. Yeah, she really should have had Anthony interview him.

As Tess sat trying to figure out how to ask him questions that wouldn’t sound so offensive, she happened to glance towards his desk and immediately froze. She was momentarily stunned as she spotted the object on his desk; what probably was just a couple of seconds felt like hours as she stared at the obscene apparatus. She turned to Dominic and in a strained voice asked, “Why do you have an hourglass on your desk?”

Dominic was temporarily speechless but then smoothly said, “It’s odd, isn’t it? I got it as a gift from Thom. I kind of like it, though.”

Tess couldn’t think how to string any words together. She felt the bottom fall out underneath her. If she’d opened her mouth, she knew she would have looked like a fish out of water. When in all actuality, she just sat frozen to the spot, trying to make sense out of Thom giving Dominic an hourglass, of all things.

Softly, almost whispering, Tess said, “Dominic, will you tell me what happened to you and Thom when you were kids in the grain silo?”

Dominic looked at her perplexed for a short while then comprehension dawned on him. “Oh, at our grandparents’. Yeah, no big deal, really. We were playing in the silo against the wishes of our grandparents, of course, and some ranch hands came by to get some grain from the silo and it caused me to be sucked down into it. I have to tell you that it certainly scared me; but I was lucky because the ranch hands heard me and rescued me. It could have been worse,” he smiled at the memory.

Tess struggled with the story Dominic told and the one she had heard from Thom where the experience had made Dominic, what was the word Thom used...cruel. What was going on here? Surely the hourglass was a coincidence. Thom would not hurt anyone...would he? But why would he tell her to stay away from Dominic; was it truly for her sake or for his own?

“Dominic, can I ask you a personal question?” she asked apprehensively.

“Of course, you are the detective,” he said, smiling at her.

“What are the issues between you and Thom?”

“Wow. That is a question. Let’s see, well, as you know I am the oldest and Thom always felt our parents preferred me to him, which wasn’t true, but that’s how he felt. He is very competitive and felt he specifically had to compete and win against me for some unknown reason. Due to his insecurities, he continuously tries to undermine me at every turn, even with Kyra. Didn’t you see how he was with her that night at Sandusky’s? He was trying to charm her and again take something from me that I had. I try not to even respond to his challenges, but sometimes he makes it difficult.”

Tess was confused. She didn’t really remember Thom being all that attentive to Kyra that night;

however, she'd been very distracted.

Tess had another thought. "Dominic, did you know Maggie Benson?"

Dominic shook his head, "No, I don't think so, who is she?"

"She was one of the other victims murdered by Kyra's killer. Did you know Christina O'Hara?"

Dominic thought a minute and shook his head.

Tess didn't know what to think. She couldn't wrap her mind around the Thom that Dominic painted and the one she actually knew. Could she be that gullible and undiscerning as to be so easily tricked? No, she didn't think so; the hourglass had to be happenstance... a fluke.

"Dominic, I need to go, okay? I'll see you at the viewing tomorrow."

CHAPTER 30

Tess climbed wearily into her car. She was well and truly confused. She needed to see Thom and ask him... ask him what? Did he kill Kyra? No, there was no way. No matter what Dominic thought, he'd not come onto Kyra that night. She'd been there and yes she'd been distracted but she wasn't blind. And she'd seen him the night Kyra was killed also. Right at that moment, the image of Thom's frustrated and angry face that night popped into her mind.

What did she actually have that would point a finger at Thom? An hourglass and the fact that he knew two of victims? Okay, that night at her house, he had shown his temper, but what normal man wouldn't have? And if their scenario was correct and her attacker and the killer were the same, then it couldn't have been Thom. She would have known immediately... wouldn't she? She couldn't get her dream from the night before out of her mind, the dream where the attacker became Thom. No, she just couldn't believe that. He'd been nothing but gentle with her. He was funny and kind. He wasn't a killer and he certainly wasn't her attacker. How crazy would that make her if she'd considered having a relationship with the very man who attacked her?

Tess slowly turned the key in her car and pulled out onto the highway. One more stop, and hopefully she would have the answers she needed.

It didn't take her long to reach Thom's office from Dominic's. When she got to the bank building, she wasn't quite ready to see Thom yet, so she decided to use the stairs. She was winded when she got to the fifth floor, but felt more centered. She walked to the reception desk and asked the receptionist if she could see Thom. As before, she rapped on the door and he motioned for her to enter.

Thom was already walking towards her when she entered. He smiled down at her as he pulled her into his arms and kissed her gently... and she let him. There was no way Thom was a killer; not this man. She wrapped her arms around him and just leaned her forehead against his chest. He just stood there quietly holding her that way for a long time. She felt... almost safe in the circle of his embrace.

"What's going on, Tess?" he eventually asked her softly.

"It's just been a rough day," she said, not really wanting to end the magic of just being.

"Well, we can stand here for as long as you need," he said, rubbing his cheek over her red head.

What was wrong with her? How could she have ever had such horrid thoughts? She stood a while longer and then pulled away slowly and took his hand and led him to the couch.

"Thom, as inappropriate as it is, I do need to ask you a few questions professionally, if that's okay?"

"Of course, anything."

"I need to ask you a few more questions about Maggie Benson."

She immediately felt him stiffen next to her and it caused her to snap her head in his direction. As quick as she could, she strove to pull herself back in line. "Thom, please," she begged, "this is hard for me also."

Thom slowly nodded, "I know it must be, of course. Ask what you need to."

"I spoke with Maggie's mother and she told me that Maggie had been dating somebody pretty seriously, but that he broke it off because he found somebody else; was that someone, you?"

Slowly he withdrew from her, stood up, and walked over to look out of his fifth-floor window. He

stood there for a long time, thinking or remembering. In hushed tones, Thom began to speak. "As I told you earlier, I met Maggie in the emergency room when I got stitches. She was a sweet kid with a big heart and I did like her and we had fun. Unfortunately, she was in love with me - and I knew it - but I wasn't in love with her. I wanted to be, because she was genuinely a good person, but I just didn't love her. That night you saw me kiss her was the last night I saw her."

"I don't understand, why did her mother think you had broken it off with her for somebody else?" Tess asked.

"Because I did... for you," he said, turning away from the window to face her.

She looked at him dumbfounded, trying to make sense out of what he was saying. "You left her... for me?"

"Yes, I knew shortly after that night at Sandusky's that I would never love Maggie, because I never felt for her, in all the time I knew her, the way I felt *just* sitting next to you that night. You blew me away. Maggie was sweet and kind; one of the most sincere people I've ever met. But she wasn't the one for me," he said solemnly.

"And you think I am," she asked rocked.

"Yes," he answered simply.

Tess sat rock still trying to absorb what he was saying. The dam she'd so carefully built was springing so many leaks she was afraid she wouldn't be able to get them all patched. Thom made her afraid, but not in the same way as before. She was afraid he would break her heart. So she didn't move; she remained seated on the couch. She couldn't believe his words. "But that day in your office, you were so upset about her, how can you say you didn't love her?"

"Tess, can you imagine how guilty I feel knowing that Maggie might still be alive if I had not left her for you?" he said, his voice filled with regret.

His tone finally had her moving off the couch to him. She went back into the circle of his arms and resumed her position of placing her forehead against his chest, "Thom, you were not to blame for Maggie's death. Even if you hadn't broken up with her, there's no guarantee that you could have prevented what happened. She was killed after her shift at the hospital, so you probably wouldn't have been with her anyway at that time. You can't blame yourself."

He pulled her closer to him which brought her cheek flush to his chest. She listened for a long time to the solid thump of his heart against her ear. He felt solid and warm.

CHAPTER 31

The next morning, Anthony had beaten her into the office and was already in the task force conference room. He had his back to Tess and was studying the murder whiteboard intently.

"Good morning, Anthony."

He turned as she entered, "Hey, Tess," he said before turning back to the board.

"What do you think is this guy's obsession with sand?" he asked with his head cocked to one side in contemplation.

Tess couldn't help but think of the hourglass that Thom had given Dominic and it made her feel uneasy. "I think sand is the least of this guy's problems," she answered vengefully.

"I mean he is taunting us with the sand reference and then treats us like we're too stupid to remember the order by giving us the number sequence. He is really starting to piss me off," he said in frustration. "Did you find out anything interesting yesterday?"

Tess thought about all she had gleaned yesterday and felt her loyalties divided. She thought about what she had actually learned: Kyra's mom thought Dominic acted strangely towards Kyra; Maggie Benson's mother could only say that Thom had broken up with her daughter for someone else. So what had she gained...nothing.

"No, nothing really, outside of Maggie Benson's mother telling me that her daughter was missing a

necklace. The only thing I got was that they all had a lot of hurt and grief,” she said evasively, “How about you?”

“Same as you, nothing, I spoke again to Christina O’Hara’s family and friends and they don’t know anything. One minute she was at the bar and the next she was gone. Her friends said she was sitting at the bar by herself and didn’t even get up to dance with anyone and the bartender backed their story. So we know no more than what we had before: weird addresses; hourglasses; a creepy poem; and missing items. I’m just not sure where to go from here. I guess we can go pick Aaron Moss’s and Jackson Manning’s brains to see if they found anything we don’t know about.”

Tess and Anthony went back over every piece of information they had with the exception of the tidbits that Tess kept to herself regarding both Dominic and Thom. She didn’t think that anything she had learned would actually help their case, but she still felt a little guilty in not being exactly truthful with Anthony. They sent BOLOs to local pawn shops for the victims’ missing items.

Late in the afternoon, Tess received a call from Thom telling her he would pick her at four-thirty for Kyra’s viewing. He’d understood how hard this evening was going to be on her and had offered to drive her. The little girl way down deep inside her began whispering that she might be falling for this guy...and that little girl scared her to death.

Tess was dressed smartly in her only black pantsuit and waited for Thom to pick her up for the viewing. It dawned on her that she’d never asked Thom about the hourglass. He made her want to forget everything else except for him. It bothered her a little bit that he had so many connections to the case. The thing she always came back to was the fact that if the killer and her attacker were the same then surely she would know or at least sense that it was him...right?

While she waited, she tried to block her mind to what lay ahead for the evening. She’d purposefully kept Kyra out of her mind as her friend, and only allowed herself to think of her as someone neutral involved in a case she was working. Tess glanced around her house at all the little knick-knacks and household items that Kyra had helped her pick out. She remembered all the late night chats and times spent hiking through different parts of Colorado. She didn’t realize that tears were streaming down her face until her sight became blurry from them. This was so unfair. Why did it have to be Kyra?

Thom arrived right on time and knocked on her door. When she opened it, he took one look at her face and pulled her in close to him. He held her tenderly, rubbing her back in comfort. She leaned into him, wrapping her arms around him tight. They stayed like that for long time. Thom was so good to her and had been so patient. She appreciated him allowing her the opportunity to just feel her pain and not make her self-conscious about it. She was so moved by his generousness of spirit, that she lifted her tear-streaked face and looked up into his beautiful one. This time she confidently reached up her hand and traced the square line of his jaw. The man standing before her was kind, considerate, and sexy as hell. She desperately needed to feel something life-affirming. Looking deep into his beautiful blue eyes, she leaned into him for a kiss. He accepted her kiss, and when she didn’t pull back from him, he deepened it and gently walked her backwards into her house and out of the doorway. He shut the door with his foot without breaking the kiss. He molded her body to his and rubbed his hands up and down her back. He groaned, and with his breathing heavy, he lifted his hands to gently cradle her face and began kissing her with barely-controlled passion.

As his desire grew, he became more aggressive. He moved his hands down to the buttons on her suit and began to unbutton her jacket. She reached up to stay his hands, but he brushed them aside as he backed her up against her living room wall, effectively trapping her. She could feel the panic begin to flutter within her and she began to struggle in earnest.

She shoved against his chest and finally was able to break through his passion-clouded mind. He lifted his head and looked down into her eyes, confused. When he saw her expression, he dropped his hands and stepped away from her, breathing hard and unsteady.

“Thom, I think we need to put this on hold, okay?” she said a little shaky.

He clenched his jaw but nodded.

"I'm sorry, that was unfair of me, I thought I could handle it, but I was wrong," she said a little shamefully.

Again he said nothing, only nodded. After he had gotten himself under control, he stood looking at her steadfastly and unwavering. "Tess, I'm not going to apologize for wanting you. I will admit to being a little frustrated by you running hot and cold, but I'm trying to deal with your situation. With that being said, I will do whatever is necessary to help you through this." He paused, looked down briefly at his clasped hands, then moved to her, pulled her close to him and looked deep into her eyes. "I need you to know something, also. I don't want to add pressure to you or alarm you further, but I'm in love with you and have known it for what seems a very long time." He slowly bent his head and parted her lips with his.

She gently broke the kiss and opened her eyes to look into his. In every moment that she had spent with her attacker, she had never been more afraid than she was at that moment, but for very different reasons. "Thom, I seriously need to put this on hold right now, okay? Can we discuss this later, after the viewing?" she asked pleadingly.

Thom looked at her oddly, obviously expecting a different response than the one he received, but he slowly nodded his head. Tess watched his lips thin and his jaw tighten – who could blame him for being frustrated? She wasn't sure what he expected from her, but the whole thing made her feel vulnerable and jittery on the inside. She definitely wasn't ready for anything this emotionally heavy. He dropped his hands before lifting one to run through his hair. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "You're right, now is not the time. Shall we go?"

CHAPTER 32

The atmosphere was still tense in the car when Tess and Thom arrived at the funeral home for Kyra's viewing. Tess decided that she couldn't deal with this particular problem at the moment, this evening was about Kyra and those who loved her. Anthony was standing at the door of the room where Kyra's viewing was being held. After the stress of the past few minutes, it was comforting to walk into his arms and just feel solace with no underlying emotional baggage. He held her close and kissed her on her head.

"How are you holding up, kid?" he asked tenderly.

His kindness choked her up for some reason so she just buried her face into his chest and nodded her head, indicating that she was okay. He held her close for several minutes rocking her back and forth. She eventually broke away from him and wiped the tears from her lashes.

She turned, embarrassed, and nodded towards Thom. "Anthony, you remember Thom?" He nodded his head and reached to shake hands with Thom. Tess was surprised to see an odd look pass over Thom's features; almost as if he was jealous of Anthony. But surely he knew what their relationship was? Thom came up behind her and put a hand around her shoulder and they walked into the room. As was the case at the Samuelson's house the day before, the room held room-to-room Samuelsons. Tess walked forward to where Glynnis stood next to the casket containing Kyra's body; without saying anything, she put her arms around Glynnis and hugged her tight.

They broke apart but Tess remained by her side as others came by to speak and give words of encouragement. She saw Thom take a seat close by to allow her the time she needed to grieve. It almost made her sigh in relief as this was the Thom she knew; the one who was thoughtful and gentle. They'd been there about an hour when Dominic arrived. He walked directly to her and hugged her tight to him. He pulled back slightly to look down into her face, "How are you? I've been worried about you."

Pulling back a little uncomfortably, she said, "I'm doing okay. How about you? How are you managing?"

He grimaced, "It's harder than I thought. I really miss her and I didn't expect it to be like this. I'm not sure where to go from here."

Tess wasn't sure what to do with Dominic now that he was here. She hadn't realized how awkward it was going to be to have him here. On one side she had Glynnis, who didn't think that highly of him, and

on the other side was Thom, whose relationship with him was rocky as well. In the end she invited him to sit with her and Thom.

Dominic walked over with her and shook hands awkwardly with Thom. "I'm surprised to see you here, Thom. I didn't know that you knew Kyra all that well," he said almost harshly.

"Actually I'm here with Tess. We're dating now," he said, pulling her to his side and putting his arm around her.

Dominic looked sharply at Tess in surprise. "I thought you said you weren't dating, only friends?"

Tess could see the tension riding high between the two brothers, and in an effort to ease the strain, she joked, "We're testing the waters of the dating pool."

The joking did not quell the situation in the least and she saw Dominic clench his jaw before saying, "Well I hope you don't find any sharks in that pool."

Very abruptly, Thom responded in a low, harsh voice, "Dominic, have a little respect, now is not the time."

Tess moved them both back to the chairs and each sat on either side of her. Thom reached over and took one of her hands in his. She was more than a little frustrated. Now was not the time for this situation, whatever it was between them. She could feel the tension radiating from Thom. In more ways than one, she couldn't wait for this night to be over.

Tess, Thom, and Dominic stayed for another hour and then by mutual consent decided to leave. She looked around for Anthony, but didn't see him. She went and said her goodbyes to Kyra's family and assured them she would be back tomorrow for the funeral. She gave Dominic a brief hug goodbye and left with Thom.

The drive home was no less tense than the ride to the funeral home. She was exhausted and emotionally overwrought. She just wanted to be home away from everyone. It had been an extremely long day. When they arrived at her house, Thom came around, opened her car door, and walked her up to her front door.

Politely she asked him if he wanted to come in, but he just shook his head, and a brief hesitation softly said, "This evening has not gone particularly well and I'm sorry. I'm not sure how everything got so off track. Tess, I want you to think about something, okay? I think we need to spend some time together, just you and me. I have a cabin not far from here and I would like to go up there for the weekend. There is no pressure, it would just give us an opportunity to get to know each other and maybe you could begin to trust me a little more."

She looked at him contemplatively for a long while but finally nodded her acquiescence.

CHAPTER 33

Tess, clad in her dress-blues, was surprised to see that Anthony had gotten into work before her for the second day in a row. He also was in his dress uniform. She assumed he had the same idea as her, to get in early and try to get some things done before leaving to attend Kyra's funeral.

From her desk, she watched him studying something intently, so curiously she rounded her desk. She could see he was going over a report he'd received from the crime lab regarding all the fingerprints lifted from the car which had escaped during the Auto-Chop case. Leaning over his shoulder and looking at the report she asked, "Find anything useful?"

Studying the report intently, he read down a list of names supplied by the fingerprints. "Nothing yet. I don't see anyone familiar to me. I also don't see anyone who was listed from the garage. We'll have our hands full trying to cross-reference all of these with their pictures to see if you can identify the shooter."

She shook her head at him. "I didn't actually see the driver and don't even know if there was more than one person in the car. The driver and the shooter might not be the same person. I just couldn't see inside the car that well."

Anthony tossed the report down on his desk and rubbed his eyes. "There must be fifty different

fingerprints in and on that car.”

Shrugging, she said confidently, “We’ll just take it one by one and whittle the list down. We know that one set of prints has to be the shooter. So, I think that puts us ahead, right?”

Anthony just nodded. Then obviously shifting gears and smiling at his own cleverness, he asked, “How did things go for you and the Brothers Grimm?”

She grimaced. “It was challenging and awkward. I thought for a little while that they would come to blows. I’m not sure what their issues are, but they must run pretty deep.” She hesitated, wrinkled up her face, and said, “Thom has asked me to go to his cabin for the weekend.”

Anthony looked up surprised, “Are you going?”

She paused to consider her answer, “I am scared to go because of what it could mean, but I think I’m more scared not to go for exactly the same reason.” She blew out her breath slowly. “I told him I would go. He promised there would be no pressure and I have to admit that I could use some time away from... everything. And Thom is a good guy. I’m just not sure if I’m really ready for this kind of commitment. It terrifies me!”

Anthony watched, keeping his face completely neutral, not allowing her to read his true thoughts. “Do you think you can trust him?”

She laughed a humorless laugh, “No, but then I don’t really trust anyone, do I? Present company excluded, of course,” she said, blowing him a kiss.

Anthony sat quietly for a long time while he weighed her words. “I guess like the fingerprint list, you just take it one thing at a time.”

Thom called before eight to let her know something had come up with one of his clients and he would not be able to make it to the funeral. He felt terrible and hated to let her down. Secretly, she was actually glad he wouldn’t be there, for Dominic’s sake. She expected the funeral would be devastating for him and she was dreading having to juggle the two of them and their invisible landmines.

As her ride had cancelled, Tess rode to the funeral with Anthony. As they drew near to the cemetery, they could see lines and lines of off-duty police cars and officers lined up on either side of the interior roads of the cemetery in memorial for one of their own. It always made her glow with pride when she saw her fellow law enforcement officers unite together in times of strife and hardship. Tess was happy for the amazing sendoff and what it would mean to Kyra’s family. She took a deep breath and got out of the car and went forward to the gravesite.

As she neared she saw Kyra’s family seated in the first several rows of chairs. Standing off to the side by himself, with his hands dug deep into the pockets of his three-piece black suit, was Dominic, looking somewhat lost and forlorn. She tapped Anthony on his arm and pointed she was going to stand with Dominic, and lifting his eyebrows questioning the sanity of her decision, he nodded his head.

When she got closer to Dominic she could see how hard this actually was for him and that he was having a rough time dealing with his grief. She silently walked up beside him and slipped her arm around his waist. He stiffened at her touch and then withdrew one his hands out of his pocket and placed his arm around her, drawing her closer to him in a gesture of comfort. They stood that way until Kyra Samuelson was laid to rest and the haunting echoes of the trumpet playing Taps faded into nothingness.

They continued to stand off to the side until most everyone had departed the cemetery, neither wanted to break their invisible cord to the woman lying in the ground. Eventually, by mutual consent, they turned silently and walked back to where he was parked.

Looking around for any sign of Anthony, Tess said, “I seem to have lost my ride, do you mind taking me home?”

Shaking his head and giving her a rueful half-smile, he replied, “I would be happy to. How about we catch some dinner on the way back? I really don’t feel like being alone right now.”

While Tess was sure Thom would not be happy with this turn of events, she could not, in good conscience, leave him to his own devices. “Sounds like a good plan.”

In a kind of memorial to Kyra, they ended up at Sandusky's Pub; to further the irony, the last waitress they'd had when they had all been together, Miranda, was again serving them. Being in the same place with the same waitress was both comforting and devastating all at the same time.

They placed their order and sat together silently, each lost in their own thoughts. Dominic sat across from Tess, folding a napkin between his fingers in a kind of busy-work. He looked up and eyed her carefully, "So... you and Thom, huh?"

She almost cringed on the inside at this topic of conversation, "Yep, me and Thom."

He continued to watch her closely, obviously expecting more of a response, "Do you think that's wise?"

Striving to maintain her cool on the outside when on the inside she was immediately fuming, "Dominic, I'm not really sure what the issues are between the two of you, but I really don't want to be put in the middle, if you don't mind."

Slowly and contemplatively, he nodded, "Okay, no more about Thom. Can I ask you a different question?" At her nod, he continued, "What is the deal with you and that partner of yours?" Puzzled by his question, she just looked at him and waited for him to elaborate. "I mean, the way that guy watches you is creepy."

Now really angry, "Anthony is my partner and our lives depend on each other; beside that fact, we are friends. I am very close to him and I would appreciate it if you wouldn't besmirch our relationship by making it something that it isn't."

Dominic lifted his hands in a sign of surrender, "Okay, okay, sorry. I didn't mean anything by it. I was just concerned, that's all."

Taking a deep, calming breath, she said, "I promise you don't have anything to worry about with either Anthony or Thom."

Dominic sat silently, again obviously trying to decide how to ask his next question. "I want to ask you something that I'm curious about, but I don't want you to get mad at me, okay?"

She got that same feeling you get when another person says to you that they hope what they're going to say isn't meant to be offensive, but you always know that what's coming next will be. She shrugged her shoulders, "I'll guess we won't know until you ask."

Hesitating, he looked down at the napkin in his fingers, "I was just curious...why Thom? What is it about him that seems to draw women to him like a moth to a flame, as they say?"

Tess was a little surprised. Not only by the question, but that he had asked it. She truthfully answered, "Thom is a good man. He is both gentle and compassionate. What woman wouldn't want that?"

Dominic reflected on her answer before asking, "I guess, the question I really want answered is, more specifically, why him and not me?"

Tess was taken aback and uncomfortable with his question, "I'm not sure I understand your question. I didn't know I had a choice between the two of you. I mean, you were dating my best friend."

"Tess, you know I was interested in you first, but you turned me down flat. But Thom... you followed like the pied piper. I'm not trying to make you uncomfortable, I'm just curious."

Her first reaction was irritation, but she overrode it and answered his question, "Dominic, I don't really know the answer. I guess when Thom came along I was just ready."

Snidely he said under his breath, "You and most women."

"What do you mean by that?"

Ignoring her irritation, he said, "Surely, you've noticed how woman just flock to him?"

Tess didn't answer. She couldn't help but remember the night she'd met Thom, he'd first been kissing Maggie Benson and then practically been picked up by their waitress, Miranda. "I guess I can see your point. Has it always been that way?"

He nodded. "For as long as I can remember, Thom has had women throw themselves at him. And while he certainly does enjoy them, he never keeps them for long."

Tess looked up sharply at him. "What exactly are you trying to say?"

Raising his hands again in surrender, he said, "I'm not saying anything. I was only making an

observation. And I guess, I want you to be careful, that's all."

Gathering her purse and coat, she stood. "Dominic, I'm sorry, but it's been a very long day and I'm tired. I don't want to be rude, but I really need to go." She held up her hand to stop him when started to rise. "Please don't get up, I'll call a taxi."

She walked out before he had time to protest. She was furious at Dominic for adding more stress to an already stressful day. But she was mostly furious because she knew what he'd said about Thom was true. Not the part about Thom's intentions with her, but that she had known the type of man Thom was before beginning to date him and she'd already lived through that type of mistake before...just barely lived through it.

While Tess was unlocking the front door to her house, her cell phone began ringing. She pulled it out of her coat pocket and saw that it was Thom. She looked at it for a long time and then slipped it back into her pocket. She just wasn't up to dealing with him at this moment. And that made her even angrier at Dominic for adding more wood to a fire that was already consuming her relationship with Thom.

Her cell phone rang twice more during the evening, but she ignored it both times. She knew she would eventually have to deal with the situation with Thom. Not deal with, as much as determine within herself what she was looking for in a relationship with Thom...but not tonight. She eventually made her security loop through her house, turned out the lights, and climbed wearily into bed.

CHAPTER 34

The Angry One sat in his study, twirling a drink in his hand. Somehow things were not turning out as he had planned. No matter what he did, she just refused to see there could be no other but him. He thought the last one would have given her the push she needed, but there she was again throwing herself at every man she came into contact with. He was fast losing patience with her. He took his glass and savagely threw it against the back of the fireplace, gaining temporary pleasure at the shrill sound of the glass exploding.

He should have just finished what he had started at her house that night. But he didn't want her that way. He wanted her to quit pretending that she didn't want him. He wanted her to look up at him with those green eyes flashing with brilliant passion; he'd seen that look before. He wanted to hear her say the words...I want you.

He poured himself another drink, and sitting back in his chair, he tossed the fiery liquid down his throat. His stomach burned with his intense rage. Why couldn't she just see the truth that was right in front of her? He leaned forward and picked up the hourglass and stared at it contemplatively. The time for games was over, he had given her enough chances, and enough gentle nudges in the right direction. He turned the hourglass over and watched as the light caught the shimmer of the sand as it began spinning down into its base. He thought again of William Shakespeare in the words of Macbeth: Come what come may, time and the hour runs through the roughest day.

CHAPTER 35

Tess arrived at work the next morning before Anthony. She sat down at her desk and began going through the items in her inbox, which was mostly a mountain of paperwork. She sorted the items into piles in accordance to priority of completion. Amongst her inbox clutter was an envelope from the crime lab in reference to the Auto-Chop investigation. She opened the envelope and pulled out the contents. Inside were the photographs of people whose fingerprints they were able to identify from the getaway car. While she didn't think it would help, she began to glance through them.

Anthony had been right; there were over fifty photos here. She was about two-thirds of the way

through the stack when one photo stopped her cold. It wasn't that she actually recognized the man in the photo; it was that he reminded her of someone else. She was still studying the photo when Anthony came in. He was again dressed spectacularly in a sage-colored suit with tan accessories. He walked in as usual and leaned in to kiss her on her head.

"Glad to see you here. I looked for you yesterday after the funeral but didn't see you."

Trying to avoid discussing Dominic, she instead handed the photo she had been studying to Anthony. "Does this guy look familiar to you?"

Anthony studied it intently, "Yes, but not like I've actually seen him, but someone who looks like him."

Tess began nodding her head, "That's exactly what I thought. For some reason, the only one who comes to mind is the bald guy from the garage; the one with the tattoos."

Anthony nodded his head also, "Yeah, I can see it. I wonder if they are related. I think we need to go pay him a visit. He's still in lockup."

Anthony walked over to his desk to call the county jail to set up a time to meet with Rolando Garcia, the bald, tattooed man who was the ringleader in the chop-shop garage case. While he set up the time, Tess turned to her computer and began going through her emails. She could hear the steady rhythm of Anthony's voice as he spoke on the phone and glanced up at him when she heard him falter. She saw that he had paused and was looking behind her; she turned in her chair and saw Thom standing in the doorway.

Inwardly she cringed as she still wasn't sure how to deal with him, but outwardly, she smiled, got up, and went to him in the doorway. Thom, however, did not return her smile and with irritation evident in his voice said, "I have been so worried about you. Why didn't you return my calls? I left several messages." He softly finished, "Listen, I'm sorry I missed the funeral yesterday, I didn't have a choice. You have to know that I wouldn't hurt you like that if I could have in any way avoided it."

Tess cringed further on the inside, but this time at herself for being such a jerk. This was Thom. The same sweet, considerate man he has always been and she had let Dominic taint him and that wasn't fair. She placed a hand on his arm, "I'm sorry, you're right. Yesterday was just a crazy day, please forgive me."

Without saying anything he pulled her to him and held her as he placed his head on the top of hers. Eventually he said, "You don't have to apologize. I was just worried you wouldn't understand."

She shook her head and stepped back, "No, of course I understand. It was no problem, I totally understood."

Glancing at Anthony, he lowered his voice, "Are we still on to go the cabin this weekend? I'd like to drive up in the morning if you're still game."

She hesitated briefly but nodded her head. "I'll be ready."

He smiled and leaned forward to kiss her on her cheek, "Good, I'll see you then. I'll let you get back to work." Lifting a hand to Anthony, Thom turned around and left.

She quietly and thoughtfully sat back down at her desk. Anthony finished his call and continued to watch her. "So you're really going through with the cabin trip, huh?" he said with surprise in his voice.

Blowing out a deep breath she said, "Yep, I think I am. I'm not one hundred percent sure it's the right thing. But I want to move forward from the past and I think Thom may be my future, so I owe it to myself to at least try."

Anthony sat watching her soberly for a few long seconds before saying, "Well, I'm not sure what to say to that. I just don't think he's the right basket in which to place all your eggs, if you know what I mean."

"Again that's the point, I'm not sure either, but I want to try."

Anthony sat silently for a few more minutes before standing. "We can meet with Garcia in an hour. Are you ready?"

The trip to the jail was a bust as Rolando Garcia refused to speak...period. He sat silently across from them with his arms crossed, never once opening this mouth. Upon their return, they were able to verify that the man in the photo was indeed Garcia's brother, not that it got them anywhere on their case.

Big deal, the owner of the garage's brother left his fingerprint in a car stolen by his brother.

After lunch Anthony and Tess returned to the conference room set up for, what was being dubbed in the police station, as the Hourglass Killer. As was her practice, she went to stand in front of the whiteboard holding all the victims' photos and their information. She saw her name written first, then a photo of Christina O'Hara with her fiery red hair, a photo of Maggie Benson with her shy smile and brown locks, and then of course, a photo of Kyra. Tess stared at the latest addition of her friend's photo with her shiny blonde hair and big smile.

Collectively, the women were all vastly different. Christina was a college student from a middle-class family; Maggie was also a student, working to become a nurse from a very low-income family; and then she and Kyra worked in a police station. What drew the killer to these women? Why did he kill them all but let her live? Was it someone she knew? She momentarily thought again about the lone fact that three of the four women had something in common: She, Maggie, and Kyra had all known Thom Wyndom. No, that was just a coincidence, the hourglass sitting on Dominic's desk flashed through her mind. Again, no, just because Thom had given it to Dominic was a coincidence. A little voice that she was trying hard to ignore told her that was a lot of coincidences.

She kept thinking to herself there was no way it could be Thom because she would know. That little voice said to her she had been tied up, blindfolded, and her attacker had whispered in an indistinguishable voice. It could have been anyone, and try as she might, she had not been able to identify him.

She began to think about the hourglass and read through the morbid poem:

The sands of life run quickly through the hourglass's slope;

And while some try to staunch its flow, there really is no hope!

For death is sure we are told and no one knows the hour;

Love fades as blood flows, the hourglass holds the power!

What did these things mean to the killer? The hourglasses themselves brought little in the way of usefulness. They were made in mass production and distributed everywhere, so no help there. She had tried to research the poem itself but couldn't find it in any literature or Internet searches. She figured the killer had penned it himself. She thought the next time she had a counseling session with Dr. Michaels she would take a copy of the poem with her so Dr. Michaels could give her take on it.

CHAPTER 36

The next morning, Tess rose early and began to pack for her weekend away with Thom. She was very apprehensive about going with him as she wasn't sure what he was expecting or what she could give. She had already decided she was going to begin stretching her boundaries with Thom and try to break through the emotional barrier she had erected to protect herself.

He arrived shortly before midmorning. He knocked softly on her door and when she opened, he immediately pulled her into his arms and kissed her soundly. He eventually pulled his lips away from hers and like in times of old, he leaned his forehead on hers, and held her close.

"God, I've missed you. It seems forever since we've had a chance to be together."

Towards her goal of breaking through barriers, Tess leaned into to him and held him just as tight, "I've missed you, too."

He gathered her belongings and packed them in his SUV. The cabin actually wasn't far from the city, only a little under an hour in Golden, Colorado. The cabin was set high in a developed area called Goldenview, usually reserved for vacation homes. They turned onto Thom's street and Tess smiled at the name, Land Shark Lane. The cabin was cozy with a fireplace in the living room being the central feature; stone rose from floor to ceiling with a huge wooden mantle which stretched the width of the entire wall - it was impressive. The cabin had two bedrooms with baths and Thom purposefully and considerately placed her bags in the spare room.

Tess began putting the food items away in the kitchen and then put some sandwiches together for them. Later, they decided to walk around the area surrounding the cabin which included a small trout

stream a little further down the lane. It was a beautiful day and it felt good to be outside in the sun and fresh air. They held hands, laughed, and talked about different things that had happened in their lives; nothing serious, only things that were lighthearted and fun. It seemed to Tess that she wasn't the only one who'd decided to break through barriers. She could tell he was making a concerted effort to make her comfortable and not put any undue stress on the day.

Late in the afternoon, while she and Thom were in the kitchen cooking dinner, her cell phone rang and without looking she automatically answered, "Champion."

Her body froze at the unexpected voice on the other end, "Wow, so formal, are we in detective mode or what?" chuckled Dominic.

Tess cringed on the inside as she remembered all the missed calls from Dominic she had ignored and glanced uncomfortably at Thom who was watching her curiously. "Hey, no...sorry, habit, I'm afraid. I'm sorry I didn't get back with you, it's been a crazy week," she said vaguely.

She glanced over to see Thom watching her intently as Dominic continued, "I've just been so worried about you since the night of Kyra's You've been avoiding me."

Apparently noticing how tense she'd immediately become upon answering the phone, Thom asked, "Who is it, Tess?"

Dominic heard Thom's voice said sharply, but with an attempt to soften, "Are you with Thom?"

Not sure who to answer first, she decided to finish the call and then deal with Thom, so holding a finger up to him she continued with Dominic, "Yes, we're at his cabin for the weekend. So as you can imagine, this really isn't the best time. Can we talk later?"

She could hear the silence on the other end of the phone. Eventually he said, "No, I guess it's not the best time. Look, I just wanted to make sure you were okay, but it appears my concern is unwarranted. I'll talk to you later."

Tess slowly pushed the off button on her phone and slid it back onto the counter before glancing up at Thom who was still looking at her questioningly. "That was Dominic, he was just checking on me. He was concerned about how I've been since the funeral."

Tess could see that Thom was fighting an internal battle within himself but only said, "Oh, that was nice of him," through clenched teeth before turning back to the stove.

In a rush to regain their earlier mood, she continued glossing over the events of that day. "We were at the funeral together and then had dinner. He was upset and I felt bad for him but I was dead-tired and left early. He was just concerned."

Still with his back to her, she could see his body tense, but his words remained steady and calm sounding. "Again, that was nice of him." With an obvious effort to move beyond Dominic's phone call, Thom turned to her and placed a kiss on her forehead as he moved past to set the table for dinner. She closed her eyes and blew out a deep breath. She shrugged her shoulders and gave up trying to undo Dominic's phone call. She turned and continued making the forgotten salad.

Dinner went better than expected and Tess and Thom settled back into their easy rhythm. Thom had placed candles on the table and along with the firelight, it was the only light in the cabin; it made their dinner more intimate and relaxed. After dinner, Thom reached across the table and took her hand.

Looking into her face, he smiled gently, "This is nice, I can't remember a better day. I'm glad you decided to come, I know the decision wasn't easy." He brought her hand to his lips.

She smiled at him, "I'm glad I came too, it has been a good day."

Thom rose from his chair and went to his sound system, and soon soft music was wafting over the air in the cabin. He turned back to where she sat and slowly pulled her up and into his arms. They circled slowly for a long time in the timeless motion of dancing. Thom held her close with only their entwined hands between them and he rested his chin on top of her head with his eyes closed.

Eventually, he tipped her face up towards his and placed his lips softly and undemanding on hers. She stretched to meet his kiss and soon everything else was blocked out of her mind...the night...the music...and her ever abiding fear.

As the kiss deepened, Thom wrapped his arms tighter around her, drawing her even closer and formed his body intimately to hers as they continued to circle the floor. He eventually led them to the

couch and gently laid her across it without breaking the kiss. She ran her hands up and inside his shirt so that she was rubbing up the long length of his bare back. He moaned softly against her mouth and began slowly unbuttoning her top. He gently pulled it open and still without breaking the kiss, he moved his hands over her bra-clad breast and the bare skin of her mid-drift.

She shifted her body so they were lying on their sides facing each other on the couch. He moved his lips from her mouth and slowly lowered them to her neck. He continued to rub his hands over her body. She couldn't contain the moan that escaped her lips.

Suddenly, Thom pulled away, stood up, and went to stand in front the fireplace. With his head lying on one of his forearms that leaned against the mantle, he struggled to catch his breath and composure.

She sat up bewildered, not sure what was going on. "Thom, what's the matter, did I do something wrong?"

He gave a rueful laugh, "No, you were doing everything right. But if I let it go on any longer, I don't know if I'll have the strength to stop. And I promised you this would be a non-pressure weekend. I'm trying to live up to that promise, but I didn't realize how difficult it would be to stay away from you."

Pulling her unbuttoned blouse together in a sign of protection and licking her lips nervously, she said softly, "Maybe I don't want you to stay away."

He raised his head from his forearm and looked at her intently, trying to discern her meaning, "You don't want me to stop?"

Again licking her lips, swallowing hard, and looking down at her hands she said almost inaudibly, "I'm...afraid."

Thom blew out a breath, "Tess, I'm not sure what to do here, I'm damned either way. I can continue and be forced to stop, or continue and freak you out further. You are going to have to tell me what you want. I can't risk hurting you."

She sat still in indecision. She didn't know if she could go through with it, but she was scared to not at least try, "Thom, I have to be honest and tell you that I'm scared, not of you, but of hurting you if this fails miserably. I can only say that I'm willing to try, but I can't promise how it will turn out. So I'm sorry to tell you this, but ultimately the decision is yours...are you willing to risk it?"

She had no sooner gotten the words out of her mouth when he moved quickly from the fireplace and back to the couch, pulling her into his arms, and placing his lips on hers. He broke away momentarily. "I'm definitely willing to risk it." He placed his lips back on hers in need and demand. He moved his hands under her unbuttoned blouse and gently rubbed his hands over her back.

He eventually broke away from her, lifted his hands to cradle her face between them as he looked deep into her eyes trying to gauge her reaction. Apparently finding his answer, he gently lowered his lips back to hers in one last soft kiss and led her to the bedroom.

In the end, she wished she had taken the easy way out he'd offered while standing at the fireplace. If she had, things might have turned out differently between them. But tragically, that wasn't the decision she'd made.

At first, there'd been nothing but want and need and things were going passionately and smoothly. She didn't think about anything but just concentrated on his lips, his hands, and her need. But then he uttered some words - words which completely took her from the bedroom in the cabin back to the bedroom trapped in her nightmares.

They had managed to escape the confines of their clothing and Thom was leaning over her looking down into eyes when he said, "You are so beautiful, I have wanted you for so long," as he bent forward to kiss her passionately.

But she was immediately frozen in place. Those words were the words the attacker had used in her room that night. Once she could make her limbs obey, she began to scoot backwards from him. Startled, he didn't quite understand what she was doing and reached automatically to pull her back, intent only on his passion. He didn't realize at first that she wasn't trying to get closer to him, but was pulling away.

She whimpered for him to stop and struggled to get away. Her heart was beating uncontrollably fast and she couldn't catch her breath. She was afraid she would pass out from her terror. Eventually, it

dawned on Thom there was a problem and he slowly pulled back and looked down to see tears streaming down her face. A savage look crossed his face which he tried unsuccessfully to mask. With slow but jerky movements, he rose from the bed and walked out of the room, naked, without saying anything.

She pulled the covers up to cover her nakedness and turned her head into the pillow and cried. Why would he use those same words? Of course, Thom wouldn't have realized those words would trigger her terror like that. She was so horrified and embarrassed. She had been right about not coming here. She wasn't ready for this and it saddened her even more because she just realized that she had gone from falling into love with Thom, to being in love with Thom. She had thought because of her feelings for Thom that she could work past it. But even love had not stopped the nightmare. When she had calmed down, she got up, padded quietly to her own room, and dressed. She sat in a chair by the window in her room until the gray light of morning filtered through the trees into her room. Then she called Anthony and asked him if he would come and pick her up. He said he would be there within the hour.

While she waited, she composed a note for Thom:

Dear Thom, You have been so very patient and understanding with me. I'm sorry things didn't work out, I really wanted them to. I thought because of my feelings for you I would be able to be normal. But now I can see that I am not ready. In all fairness to you, I don't think we should see each other anymore. You are a good and honorable man, and I hope one day you can forgive me. Tess

When she heard the sound of a car in the lane, she quietly picked up her bags and walked towards the front door. As she passed through the living room, she saw Thom asleep on the couch with his arm flung across his eyes. Her heart ached at what she knew she was losing, but didn't think it was fair of her to keep torturing him this way. She placed the note on the table and silently closed the door behind her.

Anthony got out of the car to help her with her bags and pulled her into his arms as the tears began to flow again. He helped her into the passenger side of the car and quietly shut her door. She leaned her forehead against the side window. As she glanced at the front of the cabin, she saw Thom push the curtains aside to see what was going on as she and Anthony pulled out of the drive. She closed her eyes and concentrated on pulling herself together.

When she stopped crying, Anthony glanced over, "Do you feel like talking about it?"

She shrugged her shoulders, "You were right, I wasn't ready."

Anthony's jaw clenched as he studied her for a long while, "I'm sorry, I wish I'd been wrong."

With a catch in her voice she said, "He tried to make it easy for me, but I let him down. He probably won't ever forgive me, not that I blame him. And the worst part is – I've fallen in love with him and even now I couldn't move past what happened before. I don't think I'll ever be normal again."

Again Anthony's jaw clenched but he just reached over for her hand and held it without saying anything. Her cell phone rang as they drove and she pulled it out of her pocket and saw it was Thom. She slowly touched the button to turn the phone off and slid it back into her pocket.

Anthony glanced over at her and with concern in his voice said, "You are going to have to talk to him at some point."

Slowly she nodded her head, "But not today, not today."

CHAPTER 37

On Monday, Tess arrived late to work. She'd dreaded going into the office because she was a coward and was trying to stay hidden from Thom. He'd called thirty-seven times the day before, but she'd never answered. He had stopped by her house four times, but again, she never answered the door. She knew she would eventually have to talk to him, but she was not strong enough yet...if she would ever be. She was so confused about Thom. On one hand she was in love with him and wanted to be able to pursue it; and on the other hand she was afraid because everything about a physical relationship plunged her back into her nightmare.

Why would he say those words? Of all the words he could have strung together in a number of different sequences, why had he uttered those words? She remembered Dr. Michaels asking her if Thom could be her attacker, but she had immediately discounted that; and she hesitated to pursue him in connection to her case because it just didn't feel right. She thought she had pretty good discernment when it came to people and Thom Wyndom just didn't fit the mold of a heinous killer. Plus, if he'd wanted to rape her, he could have, twice, if indeed he was the original attacker, but he had not either time. She was so confused which was why she didn't mention any of these things to Anthony.

Anthony met her at the door when she entered the office, "There you are! I've been so worried. Thom called me a couple of times yesterday; he is really worried about you. I told him you were okay and to just give you time."

Tess blew her breath out and grimaced, "I'm sorry, Anthony, I shouldn't have involved you. And I should have talked to him yesterday. He called me numerous times and stopped by, but I obviously didn't answer."

Anthony shrugged shoulders, striving for indifference. "I don't mind being involved. I was just worried about you because I know how hard this is on you. I think Thom is a nice enough guy but he needs to accept the decision you've made."

Tess thought it through, "I'm going by his office this morning to talk to him and then it will be over and we can all move forward with our lives."

She felt Anthony become tense beside her, "Do you think that's wise?"

Tess threw her hands up in the air, "At this point, I don't know anything anymore. But it's not fair to make him suffer any more, either. So I'll just quit being a wimp and go see him."

It was midmorning by the time Tess walked off the elevator on the fifth floor of the bank building. Slowly, as she walked towards Thom's reception desk, she felt like she was walking down the corridor of death row. The receptionist immediately got up and walked to Thom's door without Tess having to say anything. The receptionist immediately waved her to the office door. She hesitated briefly then squared her shoulders and walked to the door.

In a repeat of scenes past, he rose and was already coming around the desk when she entered. He immediately walked to her and grabbed her in a huge hug, "Oh, Red, I have been so worried about you."

Tess stood rigid in his arms and eventually moved away from him, "Thom, I can't tell you how sorry I am that things didn't work out. I feel badly because you tried to stop before things had gone too far and I talked you into continuing."

He again walked to her and led her to the couch, "Listen, Tess, you warned me that you might not be able to continue, so it wasn't like I didn't know. You just took me by surprise and I didn't handle it very well. I'm the one who's sorry. I shouldn't have stormed off like I did. I'm just not sure what happened. Can you tell me now?"

Tess thought about telling him what he wanted to know, but couldn't conjure up the nerve. In the end, she needed to break it off with him anyway, so it didn't really matter. In her mind, she separated herself from what was actually happening to strengthen her resolve, "Thom, I think you are a very special man and had it been a different time in my life, I would have loved to be in a relationship with you. But you don't deserve this and I hate myself for putting you through it. I still think it's better if we don't see each other anymore."

Thom got up, walked over to the window and stared out. "Tess, I don't know what to say to convince you that we can work through this."

Swallowing several times in an effort to regain her fast disappearing control she said, "There's nothing, Thom. I think this is what's best for everyone. If we continue it will only hurt the both of us one way or the other." Tess stood up and walked to where Thom stood with his back to her. She placed her hand on his arm, and choking back a sob she whispered, "Thanks, Thom for giving me a chance; I'm just sorry I wasn't the girl for you...even though I really wanted to be."

Thom turned suddenly and enveloped her in a tight hug, his body trembling with emotion, "Please reconsider. I beg you to reconsider!"

Slowly Tess dropped her arms from around his body and stepped back, "I'm sorry, Thom, but eventually you'll realize this is what's best."

Thom let his arms fall to his side and stepped further away from her, resolved. "I'm going to miss you. Call me anytime and I'll come running."

CHAPTER 38

The Angry One was now furious! If she thought he would put up with this, she was sadly mistaken. He gave and gave and it was never enough for her. He had her within his grasp but somehow she had slipped away...again. What was it going to take? He was growing tired of all of these games. Every time he turned around, there she was, flitting this way and that.

He was beginning to think he had been going about the situation with her all wrong. Trying to draw her attention through her deductive reasoning as a detective was not turning out as he had planned. She obviously didn't see his point. He was going to have to try another tactic.

He sat at his desk tapping his fingertips against its edge. The problem was, there were too many distractions in her life and he needed to clear out some of them in order for her sight to be made clearer; but how best to achieve that?

Suddenly an evil grin appeared on his face. He knew exactly how to meet his every objective. He had been so stupid. This was so obvious a fifth grader could have figured it out. Now he was going to get somewhere. Instead of turning the hourglass over, he leaned over and laid it on its side and thought, while the hourglass may be on its side, time was definitely not on hers.

CHAPTER 39

Miranda Browning had pulled a double shift at Sandusky's Pub and she was tired. It was the height of football season and she must have served a hundred pitchers of beer. When the crowds thinned, she went off shift and sat down on one of the barstools to rest her tired, aching feet. She had two beers of her own and finally decided to head out. Because the pub had been packed for most of the day, she'd had to park several blocks over.

As she walked, she stretched her tired muscles and ran her fingers through her hair to help alleviate some the tension she had been carrying all day. She walked down the sidewalks, not really paying attention to her surroundings. She'd walked these sidewalks on at least a hundred different occasions so she wasn't worried. She turned the corner which would lead her to her car and before she completely knew what was happening, someone came up behind her and placed a cloth soaked in something medicinal-smelling over her face. Before she could gather her wits enough to scream or turn around, her vision started to go black and she sank to the ground.

When she came to, she immediately knew she was in a bad way. She was naked tied down, and blindfolded. Not being able to see around her made her even more afraid. Even though she couldn't see, she sensed someone else in the room. She feebly called out for help. Softly, she heard a man chuckle. That made her even more afraid and she began whimper and then as hysteria grew, scream. She screamed for a long time and then whimpered again. She felt the man kneel on the bed and she tried to twist away from him. But due to the ties, she was trapped and her movements extremely limited.

Without preamble he climbed on top of her, wrapped his hands around her neck to hold her steady and slammed himself intimately into her body. The more she gasped for air the harder he pounded into her. Tears were pooling under her blindfold and just when the blackness would almost take her over, he would loosen his grip just enough for her to greedily suck in some air. Finally, blissfully, he finished and

climbed off of her.

She begged him not to kill her. She strained to hear him in the room but didn't hear anything for a long time. Then to her left, she heard him enter and cross back over to the bed. Again she strained to move away from him. She felt the bed give as he again knelt on it but this time he wasn't on the end but on the edge close to her side. Suddenly she felt that same smelly cloth being placed over her face and then she slipped into blessed nothingness.

Miranda awoke sometime around midmorning. Her mouth felt like parchment. She remembered the medicinal cloth which had been placed over her face twice the night before. She strained again to hear anything. When she heard only silence, she began to twist and turn violently, trying to loosen her bonds. As she wriggled, whatever was tied over her eyes began to slip down and she had to blink suddenly as the bright sunlight hit her eyes. She looked around quickly but didn't see anyone. She looked up at her bonds and saw that if she could move completely to the left side, she would be able to loop the rope she was tied with back over the bedpost and it would give her enough feed so that she could theoretically get free. She moved over as far as she could and flipped the rope. She had to do it several times, but finally she was able to get the rope to un-loop. After that it was a simple matter of untying herself with her teeth.

She worked quickly and soon was untied and off the bed. She opened one of the closets and found some clothes, obviously belonging to a man, and even though they hung hugely off her body, she put them on and walked silently through the house, shivering with terror. It appeared to be a cabin of some kind with a huge fireplace in the living room. She looked around but didn't see a phone anywhere. She quickly looked around and not seeing anyone, ran out of the house and down the lane, making sure to stay hidden in the tree line. About a mile from the cabin she came upon another house and frantically ran to the door. But before pounding on the door, she thought better of it. Who could she trust? How did she know that whoever lived here wasn't part of what happened to her? She knew she couldn't trust anyone. So getting control of herself, she calmly knocked. An elderly man opened the door and Miranda told him that she'd had car trouble and needed to call someone to come and get her. He eyed her clothing suspiciously but let her inside. She'd called her sometimes-boyfriend, Kevin, and he said he would come when he could get there.

The elderly gentleman was nice enough to allow her to wait inside his home until Kevin arrived. While she waited, Miranda knew exactly who she was going to call when she got back. There was a young female detective who came in a lot to Sandusky's. She'd always been nice and tipped well. She knew she could trust her. She would call her and no one else.

After Miranda left the elderly gentleman's home, he shuffled over to his desk, pulled out his address book, found the number he was looking for, and dialed the phone. When the phone was connected and answered on the other end, he said, "Hello, Thom...?"

CHAPTER 40

Tess was not dealing well with her breakup with Thom. The morning she'd left him in his office, she'd cried all the way back to her house. She called Anthony and told him something had come up and she wouldn't be in for the rest of the day. He, of course, had been worried, but she'd been too upset to soothe him. She'd wearily crawled back into her bed and buried her face in her pillow and cried for everything that had been taken from her: beginning with Dane who had betrayed her; her father who had died and essentially left her; the attacker who had stolen what little bit of life she had carved out for herself; Kyra who had been her best friend and had been brutally torn away from her; and finally Thom, who was supposed to be the one to put all the pieces back together.

She cried for her own stupidity because she had known in the beginning that this was how it would end. She would have liked it better had Thom done something horrible to deserve her hatred, but he had never been anything but the good, kind, and decent man that he was.

She cried until she had no more tears left and eventually fell into a troubled sleep. She was jarred awake when she heard someone in her house. She quietly swung off the side of the bed and reached for

her gun. With her heart pounding and her hands trembling, she walked quietly but purposely to the door. The sunlight poured through her open curtains as she wheeled her gun first from one side then to the other. When she swung in the direction of the living room, she saw Anthony coming towards her. She took a deep breath to regain her composure and dropped the gun to her side.

Stupid tears flooded her eyes and with her hand over her heart, she cried, “Anthony, you scared me! I could have shot you!”

“I was worried about you and didn’t want you to be alone.” Taking her gun from her fingers, he eased her unresisting body to the couch and gently pulled her into his arms and just held her. He always knew just what to do. Why couldn’t it have been this easy with Thom? A little voice in her head said it was because with Thom, it really mattered.

Anthony had held her and didn’t press her to talk about things she just wasn’t ready to talk about. Eventually she asked, “How did you get in the house?”

The answer he gave surprised her, “The door was unlocked.”

How could that be? She was always so careful about locking the door. She was really slipping.

In a defeated tone she whispered, “I don’t know what to do anymore, Anthony.”

He pulled her back close to him and stroked her hair, “I know, honey, I’m so sorry. I wish it could be different. But this probably is for the best.”

With her heart in pieces, she only mumbled, “I know it is. But I don’t think I have the strength to go on anymore. I’m tired, so very tired.”

Anthony tightened his hold on her and continued stroking her hair, “You can’t talk like that, Tess. You have so many things to continue on for; your family, your work...me.”

She nodded her head but didn’t answer. There was no answer that would help. Her life had become a vicious cycle of almost getting what she wanted and then having it ripped cruelly away from her grasp. Life was becoming...too hard.

Anthony stayed with her throughout the night and left the next morning in time to go home and change for work. She knew she needed to pull it together and not wallow in misery because as she knew from past experience, it never helped. And once you fell into misery’s murky depths, it was almost impossible to climb back out of it. She was determined to move past Thom. She had pulled her life together after Dane and she’d thought that was impossible at the time also.

She made herself get up and shower. She put on her favorite suit and piled her unruly hair into a French twist on her head. She would fake it until she could actually deal with it. There was work to be done and that was where she would concentrate her efforts.

If she had known then what was lurking just on the other side of her front door, she would have just stayed in the bed, pulled the covers over her head, and prayed for death.

CHAPTER 41

That morning, which was the beginning of the end, Tess straightened her shoulders, grabbed her purse and car keys, and headed out her front door. When she opened the door, she stopped cold. Sitting on her porch step was Miranda, the waitress from Sandusky’s. Tess couldn’t quite figure out what she could possibly be doing on her front porch. Miranda turned when she heard the door open and stood up to face Tess. Tess looked at her closely and saw the tears that had streaked across her face. She could see that she was truly terrified about something.

“It’s Miranda, right?”

Slowly she nodded her head and looking around in a paranoid fashion she said quietly, “I need to talk to you about something. But I only want to talk to you because I’m not sure who I can trust.”

Not really understanding what was going on and unsure if she should allow this woman, who was obviously very unbalanced into her house, Tess eventually invited the woman to come inside. She led Miranda to her kitchen and directed her to sit while she put coffee on to drip.

When the coffee was ready, she grabbed them each a cup and sat across from Miranda who was trying to pull herself together. Tess waited until Miranda finished about half her coffee then asked, "Okay, Miranda, do you want to tell me what's going on...and how did you find out where I live?"

Repeatedly swallowing hard, the young girl looked down at her hands, embarrassed, and replied, "I followed that other guy you are always with here from the police station. I was waiting there for you but when I didn't see you, I decided to follow him and he came here. I didn't know where else to turn; I'm not sure who I can trust and you were the only one I could think of." In a tone Tess was very familiar with, the young girl continued speaking in the softest of voices, "The night before last, after I got off work, a man abducted me, took me to his house, tied me up, and raped me. But I was able to get away."

She looked up at Tess to see if she believed her. To say Tess was shocked was putting it mildly. She wondered briefly if someone was playing a cruel trick on her. But who would have possibly said anything to this girl about her? Tess cleared her throat as she struggled with the implications of what the girl was telling her. "Did you report this to the police?"

Lifting terrified eyes to hers, she said in a trembling voice, "No, I didn't think they would believe me."

Watching her closely, Tess asked, "Did you go to the hospital to get checked out?"

Miranda just shook her head with worried eyes.

Trying to pull her thoughts into a semblance of order, Tess asked, "Do you know who did this to you?"

Slowly, Miranda shook her head. "I was blindfolded. The only thing I can tell you was where I was held."

A little glimmer of excitement began to grow in Tess, "Where were you held?"

"In a little house over in Golden on a road called Land Shark, it was some type of...hey are you okay?"

Miranda had stopped talking when she saw the expression on Tess's face. All the blood had drained from her face. No, it couldn't be. It couldn't be. It was impossible. There was no way that this girl was talking about...about Thom's cabin.

Whispering and with a catch in her voice, she asked, "Are you sure?"

Slowly and with a questioning expression, she nodded.

Tess sat back in her chair shocked beyond comprehension. She needed time to think. She needed to talk to Anthony; he would know what to do. Her mind kept bringing back all the things she had striven so hard to eradicate from her mind; all the pieces of the puzzle that Thom had fit. She thought of the hourglass he'd given Dominic, all the murdered women he'd a connection with, the words he'd whispered on their last night together, and now this girl escaping from the very cabin she'd just spent the weekend with Thom. How could this be? How could it be Thom? She loved him. She was so stupid and blind!

Remembering the girl sitting across from her she said, "Miranda, I do believe you, okay? I just need time to figure it all out. Can I get your phone number? I need to check out a few things. Can I give you a lift home?"

Miranda stayed where she was seated and quietly said, "I'm scared, and I'm not sure where to go or who I can trust. What do I do?"

Tess knew those feelings intimately, "Do you have someone you can stay with for a couple of days?"

Slowly she nodded her head.

"Okay, well give me your cell phone number and I'll contact you, okay?"

Again Miranda just slowly nodded her head.

CHAPTER 42

Once Miranda left, Tess continued to sit numbly at her kitchen table. She didn't know what to do. She knew she should call Anthony and let him know about the break in the Hourglass Killer case, but she hesitated. As long as she didn't call him, she could still live in denial.

Tess shook her head as she sat. She just couldn't believe it. There had to be something she was missing, but what? She knew there were things that tied Thom to the case, but she knew him, and he was not that man. He was not the man who had hit her so hard in the head that it knocked her out. Thom was the man who stood with tears in his eyes when she had told him goodbye. How could he be the man who raped Miranda and killed the other girls? She couldn't reconcile the two. She remembered the first night she met him and Miranda had been their waitress. She had practically thrown herself at him that night. Why would he have to take something by force that would have been so obviously given willingly?

Of all things that could have flitted through her mind she remembered the dream where she was lying on the beach and the water kept rising. In her dream she'd been able to see her attacker and it had been Thom. Had she subconsciously known all along? No, she just wouldn't believe it. Thom was a man who'd been so patient and who'd desired her in spite of what that monster had done to her...but she couldn't stop the thought that floated through her head which said that maybe he could overlook it because he was that monster.

She buried her face in her hands. And what about Maggie Benson? The emotion he'd shown in his office that day couldn't have been faked...could it? She just didn't know anymore what was the truth and what was a lie. Taking a deep breath, she stood, reached for her phone, called her brother and asked him if she could meet up with him immediately. As she knew he would, he agreed without hesitation.

Next she called and left a message for Anthony, telling him she was meeting with her brother and would be in soon.

CHAPTER 43

Carter was sitting behind his desk talking on the phone when she walked in. He waved her to the chair seated across from him. Tess could tell he was talking to Jade, his wife. He finished quickly and hung up then came around the desk to give her a quick hug. He sat down in the chair next to hers so that they were now side by side, instead of having a desk between them.

Reaching for her hand he said, "I've been worried I would never hear from you again after the last time I saw you."

Tess shook her head, licked her lips nervously, and looked down at their joined hands. She didn't know what to say or where to start. Carter sat silently, allowing her the time she needed to compose herself. Finally she lifted her eyes to his questioning ones, "I have a problem that I'm not sure how to handle and I need your help to figure it out, okay?"

Although confused, he slowly nodded his head.

Swallowing, she paused, scared to bring everything out in the open. She knew once she opened Pandora's Box, there would be no closing it back up; once she spoke the words, action would have to ensue. Timidly and softly, she began, "Recently, I met someone...someone who became very important to me...someone I fell in love with," she paused and Carter interrupted her.

Reaching over to hug her, he said, "Oh, honey, I'm so happy for you. That's wonderful news."

Tess pulled back from him, shaking her head, "No, not really." She stood up and wandered over to his window to stare blindly at the traffic flooding by.

Taking a deep breath, she began again, "Do you remember the murder cases that Anthony and I have been involved with lately?"

Nodding his head obviously trying to make a connection between her first statement and her last one, "Yeah, the ones that involved Kyra's murder, right?"

She nodded her head but did not turn around, "Well, one thing I didn't tell you was that I suspect that whoever killed all those women was also the same man who attacked me."

Carter stood up suddenly and moved over to her, turning her towards him, "Are you sure?"

She shook her head, "Not a hundred percent, but there were too many coincidences to ignore. So Anthony and I have been working under that assumption." She pulled away from Carter and turned again

back to the window. "While working on the case, I began to notice that Thom, the guy I've been...dating, has had a lot of connections to the case. He knew a lot of the victims, and while this wasn't made public knowledge, the killer was leaving hourglasses at the scene of each murder; Thom gave his brother an hourglass as a gift."

Carter, listening intently, said, "While I can see why you might raise an eyebrow at those things, they don't in themselves prove he's a killer. What does Anthony think?"

Again she swallowed, "I haven't told Anthony."

She had barely gotten the words out of her mouth when Carter jerked her around to face him, "What do you mean you haven't told him? Not only is he your partner, he is also working the case!"

She nodded in agreement, "I know, but I didn't really think Thom could be the killer. I mean, I know him. Wouldn't I be able to tell if he was the same man who attacked me?"

Carter shrugged his shoulders, "I don't know, but if you really didn't consider him a suspect, why keep it from Anthony?"

Shamefully, she answered, whispering, "Because I was afraid it would be true."

Carter stood quietly in contemplation for a few minutes, "Okay, so what happened to bring you here?"

She again withdrew from Carter, walked back to her previous seat, sat down heavily, and looked down at her hands, "This past weekend, I went away with Thom to a cabin he has on Land Shark Lane over in Golden. It didn't turn out well, as I wasn't as ready as I thought I was for that type of relationship. I ended up cutting it short and calling Anthony to come and get me."

Moving to lean against the desk facing her, he said gently, "He didn't hurt you, did he?"

Immediately she began to shake her head, "No, nothing like that." She hesitated and drew a deep breath and almost in a whisper she continued, "This morning, a woman I know from the local pub stopped by my house and told me that she'd been tied up and raped, but had managed to escape. While she didn't know who the attacker was as she was blindfolded, she did know the location she'd escaped from."

Carter interrupted her, "Land Shark Lane in Golden?"

Slowly, with tears streaming down her face and dripping on her hands, she nodded.

Carter stayed where he was as he absorbed what he'd learned. Then he moved to her, drew her into his arms, and simply held her as she sobbed in his arms.

Eventually, she drew back and angrily wiped at the tears, "Why, Carter, why would he do that? How could I not know what he really was? I guess I shouldn't be surprised, we both know I apparently have no discernment when it comes to men."

He reached behind him and handed her a tissue, "You can't compare what happened to a stupid college boy going through a tough time to this...person."

Still obviously struggling she said, "I'm not sure what to do. I just can't believe that the man who committed such awful things, including attacking me, is the same man I've been dating. He is good, kind, and decent. He could have any woman he wanted, why would he need to do these things?"

"We both know that rape and murder have little to do with connecting with someone. It has more to do with hidden demons."

Slowly, Tess nodded her head, "I know you're right. But I don't know what to do. What if I bring all this out in the open and I'm wrong and Thom isn't the killer?"

Shrugging his shoulders and pursing his lips, he asked softly, "But what if he is? I think you need to discuss this with Anthony."

Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, "I know you're right, but Anthony's been acting strange lately. I don't really think he likes me being involved with Thom. I've been afraid to say anything about Thom to him because I don't think he would be objective about it. That's why I came here to talk to you first."

"Again, Anthony is your partner and your friend. I'm sure he only has your best interests at heart. Besides, he knows the cases you've been working on as well as yourself. You owe it to him to tell him what you know. You would expect no less from him, right?"

She nodded her head as her phone rang. She reached inside her pocket and saw it was Anthony, “Speak of the devil...” she clicked the phone on, “Hey, what’s up?”

Without any preamble, Anthony said, “Hey, I wanted to let you know that Julio Garcia, Rolando’s brother, has finally turned up and is being held in the county jail. He’s been picked for a drunk and disorderly. I’m on my way over there now to talk to him about the connection to the chop-shop case. Do you want to meet me there?”

She paused as an idea came to her, “No, why don’t you go on and I’ll meet you at the station in a little while. I’m almost finished here with Carter.”

“Okay, well tell Carter hello for me. I’ll see you an hour or two,” he said, clicking off his phone.

Looking up at Carter and being somewhat evasive she said, “Anthony says hello. Look, I need to go and take care of some things, okay?”

“Will you promise to talk to Anthony?”

Slowly she nodded her head, “I promise I will talk to Anthony.” In her mind she crossed her fingers and said in her head, eventually.

CHAPTER 44

Tess didn’t drive back into Aurora; instead, she turned her car and began the drive to Golden. Her cell phone rang several times as Anthony tried to call her, but she just ignored it. She had promised she would tell Anthony, and she would, but first she wanted to do a little research of her own. She just wanted to be sure before she began throwing allegations around.

She was about halfway to Golden when her phone rang again. She reached over and picked it up, looking at the screen. She was somewhat annoyed to see that this time it was Dominic Wyndom. With everything that had been going on, she’d practically forgotten about him. He had left messages both on her cell phone and work phone at least twice daily since the funeral; but she hadn’t returned them. She definitely didn’t want to speak to him right now. She leaned over, clicked the phone off, and threw it onto the passenger seat of her car.

It took her about an hour and a half to reach the cabin. She didn’t drive onto the lane, but instead pulled off about half a mile short and parked. She was thankful she and Thom had walked around the area when they’d come here because now she had the lay of the land. She walked about halfway down the lane when she heard a car in the distance. She edged off into the trees beside the road and waited for the car to pass. She was stunned and dismayed to see Thom’s SUV drive slowly past.

She waited until she was certain it had gone on to the cabin and that she hadn’t been spotted. She continued the walk to the cabin, sticking even more closely to the tree line in case Thom came back down the lane. She followed the lane passing the cabin and then double-backed until she was on the backside of the cabin. She crept slowly towards the cabin, keeping to as much cover as possible. She was curious to see what Thom was doing at the cabin in the middle of the day, in the middle of the work week. She continued until she was at the exterior wall of the cabin. She leaned against the cabin and peered into the window. When she looked in, she could see only the kitchen and part of the dining room, which were empty. She crept further along until she arrived at the second bedroom and again peered into the cabin. The spare room she’d used when she’d spent that agonizing night here was empty of Thom. So off she set off again, ducking under the huge picture window in the living room. She came to the side window which would give a view of the living room and another side of the dining room. Again, she saw nothing but empty rooms.

She felt almost sick to her stomach and she feared continuing around the cabin. The only windows left to check were the master bedroom windows. If there was any truth to Miranda’s story, that’s where the proof would be, and with a dead certainty, she knew that’s where Thom would be as well. She swallowed hard and made herself push forward. She held on to a sliver of hope that everything the facts

were pointing to was wrong.

Slowly and quietly she slipped to the next window and hesitating, peered inside. Her heart stopped then began slamming in her chest. Standing at the head of the bed was Thom. He was trying to unknot a rope which was tied to the headboard of the bed. Tess couldn't, and didn't want to absorb what this meant. Thom was calmly standing in the room untying the bonds, which only the day before had held Miranda Browning captive. Why had he done that to her? He could have had her in any capacity. What demons did he have that made him do this?

She couldn't help but think of her own night of torment; of being slammed in the head and slapped repeatedly. How could the man, who later had been so gentle and patient, have been so brutal? And in a sick, vain twist, she wondered why he couldn't finish that night; what could have been wrong with her? She shook her head to rid it of such stupid and non-productive thoughts. She must be more mental than even she knew.

She continued to watch and once he completed untying the ropes, he stood in the middle of the room looking around. It appeared to Tess he was checking for any other evidence of his crime. She wondered how he'd found out Miranda had escaped. She watched as he began walking around the room, opening this drawer and that one. He went to the side table furthest from her and when he opened it, she saw him visibly pause. He reached his hand in and began pulling out different items. From this view, Tess could only discern one item that he removed; it was... a hand gun – a revolver, which he sat on the table as he continued pulling other items out of the drawer. She couldn't tell exactly what they were, only that whatever they were, were small. She decided to move to the window closest to him.

As she covertly moved forward, trying to keep an eye and an ear open for Thom, her foot stepped on a rotting limb and it caused her to slip. She struggled to regain her footing. From inside, she heard Thom walk slowly over to the window directly above her. She flattened herself as best she could under the window's ledge. While she couldn't actually see Thom, she could feel his presence above her. He continued to stand there for what seemed a lifetime. The muscles in her thighs were screaming from being held in such an awkward position for such a long time. Eventually, she heard him move away from the window's edge. She stayed in her position for the count of one hundred before moving.

She grabbed the window ledge in order to gain some traction to help her remain upright and steady. She slowly peered through the window. From this vantage place, she could clearly see Thom. He was again at the side table looking through a collection of some type. She stared intently, then she froze, as the realization of what he was looking at hit her... he was holding several pieces of jewelry in his hands. He was turning them over staring keenly at each item. As she watched she saw a pendant attached to a chain slip through his fingers until it dangled from its chain there. She could clearly make out the mood pendant she'd given Kyra.

She had to bend down in order to quell the queasy feeling in her stomach. How could he have done that to Kyra? She had been beaten brutally before being raped. And how could he have raped, killed, and cut the throat of Maggie Benson, a woman he claimed to have cared for? What had he called her, a nice girl? She didn't know what to do... no that wasn't true; she didn't want any of this to be true enough to demand action from her. She edged back away from the window and headed a little further away. She reached into her back pocket for her phone but didn't feel its familiar bulge. She cursed to herself as she remembered the call from Dominic which had prompted her to throw her phone over onto the passenger seat of the car. Now her car and her phone were over a half mile away. She reached down and slid her gun from its harness and clicked the safety off; she needed to be prepared as she remembered the handgun he had set on the side table.

She knew she needed to go in and confront Thom before he had time to get rid of the evidence. She would need every piece of that evidence to tie him to the murders. She walked around to the back door of the cabin and slowly turned the knob, but it was locked and didn't budge. She quietly walked around to the front door which was the only other entrance to the house. She slowly turned the knob and then inched the door open bit by bit, trying to be as quiet as possible. She stepped into the cabin and began the tenuous step-by-step process of walking back to the master bedroom; she needed the element of surprise.

She'd managed to get to the bedroom door without detection. She took a deep breath and let it out

silently before bringing her gun up in front of her and walked into the room. Thom was faced away from her staring out the window, obviously lost in thought and not really looking at anything. Tess continued to step forward, wanting to get close enough to him where he wouldn't be able to draw his weapon on her.

She was almost halfway across the room when she heard a noise behind her. She turned her head at the same time that Thom, hearing the noise, turned. Dominic was standing in the bedroom door holding a gun. She heard Thom behind her grab the revolver off the side table. She spun around to see Thom pointing the gun in her direction. She watched in horror as he drew the hammer back on the gun and then before she knew what was happening, Dominic was spinning her, she assumed to get her out of the line of fire, but he had over-calculated his spin and she ended up falling in exactly the very direction he was trying to remove her from. Suddenly, she heard two shots ring out almost instantaneously. She felt a searing pain pierce her left shoulder as she fell to the floor with a yelp. She hit the floor on the same shoulder in which she'd been shot. She struggled to right herself but her injured arm was unforgiving and burned like fire. As she couldn't right herself, she instead rolled away and lay on her stomach with her gun awkwardly in her right hand, pointed at nothing. She looked frantically around the room trying to understand what'd happened. She looked behind her at Thom. He was lying motionless on the floor, a bullet hole clearly visible almost in the center of his forehead and a pool of blood slowly inching its way out from behind his head. She struggled to twist around to Dominic and saw that he also was lying motionless. She couldn't, however, see where he'd been hit.

She painfully inched her way over to Thom and checked the pulse she knew she wouldn't find. As sick as it was, her heart broke at the waste and loss of his life. She sat for a moment just holding his hand which still retained warmth. She sat until she heard Dominic stir behind her. Sadly, she'd once again forgotten all about him.

Struggling to control her emotions, which were all over the place, she made her way to Dominic while favoring her left shoulder. Dominic was struggling to sit up when Tess reached him. She laid a stilling hand on his shoulder.

"Just lie still and I'll go get help. Can you tell me where you're hurt?"

Like her, he'd also been shot in the shoulder; however, she'd been shot in the soft, fleshy part of her shoulder and the bullet, once it'd passed through her, had ended up in the muscle of Dominic's shoulder. He winced at the pain and listening to her, lay back down.

"Do you have your cell phone with you?"

Dominic just shook his head, slightly grunting but whispered, "No, I left it in my car."

Tess scooted over to the doorframe and had just managed to struggle into a standing position when the front door burst opened and Carter and Anthony both came running into the cabin.

Carter gently grabbed her and began checking the wound in her shoulder. As he did that, she could hear Anthony on the phone calling 9-1-1. Carter left her to check on Thom and finding him dead, moved over to assist Dominic. Once Anthony had completed his call, he went immediately to Tess and helped her to a chair.

Looking around the room, Anthony tried to catch his breath and asked, "Can you tell me what happened here?"

Tess looked behind to stare at Thom's face, which was still perfect from the front with the exception of the small entry wound of the bullet. She knew from past experience there probably wouldn't be much left of the backside of his head due to the exit wound.

She turned back to Anthony and shrugged her good shoulder, "I guess Carter filled you in on what I told him?" At his nod, she continued, "I came here to see if I could find any evidence which would point either toward or away from Thom. When I got here, I saw him through the window as he was untying the ropes off of the bed and then placed a gun on the side table. I continued to watch him as he pulled the souvenirs from the table, then I decided to stop him before he had a chance to hide or destroy the evidence. I'd just gotten into the house when Dominic showed up behind me with a gun. He managed to kill Thom before he had a chance to kill us. But Thom did get one shot off which hit both me and Dominic. I'm not sure why Dominic is here..." she trailed off.

The ambulance arrived before she had a chance to ask or answer any more questions. At their arrival,

there was a flurry of activity as both she and Dominic were placed on stretchers and into ambulances. The EMTs gave her a shot which made her drowsy and would allow them to explore her wound without causing her severe pain. She gladly succumbed to the medication's numbing power and closed her eyes.

Carter met her at the hospital when she arrived and sat with her in the emergency room. He asked her questions about what had happened but she kept brushing him off as she didn't want to discuss it, she only wanted to forget. Blessedly, the doctors almost immediately wheeled her away to surgery to repair the gunshot wound in her shoulder.

When she came to, she was in a hospital room and it was dark. She could make out Carter in one chair and Anthony on the other side in another chair; both were asleep. She thought back over the chain of events that had brought her here. How could she have been so blind? If she hadn't seen Thom ogling over his souvenirs, she wouldn't have believed him to be capable of what he'd done. When she turned and saw him with the gun pointed at her, she died a thousand painful deaths. He'd made her feel powerful with all his pretty words of unconditional love but they'd been like the sands on the desert; solid only until the next wind came and blew across the desert's face. All his words had meant nothing.

She still didn't know how any of the others had ended up at the cabin, and if she were honest, she really didn't want to know, nor did she care. She wanted this whole thing over so she could finally be alone. She laughed ruefully at herself; all this time, all she'd wanted was to be whole enough to be in a relationship with someone and now all she wanted was to be alone. But she knew she was going to have to play the old game of 'being fine' once again. They would certainly be watching her like a hawk now. She didn't think she was strong enough to cope with the torrent of emotions which ran in a continuous loop through her body.

She knew she should be happy that she'd caught such a heinous murderer, but all she felt was deflation and embarrassment for being taken in like a fool. She let the tears flow silently down her cheeks. She was amazed at her own naivety. Again, she had let a man lull her into a false sense of security and bam! She had been sacked like a quarterback.

She didn't know if she had the strength to move on this time. Back, a long time ago, she had brushed herself off with determination and had believed there would be better days ahead; now, she knew better. With age comes experience, somebody had said. She angrily brushed the tears from her face in case Anthony or Carter woke. This was how the game was played...she pretended to be strong, and they pretended to believe her. She lied the rest of the night building her fortitude and control. She began placing the bricks of her dam back together – shoring up the glass walls of her box – to compass and contain the well of emotions she needed to repress. When the first light of dawn began filtering through the white sheers of the hospital room, she fell into an exhausted slumber.

CHAPTER 45

When Tess woke around mid-morning, Anthony wasn't in the room, but Carter was standing looking out the window with his back to her. When she stirred, he immediately turned and came to her. He sat down in the chair next to the bed and reached for her hand.

He smiled at her soothingly, "Good morning. How are you feeling? Are you in pain? Do you need anything?"

Slowly and with resolve, she shook her head. "No, I'm fine. I don't need anything. What did the doctor say about my shoulder? Will there be any permanent damage?"

Carter shook his head, "No, he said you were lucky and the bullet passed cleanly through the tissues and didn't hit anything. You will probably be sore, but they expect you to fully recover."

Nodding her head, she asked, "Where's Anthony?"

Watching her keenly, he said, "He had to go into the office to speak with Office of Internal Affairs regarding the shooting. They obviously will need to speak to you eventually, but as you weren't the shooter, it won't be a big deal."

Slowly she nodded her head, and in an effort to appear normal, not that she really wanted to know, she asked, "How did you and Anthony end up at the cabin?"

Sitting back in his chair, Carter ran a hand through his already tousled hair, "A short while after you left my office, Anthony called me, looking for you. He said he'd tried your cell phone but you didn't answer. I thought you were going to talk to him about the case?"

Tess just raised her eyebrows and slightly shook her head but said nothing.

Carter continued, a little irritated at her non-response. "Anyway, apparently when he went to interview Julio Garcia, it came out that this was a third hit on Garcia's record and if convicted, he would serve some serious time. So Garcia offered information about the murders for a deal. Apparently, Julio Garcia had seen the man who'd abducted the very first victim, Christina O'Hara. He and his brother had been in the process of heisting an SUV from the bar's parking lot when they saw a man dragging a red-haired woman towards a car. He was able to give a pretty detailed description of the man. When Anthony heard the description, he was pretty sure it was Thom Wyndom.

He tried to reach you, and when unable, he called me. Although I didn't want to tell him because I thought you should be the one to do it, I eventually told him what you'd told me about your suspicions. He asked where you were, and while I wasn't certain, I told him I figured you would go back to the cabin. But Anthony couldn't recall exactly where it was, so he called Dominic Wyndom to get the address for the GPS. And the rest you know."

Tess cringed as she remembered clicking her phone off at Dominic's call. Maybe if she would have just answered the phone, things would have turned out differently. Regret washed over her in waves. She might have been able to save Thom's life if she would have just answered her damn phone.

She knew she must be really unbalanced to still feel something for such a monster as Thom Wyndom had turned out to be. But as angry as she knew she should be, there was a part of her that ached at his loss. While she'd told him things wouldn't work out for them, there had still been a molecule of hope inside of her that maybe one day things could be different.

Looking back at Carter, and repressing the anger she was internally harboring against Dominic, she asked, "How is Dominic?"

Carter again watched her intently trying to discern her tone, "He will be okay as well. The bullet lodged in the muscle of his arm. It will hurt, but he will heal."

Hesitantly, and in a strangled voice, not meeting his eyes, Tess asked, "Do you know what arrangements have been made for Thom?"

Carter looked at her oddly but just shook his head, "Probably Dominic will know, but nothing has been said to me."

Again Tess nodded and looked back at him, "Carter, you don't have to stay here. I'm fine and you need to get home to Jade," he started to shake his head, "Carter, I promise I will call you if I need anything. Anthony's here, so you don't need to stand guard over me. I'm okay. Everything is a little confusing internally, but I'm fine.

It took a lot of convincing, but eventually Carter left the hospital. As she was being released from the hospital the next day, he volunteered to come back and take her home. But she determinedly argued against it. He had his own life and she would be able to get herself home one way or the other.

Tess breathed a sigh of relief when Carter departed. She needed time to think and didn't need him hovering over her. The strain of having to appear normal was exhausting and she closed her eyes. In her mind's eye, she could see Thom standing in front of her pointing the gun; then her mind flashed to the image of Thom with a bullet hole in his forehead. She shuddered at the thought. She wondered what had induced Dominic to drive to the cabin. What had made him decide to come in with a gun? What had he known about Thom? Had he also been suspicious of him? She remembered all the times he had tried to steer her away from Thom. She really wished she would have listened.

She must have dozed off because when she opened her eyes this time, she saw Dominic standing in

the doorway of her room. She waved him in and told him to sit down. "Hey, Dominic, how are you feeling?"

He slowly made his way to the chair and gingerly lowered himself into it, trying not to jar his shoulder which was held up by a sling. "I'm okay; I was just worried about you. I'm so sorry, Tess. I can't even image how hard this is on you."

Tess lowered her eyes, "I'm sorry for your loss, Dominic."

Dominic ruefully shook his head, "It's no loss, I promise you. I have always known there was something off about Thom; I just didn't realize how off he really was."

Tess looked back up at Dominic, absurdly feeling anger building up towards him, "Have any arrangements been made in regards to his funeral?"

Dominic eyed her curiously, "No, not yet. Why? You're not planning on attending, are you?"

Tess just shrugged her good shoulder.

Dominic's lips flattened into a hard line, "Do you really think that's wise?"

"I think it might give me a sense of closure, don't you?"

Slowly he nodded his head, "I guess I can see that. I'll let you know what they are, okay?"

"I would appreciate that, Dominic."

He sat for a few minutes more, then slowly rose and walked to the door. Before leaving, he turned back around and said, "Tess, I know this is hard for you, but I hope you know I did what I did only to protect you."

Looking back down at her lap, she slowly nodded her head. When she looked back up, he was gone.

Anthony arrived late in the afternoon. He walked in as she was sitting up, staring distractedly out the hospital window. He walked over to her bed, leaned down and gently placed a kiss on her forehead. "How are you feeling? Are you pretty sore?"

Tess shook her head, "No, I'm fine. The medication is doing its job." In an attempt to move the topic of conversation away from her, she asked, "Were you able to get everything settled with OIA?"

He stepped over to the chair and sat down wearily, "Yeah, I think everything's golden. As per their standard operating procedure, you've been placed on leave with pay until the investigation has been completed. But it's only a formality, really."

Hesitating and swallowing hard, she said, "Anthony, thanks for coming to get me. I'm sorry I didn't tell you about Thom. You don't know how much I wished I would have told you. Probably if I had, things might have turned out differently."

Anthony clenched his jaw but neither his tone nor his words showed any other irritation, "Its okay, Tess, it all worked out in the end. I'm just sorry you felt you had to face it on your own."

She looked back out the window beyond Anthony's head and softly said, "I didn't want it to be true. I still don't want it to be true."

Anthony startled her by leaping out of his chair and going to look out the window with his back to her, "Dammit, Tess, you can't still have feelings for that...monster."

Remembering her resolution to keep things under control and hidden, she answered calmly, "Of course not. I...I'm just angry at myself for not seeing him for what he was. How could I not have known?"

Anthony turned towards her and said more gently, "You were not alone, he hid it from everyone."

"Thanks for that, Anthony. But I had the pieces in front of me. I should've been able to put it all together long before I did. Has anyone contacted Miranda Browning to let her know he's dead?"

Anthony shook his head, "No, not yet. I was tied up today finishing up the loose ends and typing reports and memos regarding the case. I'll stop by and see her tomorrow. I imagine she will be very relieved."

Tess just nodded.

As a thought occurred to him, Anthony reached into his pocket and brought out a small item and handed to Tess. She reached out her hand and Anthony dropped a small bracelet into her palm. She brought it down to eye level and gasped. It was the bracelet Dane Carver had given her ten years before;

the one that had been ripped off of her arm when she was attacked. She looked down at the half of the best friend charm dangling from the small silver links and blinked the tears from her eyes.

She looked up at Anthony and said softly, "Thanks for returning this to me. It means a lot."

Anthony left not long after promising to stop by her house the next day when he got off work. She tried to dissuade him, but he was adamant. When he'd been preparing to depart, he'd leaned over and again kissed her softly on her cheek, "Everything will all work out, Tess."

She slowly nodded her head.

CHAPTER 46

The next day, Tess was discharged from the hospital. The doctor came by and gave her prescriptions for both pain pills for the day and sleeping pills to help her at night. She would be required to have her shoulder in a sling for about a month. She stopped at the hospital pharmacy and had her prescriptions filled. Before she left the hospital, she made a quick stop by Dominic's room. He was lying on the bed watching TV when she entered.

He turned his head towards the door when she entered and he smiled, "Well, this is a pleasant surprise."

She smiled back at him somewhat tensely, "Hey, Dominic. I wanted to stop by before I left. Is there anything I can get for you?"

He shook his head, "No, I'm fine. I'm glad you stopped by. I've missed having you in my life since Kyra. I hope we can keep in contact."

Tess nodded her head, "Of course."

Dominic hesitated, apparently trying to decide whether to broach the subject or not, "I told you I would let you know about the funeral arrangements. There will be a small graveside service on Thursday at two." Again he hesitated, "Tess, I won't tell you not to come, but I think you should reconsider it."

Tess answered him evasively, "I'll think about it. Thanks, Dominic. I'll see you soon."

Tess called a taxi prior to leaving her room and it was waiting for her when she walked out of the hospital. The sun was shining bright and there were huge, fluffy clouds in the sky. There were people milling around going to and fro. Tess was somewhat shocked to see how normal everything looked. She'd thought the world would have changed somehow; but she guessed it was just she who had changed. She felt like she'd been out of touch for months instead of only a couple of days. Hospital stays are like that; the concept of time gets distorted.

Tess arrived home, carefully eased out of the taxi, and paid the driver. She walked up to her front door and then stopped. Sitting by her door was an arrangement of yellow roses; her heart beat faster as she remembered the last person to give her yellow roses had been Thom. The arrangement itself was beginning to wilt and it was obvious it had been sitting outside for a couple of days.

She walked slowly towards the flowers and winced as she bent down to pull the envelope from its holder in the arrangement. Awkwardly because of the sling, she opened the envelope and read the card. Tears immediately pooled in her eyes, blurring the words written before her. Tess, I will love you always. I think you are worth the wait, so don't lose my number. Thom.

Tess sat down heavily on the doorstep and let the tears slide silently down her face. This is what she needed. She needed to be sad for Thom. He had meant something to her and nobody understood her need to grieve for him, even if he was a monster. She struggled to reconcile this Thom - the Thom who sent roses after a breakup; to the Thom who raped and murdered helpless women. What was wrong with her? Why was she so tormented by his death? Why, even after everything she knew, could she still not believe Thom was the Hourglass Killer?

Tess stood up, opened her door, picked up the flower arrangement, and placed it on her dresser in her bedroom. She knew it made no sense for her to keep flowers sent to her by someone who had done all the things Thom had done, but she couldn't bring herself to throw them out. She sat down on the edge of her

bed and looked reflectively at the roses. She felt...defeated. Life had become too hard and too complicated.

Tess stood, went into the kitchen, and got a glass of water. Even though it wasn't even noon yet, she grabbed a couple of the sleeping pills and lay down. She was asleep within minutes - mindless, dreamless, nothing sleep.

CHAPTER 47

In the end, Tess did go to the funeral; however, she stayed far from the proceedings behind a tree. She felt like a TV spy with dark glasses and a scarf tied over her unkempt hair. She watched the appallingly few mourners gathered around the gravesite and could hear the drone of the minister giving words of advice and encouragement to those gathered round. She stayed until they lowered his body into the ground; she stayed until everyone else had departed; and she stayed until the cemetery personnel came and pushed the dirt over his casket.

Once the cemetery was once again quiet and empty, Tess moved forward to where they'd placed his body. There was not yet a headstone, only a little metal plaque provided by the cemetery which bore his name...Thomas Alexander Wyndom. Slowly, Tess knelt down in the soft moist dirt and said a small prayer for him. She didn't know if it would help or not, but she figured it couldn't hurt. Before she'd left her house, she'd gone into her bedroom and removed one of the now brown-tinged yellow roses from the arrangement Thom had sent. She took that flower, placed a kiss on it, and laid it on top of his new resting place. She hoped he would find peace in the next life as he obviously had none in this one.

Slowly and awkwardly because of her shoulder, she stood, brushed the dirt off of her knees, and walked quickly back to her car. Technically she wasn't supposed to be driving due to both her shoulder injury and the pain medication, but she hadn't wanted anyone else to know what she intended to do today. She didn't want to hear the reprimands and reprisals from anyone. She knew it was stupid, probably wrong, and definitely disloyal to Kyra and all the other women. But she needed to try and find peace with this awful nightmare.

Tess went home, poured herself a large glass of wine and sat outside on her back patio. As from almost anywhere in this area, she had a good view of the majestic Rocky Mountains. She wondered what would become of her life. She felt so fragile and unsure of herself. She felt on the inside like her view of the Rocky Mountains, all jagged and gray. As she sat in contemplation sipping her wine, her cell phone rang but she didn't want to speak to anyone today and maybe not tomorrow either. She knew she was wallowing but didn't have the strength to pull out of it. She poured herself another glass of wine and ignored the shrill of the phone.

She thought back over her life and all the mistakes and missteps she'd made. Would her life now be different if she'd never continued on to college with Dane Carver? Would her life have been different if her father had not died so unexpectedly? Would her life have been better had she just sucked it up and went back home to be close to her mother? She knew her life would have been better had Thom not tied her up and attempted to rape her. She didn't know which one, or if all of them, had brought her to this point in her life.

She heard her cell phone ring again, but she still chose to ignore it. She decided she was tired and wanted a little reprieve. So, just as she had on the previous two nights, she grabbed a couple sleeping pills and swallowed them with the last of her wine. She slowly shuffled to her bedroom, stripped off her black pantsuit, pulled a sleep shirt over her head and climbed wearily into bed.

She lay there for about thirty minutes and couldn't fall asleep as her mind was twirling in circles of this and that. Eventually she got up and took one more pill and again climbed back into bed. It wasn't long before she felt the gentle pull of sleep as it overtook her.

CHAPTER 48

Tess's mouth felt like it was stuffed with cotton. She could hardly move her tongue to moisten her lips. She had a pounding headache and her surroundings seemed off somehow. She slowly began to open her eyes but the bright sunlight seared them and she shut them immediately. At the same time, someone reached over and grabbed her hand. She immediately snapped her eyes open even though it was painful and snatched her hand back. She jerked upward from her prone position on the bed to see Carter sitting beside her with a worried expression on his face. It was then she realized she was back in the hospital.

Striving to obtain some moisture in her still-dry mouth she said, "Carter, what happened? Why am I here?"

He put a hand on her arm and brushed the hair out of her face with the other, "You overdosed. Don't you remember?"

She began to shake her head but stopped immediately due to the fierce pounding it created. "I didn't overdose, Carter. There must be some mistake."

Carter shook his head, "I tried to call you yesterday several times but you never answered. I knew Thom was being buried and it would be hard for you on so many levels. When you didn't answer, I called Anthony and he drove over to your house. He found you asleep and couldn't wake you. He called an ambulance and then he called me." Carter paused and continued with pained eyes, "Why, Tess, why would you do this to yourself...to us?"

With beseeching eyes she said emphatically, "I didn't try to kill myself, I promise. I had a couple glasses of wine and took a couple of sleeping pills and went to bed. But I still couldn't sleep, so I took another pill."

He studied her, wanting to believe her words. After a couple of minutes he reached a decision. "Tess, I think you should consider going back home. I think this place has too many demons for you now. Even is what you say is true, you're obviously not thinking clearly."

Tess immediately began shaking her head, "No, I can't go back there, the demons there are much worse than those that are here."

Carter gently leaned towards her and kissed her forehead, "I want you to at least think about it, okay?"

She lifted tired eyes to his and simply nodded - It was what was easiest. He would never understand why she couldn't contemplate going back home.

As it was late, Carter left and told her he would be back first thing in the morning to take her home with him. He would not be deterred no matter how many arguments she gave him. "I knew the last time we were here at this hospital that you didn't need to be alone and I let you dissuade me then, but I won't now."

Carter hadn't been gone long, and even though the hour was late and past the normal visiting hours, Anthony arrived and sat wearily by her bed. As he had been on the day of Kyra's murder, he was again aloof and distant. He looked tired and dragged his hands through his black hair, which looked like he had raked his hands through it several times that day.

"How ya doing, Tess?"

Eyeing him warily, she answered, "I'm fine."

Sitting back heavily in his chair obviously with a temper brewing, he said softly, "Why, Tess, why would you do this? Why would you go to that monster's funeral when you, above everyone else, know exactly what he had done to all those women...to Kyra?"

She narrowed her eyes at him and asked almost inaudibly, "How did you know I was there?"

Frustrated by the only answer she gave, he said, "We had an undercover police officer there just in case there was any trouble from any of the victims' families. Imagine my shock, dismay, and disbelief when I got word that you were spotted there. What did you hope to gain by going? It obviously was more than you could bear; although I won't even pretend to understand why you would feel anything for that monster."

Through gritted teeth she answered, "It wasn't like that, Anthony. I didn't try to commit suicide, it was an accident; I promise, it wasn't on purpose." Hesitantly she added, "I don't know why his death bothers me, it just does. I don't want it to matter, but it does. There is nothing you can say that I haven't said to myself a thousand times."

In further frustration, Anthony again scraped his hand through his hair, "Tess, your brother and I have discussed it and we both feel you need a little separation from this place. We think you should consider going home. You have to realize that your thinking is a little screwed up right now."

In disbelief and hurt that Anthony would want her to leave she said, "I can't believe you feel that way."

With his lips in a grim line he said, "Tess, look at it from my point of view. You withheld valuable information about a case we were working together; information which potentially could have solved the case long before some of the victims were murdered. And for reasons I will never understand, you choose to protect him. And even if you didn't know at first, even after everything that happened, you still can't let go of him; even though you know without a doubt what he did...what he was."

Swallowing back tears she refused to shed, she slowly nodded her head, "I'll think about it."

Anthony slowly rose and walked out the door with saying anything further.

The next morning, Tess could tell the sun was streaming through the windows without opening her eyes. With a heavy heart, she knew that no matter how many times she told people she'd overdosed by accident, no one would ever believe her. She knew she would never be able to explain her emotions about a man such as Thom. Without her eyes being open, she could sense someone sitting in the chair beside her. She figured it would be Carter coming to take her home and she slowly opened eyes, giving them a chance to adjust to the brightness. As her eyes were opening, she managed to put a small smile on her lips to satisfy Carter that she wasn't suicidal, but when her eyes opened fully, her smile froze; sitting in the chair next to her bed was...Dane Carver.

EPILOGUE

Tess carried the last box to the moving truck. Anthony, Carter, and even Dominic had all offered to help her move. But she wasn't speaking to any of them; specifically Anthony and Carter. She preferred to do this on her own. On this day, a month to the day that Dominic had fired that deadly bullet into Thom's skull, Tess was angry...bitterly angry. She felt betrayed by everyone who was close to her - and how dare Carter call Dane, of all people.

Anthony, who'd always been on her side throughout everything, had accused her of leading all the victims to their deaths, like some type of pied piper. And while Carter hadn't come down that hard, it stung that he doubted her sanity and ability to deal with the situation. Maybe he was right; maybe she couldn't deal with it.

It surprised her, that out of all of them, the only one she somewhat trusted right now was Dane. He had allowed her to keep her dignity and self-respect. He had not come in and pushed or demanded; he'd simply given her a way out, which was why she was packing up her house and moving back to Colorado Springs. She desperately wanted away from the ever-watchful eyes of Dominic, Carter, and Anthony.

She walked back into the house to do one last walk-through. She went to the bedrooms and checked the closets one last time. Finding them empty, she walked to the door of her bedroom and looked back one last time. The room was empty with one exception: in the center of the room, sitting on the floor, was the now-dead bouquet of roses that Thom had left on her doorstep on the last day of his life. Even though she knew she shouldn't, and calling herself a fool for doing so, she went back, picked up the dead bouquet, and carried them with her to her car.

If you think the mystery is solved, not so fast - you absolutely cannot miss what happens in part 2:

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