

2011-01-01

And Then It Clicked

Tanya Marie Robertson

University of Texas at El Paso, tmyaya2002@yahoo.com

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AND THEN IT CLICKED

TANYA ROBERTSON

Department of Creative Writing

APPROVED:

Benjamin Alire Saénz, Chair

Deane Mansfield-Kelley, Ph.D.

José de Piérola, Ph.D.

Patricia D. Witherspoon, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

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By

Tanya Marie Robertson

2011

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by

TANYA MARIE ROBERTSON

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department of Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

May 2011

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Insight Into *And Then It Clicked*

Good novels—great ones—never actually seem to tell us anything; rather, they make us live it and share in it by virtue of their persuasive powers.

*-Mario Vargas Llosa
Letters to a Young Novelist*

Introduction:

A crime fiction novel must be “true to human nature and tell a good story,” (Blythe). Phrases similar to this permeate just about every essay, textbook, interview, and journal I’ve read regarding the writing of crime fiction. The volatility of human nature—the actions we are capable of and the decisions we make—that is what keeps us watching reality TV and reading books that question our morals. A fourteen year-old boy murders his abusive father. Do we feel outrage at the abuse, the murder, or both? Do we feel relief that the child no longer has to live his life terrified that his mother will be killed by the next punch? Do we feel empathy for the father because that is how he lived his life?

Human nature is complex. And, capturing it in a true manner, on the page, is difficult. The authors that manage to do it in such a manner that the reader feels outrage, joy, empathy, despair, fear, and even love are the ones who have navigated their way to a successful story. By successful I do not mean in terms of selling millions of copies. But, successful in creating a space in which the reader lives, experiencing the story from the inside, as another character. In my thesis I hope to develop a relationship between the protagonist and my audience. I hope to capture the good, bad, and

complexities of human nature in a story that continues to live inside the reader long after the last word of the epilogue.

“Examine the commonalities between people instead of focusing on differences.”

- Gar Anthony Haywood
Left Coast Crime Convention 2011

Scope and Origins:

And Then It Clicked, is about an African-American female detective, Adrienne O. Butler, from Louisville, Kentucky, my home town, who accepts a case centered around the issue of domestic violence. It tells the story of an abused woman, Sonia Fenton, who is murdered. Her husband, initially suspected of the crime, has an air-tight alibi and Sonia’s family asks Adrienne to find out who killed her and why. Adrienne has had past experiences with domestic violence and the new case causes her trauma to resurface.

Often, in stories of domestic violence, the cases focus on the abused victim. However, I wanted to focus on the friends and family of victims who are forced to watch the abuse and the helplessness they feel at their inability to change the situation. In *And Then It Clicked*, the audience sees the crimes committed against Sonia Fenton through the eyes of her sister, brother-in-law, and neighbors. Other than in the Prologue, Sonia’s voice is not heard. Quincy Fenton’s voice is never heard. The anguish and frustration felt by the people who love both the victim and the abuser is highlighted. The reader sees how the community is affected by the violence.

Adrienne, the narrator of the novel, experiences flashbacks to the death of a friend, Paige Matthews, and the reader is also able to “witness” abuse through her memories. Paige’s death directly affects Adrienne’s emotional state, personal relationships, and actions throughout the novel. The story takes place during Domestic Violence Awareness Month and one of the issues Adrienne struggles with is dealing with the guilt she feels at not saving Paige. She often comments that she will attend social events scheduled during the month but she always finds an excuse to miss out on the activities. By adding this back story, I felt I could make the domestic violence even more personal for the audience.

There are several reasons for my wanting to address such a complex, painful, and ugly issue in *And Then It Clicked*. Previously, I worked for a company that was founded to help victims of domestic violence. It grew to be the largest victim notification company in the United States. I worked there for eleven years and during that time I personally spoke to and heard from women, children, and men who had suffered in abusive relationships or were victims of other violent crimes. Just as important, though, I worked with the family and friends left behind after a violent crime occurs – the mothers, fathers, sisters, neighbors, and best friends who tried to protect their loved ones but still lost them to horrible crimes.

For me personally, I experienced the frustration of not being able to convince a friend to seek help or leave an abusive situation. My most vivid memory is of standing outside of her apartment with the Louisville Police Department, trying to break in the front door. After months of fear for her well-being, I had prepared myself for finding her body in that apartment. Fortunately, that did not happen and family members intervened

and moved her to another city. Although, I did not directly use details of that experience in the novel, I tried to capture the emotions generated by it.

Originally, I had not planned to write a genre novel as my thesis. Crime fiction is my favorite genre, but I had started a novel that did not fall into a specific category and I did not think that the Creative Writing Department would allow me to write genre fiction. Since I hope to someday publish in that particular market, I wanted to take advantage of the opportunities and experiences of the professors around me at UTEP. After consulting with the department I was given permission to write a crime fiction novel.

In writing *And Then It Clicked* I knew going into it that I needed to study crime fiction and its role not only in contemporary fiction but in society as a whole. Although I had taken a course in detective fiction as an undergraduate, I began with a course called “Crime and Culture” taught by Dr. Deane Mansfield-Kelly. Each week we studied a crime novel written and published in a different country and gave presentations on several aspects of that country’s culture. For example, I gave a presentation on Scotland Yard and the Icelandic Police Force while others presented on topics such as specific types of weapons, family law in a given country, cultural practices, and race relations. Having an understanding of these kinds of issues not only helped me to understand what I needed to include in my novel in order to meet with the specifics of the genre, but also helped me to decide where to take creative license in order to make the novel unique.

My next step was to design an independent studies course covering the history of crime fiction. I titled the course “A History of Crime Fiction: From Poe to Today.” Dr. Kelley agreed to be the director for the course and we spent quite a bit of time

narrowing down the novels, essays, and short-stories I would read. It was an intensive, focused class and by the end of the semester I had read over twenty-five novels and short stories. I also read several collections of essays on the topic of crime fiction and how it developed over time. Our one-on-one class time was spent on in-depth discussions of the readings and how my thesis related to them.

Outside of the classroom I became obsessed with expanding my knowledge of crime solving processes. I use the word “became” but perhaps that suggests a new found love for the topic. In reality, I was already obsessed. As a child I started reading Nancy Drew mysteries, checking them out from the school library at a record pace. I moved on to The Hardy Boys and any other young adult detective stories I could find. Every year for career day in school I was an FBI agent. Today, almost all of my favorite television shows are crime dramas and I would gladly skip the Romantic Comedy for a movie involving serial killers, a bloody murder, or the lone cop forced to discover the mole within the police department.

My outside research included reading short stories and novels using all three types of detectives (amateur, private investigator, and police). In the car, I listened to audio books by Walter Moseley, Robert Parker, Sara Paretsky, James Patterson, and many others. I found essays about crimes and how-tos on writing about crime. My philosophy was that it was better to do all of the research and not use it, then to write a novel in the dark, haphazardly guessing at what worked for the genre. There is nothing more disappointing to me than to pick up a crime novel and realize that the author did not bother to figure out that the criminal left enough forensics to solve the case in two hours.

As a writer of crime fiction, the author must know something of forensic evidence, crime solving techniques, crime trends, and the actions of criminals – especially if he or she does not want the reader to guess the ending three chapters into the novel.

“If as a writer you pay attention to the image in your mind, and if you develop the flexibility of vocabulary and syntax that allows you to be true to that image, you will be on your way to a voice that is recognizably your own.”

*-Janet Burroway
Imaginative Writing*

Process Assessment, Poetics, & Prose:

One of the initial difficulties I faced in writing this novel was deciding between an amateur detective, private investigator, or police procedural novel. I chose to write a private investigator novel for various reasons. Writing a police procedure requires extensive knowledge of the legal system and law enforcement practices in the United States and within the state and city in which the story takes place. It would have required research into the actual processes and policies of the Louisville Metro Police Department in order to accurately portray their role in solving a murder. Given the time constraints and my lack of knowledge I felt it would be too large of an undertaking to attempt a police procedure novel as my thesis.

The easiest option would probably have been to write an amateur detective. I could give the main character a job in any field, which would have allowed me more freedom in how the detective acquired the knowledge to solve the crime. Some of the

most famous detectives are amateurs, such as Sir Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, Edgar Allan Poe's Augustine Dupin, and more recently Mikael Blomkvist and Lisbeth Salander of Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*.

Within the genre of crime fiction, private detective stories are my favorite and that is why I chose to write one instead of an amateur detective novel. I knew it would require research into laws surrounding the licensing of detectives and specifics to the state of Kentucky, but I was willing to put in the time and effort; I felt that was manageable. In the end I found that I still had to research the Louisville Metro Police Department because my protagonist, Adrienne, works closely with them and her ex-husband is a LMPD detective. I used their website to determine the structure of the departments and hierarchy of the officers.

Another difficulty I faced was whether or not to write the novel in third person or first person. It began in third person limited omniscient but after the first few chapters I decided I wanted it to be Adrienne's story and experiences and I wanted the audience to see everything through her eyes. In the next revision I changed the point of view to first person. In the end, I decided I had made a good decision but it presented me with other difficulties. How would I provide details regarding the activities of the characters in Atlanta? Did I ever want to give Quincy Fenton a voice? It might have added to the complexity of the novel if he described his own actions. But, since the focus of the novel is from the perspective of friends and family, I gave him a brother, Keeshawn Fenton, and added dialogue between him and Adrienne Butler.

The next obstacle I had to tackle was the difficulty of setting the novel in a real location. How much should I stick to fact and how much should I make up about Louisville, Kentucky? What complications would I create by having a murder in a real public place, such as Fourth Street Live? What are the legal ramifications? I received several suggestions, many from authors and Professors Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet, whose stories often take place in Kentucky—make up a city and county based on Louisville; make up a city that exists on the outskirts of Louisville, that could still encompass the culture; create a completely fictional place with my own cultural dynamics; place the characters in Louisville and draw on real locations but fictionalize key places needed for the story. I decided to go with the final suggestion and set the novel in Louisville, mainly in two areas. That way I could provide whatever layout I wanted. The Newburg area of Louisville is real but I fictionalized several buildings and streets. It is a mostly African-American neighborhood, ranging from lower class to upper middle class homes. There is a strong sense of community in Newburg and I wanted to show that through the relationships between characters.

I faced one major problem in terms of having a crime committed in a real public place. A character is shot in a shopping center in downtown Louisville. This location houses The Hard Rock Café, The Maker's Mark Lounge, and is a major attraction for the city. I attended the Left Coast Crime Convention 2011 in Santa Fe and during a panel discussion on unusual crime scenes I specifically asked about the reactions of real businesses when fictional crimes happen on their properties. There was a unanimous vote that it would be more trouble than it was worth. I had already moved the shooting to the parking garage and then the victim stumbles into the mall and is

found by a security guard, who calls an ambulance. But, the panel response worried me and I wondered if I had to rewrite the scene again. Eventually I decided that if I am fortunate enough to have the novel published, the agent and publisher can determine the legal ramifications and whether or not I need to change the scene.

From the beginning, I had a strong sense of most of the characters. I knew who I wanted Sonia and Quincy Fenton to be. I knew that I wanted to create family members and friends who were frustrated by the abuse they saw but were unable to stop. My problem was that my protagonist, Adrienne, remained fluid in my mind for much of the novel. I struggled to find her voice. There are certain traits that a female private detective should have, such as intelligence, mental and physical strength, proficiency with weapons, distrust of men, and a desire to seek justice for the victim. Building in those characteristics was easy. But the question remained. Who was Adrienne?

I couldn't understand why she didn't click for me until recently. In the beginning, I recognized that my thought process was very plot driven. I had become so obsessed with creating the plot, I had not focused on character development—for any character. Then, when I went back and began adding more dialogue and character background, Adrienne still had not become concrete. I had a suspicion of what the problem could be. At the LCCC 2011 conference, I attended a panel on diversity. All of the authors on this panel had either a minority or homosexual protagonist as the detective. I asked the panel if they ever had publishers, editors, or agents tell them to change a character's voice in order to fit certain stereotypes. They all said that it happens but that I should never give in to that pressure.

Then, I realized that my struggle with Adrienne was that I had been conflicted between what I knew she should sound like and trying to cater to what others thought a black woman in her field should sound like. Barbara Peters, founder and Editor-in-Chief of Poisoned Pen Press, told me that knowing my audience was most important. I knew that my audience would expect an intricate plot with several suspects. I knew that my audience would expect me to know technology and forensics.

But most of all, I knew that my audience would never believe that a protagonist recruited straight out of college to spend eleven years working in the corporate world would speak as though she came from the hood. Fans of crime fiction are far too savvy to ignore that kind of contradiction. Once I settled this issue in my mind, Adrienne became concrete. The newer scenes and edits in the novel are stronger, in terms of her character, but they created inconsistencies. Now, one of my remaining tasks is to revisit every scene and make her voice consistent. That will also help the development of other characters through their interactions with Adrienne.

The inspiration a writer takes from a predecessor is usually accidental, like the inspirations of our lives; those individuals met by chance who become integral to our destinies.

*-Joyce Carol Oates,
The Faith of a Writer*

Framework:

Some of my emerging favorite crime fiction authors are Tana French, Arnuldur Indridason, Peter Temple, and Walter Mosley. I am drawn to them because of their style

of writing and the way in which they approach crime fiction. They are literary authors who happen to write about crime in a specific culture. Audiences learn about African-American culture in the 1970s, Aboriginal race relations in Australia, family law in Iceland, or police procedure in Ireland.

One of the biggest influences on my study of writing detective fiction came from the book *Private Eyes: A Writer's Guide to Private Investigators* by Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet. The text addressed the issue of verisimilitude in crime fiction, specifically detective fiction. Although it was written in 1994, much of the basic information was still relevant. I realized how much more research I needed to do to ensure that Adrienne, my detective, seemed as real as possible. I had to consider her actions and whether or not they could realistically happen.

I was so inspired by *Private Eyes* that I contacted the authors and asked to meet them. Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet are Professors at Eastern Kentucky University. That happened to be the exact same university Adrienne attended in the novel. Eastern Kentucky University is known for its Criminal Justice program and many police officers from Kentucky and around the United States receive their education there. Professors Blythe and Sweet teach Creative Writing and were ghost writers for the Mike Shayne series in the early nineties. They agreed to meet with me and I drove to Richmond, Kentucky full of questions.

During our discussion Professors Sweet and Blythe talked about how all literature has a little bit of mystery to it. Mystery is part of the conflict that characters must face in order to keep the audience engaged. What does the character desire? How will the character achieve his or her goals? What actions will affect the character

and how will the plot play out? The difference with crime fiction is that the mystery plays a much bigger role and there are rules to how it affects the characters and the plot.

These are some tips the professors passed on to me:

1. Much of a private detective's time is spent driving around to interviews.
Interviewing is one of the best tools a detective can have. It is important that the detective see body language and make eye contact as opposed to talking with someone over the phone.
2. Clients do not want to be seen entering a PI's office. Chose the location of the detective agency carefully.
3. Create tension in the public life verses the private/social life of the private investigator.

I incorporated all of these suggestions into the novel. Adrienne's minor in college was public speaking, her agency is located on the ninth floor of a large office building with an enclosed parking garage, and I created tension in the relationship she shares with her ex-husband and in her relationship with Paige Matthews.

I am also influenced by authors with minority detectives. Although I have read numerous novels by Walter Mosley and a few short stories by other African-American authors such as Gar Anthony Haywood, I now seek out these types of works. I have recently discovered Darryl Wimberley, Deborah J. Ledford, and Neil Plakcy but there are many more writers with diverse characters for me to explore.

Studying crime novels from their cultural perspectives is also key to my understanding of the genre and how to approach my writing. Even those novels whose protagonists are not minorities but are placed amongst minorities is important. For

example, Craig Johnson's novels are set in Wyoming and tackle the race relations between Native American and White cultures. In Robert Parker's novels, Private Investigator Spencer's best friend and colleague is a rough, lethal African-American and in *Double Deuce* the two of them must solve a crime that takes place in a poor, dangerous black neighborhood.

But, my literary and cultural influences are not exclusive to authors of crime fiction. Adrienne O. Butler, my protagonist, is named after Octavia E. Butler. Her novels, *Kindred* and *Fledgling*, are two of my all-time favorites, along with Margaret Atwood's *A Handmaid's Tale*, Audry Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, and Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*. What these books have in common is that they address race and social issues in unique, creative, beautifully written ways but yet they do not shy from the harsh realities of those situations.

Beautiful writing about the truth of human nature—that is my goal as an author. As I reflect on the novel and my writing process, I believe that I have come a long way from the undergraduate student writing cliché love stories. My exposure to a wide variety of literature and the dedication to researching and understanding the genre of crime fiction have contributed a great deal to that growth.

The time is now for me to defend *And Then It Clicked*. In terms of the genre, I know that I have developed a story that fans of crime fiction will appreciate. I know it needs a little more work but I think that it is on its way to becoming what I have always wanted from my first novel—something I can be proud of as a writer.

And Then It Clicked

Prologue

Although her left eye was nearly swollen shut, the pain in her ribs making each breath difficult, Sonia Fenton stood at the kitchen sink meticulously scrubbing each dish. *Lazy. Wives who use dishwashers are just plain lazy.*

Always, always, he managed to find a speck. Not tonight, she'd make sure of that. She rinsed the last mug and reached for a dish towel. Everything would be in its place.

Quincy was due home in a few hours. The man who walked through the door every night with suspicious eyes, the man who spent hours alone in the basement, the man who stretched infant-like beside her at night. He was now an unwelcome visitor, inhabiting the body of a man whose name she used to whisper in the night.

After all of the dishes were dried and put away, Sonia began to prepare dinner. Meat loaf, mashed potatoes, and green beans. It was one of his favorite meals. He would expect dinner to be waiting and she'd ensure his arrival home would be uneventful.

That morning Quincy'd called to say he would be home at eight o'clock. He'd been in Chicago for two days, DJ-ing at a popular nightclub. Sonia wanted to have the house ready and dinner started by six—he had a habit of telling her random times. *Don't let me catch you doing something you ain't supposed to be doing.*

Every corner of Louisville, especially the Newburg area, seemed to be populated by his friends. Although they'd both grown up here, it was much more his place than hers. He knew everybody and everything that happened in Newburg. Sonia assumed she was being watched every time she left the house, his eyes and ears waving at her from the house down the street, passing by her in the grocery store.

She put the potatoes in a pot to boil and walked through the house checking each room. The tub and sink in the bathroom attached to their bedroom had been cleaned with calcium remover so they would shine. She washed the shower curtain, rehung it with a new liner. The faint smell of new vinyl mixed with Mr. Clean hung in the air. Sonia lit a lavender candle and set it on the countertop.

In the bedroom, she made the bed, folded and put away the laundry, and dusted every surface. The bloodstain by the closet door, remnants of a bloody nose two months prior, was barely visible. She'd briefly lost consciousness that day and Quincy tried to clean the stain himself. It took two days for her to be able to bend down to get to it. Still, she'd managed to do a good job.

Sonia was surprised that Quincy'd even tried to help. He often walked out after hitting her, not seeking refuge in his studio but actually leaving the house. She wanted to think it was because he felt a touch of guilt.

On occasion, when he would explain yet again how she managed to get him so angry, he would touch the permanent scar above her left eyebrow. *If only you would act right, things like this wouldn't happen.* When she looked at the scar she hated him—almost enough.

She finished her walk-through of the house and returned to the kitchen. Vacuuming was all she had left to do, once she got the meatloaf in the oven she would take care of that. The aches and pains covering her body forced her to finally rest. Sonia sat at kitchen table, the usual place where she began the mental preparation for Quincy's arrival home.

Why isn't dinner ready? I was expecting you at eight. No, he might think I'm blaming him for coming home early. Everything is prepped, I wanted the food to be fresh and hot when you got home. It will be ready soon. It's your favorite. How was your show? Yes. Good. That will get him talking about his music while dinner finishes cooking. What if he gets home late? Is the food all dried out? Why didn't you wait for me to get home? I thought you would be tired and hungry after your drive. I wanted everything ready when you walked through the door. All of the food is tightly sealed and still warm. It's not dried out. Let me make you a plate. Bases covered.

At eleven Sonia placed the food in the refrigerator and went into the living room. Footprints showed in the carpet from her pacing. She removed the vacuum cleaner from the hall closet and pushed it towards the living room. A cramp seized her right thigh, radiating from the point where he'd kicked her just days before. Her hands gripped the back of the sofa and she shook her leg, trying to relieve the pain.

She hobbled to the bathroom medicine cabinet, found a bottle of muscle relaxants and took two, even though the prescription was for one tablet every twelve hours. Not wanting to wrinkle the bed linens she limped back to the recliner in the living room and stretched out her leg. Fifteen minutes passed before the cramping stopped.

The vacuum cleaner was still in the hallway. She plugged it in and turned it on. A shadow on the wall startled her.

Sonia turned the vacuum off.

“Quincy?” She turned towards the figure, shorter, narrower than Quincy’s. Her heart raced as she took in the gloved hand and gun pointed at her.

“Sit over there.” The hand waived the gun towards a chair in the living room.

Sonia Fenton did as she was told, closed her eyes, and said a silent prayer. When she opened them again her killer looked her directly in the eyes, raised the gun, and pulled the trigger. She didn’t feel a thing.

Chapter 1

I had a 9:30 appointment with Rita and Walter Gayle regarding their murdered sister. It was my only appointment for the day, the rest of it taken up by a very long to-do list. Somehow Shane, my assistant, managed to keep my mornings organized even though it seemed my task list was never ending.

I pulled out the file I'd started on Sonia Fenton a few days earlier. Sonia was a twenty-nine year old, black woman who had been found shot to death in her home in January. After nine months the police hadn't made any arrests and the family was coming in to discuss the case. The file was pretty thin. I hadn't done much preliminary work in the three days since the family'd contacted me but the media reported numerous domestic disturbance calls to the Fenton home over the last few years and Quincy Fenton, Sonia's husband, had been a prime suspect in her murder.

"Hi Adrienne."

"Good morning."

"So far it is," said Shane. "My loud roommate is out of town for the next week. I got homework done and slept over eight hours."

"I really don't miss those days. I couldn't wait to get my own apartment."

"One more year and I'm out of there." He nodded toward my cup. "When are you going to stop pretending like you're a one-cup-a-day kind of woman?"

"This is only my second cup."

"Exactly. I can't remember the last time you only had one cup."

“Look. I used to drink a pot a day so leave me alone. Besides, this cup is small...ish.”

Shane laughed as he went over to his desk and typed in his password. “You have a 9:30 and you need to call Pearson back. He called twice yesterday while you were out. He said it had something to do with a case he was working on.”

“Oh, I forgot. I saw the message, just didn’t make the call. Let me do that right now.” Pearson Gray was a former colleague from Orman and Associates Private Investigations. We still helped each other out on a regular basis. No sooner had I sat down at my desk, though, when the door dinged. I looked at the security monitor and saw a black couple enter. I knew right away it was Walter and Rita Gayle.

They’d arrived early, anxious to see some progress made in Sonia Fenton’s murder. After introductions I showed them into my office and offered them coffee. The office had a receptionist’s desk, a double duty kitchenette and supply room, and two private offices. The smaller office was used as a conference room. The walls were bluish-gray with green and beige accents. I put quite a bit of money into the office décor. There were leather chairs in both the receptionist’s area and my office. Thick, navy blue carpet and heavy drapes on either side of the long windows gave clients the impression they were hiring a successful investigator. They were, but appearances went a long way in proving that.

Rita, who was already nervous and jittery, turned down the coffee but Walter accepted the invitation. Seated across from me, they held hands and looked at me as if I were the answer to healing their pain. I, better than anyone, knew that wasn’t going to happen.

Rita looked a lot like the pictures I had of Sonia. She was short, about 5'3", and had a medium build. Her hair was stylish, cut short and curled away from her face. It was the kind of style that required a curling iron and quite a bit of maintenance. She was in the salon at least every other week, no doubt. Although Rita's make-up was meticulous I could still see the grouping of brown freckles on her left cheek. She was attractive and well put together—at least on the outside.

Rita's husband, Walter, was pretty good-looking too. He was broad shouldered, thick around the waist, and dressed more casually, in khaki's and a striped button-down. His mustache was thin, well trimmed.

"I'm going to record our meeting so I don't miss any details," I said, indicating the small recorder on my desk. "I have my notes from our phone conversation but I'd like to start at the beginning." I pressed record and placed it on the desk between us. I stated the date and time and named the persons present. Looking at Rita I said, "I've read about your sister's crime but I'd like to hear everything from your perspective. Sonia was your sister?"

"Yes. My baby sister."

"When was the last time you saw or talked to Sonia?" I asked.

"Three days before she died. I stopped by on my way home from work. She was cooking dinner and Quincy was in the basement working on some new mixes. He sometimes got angry when I visited her so we only talked for a little while and I left."

I looked at Walter and asked, "You discovered the body. Is that correct?"

"Yes. I went to Sonia's house to check up on her," he said.

“Sonia didn’t come to church that morning,” Rita added. “We usually met at the eleven o’clock service. The only time she missed church was when she had visible bruises and she didn’t want people to see her. I tried calling but she didn’t answer. That’s when I told Walter I wanted to stop by her house on the way home. It was Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend and we were having a guest pastor at church. She wanted to see that pastor.”

“What time did you get to her place?”

“Around 2:00 in the afternoon. Her car was there but she didn’t answer the phone. Walter went around to the back door and when he came back he told me to go next door and ask the neighbors if they’d seen her.”

Walter sat up straighter in his chair. “But on my way around to the back I saw her through the window on the side of the house. The back door was unlocked but I didn’t want Rita to see so I sent her away and went in by myself. I could tell right away she was gone and I called the police.”

“How was your relationship? Did you get along well?”

Rita hesitated, “For the most part. She got to the point where she didn’t want to discuss Quincy anymore.”

“Why was that?”

“I think she knew I couldn’t understand why she stayed with him. I don’t think I did a very good job of being understanding. At least, not in the last year.”

“What happened in the last year?”

Rita opened her mouth to answer but choked up. Walter answered for her.

“Sonia got pregnant early last year. It was a big deal ‘cause she’d had an accident when she was in high school and the doctor said she couldn’t get pregnant.”

“He’s an asshole,” said Rita.

“Do you mean Quincy?” I asked.

“Yes. He made her lose the baby. I was there.”

“You saw him hit her?”

“We went shopping, just to look at baby furniture and stuff. You know, just pricing things and picking out colors and getting excited. When we got back to her house Quincy was there and he was furious. He wanted to know why we’d been gone so long and what were we out doing. Sonia tried to tell him. I tried to tell him. He just kept yelling about how he couldn’t trust her. I could tell he wanted to hit her so I stood in front of her and threatened to call the police. His friend Bobby showed up and they left.”

“And that was the end of it?”

“For the time being. I begged Sonia to come home with me but she said that would just make him angrier.”

“So how did he make her lose the baby?”

“I was scared to leave her alone so I called Walter to come over and stay with us until Quincy came back and I knew he wasn’t angry anymore. But, right before Walter got there Quincy walked in the back door, as if he was going to catch us doing something wrong. He went right up to Sonia and said, ‘Is that baby even mine?’ Then he punched her in the stomach, turned around and left again. Just like that.”

“How far along was Sonia’s pregnancy?”

“She was almost three months. I wanted to take her to the hospital but she laid down on the couch and said she was fine, that he hadn’t hit her that hard. When Walter got there he made her come home with us. He had to threaten to carry her to the car kicking and screaming before she finally agreed.”

“Sonia sure was stubborn when it came to Quincy and needin’ our help,” said Walter. “The next mornin’ Quincy showed up to take her back home and she went. Nothin’ we said could change her mind. A couple of hours later we get a phone call from Sonia tellin’ us she was in the emergency room. By the time we got there, she’d lost the baby.”

“I imagine the doctors knew what happened after examining her. Did they talk to her or contact Family Services?” I asked.

“Sonia told them a stranger ran into her with a grocery cart, that’s how she got the bruises,” Rita’s eyes shifted to the floor.

“Is that when things between you became strained?”

“She wouldn’t leave. She wanted that baby so much and he killed it. Still, she wouldn’t leave and I was angry at her. I was the one person he hadn’t been able to run out of her life and I messed that up. Now he’s killed her and it’s too late.”

“I need to go to Sonia’s house,” I said. “Will Quincy let us in to take a look?”

Walter rubbed his wife’s shoulder. “He don’t live there anymore. After the murder he stayed with his father and then moved in with some woman he met at a club a few months later. I’ve been checkin’ on the house.”

“I’ll take you,” Rita mumbled. “I want to make sure you know and see everything.”

Walter put his arms around Rita and turned to look at me. “You get that son of a bitch.”

Chapter 2

Kevin, my ex-husband, used to say he could set his watch by my morning routine. At 6:42am, three minutes before my alarm was set to go off, I woke up. I laid there until the buzzing started and considered hitting the snooze button. Every morning I thought about the snooze button but I rarely touched it. I got up, put on my tank top and leggings, and went into the spare bedroom. My exercise mat was already out and I chose a yoga video from the stack of DVDs next to the TV. At 7:45 I got in the shower and was ready for breakfast by 8:25.

Downstairs in the kitchen, I toasted an onion bagel and added low fat cream cheese with grape jam. I poured myself a glass of orange juice and turned on the TV. A simple breakfast and the early morning news was my morning ritual, even on days I didn't work out. Big, heavy breakfasts with bacon, eggs, and pancakes had never appealed to me. That was too much food too early in the day and every time I went against my better judgment I was sluggish for the rest of the day.

I was just about to turn the TV off and head upstairs to get dressed when a segment came on about the start of Domestic Violence Awareness Month. October was still three days away but some organizations were starting early with rallies and fundraisers. The Center for Women and Families was having a cook-out on October 1st at Waterfront Park. Maybe I'd attend this year.

It was almost 8:30 and I had to get going. Although it was still September the air had a little bit of a nip to it and I was glad I was wearing a pant suit instead of a skirt. As

soon as I got in the car and started the engine I turned on the heat. The Walter Mosley audio book I'd purchased the week before, *Fearless Jones*, began playing immediately.

The drive to work didn't take long, less than 20 minutes even during rush hour. I lived in the Crescent Hill area of Louisville. I usually took River Road to Third Street so I could start my mornings off with a view of the Ohio River and the old Water Tower, now a museum. Butler Private Investigations had a small office in Fisk Tower, overlooking Muhammad Ali Boulevard in downtown Louisville. It was a historic building and rent didn't come cheap but I was proud of myself for getting the space and setting up my own shop. I shared the ninth floor with a dentist, a chiropractor, an accounting firm, and a temp agency. Maya Wells, my cousin and best friend, referred to the building as one stop shopping. Anyone looking at the large directory on the first floor would probably agree.

One side of Fisk Tower was right across from Fourth Street Live, an open mall connecting Muhammad Ali with Liberty Street. It had restaurants, night clubs, shopping, and entertainment. On nights when I worked late I walked over to the Hard Rock Café or TJI Friday's for a nice dinner and good people watching. From my office window I could see the famous Seelbach Hotel.

The week before I filed for divorce from Kevin, we had a dinner date there in The Oakroom. We tried one last time to find the connection we had when we first married. Instead the dinner made us realize we couldn't stay together. The conversation was forced and awkward and it made me sad. I've never been back to The Oakroom or even stepped foot in that hotel since. Once, a former client staying there wanted to have a meeting over dinner. I convinced him to meet me at the Maker's Mark Lounge at

Fourth Street Live. I couldn't bring myself to sit in that restaurant thinking about Kevin while trying to conduct business.

I had a lot of work to get done for the day but fortunately I had no client meetings and could tackle some of the billing and contract paperwork. Shane was already there and I could smell the coffee when I walked in. Two months after opening Butler Investigations I realized I desperately needed an assistant. Instead of going through a temp agency or putting an ad in the paper, I went to the University of Louisville career center.

Shane had an Associates Degree as a Paralegal and was working on his Bachelors in Political Science with a concentration in Law and Public Policy. He was looking for part-time work in a law office but the career counselor recommended him to me. Ten minutes into the interview I knew I had an assistant. After twelve interviews I'd almost given up on the student idea. Most of them had crazy schedules with stipulations about taking time off for tests or projects or trips home to see family. Others had obviously never held a professional job and I worried about their skills in meeting with my clients. Then Shane arrived – not dressed in Khaki's and a button down, but a black suit, green and black tie, and black dress shoes.

I'd actually noticed him in the lobby when I came in that morning. I wanted a latte instead of regular coffee and he was in Starbuck's looking at the Orman and Associates website on his laptop. I stood at the condiments counter and watched him navigate through the pages of discreet services offered. He got to the page with bios of the three company executives and leaned back with his coffee.

It didn't take me long to deduce he was my next appointment. The guy was white, a little on the skinny side, and young. Twenty-four or twenty-five I guessed. Although he was sitting down I could tell he was tall, at least six feet. His shoulder-length blonde hair was parted straight down the middle and held back on each side by somewhat large ears. Hazel eyes, surrounded by some of the longest lashes I'd ever seen on a man, saved his face from being completely boring. There were two large zits on his chin and he ran his thumb over them as he read.

I went back to my office and read over his application one more time. Shane McAdams used to work for a law office on the east side of town. It was a small office with two attorneys I'd worked with on cases in the past. They were real assholes, concerned only about money and not the law. McAdams' reason for leaving was cited as a scheduling conflict and I'd be sure to ask him about that.

When he arrived in my office four minutes before his interview time, he introduced himself and shook my hand with a firm, but not too firm, grip. His smile showed teeth that had most likely worn braces and a dimple on each side of his mouth. He went from kinda boring to somewhat attractive. We discussed his schooling and career goals first and then I explained exactly what I was looking for in an administrative assistant. Once I saw that he'd relaxed somewhat I asked about his job at Toby and Blight Law Offices. He pushed an imaginary stray hair off his forehead, scratched his left elbow, and described his duties almost as if he were presenting an academic paper.

"Tell me about the scheduling conflict," I asked.

"It was the end of the semester."

“You’re from Louisville. What does the end of the semester have to do with it?
You didn’t designate it as an internship.”

“Well, I-I wanted to look for something that worked better with my schedule.” He brought his hand up to his chin as he spoke.

“You didn’t want to wait until you’d found another job before quitting that one?”

“Umm...there was a...umm...philosophy misalignment.”

I laughed then. I actually laughed.

“What I mean is...umm...well, to be honest I didn’t agree with some of the company policies.”

I laughed again and let him continue to ramble.

“I thought it best if I leave and...,” he trailed off.

I figured it was time to rescue him. “I’m aware of the practices of Toby and Blight so you don’t have to continue.”

McAdams slouched and blinked rapidly for several seconds. “Thank you, ma’am.”

The interview lasted less than an hour but in that time I could see that he was intelligent, professional, and easy to talk to. He understood the need for confidentiality and I felt his studies and job experience would come in handy. I ran a background check and called his references. Four days later, I hired him.

Although he only worked part-time, Shane turned out to be a valuable asset to the office. He arranged his class schedule so he could work 9:00 am to 1:00 pm Monday through Friday. I considered myself fairly organized but Shane put me to shame. Every appointment on my calendar had a name, more than one if possible,

contact numbers, e-mail addresses, website links, and notes detailing client information or reason for appointment. He was always a few minutes early and stayed until he finished whatever task he was working on. The supply room was always stocked and organized and we never ran out of coffee.

What I found intriguing about Shane was that he always looked like he was going on a job interview and spoke as if he came from an upper-middle class family, which he had. Yet, he spent most of the day listening to hard core rap and hip-hop at his desk and he was working on a minor in Pan-African studies. He'd had a recent break-up with his girlfriend of three years, who was black, and his best friend, Jarvis, was black.

A few months after he'd come to work for Butler Investigations curiosity got the better of me and I asked what influences in his life had led him to be so interested in African-American history and culture.

"Is there something wrong with just finding it interesting?" he'd replied. The expression on my face told him I wanted a real answer and he said, "My grandfather. His best friend, Jarvis, is black and they did a lot of stuff together during the civil rights movement. They've told a lot of stories that had a big effect on me."

"Jarvis? As in your best friend Jarvis?"

"Yeah, Jarvis III. Grandfather and grandson."

After that I'd learned to not be surprised by anything I'd learned about Shane's upbringing.

"Good morning, Shane."

"Adrienne, you just missed a call from Maya. She's gonna call back in a little while. And good morning to you too."

“Coffee smells good. Let me get settled and we’ll tackle some of that outstanding paperwork.”

There was an e-mail from Pearson Gray about a case he was working on. He needed some help and in exchange he offered to do some of the legwork on the Fenton case. I got the better end of that deal since the help he needed from me didn’t involve leaving the office. Pearson was great with computers and an excellent researcher but his communication skills were somewhat lacking. He was uncomfortable talking to strangers, which was a liability in our field. My minor in college was public speaking and I was a good interviewer and could get people to give up information.

That’s what made us a good team at Orman’s. Both of us were excellent researchers but went about it in different ways. I would take care of the face-to-face stuff and Pearson, who was a little bit of a hacker, could find data I didn’t have access to. He made sure never to open Orman up to lawsuits but he admitted he bent the rules somewhat.

I’d only been in the office for twenty minutes when my cell phone rang. I checked the caller ID and saw that it was Maya’s cell. A recent picture of us, standing, smiling at the camera popped up whenever she called. Maya wasn’t the typical beauty but she carried herself regally and that’s what made her beautiful. We had the same medium brown, with a hint of cherry, skin. For that reason alone many people thought we were sisters instead of cousins.

Unlike my jet black, neck length bob, she kept her chestnut hair long simply because she liked the versatility it afforded her. In the picture she wore a ponytail but often, on days when she appeared before a judge, she wore it up in a tight bun. On

days when she didn't have court, it hung down past her shoulders. Maya's eyes were her most striking feature and she played them up with soft neutral colors and perfectly arched eyebrows. When she looked at you, you wanted to believe anything she said. What gave them that quality came directly from the inside. She had a strength and confidence that made whoever she was with feel strong too. The only time I ever saw that falter was when she was with her father.

"Hi, Maya."

"Hey. I got your e-mail inviting me to dinner Friday night."

"Good. We haven't spent any time together in over two weeks so I thought dinner would be nice. Can you make it?"

"Absolutely. Especially if you're cooking."

"Don't get too excited. You're helping me clean up."

"I figured that," she said.

Her voice trailed off and I knew she wanted to say something I wouldn't like.

"What? You called me for something other than dinner?"

"I heard a rumor."

"Umm...hmm." Maya and I were always straight up with each other and it worried me that she was hesitating now.

"I heard you're working the Sonia Fenton murder."

Maya was a lawyer with Gibson, Stuckey and Wells. She didn't make up the Wells portion of that partnership, her father did. As two peas in a pod Maya and I attended Eastern Kentucky University together, both majoring in Criminal Justice. After graduating, I started working at Orman's but Maya's father, Robert Wells, wanted his

daughter to continue in school and earn her law degree. Maya did just that. Robert, who never allowed himself to be called Bob or Bobby, was the kind of man who made it difficult to say no and Maya bent over backwards in an effort to win his approval.

Ursula, Maya's mother, a juvenile counselor, was exactly the same way. It was as if he had some kind of magic spell cast over them that made them want to obsessively please him. Robert had grown up in the civil rights era and had to fight hard for everything he had. He was a dark-skinned black man, the only one in his firm for many years, who defended other black men in criminal cases. It made him tough and I often wondered if that kept him from truly connecting with his wife and daughter, in turn making them work so hard for what little emotion he showed them.

I knew right away she'd heard that rumor from someone at Gibson, Stuckey and Wells. "Yes." I dragged out the word, already planning my explanation. "The family was referred to me and I accepted."

"Adrienne."

"I couldn't say no Maya."

"Yes. You could have."

"I need this."

"Why? Because you think it will set the past right?"

"The past doesn't change. That's not what I'm trying to do."

"Then what are you doing. Why would you take on another case involving domestic violence?"

I leaned my head back on the chair and closed my eyes. "I can get her justice. She deserves that. They all deserve that."

“Honey,” it was the tone she used when she needed to reason with me on a subject that upset me. “Honey, when Paige died you didn’t eat or sleep more than three hours at a stretch. All you did was work like a crazy woman. I was there. I had to watch you go through it.”

“It’s just that— look, I know how bad it got. It won’t be like that this time. I didn’t personally know Sonia.”

When I began working on the fraud investigation of Aaron Paulson I had been with Orman and Associates for nearly three years and they’d started assigning me larger files I could work on solo. In school I studied every type of crime, from petty theft to serial killing and on the job I had personally met many criminals. But, nothing prepared me for actually seeing the physical evidence on a victim of abuse.

I’ll never forget the day I met Paulson’s girlfriend, Paige Matthews. The eyes sunken in her pale, distorted face looked at me with both hope and terror. There were red, yellow, and blue open gashes along her cheekbones and eyebrows, the swelling making her look almost grotesque. Her protruding bottom lip had dried blood caked in the corners and a vertical wound ran down her chin, disappearing towards her neckline. That day, when she answered the door, changed me forever.

“You’re going to follow through with this. I know you will,” said Maya. “But don’t get too close to the family and don’t hold in all of your emotions. You know how you are. You did that the last time and it just about ate you up.”

“Speaking of family, her sister is coming to the office in a little while so we can drive to Sonia’s house. I’ve got things to get done before she gets here. Stop worrying. I’ll call you later.”

“I confront you with this and you’re practically hanging up on me.”

“No, I’m not. We can talk about this more over dinner. Just as long as you promise it won’t be our only dinner conversation.” I added a hint of playfulness to my voice. I didn’t want our conversation to end on such a serious note or she really would worry about me all day.

“Sure. Just be careful with this one, okay.”

“Promise. Friday at seven?”

“Yeah, seven. I love you.”

“Love you too, bye.”

I flipped the phone closed and put my head on the desk. Maya was right. I was going to have to be careful with this one.

An hour and a half later I heard the front door buzzer and looked at the security monitor to see Rita Gayle with her arms wrapped tight around herself. Once again she was early for her appointment. The black wrap-around dress, black tights, black heels, and black bracelet she wore reminded me of a funeral. Visiting the site of her sister’s murder justified her choice of clothing.

I heard Shane say, “Come on in, Mrs. Gayle. Can I get you something to drink?” In addition to coffee and tea I kept a small supply of canned sodas and juices in the

small refrigerator. Often, I knew clients preferred a shot of whiskey, which was why I never kept alcohol in the office.

“No—yes. Yes, I would like something. Thank you.”

Shane listed her options and she chose a bottle of apple juice. I shook her hand when he showed her into my office.

“I know I’m early. I can sit in the waiting room if you’re not ready for me.”

“No, please, have a seat. I was wrapping up the final wording of your contract. We can go over it before we leave.” I hated having to discuss business with her when I knew her mind was on our task ahead. It couldn’t be helped. We hadn’t been able to find any other time to meet.

Rita sighed as if she were letting out her last breath. Even though she was looking right at me I waited for her to inhale again. “I believe you will help us. The police, they’re not going to spend much more time on Sonia’s investigation. They’ve ruled out Quincy. They say they have no real leads. They’re too busy for my sister’s death to mean something to them.”

“I think it does mean something but you’re right. They’re very busy and without many leads to go on Sonia’s case won’t get the attention it deserves. Let’s get the paperwork complete so we can get going.”

I printed the completed contract and reviewed each page with her. After our first meeting, I’d e-mailed the first draft of the contract to them. We didn’t have to spend too much time on it since they only made minor adjustments.

“Is that everything? Rita asked.

“Yes. We can go now.” I stood and gathered my purse and suit jacket.

Rita continued to sit, a magnet stuck to a metal cabinet. "I've spent every minute of every day thinking about going back to that house and now," she trailed off.

I remained standing. "This is not an easy thing to face. But, I'll be with you. We'll do a walk-through, you can answer some questions for me and then I can go back another time for a more thorough look."

She nodded and rose slowly to her feet. She didn't say another word as I handed Shane the signed contract and escorted her to the parking garage.

We were in the car and through the parking gate before Rita finally spoke again. She reached out a hand and began to open and close the heat vent, watching her own hands as if mesmerized. "How did you become a private detective?"

I was startled by the question. I was expecting her to start reminiscing about Sonia. "My next door neighbors. Mr. and Mrs. Laurel. Herb was a lawyer and Beth was a social worker. They didn't have children of their own and they sort of became a second set of guardians. I was an only child, raised by my aunt. I spent almost as much time at their place as I did my own.

"They dedicated their lives to helping people. Beth constantly volunteered for charity work and organized fundraisers. Herb was right along beside her and I wanted to be like them. In high school when it came time for me to seriously think about college and what I wanted to do with my life, they were huge influences. Plus, I was a really

shy child and I read a lot. Most of what I read was Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys mysteries.”

Rita laughed, surprising me. Actually, it was more like a giggle, something childlike. “So you wanted to be her—Nancy Drew?”

“No, she was way too nice. She was just the spark. I watched any crime solving show that came on TV. ‘Starsky and Hutch.’ ‘Hart to Hart.’ ‘Magnum PI.’ The tougher the detective or police were, the more I liked them.”

She continued flipping the heat vent and I thought she’d dropped the conversation when she said, “I liked ‘Remington Steele’ and ‘Moonlighting.’ Did you watch those?”

She was trying to distract herself and I was relieved I didn’t have to work hard to keep her from freaking out. “Those shows are high on my list of favorites.”

“Why weren’t any of them black?”

“There was Hawk from Spenser and Hawk. I had a big crush on him.”

“Oh yeah. I remember him.” She moved her hand from the vent and began playing with the strap on her purse. “I think Sonia had a poster of him. It was small and she’d torn it out of a magazine. It was just a torn page, not really a poster.”

Rita was quiet again for several blocks. “Sonia was torn too. She was all broken up inside. Broken. He broke her. Inside and out.”

A single tear ran down Rita’s left cheek but since I was driving I couldn’t get her a tissue. She opened her purse and pulled one out herself. “Sonia used to run track in high school and played clarinet in the band. She always had friends and it was nearly impossible to get her off the phone. Mama and Daddy never got after her the way they

got after me and my brothers and she took full advantage of that. She convinced them to let her stay up late, even on school nights. She spent the night over one of her friends' houses at least once a week. She had so much going for her. Sonia was like any other teenager or young girl heading off to college."

"Sonia went to college?"

"Yeah. She talked about going away but when it came down to it she wouldn't leave home. She went to UofL and didn't bother to move into the dorms. I lived on campus but she stayed in her same room at my parent's house."

"Is that where she met Quincy? On campus somewhere?" We were less than ten minutes from Quincy and Sonia's house but I wanted Rita to keep talking. The more she told me stories like this the better I got to know all three of them. Sonia, Quincy, and Rita.

"He played drums in the band. I played clarinet too and knew him. He was a little egomaniac then. He was a freshman when I was a junior so I didn't pay him any attention. He was just a kid to me. Then Sonia started school during my Senior year. Sonia and Quincy knew each other as acquaintances and then friends for a while before they started dating."

"So they had friends in common?" I wished I could write in my notebook and drive at the same time.

"Ummm...Hmmm. Band people tended to hang out with each other. Sonia and Quincy were no different. I even hung out with them sometimes."

"How long was it before they got together as a couple?"

“That was towards the end of Sonia’s sophomore year, right before our parents died.”

That got my attention. Why hadn’t I asked about their parents before? I assumed they were too distraught to deal with hiring me and that was why Rita and Walter had taken care of it. It didn’t occur to me that they might be dead and that was a serious mistake on my part. Assumptions were bad in my business. “You never mentioned your parents to me. How did it happen?”

“Gang violence.” Rita made a noise then, somewhere deep in the back of her throat. A combination of that same last breath sigh she’d let out in my office and a suppressed roar. “How does a couple in their fifties end up in a gang war? Easy. They go out in their backyard to barbecue and get caught in the crossfire. There was a concrete drainage ditch that ran from one end of our street to the other. It separated the backyard fences on our side of the ditch from the fences of the houses on the other side. Two boys came running down that ditch and four more boys came running after them. All six of them were shooting.”

Rita went back to playing with the vent. This time, instead of flipping it open and closed, she stuck her finger between each slat, one at a time and then started back at the top. “My father died in the ambulance and my mother died four days later. She regained consciousness long enough to find out her husband was dead and to tell the police what happened. Three of those boys died, two more were shot and one went on the run for nearly a year before he was caught.”

It was then that it hit me. I remembered that incident. It dominated the news for weeks. “Oh—Are you telling me—Were your parents the Barkers?” I stuttered.

“Yes. That’s my maiden name.” Rita said, finally taking her gaze off the vent to look at me.

“I’m so sorry. I had no idea.”

“Why are you sorry? How could you know? But now you see why my brothers and I want to find out what happened to Sonia so bad. It’s not fair. First our parents, then our sister. It’s not right that this has happened to us twice.”

By this time we were at the light on Indian Trail, just moments away from Randolph Drive. I knew this area of town pretty well and didn’t need to ask Rita how to get to Sonia’s street. “Didn’t that happen somewhere close to here?”

“We’ll be there in a minute.” Rita’s voice was so quiet I had to replay the words in my head to hear them clearly.

Stunned, I didn’t notice the light had changed until the cars behind us started honking. “Are you telling me that Sonia lives in the same house where your parents were killed?” For some reason, my voice started shaking and Maya’s worried words ran through my head.

“My father started out as a janitor at Louisville International Airport. Back then it was called Standiford Field. He worked his way up to supervisor while my mother served school lunches to other people’s ungrateful kids. They did that so they could buy a house and pay it off. My father believed that working hard and owning property was the best way a black man could get ahead, to earn respect. There was no way we were getting rid of that house. But I’ll tell you this. I’ve never spent another night in there since it happened.”

I pulled up to the curb in front of 4593 Randolph Drive and turned off the engine. I looked around the neighborhood and thought about shattered childhood memories. Words to describe what Rita must feel looking at that house probably didn't exist.

Without saying a word, Rita opened the car door, stepped onto the sidewalk, and headed for the front door.

Chapter 3

Rita Gayle and I stood outside her murdered sister's front door. Dried, crackling leaves tumbled down the sidewalk, through the front yard, up the steps and onto the porch, resting briefly against the opened screen door before being whisked away.

"I've changed my mind, Adrienne. I'll open the door for you but I'm not going in. Now that I'm here I know I never want to step foot in this house again."

I placed my hand over Rita's, which still clung to the key in the lock.

"That's not a problem. I'll go in and you can stay out here."

We'd been standing on the porch for several minutes. Neighbors from houses along the street peered through their windows and peep holes. Some were bold enough to walk out of their houses and stare straight at us.

I was familiar with Louisville's Newburg area of town. Housing prices ranged from low-income to middle-class. Sonia and Quincy Fenton's brick home fell into the low-income bracket. Built in the seventies, it had the original metal framed windows and chain link fencing around the front yard. Rita let go of the key and I stepped in front of her.

"Why don't you go sit in the car where it's warm? I'll have a look around, take a few photos and we'll be out of here."

"I'm sorry. I want to get Quincy so bad I thought I had the courage to go in there. I don't want to see stains of my sister's blood."

"Of course not. It's okay. I'll be out soon."

I waited for her to get to the end of the sidewalk before turning the knob. The first thing I saw after stepping into the house was an old, mustard yellow recliner facing the entrance, covered in blood. Sonia Fenton had either been shot while standing in front of it or while sitting on it. I still hadn't seen the autopsy results or forensic evidence. Why in the world had Quincy left that chair in plain view? For that matter, why hadn't Walter ever moved it or covered it up?

Aside from the blood spatter still on the wall and floor around the chair, the rest of the room was surprisingly clean and neat. It contained mostly mis-matched furniture that looked like it had been handed down several times. Rusty brown carpet covered the entire floor; it was probably original to the house. A flowered sofa was arranged against a sage green wall with tables on both ends. The lamp on one table had a bell-shaped lamp shade while the other was missing the shade altogether.

There were pictures of Sonia and Quincy beside each lamp. They looked happy, newly married. First family photos? The pictures were professional and taken the same day. Quincy had a huge afro while Sonia's hair was cut short and curled over her forehead. It was almost identical to the way Rita wore her hair. They were wearing sweaters and Quincy's arm draped around Sonia's neck in one of the pictures, as if he held her in a loose chokehold.

I turned away from the photos, thinking how much that represented their lives together. Sonia must have kept the house as clean as possible to keep from upsetting Quincy. According to Rita, one of the issues that caused him to blow up was finding things out of place. For men like Quincy, that was just an excuse. Mr. Clean could stop by and scrub the place down and he still would've hit Sonia.

A hallway led to a large bedroom with a bathroom, a smaller bedroom, and a half a bath. I explored them briefly but since I was planning to return to the house without Rita I didn't want to spend too much time searching them now. It was obvious no one had lived here since the night of the murder. I doubted Quincy kept the house this clean. I went back to the living room and walked to the kitchen directly behind it.

There appeared to be two closet doors and another door leading out to the backyard. I opened the back door and examined the lock. It was old and chipped, not providing much information. The glass was intact and so was the brass chain. One of the closets was the food pantry but the other opened up to a set of wood stairs going down to the basement. That door had a loop attached to the frame so that a padlock could be placed on it. The cops had obviously cut the lock because it was lying on the kitchen table next to an empty fruit bowl. I felt for the Glock 19 inside my blazer pocket then flipped on the light.

According to Rita and Walter, Quincy used the basement as a music studio. Over the years he'd managed to build an extensive and expensive collection of recording and stereo equipment. He was determined to make it big as a DJ and apparently spent most of his time in his studio or running the streets trying to get gigs. He accepted anything within a day's driving distance.

I took out my digital camera and snapped several photos of the basement layout, the equipment and the small casement window on the side wall. Quincy'd obviously taken most of his equipment with him. What remained looked older and worn. The window looked as though it were barred from the inside so no one could open it. I made a mental note to take a look at this window from the outside. A cheap magnetic alarm,

the kind you buy at home improvement stores, was mounted to the concrete around the window. Quincy was certainly careful with his equipment. Too bad he wasn't as careful with his wife.

I went back to the living room and stood in each corner, getting a feel for the room from all angles. I took a few more photos then walked around the loveseat, observing the blood spatter. I removed the small notebook I always carried in my purse and wrote down my initial observations. From the way the room looked there didn't appear to have been a struggle. Most likely, whoever killed Sonia Fenton had backed her into that loveseat as soon as she'd answered the door—or it was someone she knew.

One of my personal rules is that I never take work home with me. If I need to stay at the office late then that's what I do. Of course, leaving papers in the office is a far cry from leaving the thoughts behind. When I got home that night I changed into sweats, drove to the water front, and took a forty-five minute run. I live close enough to the Ohio River to enjoy running there on a regular basis. One would think after growing up here I'd be accustomed to the sites but I never get tired of looking at the river.

After a rain the water can look muddy but on days like this, when the air is dry and crisp, it has a deep grayish-blue hue. At 7:00 it was already dark but moonlight and streetlamps shimmered off the water and illuminated the path. Reflections of light from

the Indiana side of the river mingled with those from the Kentucky side and I saw people jogging and strolling along on both sides.

I tried very hard not to think about work but thoughts of Sonia Fenton and even Paige Matthews kept creeping into my head. Their cases had a lot of similarities with one huge difference. I never knew Sonia. Paige died on my watch. At least that's how I felt. Like Rita and Walter did with Sonia, I tried everything to get Paige to leave Paulson. I took her to a hospital and got the external wounds stitched and patched. I spoke with the doctors about finding her a counselor. I got her involved in domestic violence group meetings on Tuesday nights.

And, against everyone's advice, I convinced her to move in with me. I thought I could be her personal bodyguard. Paulson didn't know where she was after leaving the hospital but he knew I had something to do with her disappearance. My problem was that I underestimated him. I underestimated the whole situation. He hired a detective to follow me, found out where I lived, and came after Paige. I didn't know at the time but he went to my house everyday to convince her to come back to him. Eventually he wore her down and three weeks after she'd moved in I came home to find Paige and all of her things gone. When she wouldn't answer her phone I drove to Paulson's house.

The Paige that answered the door was someone I didn't know. She greeted me as if I were a long lost friend coming over for brunch. Her thick, brunette hair was piled on top of her head in a sweeping, tangled mess. She had on layers of make-up and a skin tight dress that emphasized her emaciated body.

"Come in Adrienne. I've been meaning to return your calls." She waved me into the house as she spoke, then plastered an opened-mouth smile on her face.

“I’m very worried about you Paige. You didn’t say goodbye or tell me you were planning to leave.”

“Oh, it was a last minute thing but I do want to thank you for your hospitality.”

“Where’s Aaron? He must not be here if you invited me in.”

Her smile faltered briefly. “He stepped out for a bit but there’s no need to worry. I’m just fine. We’re fine. We’re happy and in love. See, he brought me these roses,” she said indicating a vase on the entryway table.

“Flowers don’t make up for a fractured eye socket.”

“Now that’s all in the past,” she turned away from me and walked into the living room. “He’s talked to a counselor and he’s working on his issues. I need to be here to support him.”

My mind worked frantically, trying to figure out what to say without alienating her. “You can support him without living with him. Let him attend therapy for a while and get his anger under control. Then you can move back in.”

“We’re going to a party tonight. It’ll be great fun.”

“Paige, did you hear me? Come back to my house. You can stay as long as you like and take care of yourself for a while.”

“He really does love me Adrienne. I know it doesn’t seem like it sometimes but he only gets angry when he’s under a lot of stress. He’s given one of his accounts to a co-worker so things will be much better now.”

I stood in front of her but she refused to look me in the eye. “Listen to me Paige. He can’t change overnight. You both need time to heal and time apart will allow that to happen.” I heard the jingle of keys then.

“She’s fine just where she is,” Paulson said from the doorway.

I instinctively shielded Paige with my body. Paulson turned up his lip and snickered.

“Paige, please, please come with me. You told me he doesn’t mean to hurt you but what about the next time he gets angry.”

“His counselor told him to walk away. I don’t believe he’ll hurt me again. I know what I’m doing.”

“I’m afraid to leave you here.”

“Don’t be silly. I told you, we’re going to a party tonight and we’ll have a fun time. You shouldn’t worry about me anymore. I’m a big girl. We had a rough patch and we’re working through it.”

“Yeah. A rough patch,” said Paulson. “You can get out of my house now. The door is this way.”

“Please Adrienne,” Paige whispered.

I had no choice but to leave. I didn’t want Paulson to take his frustration at me out on Paige. With each step towards the door my heart thudded and I felt sick to my stomach. “Please call me,” I said right before he slammed the door in my face.

I sat in the car for several minutes before I could drive. I went straight to Kevin’s apartment, collapsed in his arms, and cried for hours. He held me, rocked me, talked to me but I couldn’t stop. The image of her beaten face on that first day I’d met her would not go away and I knew there was nothing I could do to prevent the next beating.

Chapter 4

Detective Cliff Dunbar with the Major Case Division of the Louisville Metro Police Department looked up from his avocado and tomato on rye when I pulled out the chair in front of him and sat down. The usual standing room only crowd at Rhys and Ryan's, a hip café in the Highland's district, had thinned and I spotted Dunbar easily from the doorway. After suffering a mild heart attack two years earlier, at the age of forty-three, he had become a vegetarian. His eating habits were definitely a contradiction to his personality and rough appearance.

Dunbar's usually close-cropped dirty blonde hair had grown out some and a small part had formed down the middle of his head. He'd started to go gray but only in the back of his head. His dark brown eyes were close set with thick bushy eyebrows that were almost grown together. A healed injury and old acne scars marked his weathered skin.

He'd lost weight since his heart attack but could never be described as a small man. At 6'2" he weighed at least 240 pounds. Dunbar was not at all handsome but managed, somehow, to keep a steady stream of women in his bed.

"I've had a bad morning and it's too early in the day for me to put up with your shit. What do you want Adrienne?"

"You don't have to start off with the nasty attitude. I need to talk to you."

"So much you tracked me down on my lunch break?"

"Look. I'm working a new case. It's important to me."

Dunbar took another bite of his sandwich, leaned back and wiped his mouth. He studied my face for a moment. I couldn't hold his gaze and looked down at his food.

"OK, what do you need?"

"I need to get a peek at the Sonia Fenton murder file, the one over in Newburg. How soon can I get access to it?"

"Holy shit Adrienne. How did you end up on that one?"

"The family hired me."

"Why are you taking on a DV case? How are you going to stay objective?"

"I'm good. That won't be a problem for me."

Dunbar picked up his fork and took a bite of pasta salad. Casually he said, "Does Kevin know about this?"

Crossing my arms over my chest, I said, "He's not my guardian."

"Sure. And that's why you came to me and not him." The people in the booth beside us looked over.

Lowering my voice, I said, "Can I get a look at the file or not?"

"I don't know, Adrienne."

"You know I'll do what's right. If I uncover anything the police should know I'll pass it on to you."

"Anything we should know? That's subjective. We should know anything you know about a homicide investigation."

"Metro Police dropped the charges against Quincy Fenton. Did you know he's on the run?"

Dunbar stopped chewing. "What are you talking about?"

“I tried getting an interview with him but no one has seen him since July. His mother said she gets a phone call every few days but he won’t tell her where he is or when he’s coming back. The woman he’s living with said she came home from work one day and his equipment was gone and most of his clothes. She hasn’t heard from him at all. He’s where my investigation starts.”

Dunbar stared at her, his eyes narrowing then relaxing again. He looked at his watch. It was 12:30pm. “Let me finish my lunch and then we can head back to the precinct.”

“I’ll join you,” I said, signaling for the waitress

The Major Case Division of the Louisville Metro Police was located downtown on West Jefferson Street. The building was newer, only six years old, and made of mirrored glass. The detective room was located in the east wing of the building. Eight desks, in four rows of two, took up most of the office space. Filing cabinets lined every wall and large erase-wipe boards with wheels stood in front of them.

None of the detectives had offices. The open floor plan was supposed to inspire collaboration. Dunbar had been with Metro Police for six years and prior to that with the Kentucky State Police for twelve years. His desk was in the back row, seniority affording him a little more privacy. He sat down in his chair and I pulled another one up beside him.

“Can I get a moment of privacy, please?”

“Oh, yeah.” I stood and walked to the water fountain while Dunbar logged into his computer and the police database. A magnetic board with photos of fugitives and persons of interest hung on the side wall.

“I’m in,” Dunbar called from across the room.

All of the forensic evidence from Sonia Fenton’s murder had been processed and logged. She’d been shot twice at close range with a Beretta 96 equipped with a silencer. One bullet entered through the sternum and exited out the back while the other passed through the ribs and lungs and lodged in her spine.

Dunbar pulled up the crime lab’s photos from the scene and I saw that Sonia had fallen over the arm of the loveseat.

“It looks like she was sitting when she was shot,” I said.

“Yeah. It was determined that the shooter was sitting across from her.”

“She’s covered in bruises. Did those happen during the murder or before? I didn’t see signs of a struggle at the house.”

“You’ve been to the house already?”

“Rita, the sister, took me there yesterday. What about those bruises?

Compliments of Quincy?”

“Yeah. He’s something else. Just in the two years before her death there had been twelve domestic disturbance calls to that house. The neighbors called, we showed up, and she insisted there wasn’t a problem.”

I looked at the photos again. Sonia had a black eye and dark bruises on her wrist and neck. “It looks like he strangled her. He would have eventually killed her.”

“Yeah.” Dunbar turned his chair to face me. “Are you sure about taking on this case, Adrienne? It hits awfully close to home.”

Ignoring him I said, “Does the report mention fresh bruising? Did she fight back?”

Dunbar sighed and turned back to the computer. “No. Doesn’t look like she tried.”

When I pulled into my driveway six hours later Maya’s car was already there. She wasn’t early, I was late leaving the office. Maya had her own key to my house and when I walked through the front door she was sitting on the sofa, drinking wine, and reading Caryl Phillips’s *Crossing the River*. “I knew you’d be late so I came prepared,” she said looking up from the book.

“It couldn’t be helped. You always let yourself in anyway.”

“I would have chopped some onions or something to make myself seem like I know what I’m doing in the kitchen but I had a better idea.” Maya cooking was a terrifying concept and I anxiously looked towards the kitchen. “Don’t worry, I didn’t go in there,” she said, noticing my glance.

“What’s your better idea?”

“The reason we haven’t spent any time hanging out is because we’ve been working our asses off. We’re both stressed. I’m in a fight with Martin and if you haven’t seen me in two weeks, I know you haven’t seen Kevin in at least three or four.”

“If you’re about to suggest that we go pick up strange, hot men to have sex, I’m in.”

“Stop being nasty.”

“Why are you fighting with Martin?” I bet she thought I’d missed that tidbit of information.

“He’s being insensitive when he thinks he’s being funny.”

“How so?”

“He keeps referring to Gibson, Stuckey, and Wells as GSW—gun shot wound.”

“That is insensitive. I’m sure he’s doing it just to get a rise out of you. You need to explain exactly why that’s not so funny and he’ll stop.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t already.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re scared.”

“What?”

“You’re scared.”

“Of what?”

“Love.”

“I’m not in love.”

“Yes you are but we’re not going to fight about that. My brain can’t handle it tonight. What’s your idea for dinner?”

I got the pouty lip stare before she said, “Let’s go have wood-fired pizza, rent a movie, come back here and eat junk food.”

“The pizza sounds great but it’s a Friday night and we’d have a two hour wait wherever we went.”

“I made reservations this morning. We now have twenty-six minutes to get to the restaurant.”

Honestly, I was relieved that I didn’t have to cook. “You drive,” I said. “Wait. How much wine did you have?”

“Only three sips before you got here. You know I’d say something if it were more than that.”

Simplicity was a mid-range Italian restaurant on the east end of town. It was really crowded but we only had to wait ten minutes past our reservation time to be seated. Miraculously we got a booth towards the back, along the side wall, which gave us a little privacy. We both ordered iced tea and the waiter left us to debate whether or not to share a pizza or order separate ones. I wanted to build a pizza whereas Maya wanted something simple. The waiter came back with our drinks, a loaf of fresh bread, and seasoned olive oil. We ordered our separate pizzas and I cut into the bread.

“Are you going to call Kevin anytime soon? Maya asked, continuing the conversation we were having in the car.

“I don’t know. It’s his turn. I called him last time.”

“That’s childish. Which is why you two have such a difficult relationship. You’re both struggling for the upper hand, the control.”

“We have problems because he can be a jerk.”

“So can you.”

Maya certainly had a point. When it came to men I had real trust issues and those came out in the form of picking fights, not returning phone calls, or whatever else I had to do to keep some distance between me and them. Kevin was the only one I'd let get close.

Kevin Fredericks was introduced to me by a college friend at a party. We were attracted to each other but I was a couple of months from graduating and focused on other things. He was three months shy of completing his probation period in the Louisville Police Department, before they became Metro. We exchanged numbers but never contacted each other. A year later, at another party thrown by the same friend, we met up again. Two years after that we got married. Three years after that we got divorced.

The story of our relationship was simple. We loved each other, but that wasn't enough. We both had trust issues, compliments of two fathers who were neck and neck in the competition for asshole of the year. I was determined to be independent and Kevin didn't know how to let me be. He had old fashioned ideas about gender roles that contradicted mine.

I stuffed a chunk of bread in my mouth and mumbled, “umm...hmm.” I took a sip of tea and swallowed the bread. “If you don't want me to bring up Martin you'll change the subject.”

“How's the Fenton case coming along?”

That was another subject I wanted to avoid. “It’s still in the early stages. I’m driving up to Indianapolis next week to check out Quincy’s alibi myself.”

“I thought—never mind. You probably don’t trust the police report and want to investigate yourself.”

“Exactly. But I did talk to Dunbar. He doesn’t understand why I took the case.”

“I understand why. You said it yourself. Victims of domestic violence deserve justice. I’ve never disagreed with that. But after what happened to Paige Matthews I know it’s emotional for you. That’s what scares me about you working for Sonia’s family. Their emotional state can rub off.”

I hesitated, not sure if I should tell her about the history of the Fenton home. At times I wondered if Maya could read my mind. She looked at me expectantly, knowing I had something to say.

“Do you remember the teenage boys who got into a gang fight and shot a couple in their backyard?”

“Vaguely, it was a few years ago.”

“They were Rita’s and Sonia’s parents and the murders happened at the same house where Sonia was killed.”

“What?” Maya’s jerked reaction caused her to tip over her glass. Tea splashed on the table and spread under the bread basket. She took the napkin from her lap and blotted the tea. “That poor family.”

“I know. And, the irony of Sonia’s situation doesn’t elude me. Sonia was abused and then murdered in the home she held onto for the sake of her parents. A home in which they were murdered.”

“See, this is what I’m talking about. As if this case weren’t heartbreaking enough.”

“I can’t walk away from it Maya.”

“You can, but you won’t.”

“No. I already told that family I’d find out who did this to their sister.”

The waiter showed up then to clean up the spilt tea. I excused myself to go to the ladies room, feeling Maya’s glare heating up my back.

Chapter 5

I stood in the living room window and watched a trio of birds take turns flying around the front yard and returning to the branch they were sitting on. I was on my second cup of coffee and still felt like I couldn't clear the cobwebs out of my head. I'd woken from a nightmare in which I stood on the corner of Randolph and Riegel, just down from Sonia Fenton's house and helplessly watched a series of crimes being committed.

First, a man dressed in a dark green jogging suit walked right up to the front porch, opened a window and climbed in. Soon afterwards, Sonia Fenton and Paige Matthews walked down the street towards the house. They were arm and arm, laughing and chatting excitedly. Both women wore torn, blood stained clothes and were covered with bruises. A patch of Sonia's hair was missing. It looked like it had been pulled out from the roots. Several of Paige's teeth were missing but neither woman seemed to notice.

When I saw that they were entering the house I tried to run and stop them but my feet were encased in a cement block. My mouth, free only seconds earlier, was suddenly covered with yellow caution tape. The women opened the front door and it slammed so loudly behind them that it sounded like a gunshot. As soon as the echoes from the door quieted real gunshots rang out and a group of children, ranging in ages from about five to ten ran from the back yard of the Fenton home. Each child carried a

pistol, some with silencers. They stopped in the middle of the street, faced each other and started firing. They were all dead within seconds.

One of their stray bullets hit the cement block around my feet and it cracked. Instead of crumbling rock, blood gushed from the opening like a crimson waterfall. Still, I couldn't get my feet free. Then, the man with the green jogging suit opened Sonia's front door and stood on the front porch. I saw then he had no face. His features ran together so no one thing could be identified. In his right hand he held an Uzi, not doing anything to hide or disguise it. Blood spatters appeared and dotted the front of the jogging suit.

He walked down the porch steps and surveyed the dead children. Behind him, Sonia and Paige exited through the front door to stand where he had just been. At first I was happy they were alive but then saw that both women were full of bullet holes. The jogging suit man turned around and shot them again. Both fell but got right back up. This cycle went on for some time until he was out of rounds. He reached in his pocket for a fresh clip and while he was reloading three more battered women came around the corner. "See how hard it is to keep them in line," he said. He raised the gun towards the new women and I lunged for him.

I'd jumped out of bed and found myself running in place, heart pounding, hands ripping at the imaginary tape covering my mouth. Once I realized it had been a dream I collapsed back onto the bed, covered in sweat.

I needed more than coffee to get myself right to face the rest of the day. I went upstairs to the bedroom I'd converted into a library and music room. I liked the layout of the room and the view from those windows while I read and played my cello.

I sat down in front of the music stand and sifted through the music. Vivaldi. Sonata No. 3 of *Six Sonatas for Violoncello and Piano*. I picked up my cello and settled it between my knees. After a few minutes of tuning, I closed my eyes and began to play. The piece was a favorite of mine and I'd it memorized. Sometimes I would play it over and over again for hours, trying to solve whatever puzzle had consumed me for the day.

Just as I was entering the allegretto moderato for the second time I paused, bow suspended in the air. Why hadn't the idea come to me before? It seemed so obvious now. I placed my bow on the lip of the music stand and reached for the notebook I always kept near. I flipped through the pages from the last few days and jotted down a list of phone calls and things to do. It was still early and I didn't need to open the office until nine. Cello up and bow in hand, I practiced for another forty-five minutes. I didn't need music to tell me what my dream meant but it sure did calm the fears.

Supposedly, Quincy Fenton was working a party at a club in Indianapolis the night that Sonia was killed. The police verified this with a few phone calls but I wanted to check it out. Shane had scheduled an appointment for me with the club owner, Shawn Graves, for 2:00 in the afternoon.

The drive up to Indianapolis took a little over two hours due to an accident on I-65. I arrived just after lunch and stopped at a deli for a sandwich and some soup. Even with my hectic schedule I made an effort not to eat fast food. Club Rome was on the north side of town and I found it relatively easy. It was a square, squat, white building on a corner with burgundy trim. The sign above the door had a Roman soldier hat, the words Club above and Rome below it.

Shawn was a big man. He must have been a bouncer at some point in his past. He was about 6'4", weighing well over 300 pounds. He had a shaved head and both ears sported diamond earrings that were at least two carats each. He had a deep, authoritative voice and greeted me with a tightly gripped handshake. He led us to his office and poured two cups of coffee.

"I don't know how much more I can tell you Adrienne." It hadn't occurred to him to call me Ms. Butler. "I can only tell you what I told the police."

"To be honest, I wanted to talk to you in person. I also wanted to get a look at the layout of the club."

"You thinkin' Quincy found a way to sneak out and get back in?"

"Maybe. Can you tell me what time he got here?" I pulled out my notebook.

“He had to set up so he got here ‘round 6:30. I got family stuff to do on Sundays. I didn’t get here to unlock the doors until a little after 6:00.”

“You told the police he was coming from Chicago. Did you know that for sure or is that what he told you?”

“I’m sure he was in Chicago. That’s how he got the gig. It was a last minute party and both my regular DJs were out of town. I called up a buddy of mine and it just happened he was working up in Chi-town for the weekend. A DJ he worked with up there named Quincy was driving back to Kentucky and passing through town. My buddy hooked us up and Quincy did the show.”

“And you’re sure he never left?”

“Come see for yourself,” said Shawn. He led us to the main room of the club. The DJ booth was in an enclosed tower at the back of the club, facing the dance floor. The stairs leading from the booth would require that anyone entering or exiting cross the edge of the dance floor. “I told you. Evrybody can see the DJ and there’s no way he can leave the booth without bein’ seen.”

I took out my camera. “Do you mind?”

“Go ahead. Just don’t post them on the internet.”

It took a moment for me to realize he was joking. Given his mannerisms and appearance, he didn’t seem the type to joke around. I walked around the club and took pictures of the booth from several angles. “Where are the emergency exits?”

“By the bathrooms over there,” he said pointing to the opposite side of the club. “There’s a back door out of my office too but I keep it locked, even when I’m in there.”

“Do you have security cameras? Videos?”

“The cops got those too.”

“Well, they’re not as keen on sharing as you might think.” That got a laugh out of him.

“I can put it on a disk for you. I don’t want to e-mail it.”

“Thanks, but I brought my USB.”

“Prepared, ain’t ya,” said Shawn.

On the drive back to Louisville I had to concede that there was no way Quincy could have left the club during the party. But, something was bothering me. Some detail I seemed to be missing. Time would settle my thoughts, eventually organizing the pieces. The problem was I felt rushed. Like I needed to hurry for Sonia’s sake. Or maybe for Rita’s sake. Or for me. *Hurry up and save her.*

For months I’d had nightmares about the night Paige died. Maya and Kevin thought they’d ended in a matter of weeks. Still, occasionally, when my thoughts lingered too long in that dark place, they’d follow me to bed, insisting on invading even my unconsciousness. Like some back alley strip club, the dreams were always filtered through a smoky, cherry haze. The night of Paige’s death was the first, the only time I’d fired my gun on the job.

Four days had gone by without a return phone call from Paige. Worry ate at me until I decided to drive over to Paulson’s house. Maya and Kevin wanted me to wait

until one of them could go with me but I wanted to get there before Paulson got home from work. Perhaps, if I had waited, things would've turned out differently.

Paige's swollen lip and purple cheek greeted me. "Adrienne, what are you doing here?" she asked.

"Oh Paige, look at you." She flinched when I reached up to touch her face.

She took my hand and pulled me inside, searching up and down the street before closing the door. "I'm fine. I've just been busy."

"He got angry and took it out on you. Have you seen a doctor?"

"I said I'm fine."

"This is why I said you need space. Let him work through his issues. Please come back to my house with me."

"It's not what you think. He did lose his temper but he only hit me once. He stopped himself. He's trying to control his rage. In the past, it would have been much worse."

Everything was so rational in her mind. "Listen. Why don't we go grab a coffee together and hang out for a while? It'll be nice."

"No," she took a step backwards. "Aaron doesn't like it when I go out without him."

"Do you hear what you're saying? He's made you a prisoner. No friends. No family here in Louisville. No job. He controls every aspect of your life."

"He needs me. He's afraid of losing me and that's what makes him upset. Besides, I talk to my family. I talk to you. You're my friend, aren't you?"

"Yes. But you haven't answered my calls in four days."

“I’ve been busy getting the house ready for a dinner party with Aaron’s clients. I’m not avoiding you.”

“That’s why I want to spend time with you. How can he be upset if you just go down the street to the coffee shop? Is he that irrational and paranoid?”

Paige turned her back to me. The words I’d chosen were having the effect I’d wanted. “Adrienne, why can’t you understand?” We twirled in unison at the echo of a car door slamming. Eyes wide, hands waving chaotically, Paige said, “Don’t tell him you asked me to go out. Just say you stopped by to say hi on your way someplace else.”

The front door opened and Paulson glared at me through narrow eyes. His clinched jaw and pursed lips told me to do exactly as Paige instructed.

“Get the fuck out of my house,” he said.

Heart racing, I shifted my purse to my right shoulder, unsnapping it as I did so. “I just stopped by to say hi to Paige.”

“Adrienne was about to leave, Aaron. She was only here for a moment.”

The burgundy grimace and jerky steps toward Paige pushed my adrenaline into overdrive. Involuntarily, I stepped in front of her. My feet left the floor, breath escaping in one, hoarse gasp, as Paulson’s fist rammed into my stomach.

“Fucking Bitch. Cunt,” he screamed and threw me on top of the coffee table. Through the blur of pain I saw him grab Paige by the hair and stalk out of the room, her trailing voice explaining, pleading for him to calm down.

I wanted to follow them but I couldn’t seem to catch my breath. I’d fallen into a heap on the floor and as soon as I tried to move a cramp spread through my abdomen.

Immediately, I pulled my knees into my chest, the opposite of what I was supposed to do. Forcing my legs out straight and extending my hands above my head, I tried to stretch through the cramp, taking deep breaths through gritted teeth.

Several moments passed before I was able to reach for my purse and pull out my Glock. Rage filled screams mingled with anguished cries came from an upstairs room. Mini cramps radiated through my stomach as I crawled over to the bottom of the staircase. Using the banner for support, I pulled myself up and stumbled in the direction of the sounds.

Paulson had Paige by the throat, up against the bathroom doorframe. Blood streamed from her nose as she made a gurgled, choking noise. The second Paulson saw me, he whirled into the bathroom, dragging Paige with him. The gleam of the knife caught my attention as the door slammed in my face.

“No. No,” Paige screamed, the fear clear as a bell through the closed door.

The first bullet hit the doorknob, blowing it to pieces and splintering the wood around it. The force of the second bullet pushed the door open. It bounced off the bathroom wall and back to the frame. In those brief moments, I caught a glimpse of Paulson sitting on top of Paige, bloody knife raised above his head.

Not a scream. Not a cry. More like the growl of a wounded bear. It came from somewhere deep inside me as I lunged into the room. Paulson was still raising and lowering the knife, never pausing to give me a second thought. My third bullet went straight through his back, spine arching from the impact. The knife fell from his hand, sliding into the side of the bathtub with a clang.

Paulson lurched to the side and landed on the floor next to Paige. Now that he was no longer blocking my view, I saw that her torso, neck, and arms were drenched in blood. Eyes, wide and fixed, starred at the ceiling. I inched my way over and placed a hand on her heart, praying to feel the rise and fall of her chest, the smallest faint of a beat. She was so warm. So very warm. And so very still.

I sat with my back against the wall and gathered her in my arms. She couldn't die with Paulson being the last person who'd touched her.

One good thing about owning my own agency, I controlled the schedule. I rarely scheduled appointments on Fridays, keeping the day free for catching up on work and occasionally enjoying the day off. First things first, I organized the to-do list in my notebook. The Weekender section of the Courier-Journal made the top of the list. I grabbed the paper I'd brought from home and looked for all the entertainment events for the weekend.

Whitewater Bay, a restaurant in the Highlands area, had a live DJ every Friday and Saturday night. They alternated DJs to keep the public interested and Quincy Fenton had performed there on several occasions. There was also a poetry reading at A Taste of Tanzania on the second Friday of the month.

I placed a phone call to Whitewater Bay to find out who the DJ for the evening would be. It turned out Quincy was supposed to be the weekend entertainment but he called to cancel a few days prior. The fact that he cancelled proved he was still focused

on his career and his reputation as a DJ. Maybe that meant he planned to return to Louisville, or he was already here. A pianist they used sometimes was playing in his place. The reading at A Taste of Tanzania was more like the type of event Quincy's acquaintances would attend. It was also the place where he DJ'd the most in Louisville.

Rita Gayle had given me a few photos from family events in which some of Quincy's friends attended. For the others all I had was a physical description. I planned to go to the reading that night and Whitewater Bay the following night. Then I could make rounds to the other nightclubs to see who I could spot. Hopefully, tracking Quincy's buddies in environments where they felt safe would help me find him. It was also a chance to see who they interacted with. My file on Sonia Fenton's murder was still thin but I was determined to fill in the missing pieces.

I drove down East Broadway, headed into downtown. It was a Friday night and there was plenty of traffic. The parking lot at the White Castle on Fifth and Broadway was jam packed, the drive-thru line backed up onto the street. I drove slowly, cruising with the other cars, circling the block several times, not wanting to arrive at the club too early. Casually, I looked into the other cars, hoping I'd get lucky and spot a friend of Quincy's in one of them.

Instead, I saw open beer and whisky bottles, most people not bothering to hide them in a brown bag. Many of the cars were filled with smoke from hand rolled cigars. I

knew that the majority of those cigars contained more than tobacco. Driving while smoking a blunt was not considered a big deal.

A Taste of Tanzania was a restaurant and night club located on the corner of Chestnut and Fourth Streets. Cobblestones paved that section of Fourth and the street had only two narrow lanes. During the day no cars could drive down it, just the trolley. As such, there was limited parking and those spaces had long since been taken up. I wanted to wait until the restaurant was busy so I could slip in unnoticed. Through the glass windows across the front of the café I could see the crowded dance floor and decided to park in the garage opposite The Louisville Palace Theatre half a block down.

A short line formed outside the club and it took me twenty minutes to get in. Once inside I made my way through the crowd, checking faces at each table. I was almost to the bar when I spotted Bobby Lawson, Quincy's best friend since childhood. Rita and Walter talked about him a lot and if anyone knew where Quincy was hiding out it would be Bobby.

I hadn't been to A Taste of Tanzania in several years. It hadn't changed and the place was fairly cramped. As the name suggested, the club had an African vibe. The food on the menu claimed to be regional to Tanzania but I wouldn't have known the difference. The same was true for the décor. Bright yellow paint covered the concrete walls, with royal blue trim. Red accents adorned the tables, walls and bar.

The stage was a pie shaped wedge coming out of a back corner. DJ McCray was another regular there and he was set up to the left of the stage. It wasn't a bad location for him. Anyone coming through the front door would look directly at him. I didn't attend very many poetry events but I enjoyed the ones I did. Bobby Lawson was

sitting to the right of the DJ booth at a table in the corner with two women and a man I didn't recognize from any of the pictures.

The current performer, introduced as Ricky, was particularly good. He read four short poems and finished the last one by emphasizing each word with a stomp and a fist raise. Cheers, as well as hands, went up, finger snaps of appreciation filling the club. Ricky apparently loved the attention because he bowed and patted himself on the back for nearly a minute. Just as he stepped off the stage a man over by the bar jumped out of his chair yelling, "What the fuck!"

Seconds later others started screaming and scrambling to get away. At first I couldn't see through the chaos but when I finally got a clear view I saw Bobby Lawson with a gaping hole in his throat. I discretely pulled the Glock 19 out of my purse and tried to make my way over to the body, pushing against the mad rush of people trying to escape a killer and the soon-to-be-arriving cops.

Later the next morning, as I sorted through some paperwork on my desk, the office phone rang. I checked the caller ID before answering.

"Hello Dunbar."

"Hello Adrienne." From the tone in his voice I knew he was pissed about something.

"It's a Saturday. Why are you calling me?"

"You had a busy night."

“Yeah.”

“What were you doing there?”

“Where?”

“What the hell were you doing at A Taste of Tanzania last night?”

“Listening to poetry.”

“Stop bullshitting Adrienne. You just happened to be at a club at the same time Quincy Fenton’s best friend got killed?”

“What do you want me to say? I didn’t fire the damn bullet.”

“Why did you leave the scene? I could haul your ass in for that.”

“I didn’t see anything. I wasn’t even looking at Lawson when he got shot. How did you know I was there? They didn’t have security video. I checked.”

“The parking garage does. What were you doing tailing Lawson?”

I put the phone on speaker and set down the handset. “Bobby Lawson may have known where Quincy was hiding and they knew a lot of the same people. Quincy is too into his career to stay away for much longer.”

Dunbar considered this and his voice grew calmer, “What was going on that sent you to Tanzania?”

“It was a house full of rappers and DJs. I figured he’d be too smart to actually walk in the front door but maybe he would hook up with one of them after the event, most likely Bobby.”

“Sonia Fenton’s murder was probably a robbery Adrienne. Why are you trying so hard to find Quincy? His alibi checked out. You personally went to verify it.”

“He disappeared after his wife was murdered. I know he’s connected to this.”

“He’s a selfish punk and an abuser. More importantly he had no motive. He’s probably working at some club in some city and looking for another woman to beat on.

The question now is—”

“Why was Bobby murdered?”

“Yeah. You didn’t see anything?”

“No. He was at a table surrounded by people and the club was crowded. I’ll tell you one thing, though. The gun was suppressed.”

Dunbar was silent for a few moments. “Bobby was hit with one shot by a suppressed gun in a crowded club? Damn.”

“Yep.”

Chapter 6

I didn't have any appointments scheduled on Monday so I was surprised when the main office door buzzed just before lunch time. Shane came to my office door and told me it was Pearson Gray from Orman Associates.

Since leaving Orman and Associates, the largest private investigations firm in the city, business had been good. I usually managed to have two or three cases in the queue at all times. The bonus from my final case at Orman's, an embezzlement fiasco, gave me a nice cushion in case business slowed down. The corporation we'd represented paid a lot to put an end to the theft but more importantly, to keep the crime out of the media.

Branching out on my own had been a tough and scary decision. Orman recruited me right out of college. I hadn't even graduated when they contacted me. Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond, Kentucky was a great school for Criminal Justice majors and I was in my senior year. I'd thought about applying for jobs with the FBI, private investigations firms, airport or border security, and going into the police academy. At a career fair, Professor Ardmens made a point of introducing me to Bob Cofield, a recruiter for Orman. I gave him a resume and a few days later he came back to Richmond to interview me.

During the interview he admitted that Orman was looking to diversify and that was part of their interest in me. Of the four women in a company of fifteen people only

one was an investigator while the rest were administrative. As a black woman with a 4.0 GPA and excellent recommendations from all of my professors, I was exactly what they needed. As a twenty-three year old excited about her future, I didn't want race or gender to matter. As a black woman I knew both were a part of every career decision in my future.

Eleven years later, I left on good terms and opened Butler Private Investigations. It wasn't as if I were directly competing with Orman. They'd gotten to the point where their clients were mostly large corporations and the very wealthy from all across the United States. Butler handled mostly individual clients and a few small businesses. If I were honest I would say that I'd gotten tired of the rich trying to cover up their messes. I wanted to help people who were real victims and needed support.

In exchange for helping Pearson with a fraud case, my specialty when we worked together, he was helping me follow Quincy Fenton's money trail. I couldn't figure out how Quincy was able to afford all his equipment and travel and household expenses.

Sonia's family owned the house they had lived in so he wasn't making a mortgage payment. But, he had child support for his son from a previous high school relationship, he had driven to Chicago four times and flown to Atlanta three times in the months leading up to his disappearance. He drove a new Expedition and they had still been making payments on Sonia's three-year old Ford Fusion.

Shane did some online research and found that the recording and music equipment Quincy most likely had was worth thousands of dollars. One of his new

mixing boards was high-end—worth over two thousand dollars. Rita had already told me that Sonia lost her job because she missed too many days due to “illness.”

My initial interviews of the neighbors told me that Quincy liked to smoke marijuana when he was hanging with his friends but he didn’t appear to be selling drugs. I began to wonder if he had stolen the equipment but he’d had it insured with receipts. The receipts could have been forged but I didn’t think Quincy smart enough to pull that off.

I firmly believed that Bobby Lawson’s murder had something to do with whatever money making scheme Quincy was in to. If Quincy didn’t kill Sonia, perhaps his activities got her killed. Pearson speculated that Bobby was probably making and selling bootleg CDs and DVDs. He hadn’t held down a regular job for more than a year and had no steady income that we could find. I guessed that was why Pearson had just shown up. Shane showed him into my office and I stood up to greet him.

“Hi Pearson. I wasn’t expecting you.”

“My wife works down on the third floor so I thought I’d stop up and we could talk more about your case. Can you spare a few minutes?”

“Absolutely, have a seat.” He was already carrying a cup from the lobby coffee shop so I didn’t bother to offer him anything to drink.

“I talked to a buddy of mine down at Metro Police. No computers were on the evidence list from the Fenton house. Do you remember seeing one when you were there?”

“I saw a laptop connected to the sound board in Quincy’s music studio. The police didn’t touch any of that stuff. If there was another one he has it with him.”

“Can we get a look at that laptop?”

“It was an older model and I figured it was just used for the music but I’ll go pick it up tonight. Do you have time tomorrow to look at it?”

“I’ve got a 10:00 meeting in the morning so why don’t we meet at 8:00 here.”

“Sounds good to me.” I walked Pearson out and had Shane add the appointment to my calendar.

“Don’t forget you have that domestic violence luncheon with Maya at the Galt House tomorrow,” Shane reminded me.

“I didn’t forget.”

When Dunbar’s cell number popped up on the caller ID later that afternoon I let it ring five times before answering. I was kind of irritated with him after our conversation the night Bobby Lawson was killed. Obviously I’d been right to track down Quincy’s acquaintances but Dunbar had acted like I was an amateur detective headed in the wrong direction.

“Butler Investigations,” I answered.

“Adrienne, It’s Cliff.”

“And?”

“What’s with the attitude?”

“Nevermind,” I sighed heavily. “What’s up?”

“We need to find Quincy Fenton.”

“Why? You said he wasn’t important. You said I was wasting my time.”

Now he understood my attitude. “Listen, the more we get into this Bobby Lawson murder, the more we need to find Quincy. We’re thinking the shooter tapped Bobby because of something he was involved in and Fenton would most likely know about it or even be involved himself. And it may be that their activities could be related to Sonia Fenton’s murder.”

“That’s why I was following Bobby in the first place. Sonia’s sister told me they are always together. I know you’re overworked but not following up on a missing husband in a domestic violence murder case was just plain stupid.”

“Ouch.”

“I didn’t say you were stupid, just that you did a stupid thing. Alibi or not, what husband doesn’t stick around to find out who shot his wife in their own home? You put Sonia on the back burner.”

He didn’t have to confirm. “Listen, the slugs taken out of Bobby don’t match the ones from Sonia. He was shot with a Colt 1911 Gold Cup National Match. I doubt it’s the same shooter but the motive might be the same, especially if Bobby and Quincy were into something big. You were at the club that night, can you make time to come down and work with the sketch artist so we can ID some of the people at the table with him?”

I wanted to be hateful and say no but I needed him as much as he needed me on this case. “Yeah, I’ll try and come in there later today. I’ll also talk to Rita and ask her if she knows who might have been hanging with Bobby that night. Since he and Quincy ran with the same group, I would imagine she could help.”

“Thanks Adrienne. I’m sorry.” He hung up before I could reply.

Pearson leaned over the keyboard of the laptop I’d picked up at the Fenton home, squinting his eyes and concentrating on the list of initials and numbers. At first all we’d found on Quincy’s hard drive were music files and song lists. Finally we did a search excluding all music related file types. That got us down to fifty-six documents, enough that we could open manually and check. We found a .doc in a folder called Prince and the New Revolution.

Looking over his shoulder at me, Pearson said, “this looks like banking account numbers with amounts.” Maybe your guy was blackmailing people or keeping the books for someone else. We need some kind of document that links these account numbers to names.”

“We’re just getting started. There has to be a key somewhere. Quincy doesn’t seem bright enough to have memorized any of this. He wasn’t even smart enough to password protect this file. I want to—whoa. What was that?”

“What?”

“Put your curser over the last account number again,” I said. Pearson scrolled over the bottom of the page and the cursor changed from an arrow to a hand. “That last account number is a hyperlink. Click on it, quick!”

Pearson clicked on the link and we waited while a file tried to load in Windows Media Player. It gave a file type error but before I could give Pearson directions he'd already right clicked on it and selected open with VLC player. The hourglass came back and a few moments later a video appeared and started playing.

I didn't recognize any of the people in the video but it had audio. "Turn it up," I said impatiently, nudging Pearson with my elbow even though his arm was already reaching for the knob.

"I'm getting there," he said.

A man sitting at a desk was holding a remote control aimed towards the camera. He was black, dark-skinned with a close cropped haircut. The angle of the camera took in most of the room. It was an expensively furnished office with floor to ceiling windows behind the desk. The view suggested the office was quite a few stories up. It wasn't a Louisville backdrop and I didn't recognize the city. The man leaned back, put the remote in a drawer, picked up the phone and dialed a number.

After a few moments he began talking to someone about dinner plans. He spoke casually but fidgeted with papers on the desk. Finally he got up and sat on the edge of the desk, facing the door. He was a little on the short side, about 5'6" and had a stocky build. His navy blue suit was designer and tailored to fit him perfectly. His nervousness was obvious and he kept glancing at the camera. There was a quick knock on the door and it opened before he could answer.

Another man entered and the first man jumped up off the desk. "Listen, I'll call you back later and we'll finalize our plans," he said into the phone. The second man was also black but tall, at least 6'3", and dressed just as well as the first man.

“Reece my man, what’s up? I haven’t seen you in over a week,” said the second man. They hugged briefly, patting each other on the back.

“We on the road too much,” Reece said. He walked back around his desk and pointed to a leather chair for the other man to take a seat. “Can I get you a drink, Donnie?”

“I’m good. I’m good. Just checking to see how you doin’? You sounded a little...uh...stressed the last time we talked.”

“Bad day. You know how it is,” said Reece.

“And things are better?” Donnie was staring at Reece with a hard, almost threatening, look.

“Yeah man. That situation with Terence had me going. I didn’t know he was demandin’ certain things from you. You handled it but the cops seemed to be gettin’ a little too close for comfort.”

Donnie unbuttoned his suit jacket and crossed his legs. “I do what I need to do. Terence was gettin’ too greedy for his own good. He wanted reward with no work. You ain’t gotta worry about the cops either. I got the right kinda friends. That’s all you need to know. No need to fret, my man. It’s all good.”

“Of course. Like I said, I know you handlin’ it.”

“I got that interview with *Vibe* Magazine today,” Donnie said standing. “I just needed to make sure my house was in order first. I don’t want to have to worry about you.” He paused slightly before emphasizing the word *you* and tilted his chin down.

“Naw man. I’m doing what I do and focusin’ on the business.”

“Alright then. Call if you have any more worries.”

The two men shook hands and hugged again and Donnie left the room. Reece sat back down at his desk with his head in his hands. After a minute or two Pearson fast-forwarded the video. It took nearly ten minutes for Reece to sit up and turn off the video.

Chapter 7

“I heard you’re working on a new case.” Kevin’s voice, always warm and soothing, comforted me immediately. When I saw his name on the caller ID I actually got a little giddy. I hadn’t felt that in a long time. Maybe it was the case that had me feeling out of sorts but I needed him right then and he had a knack for showing up when I needed him. A quality both enduring and suffocating.

“I’m always working on a new case. It’s my business.”

He didn’t reply immediately, letting the silence be part of his answer. “Of course.”

“Are you going to bitch at me too? You should coordinate your argument with Maya.”

“I don’t bitch. Maya’s is just concerned.”

Guilt was making me testy. The guilt wasn’t from taking the case but knowing it worried the people who cared about me. “I’m sorry.”

“Are you sleeping?”

“For the most part.”

“Want some company?”

“If you plan to be my company, I doubt we’ll be sleeping.”

“Want some company anyway?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be there in twenty.” Kevin hung up and I sat there holding the phone, trying to decide if I were running from one scary situation into another one. There were so

many things right with Kevin and me, but the things that were wrong were big enough to keep us apart.

When I got home that evening I'd gone for a run, which usually helped me to focus. Instead, I was even more confused than I'd been before. The pieces of the Fenton case didn't fit together. It was like playing Scrabble with all the Ls and Ns missing.

The phone rang five minutes after I returned from the run so I hadn't had a chance to shower yet. The last thing I wanted to do was greet Kevin in smelly sweats. I started stripping as I headed down the hallway, naked by the time I got to the bathroom. I turned on the water and walked back into my bedroom. It was then I saw the photo on the bed. I froze, listening for any sound. I stepped back into the bathroom and snatched my robe off the hook. My gun was locked in the desk drawer in the living room where I'd put it when I went for my run.

I kept a baseball bat in the back of my bedroom closet and retrieved it. I walked slowly towards the living room, paying special attention to the doorways and corners. My keys were on the coffee table and I picked them up, careful to not let them jingle. Once I got my gun out I proceeded to do a room by room search. I couldn't figure out how the perpetrator got in. All of the doors and windows were locked. Unfortunately, I hadn't set the alarm when I went for my run.

After I was certain no one was in the house, I got dressed and waited for Kevin to arrive. When he rang the doorbell I jumped. I hadn't heard his car pull up, which surprised me. I opened the door and saw that he'd parked on the curb instead of the driveway. He leaned in to kiss me but stopped when he saw the gun in my hand.

“What?” He looked past me into the room then back at my face.

“Someone was here, in the house.”

Kevin looked around the living room again and frowned.

“No. Someone uninvited was here and he or she left me a present.” I turned and started walking towards the bedroom. Kevin followed close behind, his hand on my back. “It’s there, on the bed.”

He walked to the bed and leaned over to get a better look at the picture. “When was this left here?”

“I didn’t notice it until I was getting into the shower. The alarm has been set all day. The only time it was off was during my run, just before you called.”

“Did you call anyone?”

“No, I searched the house and waited for you.”

“We should prob—“

“I was naked.”

Kevin turned to look at me, his eyes assessing my jeans and t-shirt. “Naked?”

“I was getting in the shower, that’s when I noticed the picture.”

He stared at me for a few moments, understanding. He came over and pulled me into his arms, squeezing tight, reassuring. “I’m going to check the rest of the house.”

“I already did that. No one’s here.”

“Is that why the bat’s out?”

I looked behind us at the bat leaning against the footboard. “Yeah, my gun was locked up. I needed something right away.”

“Did you get dressed before or after?”

“I put on my robe. After I saw the house was secure, I threw on some clothes and waited for you.”

“We should call Cliff. He’ll bring over some people and we might find something to tell us who was here?” While Kevin was dialing he looked at the picture again. “Was that taken today?”

“That’s what I was wearing today.”

Dunbar picked up then and Kevin said, “Hey, I’m at Adrienne’s.” He went on to tell him what happened and asked him to call in some favors. Normally, I would’ve just filed a breaking and entering report, which would have meant a little forensics and a trip straight to the bottom of a pile.

Twenty-five minutes later Dunbar rang the doorbell. “I’m in the dark here, Adrienne. What’s going on? Kev was cryptic on the phone.”

“That’s because I didn’t know what was going on. I got here and five minutes later I called you,” Kevin said.

“It’s simple,” I explained. “I went for my run and when I was getting into the shower I noticed the picture on the bed. After I made sure no one was lurking behind the furniture I waited for Kevin to get here.”

“What are you working on that has people climbing in your windows?” Dunbar asked.

The truth of the matter was I’d been wondering the same thing. The small jobs in my queue weren’t important enough to warrant a break in. There was one birth parent search and a standard background check on a Financial Advisor. It had to have something to do with the Fenton case. “Quincy Fenton.”

“Fenton? That’s essentially a missing persons case Adrienne. What the hell does that have to do with a break-in? According to you, Quincy isn’t even in this city.”

Dunbar’s skeptical attitude seriously pissed me off. “First, it’s a missing persons case tied to his wife’s murder. Second, it’s a missing persons case tied to his friend’s murder. Third, it’s a missing persons case tied to professional hits. It’s not like stray bullets from gang violence found these people. Fourth, it’s a missing persons case involving—” I stopped, not wanting to reveal anything about the video Pearson and I viewed.

“Whoa,” Kevin said. “Involving what?” He turned to me, waiting for an explanation. “Now is not the time to hold back information.”

“Nothing,” I lied. “You two aren’t taking me or my investigation seriously. All you think about are personal reasons why I shouldn’t have taken the case. This is more than just domestic violence. Maybe Sonia knew something about Quincy’s business dealings. Maybe Sonia’s killer is after Quincy too. What I do know is that our murders are linked and you belittling me is only going to get in the way.”

“Our murders? You shouldn’t be working a murder case,” Dunbar said. “That’s our job. You’re looking for Quincy and that’s it. Sonia Fenton’s murder is an open police investigation.”

I’d screwed up. My emotions were getting me in trouble. “Of course, I’d have to keep Sonia’s murder in mind when searching for Quincy. That’s what I meant. I’m not investigating her murder, specifically. When I find her husband, he may provide information, which I’ll be happy to pass on to you. The main goal is to find him for the family and see if he has knowledge regarding her shooting.”

A look passed between Kevin and Dunbar. They knew I was full of shit. Kevin put his arm around me. “Alright Adrienne. Why has your search for Fenton led to someone leaving a threat on your bed?”

I shook his arm off and glared at him. “Don’t patronize me. If they were professional hits then anyone looking into them could be a target. Someone watched me go jogging and got into my locked house minutes after I left. You don’t think that was a professional too?”

The doorbell rang and Kevin jumped to answer it. It was an easy exit for him. He knew my tone of voice and wanted some distance. Brent Kerrigan was at the door, a lab tech I’d meet at a few crime scenes when I used to tag along with Kevin. Brent was in his mid to late twenties with sandy blonde hair, brown eyes and a petite build. The last time I’d seen him he had really bad acne and wore those invisible braces, which made him talk with a slight lisp. Now, most of the red in his face had faded and the braces were gone. A camera hung around his neck and he carried a brown bag.

“You owe me big Fredericks,” Brent said, stepping into the living room. I worked a thirteen hour shift yesterday and eleven hours today. I should be passed out right now.”

“Thanks for coming out. Adrienne, you remember Brent?”

“Hi Brent.” I plastered on a fake smile. “I know it’s late and I want to thank you for helping me.”

“Sure thing. What do you need me to look at?”

I showed him into the bedroom and explained what happened. He took pictures of my bed, the bedroom, and several close-ups of the photo before placing it in a plastic baggie.

“Can I see that please?” I asked. I took the picture and studied it. It had to have been taken that morning. My shoes were recently purchased and I’d only worn them once before. The bag in my hand came from the bakery shop next door to my office. A wheat bagel with honey walnut cream cheese. I was on my way back into the building when the photo was taken but how would the photographer have known I was leaving the building? Perhaps he or she was watching me for days. I went to that bakery about three mornings a week.

Kevin and Dunbar were still in the living room and I knew they were discussing how best to handle me. Dunbar credited Kevin with more power than he really had.

“Are there any other rooms I need to check out?” Brent asked.

“I can’t figure out how the person got in. The doors and windows were locked and the alarm was only off for about forty-five minutes.”

“Let me get a look outside, around the property. Is there a back door?”

“Yeah, I’ll show you.” Double doors in the dining room led to a small deck on the back of my house. I went outside with Brent and started to circle and look for footprints or any clues as to the entry point. When I came around the side of the house I saw Kevin and Dunbar talking to Mrs. Hemphill, my neighbor, in her driveway.

She was dressed in jeans, an orange t-shirt, and an orange and white sun visor. It was her lucky poker outfit and she wore it every Tuesday night. After her husband of twenty-six years died she got involved in almost every senior citizens group in the city, everything from book clubs to mall walking groups to poker clubs. And it was a guarantee that every time you saw her, she’d be wearing green eye shadow and bright pink lip gloss. When Kev and I moved into the house, we had bets as to who could catch her taking out the trash without her makeup. Neither of us ever won.

“I wish I could be more helpful but the first time I noticed anyone at Adrienne’s house was when Kevin showed up,” Mrs. Hemphill said as I walked up. “And I’ve been home all afternoon.”

“Did you see anyone not from this neighborhood walking around? Maybe they weren’t at Adrienne’s house. It could have been someone on the sidewalk or parked in a car on the street,” Dunbar asked.

“Well, I sat on my back patio for a couple of hours today, reading. That was around 4:00 until about 6. Then I took Dodger for a walk at 6:30. When I came back, Kevin’s car was parked on the street.”

“You can see into Adrienne’s backyard from your patio?”

“Yes, I can. Oh Adrienne, I’m sorry to hear about your break-in. You should definitely call Arnold Greer. The home owners association should hear about this right away. We need to beef up patrols.”

“I’ll be sure to do that, don’t you worry,” I said.

“My poker game starts in fifteen minutes, I have to go. It’s a tournament tonight and I don’t want to miss any hands. I can call Arnold from there if you need me to.”

“No thank you, Mrs. Hemphill. I’ll get in touch with him or someone in the association soon.”

She unlocked her car and started to get in but turned back. “Do you think this was a criminal from a case you’re working on? A bad guy you’re investigating?”

“That’s always a possibility. Detective Dunbar and Kevin are here to help determine that. Good luck in your tournament.” I wanted to send her on her way as soon as possible. Gossip was her forte. By morning, the whole neighborhood would have heard the story.

We headed back to my yard and I turned to Kevin. “What made you get her involved? You know how she is.”

“I saw her coming out of the house and thought it wise to question her. Besides, you have three cars, one of them a police cruiser, parked outside your home. The neighborhood is probably already gossiping.”

I looked around and had to admit he was probably right. That was one of the features of living in this particular neighborhood. Most of the people were elderly and had lived here for a long time. They knew everybody and everything that went on.

“Fine. Brent is trying to figure out how the perp got in. I’m going to go over each window again from the inside.”

“I’ll come with you,” Kevin said.

“I’ll check on Brent,” Dunbar said. I knew he just wanted to leave Kevin and me alone.

Inside the house I went straight to the window in the guest bathroom. It was on the side of the house facing away from the street. I almost never opened it and when I tried just then, I had to apply quite a bit of pressure. It was stuck from lack of use.

Kevin pushed it back down and said, “Well I guess it wasn’t this one. Let’s check the side kitchen window next.”

We continued around the house until we came back to the front door. We were studying the lock when Brent and Dunbar came up behind us. “Either this guy was really good and didn’t leave footprints or he didn’t use the back door or come in through any windows,” Brent said.

I had replacement windows put in the previous year and they had security catches that prevented them from opening more than five inches. The double, French style doors replaced sliding glass doors at that same time. “Yeah, all of the catches were set. He most likely used the front door or the back door,” I said.

“No, I think it was the front door,” Brent said. “The back door is obviously new and hardly ever used with a key because the lock didn’t have any scratches on it.”

“That’s true. I never come in that door using a key. The alarm goes off automatically if it’s opened. The front door has a delay, giving me enough time to turn off the alarm.”

“Saving the best for last. Let’s see what we got.” Brent knelt down and held a flashlight up to the lock. “It’s plenty scratched up but that’s normal for the amount of use. Have you always had the same set of keys for this lock?”

“Yes. Why?”

“I could take the lock apart and see if I find any foreign materials inside the lock, such as metals that have scraped off but don’t match the keys you have.”

Kevin put his hand on Brent’s shoulder. “I’ll call a locksmith. You go ahead and take that one.”

I looked at Kevin through narrowed eyes. He was making decisions for me, regarding my own home, without consulting with me. Precisely one of the main problems in our marriage. But, it would be inappropriate to bitch at him when Brent was volunteering his time. “Thank you for doing this. I know you have a heavy workload.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll call in the favor some time.”

By the time the locksmith left it was 9:00 and I was starving, cranky, and a little scared. Both Dunbar and Kevin sensed my mood. Dunbar was smart enough to call it a night. Kevin stayed around to serve as my punching bag.

“I can make decisions on my own, you know. Why do you insist on treating me like a teenage girl instead of a woman with a gun who shoots better than you?”

“That’s not my intention.” He put his hand up when I started to speak. “You’re exhausted and stressed. Let’s get some food and then get some sleep. Don’t be angry and don’t argue with me but I am staying here tonight. I’ll sleep on the couch or in the guest room.”

We were sitting in the living room and I rested my head on the back of the chair. Kevin and I had argued in the furniture store because he said the fabric was too fru-fru. A fifty-two inch television, which he took when we divorced, got me the chair. Funny how we were able to compromise over silly stuff.

“Is Italian okay?”

He laughed, “I would have been surprised if you hadn’t suggested that. You are incredibly fit for someone who eats so much pasta.”

“I never got to take a shower after my run. Can you give me ten minutes?”

“Sure. If you want I can call for take-out but I’ll wait till you’re out of the shower to pick it up.”

I liked that idea and went to the kitchen for the stack of menus I kept in a drawer. We decided on a restaurant and I wrote down what I wanted. I gave him one of the extra keys left by the locksmith so he could let himself in and out. Once in the shower I couldn’t seem to make myself hurry. Every couple of minutes I turned the cold faucet down a little until the water was pretty tepid. I stood there with it running over my neck and shoulders, forcing myself to relax. When I got out of the shower and yelled to Kevin to go pick up the food.

I put on a black satin nightgown Kevin bought when we were still married. He got back just as I was setting the table. I’d noticed he’d set the door alarms and the living

room motion sensors when he left. It beeped when he opened the door and he entered the new code I'd set after the locksmith left.

We ended up having a really nice dinner. I pushed the night's events to the back of my mind and decided I could be scared tomorrow. Kevin could see how tired I was and made up the couch to sleep on.

"You can sleep in the guest room. That's probably more comfortable."

"No, I think I'm going to watch ESPN for a while. I need to relax a little myself."

He kissed me on the forehead, turned me towards the bedroom, and swatted me on the butt.

I fell asleep almost immediately but woke at 3:00 am. At first I couldn't figure out what woke me but it was the TV. I got up and went into the living room. Kevin had kicked off the covers and was stretched out in only his boxer briefs. I picked up the remote and pressed the off button. When I turned around Kevin was watching me. Without a word, I reached down, took his hand and pulled him up. He didn't resist and we walked hand in hand to my bedroom.

We stopped beside the bed and I kissed his chest, then his neck and made my way to his ear. His arms tightened around me and I leaned into him more. His erection pressed against my stomach and I reached down to hold him in my hand. He nibbled the corner of my mouth and then licked the same spot. I opened my mouth wider, pressing my tongue against his, inviting.

Kevin inched the nightgown over my head and leaned me back on the bed. I pulled the covers back while he removed his boxers and climbed in next to me. Urgently, I reached for him but he held back, slowing me down. Pushing my arms

above my head, he leaned forward to lick one and then the other nipple. I arched my back, wanting more but he was moving on. Alternating between kisses, tongue caresses and nibbles, he worked his way down past my hips, to my inner thighs. I spread my legs wider for him, in anticipation.

Kevin shifted slightly, moving upward. The first flick of his tongue caused a cascade of ripples and I pressed my hands into the headboard for leverage. He took me in his mouth, sucking, my hips reaching for him. He put his hands beneath me for support. Kevin was an unselfish lover and tonight was no different. He pleased me, catered to me like no other man ever had. I held his head and climaxed in his mouth, calling his name. He gave me a moment to catch my breath before kneeling between my legs, positioning himself.

He cupped both breasts and pushed inside, as deep as he could go. I came again, almost immediately, after only a few thrusts, not able to wait for him. I wrapped my legs around him, giving myself, letting him take as much as he needed. Soon, his whole body stiffened then began to sway. He laid full length on top of me, my hands moving back and forth along his spine, feeling the tension slowly fade. Kevin rolled over onto his side, taking me with him. We were in that same position when I woke the next morning.

Chapter 8

The week after the break-in incident at my house, I got a call from Dunbar.

“We’ve got Quincy Fenton. He’s in University Hospital. And don’t complain that I didn’t call earlier. Our investigation takes precedence over yours.”

“Hospital? Seriously? Are you sure it’s him,” I asked. Dunbar hadn’t bothered to greet me before launching into the news.

“Of course we’re sure. He’s bad off but it’s him.”

“What happened?” Finally, I was going to get some answers.

“You been watchin’ the news about a shootin’ downtown on Fourth? Looks like he was meetin’ up with somebody.”

The news channels were running stories about the shooting but no names were released. “Holy shit. That was Quincy? According to the newspaper a security guard at Fourth Street Live found a man sitting on a bench bleeding.”

“Yeah, he was still conscious but unable to move.”

“I’m on my way. Can you meet me there?”

“It won’t matter. He’s in a coma. They got the bullets out but he’s in grave condition.”

“I need details. Why aren’t you releasing his name?”

“We’re going to this afternoon, had to buy ourselves some time to gather all the video footage and talk to his family.”

“Well, I tried talking to his brother and his father when I first got the case and they are really unwilling to help. They absolutely don’t trust cops and Rita told me they showed up to Sonia’s funeral more to claim Quincy’s innocence rather than mourn Sonia.”

“No, they’re not helpful at all. Especially the brother.”

“Speaking of relatives, I gotta call Rita and let her know. I want her to hear about Quincy from me.”

“Look Adrienne, I can’t give you too many details on this. It’s high profile now. We can’t have you interfering.”

“Wait a minute. I’m the one who’s been actively tracking Quincy for weeks. I’ve talked to his family, friends, business contacts, and club owners. I’ll share my notes and save you some legwork but you gotta put out too.”

Dunbar hesitated. “Give me a few days and I’ll see where we are.”

“Alright.” I had no choice but to agree but I wasn’t waiting around for information. We hung up and I dialed Rita Gayle.

Rita took the news about Quincy better than I’d expected. She had the same question as me. “Did the person who shot Quincy also shoot Sonia?” I explained that it was too soon to know but that I’d call when I found out.

My next step was to find that security guard. Fourth Street Live is a very busy area during the day so I knew there were cameras everywhere. Getting to that footage was going to be a hurdle. The guard who found Quincy wasn't on duty and I couldn't get any of the stores to show me their security videos. Everything was too fresh and no one wanted to get in trouble with Metro Police. Since that was a dead end for now, I went back to Sonia and Quincy's house. If he'd been in the city then he'd probably been in the house.

Shane called to inform me that the shooting was the top story on the noon news casts and that Quincy Fenton's name had been released. He was following the details on the internet. I knew the media would be all over Sonia and Quincy's house and I wanted to get there as soon as possible.

At first I thought the place had been ransacked but then I realized it must have been Quincy. Drawers and the closet doors in the bedroom were opened and clothes were thrown across the bed and hanging from the drawers. The medicine cabinet had less stuff than what was there on my last visit. The disarray wasn't from someone unfamiliar with the house. It had a sort of logic to it. Someone was searching for something, but not in the way a burglar does. The bedroom and bath were the only rooms disturbed. I guessed Quincy needed to gather up some things.

Fortunately, my camera was in the car and I went to get it. A group of women stood on the sidewalk across the street watching me. I waved at them and said I wanted to ask a few questions. One of them walked away, saying she wanted nothing to do with cops. I tried explaining I was a private investigator and didn't work for the police but she kept walking. The other women told me much of what Rita had told me.

“He beat the hell out of that poor woman. I don’t know why she stayed. Hell, why he stayed. He had other women and I knows Sonia had to know about ‘em.” The woman had a floral scarf on her head with a few exposed hair rollers, held in place with metal clips. Even though it was almost November and cold outside she was wearing house slippers on her feet and no coat, just a thin jacket. She lit a cigarette and handed the pack to the other woman, who promptly lit up too.

“This is karma,” said the second woman. “Dogs like Quincy get their payback.” She was a heavysset woman whose jeans were so tight I couldn’t imagine her sitting in them.

“I take it you weren’t a Quincy fan. Ever attend any of his shows?”

“Hard not to see one of his shows. He been doin’ it for years and played at almost every club in town.”

“I’ve known Quincy since grade school,” said the first woman. “We grew up ‘round the corner from each other, a few blocks from here. His mama and daddy got into some bad fights. Punchin’, kickin’, throwin’ stuff. One time his mama used a broken bottle to slice up Joe’s, that’s his daddy, arm. Quincy came by that temper honestly, from both sides.”

“That don’t make poundin’ on your wife right,” said the jean lady.

“I didn’t say it did, just pointin’ out why he’s like the way he is.”

“Have either of you seen him recently, since Sonia’s death,” I asked.

“Naw, I heard he been hidin’ out cause he got some people lookin’ for him.”

That got my attention. This was the first I’d heard such a rumor. “Where’d you hear that?”

“Around.” She used a long, decorated nail to scratch beneath the rollers in her hair. “Money is behind *everything*. Drugs, killing, fighting, hell, even love.”

She had a point, and given the video Pearson’s and I saw, Quincy’s trouble extended beyond the street level. I thanked both woman and gave them my card, asking them to call if they heard any other rumors or thought of anything that might help me figure out what happened to Sonia.

“She was good people,” the first woman said. “She didn’t deserve to die the way she did. I’m not sayin’ Quincy killed her but it wasn’t because of somethin’ she was in to.”

I got my camera and went back in the house, taking pictures of the bedroom and bath. The door leading to his basement studio was ajar. Most of that equipment was too big to haul around while on the run. I took more pictures so I could compare later and figure out what was missing, if anything.

When I left the Fenton home I headed back to my office. Shane had put several packages and a small stack of mail rubber banded together on my desk. There were five messages for me. Three were from other clients, one was an inquiry call wanting to discuss fees for my services, and one from Pearson Gray. He’d heard about Quincy’s shooting. I called him back first, letting him know that Dunbar was closed mouthed about the whole thing. Then, I returned the other calls, made a pot of coffee and downloaded the new pictures from my camera.

At first glance everything looked the same in the basement pictures. On closer observation, a backpack full of CDs lying in the corner of my first set of pictures was

missing. Someone could have come in and taken the CDs before Quincy came back. I hadn't been to the house in over a week.

I called Rita who told me that Walter checked on the house two days earlier and he hadn't mentioned anything about a disturbance. That was less than twenty-four hours before Quincy was shot so it was likely he was the one in the house. I needed details regarding his shooting but I was going to have to wait out Dunbar. In the meantime, I planned to follow up on some of Quincy's friends and music contacts. I still didn't know who those people were on the video but I had no doubts as to their importance in this case.

Since I hadn't spent much time in the office over the last couple of days I wanted to catch up on paperwork. I'd wrapped up the background check on the Financial Advisor by interviewing some of his previous clients. He'd received mediocre reviews and he'd lied about leaving his last job. According to my client, he'd said he'd left to branch out as an independent consultant but in fact, he'd been fired. His employer wouldn't give the reason for the termination but I'd gotten the impression he was reckless with his investment choices. I needed to write my report and schedule a meeting with my client.

Around lunch time Shane came into my office carrying a package. "I found this outside, leaning against the door. Did the door buzz while I was in the bathroom?"

“No. I didn’t hear anything. It doesn’t have a return address or postal stamp. You didn’t see anyone leaving?”

“No. I came back and it was there.”

After the incident at my home I was immediately on guard. Just to be safe I put on a pair of latex gloves before gently squeezing but there was nothing odd shaped in there. It wasn’t very heavy either. Using a letter opener I carefully cut the flap. Turning the package away from me I slid its contents onto my desk. It was a series of photos of me with Maya, me with Kevin, me at the Fenton home. I reviewed each one carefully; looking for details that would help me figure out days and times they were taken.

Two threats in a week’s time. I called Kevin and left a message on his phone and at the station for him to call me back. When he called I told him about the package and asked for Brent Kerrigan’s number. I wanted to see if Brent figured anything out about my lock.

“Why don’t you come into the station? We can go to the lab together. Bring the packaging and the photos for testing. I doubt we’ll find anything but it doesn’t hurt to look. This is no longer a favor from Brent. Our investigations are linked and figuring out who’s threatening you will probably lead us to who shot Bobby and Quincy, maybe even Sonia.

“If I come in, I want details of Quincy’s shooting. I want to see the surveillance video from Fourth Street Live.”

Kevin hesitated, “I’ll call Cliff. We’ll be waiting for you.”

I knew he wanted to consult with Dunbar before agreeing to let me in on what they’d found but in the end, they’d share. They needed my information too much.

It wasn't a long walk from Fisk Tower to Metro Police's downtown precinct. When I arrived I had to explain the package I'd wrapped in plastic to the guards at the front door security check. They didn't want to let me in with it, even after running it through the x-ray scanner. Finally, I called upstairs and Kevin came down and vouched for me. In the elevator ride to his office on the fourth floor he put his arms around me and said he was worried.

"I'm worried too, I admitted. Plus I need to call Maya and let her know to be careful. These are a threat against her, and everyone I care about." What I neglected to say was that I couldn't get the nightmare I'd had about Sonia and Paige out of my head. In all honesty, I was afraid and a small part of me wondered if I really could handle this case.

Dunbar was in Lieutenant Waterstone's office with the door closed. Without asking, Kevin got an orange soda from the machine and set it in front of me. I opened it but never took my eyes off Waterstone's door. When Dunbar exited he barely paused as he passed us and said, "Let's talk in the conference room."

We followed silently and once the door closed behind us Kevin asked what the Lieutenant said. "Get the case solved ASAP. The press has put together that Bobby and Quincy were friends and Quincy was the abusive husband whose wife was murdered in January."

"First things first," I said. "Tell me about Quincy's shooting."

"It looks like he was coming from some kind of meet," Dunbar said. "We got recordings from the banks and other businesses and he came from the direction of the waterfront."

“Is that where his meeting took place?”

“We think so. That’s where his cousin said he was going.”

“How would his cousin know?”

“That’s whose car he was driving?”

“If he had a car at the waterfront, why was he all the way down Fourth Street?”

“No, the car was in the garage at Fourth Street Live,” Kevin interjected.

“Wait. I’m confused. Start at the beginning.”

Dunbar stopped pacing and sat on the opposite side of the small conference table, next to Kevin. “Fenton went to a meet, in a borrowed car, at the waterfront but he parked at Fourth Street Live and walked there. He was wearing sunglasses and a hoodie pulled up over his head so he was definitely taking precautions. On the way back to his car a five foot, eleven inch black male stepped out and fired twice, once in the abdomen and once in the chest. The shooter calmly walked out of the garage’s west entrance. Fenton made it back into the mall then stumbled onto a bench where a security guard noticed him, coughing up blood, about two minutes later.

“The guy was waiting for him. The meet was a set-up. How do you know he actually made it to the waterfront?” My mind was racing, trying to piece everything together.

“We have the Galt House Hotel video showing him looking over the Belvedere railing at the river front below. Whether or not the person was actually there we don’t know. He never talked to anyone. One thing is for sure, they knew where he was at all times.”

“I take it the garage footage showed which car he got out of and that’s how you found the cousin. “ I said this mostly to myself so neither of them bothered to respond. “Can I watch the videos?”

“Tell us somethin’ first,” Dunbar said.

I looked at their expressions and knew I had to come at least most of the way clean about what I’d found. “Okay. Quincy went back to his house the day before he was shot and took some CDs from the basement, or at least I think it was Quincy. I compared photos from my first visit to his house to photos from the day after he was shot. Walter, Sonia’s brother-in-law, was there just two days before that and the neighbors didn’t hear or see anything between the time he was there and the time I checked on the house.

Also, Quincy was spending a lot of money on traveling to shows and new equipment. I don’t think he was making as much as he’d been spending recently. He and Bobby were working on some project, I just don’t know what that was yet. Whatever it was, I think it got them in trouble. And, I must be close to figuring it out because I’ve just received my second threat.”

Dunbar looked at the package in front of me and held out his hands.

“Put on gloves,” I said. “I haven’t taken it to the lab yet.”

Dunbar left the room and came back with a box of white latex gloves. We all put them on and I removed the envelope from the plastic. “It’s just more photos but now they include Kevin and Maya.”

“Is there a note with this one?” Dunbar asked

“No, same as the one on my bed.”

“Let’s get them to Kerrigan. I doubt we’ll find prints though. This guy is good. He was careful with the cameras and we haven’t been able to get any real evidence from any of the shootings. No one at A Taste of Tanzania saw what happened. People admit to being there but they didn’t hear the shot fired. One minute they’re having a good time, the next Bobby’s got a hole in his throat.”

“Whoa. You just made a big assumption that the person leaving me packages is the same one doing the shooting.”

“You said yourself that the Fenton case is the only one you’re working on to warrant threats like this. But you’re right. We can’t make that assumption.”

“Exactly. And it was the same weapon for both Bobby and Quincy’s shootings?”

Dunbar hesitated and looked over at Kevin. Kevin shrugged one shoulder and said, “Actually, it was the same weapon for Sonia and Quincy but not the one used on Bobby.”

“What the hell! That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I know. Maybe there are two shooters but for the same reason.”

“We need to talk to Quincy. I want to ask him about that backpack of CDs. Music files are electronic these days. What’s so special about some CDs?”

“He’s never regained consciousness,” said Kevin. “He may never be able to talk to us.”

“Then we’re going to have to go back to Sonia’s murder. Maybe if we can figure her out, we’ll get the rest of it.”

Dunbar stood up and slid the photos back into the packaging. “Let’s get these to Kerrigan, we’ll show you the Fourth Street Live footage, and you show us the photos from the Fenton house.”

Dunbar, Kevin, and I went to a computer lab in the basement of the building that housed the Major Case Division. Although it was small, it had the best equipment and was upgraded on a regular basis. I’d been to the lab before and was somewhat jealous of it. I’d had ample access to technology, and guys like Pearson, at Orman and Associates. It had the money to have the best equipment and that made me wonder just how much of the Metro Police budget went to fund this lab. My computer was the best I could afford and Shane’s was pretty good too but I didn’t have all of the software or equipment I wanted.

The lab contained several computers with numbered signs hanging on the wall above them. The ones with internet access were on the left side of the room and the stand-alones, those not networked and with no internet, were on the right. A row of printers and faxes lined the wall between them, forming a u-shape, and audio and video equipment was connected to five of the desktops. A large shredder and a copier were against the wall next to the door. I wished I had access to this lab anytime I wanted.

We’d had to sign in at a desk right outside the door. Strict rules were followed regarding the use of the room. Security cameras tracked anyone approaching and they

kept a written log of everyone coming and going. Any items taken into the room were catalogued and pockets had to be emptied of USBs, CDs, DVDs, cell phones, cameras, and anything else that could be used to remove information from the lab.

Chain of evidence rules applied so Kevin had to document why we were planning to use the room and provide a time estimate of how long we would be there.

After the three of us cleared the body scanner we were finally allowed to enter. Since the footage we wanted to see was already uploaded that made the process somewhat quicker. I suspected that the officers who used the room regularly didn't have to go through all of these steps each time. I was an outsider and therefore made to witness the attention to detail. It took us less than ten minutes to get inside the lab but I had the feeling if I hadn't been there it would have taken Kevin and Dunbar two minutes.

Once inside we huddled around computer number three. There were several videos covering Quincy's entrances and exits from Fourth Street Live. The first was a broad angle that showed him coming in from the parking garage and exiting on the Liberty Street side of the shopping center. The expression on his face was a mixture of fear and concentration. He walked with a definite purpose, never looking around, just ahead. Kevin clicked on a different file and the view changed to show Quincy walking out and down Fourth Street. Kevin then fast forwarded the video to a time fifty-one minutes later which showed Quincy coming back down Fourth Street and entering the shopping center.

"Wait. What was he doing during that time?" I asked. "Can we see those clips?"

"Yeah. Hold on a sec." Kevin looked up a file name in a document in the same folder as the video files and opened it. It was a frontal view of Quincy walking towards

steps leading down to the waterfront. “We got this from The Galt House security people. You can see that he never goes down to the river. He stays at the top of the steps, looking over the railing. We’re not sure if he was supposed to meet the person up there or if he was just waiting for someone to arrive before going down. Either way he waits about twenty minutes and leaves.”

“Does he go straight back to the parking garage?”

“No, he walks back to Main Street, down to Fifth and up onto the Belvidere.”

“Why didn’t he just walk down the steps and take River Road over to the Belvidere. He went out of his way.”

The Belvidere, a large concrete structure on Fifth and Main, hung over River Road, which ran along the Ohio River. Considered a major downtown attraction, it had a great view of the river and Southern Indiana. Often, there were festivals, parties, and even demonstrations. Many couples shared first kisses and got engaged there. It had several sets of stairs leading down to River Road and the waterfront. Concrete pillars not only supported the Belvidere but provided lots of nooks and crannies. Quincy obviously didn’t want to take any chances down there.

“He’s getting out his phone.”

“Yeah, but he’s just checking the time. See, he glances at it and then puts it away. He checks it several times before leaving.”

“Did you get his phone records?”

“We’re still waiting on that,” said Dunbar.

“Okay. I take it there is footage of him on the Belvidere.”

Kevin clicked on several files showing Quincy walking up the ramp, looking around, peering over the edge down to the waterfront, and then leaving.

“Maybe he met someone on the street on his way back to Fourth Street Live.”

“Nope. We’ve got him the whole way.”

“You have that much video?”

“Banks, office buildings, and shops. Anyone who has surveillance, we got it.”

“This fast?”

“We have our ways. Besides, we had a specific timeframe and didn’t ask for days worth of their stuff. People are more cooperative when you ask very nicely for a small amount,” Dunbar answered.

“Hmm,” I said, imagining just how much smoother my cases could go if I had that kind of access. “Can we go back to the mall video? I want to see what happens when he gets back.”

“Sure.” Kevin switched to a file that picked up with Quincy entering from Liberty Street. “See. He heads right up the escalator but he keeps looking behind him. I think he thought someone was following him from the waterfront. He may have smelled a trap.”

As Quincy reached the top of the escalators he moved out of the camera’s line of sight. Kevin opened a file which showed Quincy entering the garage. “Here’s where things really happen. This next clip is of him getting shot. You see that shadow to the side, between the Acura and the Explorer? That’s the shooter.”

Dunbar moved up beside Kevin and pointed to the screen. “He steps right out, puts two in Quincy’s torso, walks down the ramp, and out of the garage.” The man did a

good job of minimizing our view of him. He was wearing a black sweatshirt, free of logos, and the hood was pulled up. Under that, he had on a baseball cap that further shielded his face. Nothing about his clothing was distinct. Not even the brand name on the jeans was visible.

Kevin continued to alternate between camera angles while we watched Quincy make his way to a bench by the Muhammad Ali Boulevard exit. You could see blood covering the front of his shirt and running out of his mouth. A few minutes later a security guard walked by, leaned over and said a few words, then pulled out a walkie-talkie and began shouting. Soon two other guards showed up and not long after that paramedics were on the scene.

“That’s it,” said Dunbar. We got the call about two hours later. He was still in surgery when we arrived at the hospital and he’s never woken up. The docs say it’s not looking so good. The bullets tore up his lungs, spleen, and pancreas.”

“Well, if he doesn’t wake up, we may never get the shooter. There’s no way to get a positive identification from that video.”

“Maybe we’ll get something from the phone records,” said Dunbar. “Let’s get a look at the pictures from the Fenton house. We’re—make that you’re—obviously on the right track or you wouldn’t be getting threats.”

“I downloaded the pictures and printed them this morning.” I got them out of my briefcase and laid them in order along the top of the conference table. “In this first set of pictures there is a backpack full of CDs on the floor next to the turntables. Now here, in the pictures I took yesterday, the backpack is gone.”

“Why would Quincy risk coming back to the house if he thought someone was after him? He’d been missing for what, three months?” asked Kevin.

“Sonia’s sister, Rita, told me that he moved in with his mother for a few months after the murder. Sometime in April he started living with another woman. She claims she hasn’t seen or talked to him since mid-July. I talked to his brother and father and all I got out of them was that Quincy was gone and doing what he needed to do.”

“What happened in July that spooked him? Bobby Lawson wasn’t on the run. Why wouldn’t they disappear at the same time if it was something they were both involved in?”

“Damn! We have more questions than answers. And how does any of this tie back to Sonia? She had no fresh bruises and there were no signs of struggle in the house. From the position of the body and the angle of the bullet she and the killer were sitting down. So why would someone after Quincy kill her, especially if they were acquainted?” A slight headache had developed and I took a bottle of aspirin out of my purse.

“Are you okay?” asked Kevin.

“Yeah. My eyes are tired and it’s giving me a headache.”

“You can’t have food or drink in here so you’ll have to wait until we’re done to get some water.”

“No problem.” I pointed at the pictures on the table. “What’s your next step?”

“It’s looking more and more like we’ll have to solve her murder in order to figure out Bobby and Quincy,” said Kevin. He looked at me with one eyebrow raised. “Are you going to share everything you’ve found with us?”

“You probably know as much as I do. There are a few small leads I’d like to follow up on before we get into it though. Let me talk to Rita and I’ll give you a call later so we can meet up.”

Dunbar and Kevin exchanged looks and Dunbar said, “We can help you with those leads.”

“I’ll let you know if I need you. In the meantime can you get me out of this fortress so I can get back to my office?”

One more thought occurred to me when we got in the elevator. “Hey, why can’t we follow the path of the shooter the same way we followed Quincy?”

“We tried that,” said Kevin. “We lost him after he crossed down Ninth and Liberty. That area is residential. No cameras that we can access.”

“And you never got a look at his face?”

“Nope.”

“That’s hard to believe. It’s almost as if he knew Big Brother was watching.”

Chapter 9

As soon as I left the police station I called Rita. After the customary greetings I asked if she kept Sonia's mail and if I could have access to it. We agreed to meet at her house later that night when she got home from work. When I got back to the office Shane was still there. It was after 2:00 but I wasn't surprised. Often, he used the conference room as a study hall instead of going to the library on campus. It was quieter, more secure, and he had access to a microwave and a refrigerator.

I told him I'd left the mysterious package with Kerrigan and gave a brief summary of what I'd been up to that day. He seemed really anxious and I finally asked why he was so fidgety.

"I have a surprise for you. I've been busy too."

"Unless it's a basket of chocolates you know I'm not too keen on surprises."

"You'll love this one. I found the two men from the video on Quincy Fenton's computer."

"What! You should have told me that the minute I walked in the door."

Shane laughed and indicated for me to follow him back to his desk. "Get this. You remember how that guy Donnie mentioned doing an interview with *Vibe* Magazine? Well, I followed up on that and found the actual article. It was in the May issue. I have a subscription. Donnie Hill and his partner Maurice Billford co-own BlockKrew Records. They produce a lot of up and coming artists like Phillip Peace, Lil Wimbly, Corner Joint, the rapper Equator, people like that. I copied the article and it's on your desk. It's pretty

standard, just going over what the label is up to and how they choose which artists to sign.”

“You’re the best,” I said, getting up to get the article.

“Wait. I’m not done. I Googled BlockKrew and found several more articles and news stories. In the April issue of the Atlanta Times there was an article regarding the slaying of rapper Terence Perry, a member of the group Corner Joint.”

I plopped right back down in my chair with my mouth hanging open. “Didn’t—“

“Yep,” Shane finished my thought. “Donnie mentions having to handle someone named Terence.”

“Have the Atlanta police made any arrests?”

“No. It’s an unsolved case. He was in his car, leaving a restaurant, when someone fired a round of bullets from an AK-47 into the driver’s side. He died at the scene. A woman was in the car with him but she only suffered minor injuries and was released from the hospital the next day.”

“Wow. How in the world does Quincy have that video between two music execs? He travels to Atlanta for shows sometimes but as far as I know he wasn’t working on a record deal. I’ll talk to Rita about it tonight.”

“Are you going to tell Dunbar about this? Did you even tell them we had this file?”

“Umm...not exactly. I mentioned I had a couple of leads that I needed to follow up on before discussing anything else with them. I’ll have to come clean about it now, especially if I need their help working with the Atlanta police. For sure our next step is to find out if Quincy has a relationship with BlockKrew Records.”

Shane and I spent the next couple of hours searching for more articles related to Donnie Hill, Maurice Billford, Terence Perry or Corner Joint, and Quincy Fenton. Other than the local articles related to Sonia's murder, which mentioned Quincy as her husband, we found several old ads highlighting him as the featured DJ at some party or nightclub. They were ads from various cities including Indianapolis, Chicago, Atlanta, Nashville, Memphis, and all over Kentucky.

Tons of pages came up for BlockKrew and the others. Most were related to new albums coming out, artist highlights, and so on. One article on Corner Joint told us that all of the members had at one time or another been arrested for drug possession, possession with the intent to sell, robbery, domestic assault, or carrying an unlicensed firearm. They were based out of Atlanta, which I was glad to hear. That meant if I needed to get details I was still only dealing with the Atlanta police. Although I doubted I would get eager cooperation as an out-of-towner anyway.

Finally, we came across a bio of BlocKrew Records that explained how the company got started. Maurice Billford was from Louisville, Kentucky. He described his upbringing in the Newburg neighborhood. This was the connection we'd been looking for. Reece probably knew Bobby and Quincy.

Hours spent looking at surveillance videos and internet searches had turned my headache into a seven on a scale of ten. What I wanted to do was go home and rest but I'd already made the appointment to look at Sonia Fenton's mail. I got to Rita

Gayle's house around 6:30 that night. She lived in the Bon Air neighborhood, only a few minutes from Sonia in one direction and Seneca Park in the other. It was a mostly middle class area of town with easy access to Watterson Expressway, shopping, and dining. Most importantly, it was close to Krispy Kreme donuts—my nemesis and my best friend.

The Gayle home was two stories with half-brick, half-siding facing. All of the trim was buttercup yellow and a flower bed of yellow and white mums ran along the front of the house and wrapped around the right side. Many of the houses were of the same style with the driveway and garage on the left or right as the main difference. The Gayle's was on the left. The front yard and flower bed were full of Fall leaves and I thought of how much I needed to rake my own yard soon. The air smelled of wood burning fireplaces and damp leaves. Although I was there on serious business, I took a moment to close my eyes, take a deep breath, and let the cool breeze whisk away some of the stress.

Rita must have seen or heard me pull up because she opened the front door before I'd reached the steps. "Hi Adrienne. Come on in. I see you found the place with no problems. Sometimes it's tricky weaving through the subdivision."

"Well, I'm really familiar with this area. One of my high school classmates lived two streets over."

She was leading me into the dining room where a box sat on the floor and papers were stacked on the table top. "I went ahead and got everything out for you. I wasn't sure what you would need or what's important for your case. Please, have a seat.

Would you care for something to drink? I have soda, tea, hot chocolate, water, or orange juice.”

“Orange juice, thank you.”

“That sounds good. I think I’ll have juice too.” Rita turned to go into the kitchen just as her cell phone rang. “Excuse me just a moment.”

I sat down at the dining table and began looking through the stacks. They were organized according to bank statements, IRA statements, hospital bills, etc. I reached for the hospital bills, curious as to the kinds of tests and medications Sonia received. Rita returned with a glass of juice and I heard her tell the person on the other line that she wasn’t sure if she could make a meeting because she had company. I raised a finger and whispered that I wouldn’t be there long, that I just wanted the papers.

Rita nodded and told the other party that she would be late but that she’d be there, wherever there was. She went back into the kitchen, returned with a second glass of juice, and sat down across from me. After hanging up she explained that twice a month she attended a support group for families of victims of violent crimes.

“So often you see movies and stories about the victims or their abusers. People tend to forget that the family and friends left behind spend years trying to deal with the crime. Loved ones experience the effects caused by violence too.”

“You’re absolutely right. I think people just expect you to move on after a certain amount of time but sometimes there’s a lot of guilt associated with the loss of a loved one, especially in cases of domestic violence. You feel like you should have or could have done more to get the person out of the situation.”

Rita looked thoughtful for a moment and then said, “You sound like you know this from first-hand experience.”

I was surprised. I didn’t realize I’d let my guard down. It must have been the headache and stress. When I didn’t answer Rita said I didn’t have to talk about it if I didn’t want to. “It’s just, I, umm—“ I stuttered. Talking about Paige always made me emotional and I didn’t want to deal with that right then.

“You can come to my meeting with me tonight,” she said.

That was the last thing I wanted to do. Every bone in my body told me to keep as much distance as possible between this case and my emotions, and I was already struggling. “I can’t,” I said. “But thanks for the offer. I may take you up on it sometime but tonight’s not the night. It’s been a really long day and I have an even busier one tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to explain. I know how it is. Let me show you these papers so you can decide if they’ll be of any use.”

I appreciated the change of subject and directed my attention back to the stacks. Rita explained how Walter had pulled the year-end statements from the bank to make sure everything balanced correctly. There account was in Sonia’s name only, which surprised me. I couldn’t believe that Quincy let her have her own money but then Rita explained that she’d had the account since college. They never got a joint account because Quincy didn’t want Sonia meddling in his finances. She paid the bills out of her account and he gave her money to do it. If she relied on him for money, he could have had even more control. But, she had her own income.”

“How did Sonia have money if she didn’t have a job?”

“She worked part-time out of the house. Believe it or not, she was a CPA. She had a good job as an accountant for a company out on the East end but she missed so much work because of the beatings, she eventually got fired. Then she started keeping the books for a woman who owned a hair and nail salon. During tax season she made quite a bit doing people’s taxes. I don’t think Quincy really knew how much she was earning.

“Sonia didn’t spend a lot because she never went anywhere. If she bought new clothes he accused her of trying to impress a new man. He said her friends were a bad influence and they fought every time she went out to dinner or a movie. The only thing he didn’t bitch about was going to church. It’s hard to be a jerk about that, even for a guy like Quincy.”

“I find it hard to believe Quincy earned enough to support them with only his DJ-ing jobs as income. Was he getting money from anywhere else?”

“Quincy was in to all kinds of mess and it was mostly Bobby who pulled him into it. Bobby couldn’t hold a steady job so he always had some hustle going. Most of the time he’d go work for one of those day labor places and then convince the people to pay him on the side for extra hours.

Quincy did it with him too but he’d started getting a lot of gigs in Louisville and other cities. If it was a big club or private party he got them to pay his gas money, hotel, plus DJ costs. Some weekends he could profit up to two-thousand dollars. At least that’s what Sonia told me. That’s how he was able to replace his equipment so fast after it all got stolen.”

“Stolen? When did this happen?”

“Oh gosh, let me see. That was sometime last November, right before Thanksgiving.”

“The stuff got stolen from a club?”

“No. From the house. That asshole beat Sonia so bad after that she had to call me to help her get in and out of bed and cook. It was Quincy’s habit to leave the house and stay gone for hours, or even until the next day after he beat her.”

“Well, he got a taste of what it’s like to live in fear these last few months. He was running and hiding from someone. Tell me about the equipment.”

“There’s not much to tell. It was a Wednesday night and Sonia went to church. Quincy went to Chicago for a birthday party.

“On a Wednesday?”

“The party was on Thursday and the people wanted him there early in the morning—at least that’s what he said. They agreed to pay hotel expenses so he went the night before. Anyway, when Sonia got home from church she noticed the door leading down to the basement was standin’ open. Apparently somebody broke the small casement window, came up the stairs and unlocked the front door for their partner or partners. That window is way too small for a decent sized adult. The police suspected a teenager. Of course, Quincy had most of his newer expensive stuff with him but he still lost quite a bit.”

“And he blamed Sonia for not being home?”

“Yeah, but she could have been in a hospital having brain surgery and he would have found a way to make it her fault. That’s how he was. Plus, he didn’t think anyone would dare rob him. He was a cocky son of a bitch.”

“I’ll see if I can get access to that police report. Do you mind if I take everything,” I asked indicating the stacks of papers. “I want to take my time with these.”

“Sure, but I don’t know if you’ll find anything about Quincy in there.”

I didn’t want to let on that I was investigating Sonia’s activities. “You never know. I’ll bring these back as soon as I’m done.” I stood up and placed the papers in the box. “You have a meeting to get to and I have things to take care of.”

Rita walked me to the door, “you’ve rubbed your temple several times so I’m guessing you have a headache. Maybe if you come to the meeting with me it will help.”

Perhaps she was right but I felt as though I was already walking a fine line with my emotions. “Thanks but I really can’t tonight.” I promised to call her with an update on the case within the next few days. I was almost to the car when a thought occurred to me. I sat the box on the roof of my car and called to Rita. “Two quick questions. Do you know someone named Maurice Billford? He grew up in Newburg.”

“The name doesn’t ring a bell. Who is he?”

“It doesn’t matter. Next question. Would you happen to have Sonia’s e-mail address and the password to it?” I knew it was a long shot but getting a look at Sonia’s personal e-mails could tell me a lot. I was really happy to hear Rita say she had addresses and passwords for both of Sonia’s accounts. She wrote the information on a piece of paper and we said goodbye again.

It was after 8:00 by the time I arrived home and I was starved. There was nothing in the refrigerator and I didn't feel like my usual go to of oatmeal or cereal. I certainly wasn't about to cook. The Chinese restaurant close by delivered and they were pretty quick. I called and ordered orange chicken with brown rice and vegetables. While waiting I hopped in the shower, got the teapot going, and decided on a repeat of *Criminal Minds*.

I was determined to have a relaxing night and enjoy my food. "Shit, shit," slipped out as soon as the phone rang. I didn't even want to check to see who it was but I couldn't help myself. It was Kevin. I couldn't decide if it was going to be a business or personal call. I wasn't sure which I wanted it to be.

"What are you doing?" he said as soon as I answered.

"Eating dinner and relaxing in front of the television."

"I guarantee you're watching a crime drama."

"Shut up, jerk. What do you want?" He laughed. It was a purposefully sexy laugh. I closed my eyes and curled my feet under me. *I can resist. I can resist.* I recited my Kevin mantra several times before saying, "Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"You know what you're doing. Stop now. I can't deal with you tonight."

He was instantly alert. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

Then the most incredible thing happened. A single tear slid down my face and I hiccupped. Where did that come from? I sat there silent, trying to figure out what was happening. Kevin was talking but I couldn't focus on his words. Sadness suddenly overwhelmed me.

“Adrienne. Adrienne. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes, okay?”

“Okay,” I whispered. He hung up and it literally seemed like moments later when he rang the doorbell. The front door opened before I could move and he walked in, calling my name. I didn’t bother to respond. He came into the living room and knelt in front of the sofa.

“Did you get another threat? What’s happened? Do I need to make some calls?”

“I’m fine. It was just one tear and now it’s gone.” I yawned and my body seemed to deflate as I exhaled.

Kevin cupped my face in his hands and searched my face. “Why don’t we get you to bed.” He looked at my dinner and saw that I’d barely touched it. “Did you go all day without eating again? You have to stop doing that. Coffee is not a meal. I’m serious.”

“I’m not hungry anymore.”

“Did you skip lunch?” he asked more forcefully.

The five year-old in me came out and I started to pout. I could feel myself being ridiculous but I couldn’t help it.

“Eat the vegetables and I’ll stop nagging.” He picked up the plastic fork and handed it to me. I ate because I was afraid he’d try to force feed me. It was an argument we had often and I usually lost. He always pointed out the common sense of eating at least three meals a day. Who can argue with that?

When I finished the vegetables he got me to eat several bites of brown rice before I put my hand up to stop him. “I’m done. I just want to go lie down.” I set the foam container on the coffee table and stood up. As I headed toward the bedroom I

looked back and said, “Rita Gayle invited me to a victim support group meeting tonight. I didn’t go. She’s probably still there. A room full of people talking about the Sonias and the Paiges. A big room filled to the brim, filled to the brim.”

Kevin had been in the process of carrying my leftovers to the kitchen. He set the food back on the table and followed me into the bedroom. I was naked under my robe but I didn’t care. I dropped it on the floor and got under the covers. He stretched out on top of the covers next to me. “I love you,” he said and kissed my temple.

“I love you too,” I replied and closed my eyes. A shift in the mattress woke me and I saw Kevin getting up to leave. “Don’t go. Please.”

“I’ll be right back. I’m going to lock up and put the food away.” He left and I looked at the bedside table. It was only 9:00 so I must have dozed for just a few moments but it was enough. I realized I’d been holding in a lot of emotions over the last few weeks and I shouldn’t have been surprised they came out the way they did.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be a basket case,” I said when Kevin returned.

“This is a tough case. There are a lot of victims and that’s your soft spot. The rescuer.” He stripped down to his boxers and got under the covers. “I’ve been really worried about you. Not just because you’re having to come face-to-face with domestic violence again. When you’re working on a puzzle like this one you run yourself into the ground. On top of that you’re receiving personal threats. Cliff and I are taking those photos very seriously. You have to tell us everything you’re doing so we can protect you.

My limbs felt like Jello and my head was pounding. “Can we talk about it later? I just don’t have it in me now.”

“Go back to sleep. I’ll be here in the morning.” He kissed me several times and pulled me to his chest.

The next morning I awoke to a Saturday night frat party in my head. It was still dark outside and Kevin was sound asleep. I inched out of bed and took three aspirin with caffeine. An hour and a half later Kevin found me curled up in a chair in front of the window.

“My head doesn’t work right. There’s a bar fight going on in there.”

“Go figure.” He scooped me up and put me back in bed. “You’re staying home today. Call Shane.”

“That’s impossible. I have so much to do on the Fenton case. I have to get to the office.”

“No. I mean it. You’re staying in bed and you’re not going to work.”

“What the hell! You don’t tell me what to do. I’m a grown woman and you are not my daddy.”

“You’re not acting like a grownup. You won’t take care of yourself.”

“You’ve worked long hours plenty of times. I get it. That’s your job. Let me do mine.”

“Adrienne, you’re being ridiculous. You’re sick and stressed. Take a day off.”

“See, this is why we can’t be married. You try to control me.”

“Are we going to go there? I tell you what,” he said pointing at me. “We’re not married because you can’t let go. You don’t open up for anyone. Last night you had a chance to talk about everything the Fenton case has brought back but as usual you clammed up. It would have been much better if you’d broken down. Screamed, cried, whatever. But no. You allowed yourself one goddamn tear.”

I jumped out of bed, intending to get back in his face but the minute I stood up I knew I was in trouble. I made it to the bathroom just in time. Kevin was right behind me and in between heaves I told him to leave. I couldn’t have him watch me vomit. “Yeah, exactly what I mean,” he retorted as he walked out.

When I came out of the bathroom, Kevin had a cup of tea beside the bed and a stack of crackers. “I called Maya. She gets out of court at eleven and her next meeting isn’t until two. She’ll be here for lunch to make sure you eat something decent. Now can you call Shane?”

I sat on the edge of the bed glaring at him. At that moment he was the reason for all things wrong with the world. I looked around for my cell phone then remembered I left it in the living room.

“Here,” he said, handing it to me.

Of all the times to puke. I hated when he was right. I snatched the phone and scrolled to Shane’s number. Kevin stood there with his arms folded while I explained that I wasn’t feeling well and to call me if he needed me. I almost made the mistake of asking him to call Pearson to discuss the recording and the articles we found.

Neither of us said a word while Kevin got dressed. At the doorway he turned and said, “I have a feeling you won’t eat the crackers just to spite me.”

“Asswipe,” I whispered. He bowed and left. I got under the covers and put a pillow over my head. Deep down I knew we were right about each other.

The ringing of the doorbell woke me three hours later. My head was still thumping and I grumbled angrily as I walked to the door. Maya stood there with a couple of brown paper bags demanding to know why her key didn’t work anymore. That reminded me that I hadn’t told her about the photos I’d been receiving. Sick or not, that was something I couldn’t put off any longer.

“Girl, you look like shit. You need to go back to bed,” Maya said before I could explain about the locks.

I went to the bathroom and what I saw in the mirror was pretty terrifying. My relaxed hair had somehow reverted into an afro, my eyes were puffy, and I would swear to anyone that my nose had doubled in size. Maya came up behind me and put her hand on my forehead.

“You’re burning up. Where’s a thermometer?”

I reached under the sink, got out the first-aid kit, and handed her the digital thermometer. She rinsed it off and stuck it in my mouth. It beeped and the readout displayed 101.7.

“Okay, back in bed. Have you taken anything? Have you been able to eat?”

“I took some aspirin this morning but I haven’t tried to eat. Kevin put these crackers by the bed but I fell asleep.”

“You need some acetaminophen to get the fever down. Did you feel this coming on? Kevin said you were a bit out of sorts last night and this morning.”

“Liar. He definitely didn’t use the phrase *out of sorts*.”

“He said bitchy but I thought I’d help him out. You’re always so mean to the poor guy.”

I glared at her and she gave it right back. That was the thing with Maya. I couldn’t dish anything out that I didn’t expect to get back. She was a strong, intelligent black woman with serious attitude when she needed it. She left to get a glass of water and medication.

“Here. I stopped at that little café on Market. They make homemade soups. I got tomato vegetable, chicken and rice, and French onion. There’s enough to last you until tomorrow. Which one do you want now?”

“I’ll take the tomato vegetable.” I looked straight at her. “There are some things we need to talk about while we’re eating.”

Maya set about getting lunch ready. Soon, I heard the teapot whistling and dishes rattling. She brought my tray first with soup, toast, and tea and set it across my lap. I half expected her to sit down and try to feed me but she brought her own tray with a turkey club Panini and pasta salad. She kicked off her shoes and climbed onto the bed next to me. I stared at her food. “Yours looks better,” I said.

“I’m not sick. What is it you have to tell me? I’m guessing it’s either about Kevin or a case.”

“It’s about why the locks are changed. I had a break-in.”

Her head whipped around. “A break-in? Why am I just hearing about this? What did they take?”

“Nothing. It wasn’t that kind of a break-in.” I gave Maya the rundown of everything that had happened that night and told her about the package left at my office. Then I told her everything that was going on with the Fenton case and how I thought the two were related. “This is a threat against you, Kevin, and anyone else in my life. You have to be careful, even more suspicious than your normal self.”

She looked at me with those serious dark eyes. “So what’s your next step.”

“So much is going on. Brent Kerrigan down at the crime scene lab has the photos but we don’t really think he’ll find anything. We’re still waiting for Quincy to regain consciousness. Shane is researching those two music execs, the record company, and the acts they’ve signed. He knows a helluva lot more about the hip-hop scene than I do.”

“Yeah. I find that interesting. He’s like your own version of Eminem, only not insane.”

That made me laugh and I realized that the food and medicine were making me feel better. “I’m going to tell both of them you said that.”

Maya raised her eyebrows at me. “If you do I’m going to tell Dunbar you have a secret video.”

“Oh man. I’ve got to tell them soon. I just want a little more time. I just don’t understand why they’d bother to kill Sonia if they wanted Quincy because of the video. Besides, I can’t shake the idea that she knew her killer. And, I got Sonia’s personal papers from her sister last night and I want to go through those.”

“You also need to figure out who knows you were hired to find Quincy and what those random pictures are about. Have you considered they might be about something else? Let’s think this through.” Maya set her lunch tray on the floor and turned in the bed to face me. “The photos have no message with them. They’re taken outside your office or on the street. None of them show you at Sonia’s house or doing anything connected to the case. Are there any jobs you’re working that could spark these threats? Are you sure they’re threats? No one is telling you to stop what you’re doing or back off.

“I’ve thought about that. Pearson asked for my help on an embezzlement case but I haven’t even started it yet. I’ve got a few appointments next week with potential clients and I just wrapped a background check but to be honest, the Fenton case is the only thing on my plate right now.”

Maya tapped her index finger against her lips. “Hmm, hmm,” she said.

“You have a point about the photos coming with no written message. I assumed the implied message was that I’m being watched. Maybe Donnie Hill is handling me the same way he handled Terence.”

“Oh, don’t say that. You absolutely have to tell Kevin about that recording. And I mean *today*.”

“Yeah. I am.”

“Don’t wait to do more research. Let Metro resources do it for you.”

“Alright, I hear you. I need to step back and organize my notes and thoughts on this case anyway. It seems like there’s been activity going back almost a year.”

“What’s the timeline?”

“Sonia died in January. Next was— “ It hit me then. Terence Perry was killed in April, four months after Sonia. Bobby was killed at the end of September and Quincy was shot less than a week ago. No wonder things weren’t lining up. Whatever Bobby and Quincy were doing didn’t happen until well after Sonia’s death. That would explain why Quincy didn’t go on the run until July. He didn’t need to. Maybe, somehow Donnie or Maurice found out that Quincy had the recording over the summer. Rita said she didn’t know Maurice but that didn’t mean Quincy and Maurice didn’t know each other. I realized I might be looking at two completely separate cases.

“Adrienne,” Maya sang my name. “Are you doing one of those *Monk* wrap ups in your head where you tell the audience how you’ve solved the crime?”

“Not even close. There are a lot of unanswered questions but I don’t think Sonia’s murder is related to the BlockKrew Records situation. The timeframe doesn’t work out.”

“Whoa. How’d you jump to that?”

Before I could answer, Maya’s cell rang from the living room. She ran to grab her purse and I heard her say the name Steve. He was one of the partners at Gibson, Stuckey, and Wells. “I gotta go,” she said coming back to get her shoes and take our trays to the kitchen.

“You go. I can clean up. I’ll give you a call later to tell you what happens with Kevin.”

“Talk to him but get some rest. You won’t be solving anything if you don’t get better. No kisses, I can’t afford to get sick.” She blew me a kiss and ran out the door.

It got up, put away the leftovers, cleaned up the kitchen, and set the house alarm. I wanted to start digging through Sonia's paperwork but Maya was right that I needed to get over whatever it was I had caught. And soon. I felt better but not good and I couldn't let a headache and nausea cause me to make mistakes. I couldn't be around Shane, Pearson, or Kevin because I could make them sick too. Maybe it was too late for Kevin. He'd slept next to me the night before. It would serve him right if he got sick.

Not fair, I told myself. He came over out of concern and he stayed when I asked him to. And, he'd called Maya to help take care of me. He had tried to boss me around a lot but in this situation he was only trying to help. I decided to apologize. Later. Funny how I could reject his advice but listen to Maya.

Before going back to bed I called Shane but he'd already left the office. I remembered that he had a paper due and decided not to call his cell phone. Instead, I called Pearson but he was on his way to a meeting and didn't have time to talk. He told me he'd be super busy for the next few days but would call me back when he got a free moment. I didn't have the energy to be fussed at by Dunbar or Kevin so I didn't bother to call either of them.

I turned on the TV and flipped channels until I came across a rerun of *Numbers*. Predictable. That's what Kevin called me. And it was true. If my TV was on, it was

usually a movie or show having to do with crime. I didn't get enough of it in my daily life. I had to add it to my fictional life too.

A commercial came on, I yawned, and the next thing I knew it was a different commercial, dark outside my window, and I was bathed in sweat. I looked over at the clock and saw that it was 6:58. I'd been asleep for hours and still felt tired and groggy. *Why do I smell baking bread?* I raised up on my elbows and realized my bedroom door was closed. It was open when I went to bed.

I thought about getting my gun but I didn't know many burglars who would close my door and use my oven. I tiptoed to the door and opened it slowly. The TV in the living room was on and I knew it was Kevin right away. Maya still didn't have a key and she didn't know the new alarm code. I heard the toilet in the hallway bathroom flush and Kevin stopped short when he saw my shadow in the doorway.

"Are you in a better mood or do I need chainmail?" he asked.

"No. I'm sorry. Thanks for staying with me last night. I really wasn't feeling well."

"I know. Maya called and said you had a fever. I'm supposed to make sure you eat your soup and stay in bed."

"I can't believe I didn't wake up. It's a little crazy to know you were walking around in here and I slept through it." I thought about how a stranger had been in my house and I didn't know for sure how he'd gotten in. Kevin didn't reply and I figured he was thinking the same thing. "Are you cooking?"

“No. I ordered pizza and breadsticks. I’d offer you some but I don’t want you to get sick again. I’ll heat up your soup.” He went to the fridge and read the handwritten labels.”

“I’ll have the chicken and rice. Listen, there’s something I need to tell you.” It seemed to be a day of revelations. I sat down at the kitchen table and took a deep breath.

“You have your legs crossed and your arms folded. Is this a topic we’re going to fight about?”

“Maybe. But I don’t feel like arguing so you can just yell and get it out of your system.”

Kevin poured the soup into a bowl and set the microwave. He took the chair across from me and waited. I told him about going back to get Quincy’s music laptop and how Shane, Pearson, and I had found the hidden link in a file of bank account numbers. He listened intently, never interrupting. When I got to the part of how Maya and I wondered if Donnie was the one sending the photos he tensed and held up his hand.

“How long have you believed this guy could be the one?”

“Just today. It didn’t occur to me before. Not until I started thinking that Sonia’s death had nothing to do with Bobby and Quincy.” From the expression on his face I could tell he was getting irritated with me so I started at the beginning and told him that the timeline suggested two separate scenarios.

Kevin placed both hands on top of his head and leaned backwards over the chair, stretching, thinking. “If Bobby Lawson’s murder is tied to one in another state I’ve

got to talk to Cliff and the Lieutenant. We need to make some calls. I'm not so sure you should stay here. This guy could just be waiting to make his move."

"No. I've got new locks, a new alarm code, and I've got three guns in the house. Plus my knives. Plus my bat. The only reason he, or she, got in last time was because I didn't set the alarm. I won't make that mistake again."

"I'm going to start staying here. In the guest room," he emphasized, holding up his hand, trying to stop my complaints.

"I have a black belt in Aikido and we're matched in firearm skills. I don't need a babysitter." It was hard to feel like an independent woman with a man who treated you like a China doll.

"That's not my intention. Just think of it as a way for me to keep my sanity. The other option is for me to sit outside in the car all night long with Mrs. Hemphill peeping out the window."

"Ha Ha. Fine, stay in the guest room. I'm going to take a shower and reheat my soup. Call Dunbar."

As it turned out, Dunbar was the one I should have been worried about. He huffed and puffed for fifteen minutes about interfering in a police investigation and respecting law enforcement and rules of evidence. Whatever. I just let him talk while I slurped my soup. Kevin kept nodding in agreement with him and then would smile at me when Dunbar wasn't looking.

“You’re making my headache come back,” I said. That finally stopped him and he asked if I needed to lie down. “No, but you’re acting like I was being malicious. As I explained to Kevin, I didn’t put all of this together until today and now I’m telling you.”

“But you kept the video from us,” said Dunbar.

“I didn’t know what it was that we’d found until yesterday. That’s when Shane read the articles and looked up the record company. Give me a break. We’re talking a little more than twenty-four hours from the time we figured it out until now, so lay off.”

“I get the feeling you only told us ‘cause it’s cross jurisdictional and you need our help.”

Busted. “I told you because Kevin could be in danger and it was the right thing to do as a law abiding citizen.” Both men laughed and Dunbar said I was full of shit. At least that got him to shut up.

“Kev, we gotta talk to the Lieutenant first thing in the morning and contact Atlanta PD. Adrienne, what else have you got going?”

If I admitted to tracking Sonia’s movements leading up to her death I’d be admitting to working on an open murder investigation. “I was hired to work the Quincy angle so I’m waiting for him to wake up. I’ve got enough other stuff to keep me busy. Shane is still researching BlocKrew Records. If he turns up anything I’ll let you know. I’d appreciate it if you kept me in the loop too.”

“We’ll see about that. I gotta go. Tomorrow’s going to be a long day.”

Kevin walked him to the door and they stood there talking for a while. I suddenly felt exhausted. Although I’d gotten plenty of sleep, my brain had been on overload. I took more acetaminophen, drank a glass of water, and was under the covers and half

asleep when Kevin came to check on me. I pushed him away when he leaned down to kiss me. "Don't want you sick," I mumbled.

"Goodnight, I'll be in the next room if you need me." He turned off the light and walked out, leaving my door slightly ajar.

Chapter 10

Kevin was gone when I woke the next morning, I was glad. I wanted to dig into Sonia's papers without him finding out. Sitting on the kitchen table was a memo pad with a big question mark, and under it, the box of papers Rita had given me. Damn. It was getting harder and harder to work this case without Metro Police looking over my shoulders.

It was too early to call Shane. He wouldn't get to the office until 9:00. I opened the box and curiosity made me look at the hospital bills first. The bulk of the charges were for x-rays and CT scans. Sonia had bills from four different hospitals in various parts of town. One was way on the East end of Louisville, at least twenty-five minutes from her house. I don't know what I expected to find but they didn't really tell me anything.

The bank statements for January and February weren't like the ones you get in the mail. They were printouts as if someone had gone to a branch and requested them. The February statement contained a note stating that the account was closed as of February 4th. As expected, the new charges stopped after the second week of January. Next I sorted through the retirement account. Sonia had stopped contributing when she lost her job but the account had a little over twenty-five thousand dollars at the time of her death. I made a mental note to ask Rita who the beneficiary was. It was

most likely Quincy, but given how bad the abuse was, Sonia may have chosen a different one.

I continued going through the box but got frustrated when I realized nothing in there gave a hint as to her activities leading up to her murder. I was hoping the bank statements would provide some clues but that didn't happen. The final stack was her Macy's credit card statements but the purchases she made were consistent with Christmas gifts. They were all clothing, small appliance, or perfume items and were bought on one of two days, lending credibility to Rita's claim that Sonia didn't get out much. Even during the holidays she only shopped with her card twice. Even me, who hated shopping, was in Macy's at least four or five times buying Christmas gifts.

I almost overlooked a sealed envelope attached to the credit card statements. It wasn't from Macy's but from the bank. The December statement. I opened it and discovered tons of activity. Sonia had used her debit card to pay for everything. I started with the most recent debit and worked my way backwards. Food, gas, books. She'd made a payment on one of the hospital bills, the electric and water bills, and an automatic debit to her church for tithing.

On December 8th there was a charge at a supermarket gas station all the way down Westport Road, heading towards Oldham County, Kentucky. What was she doing out there? I dug through the hospital bills again but there were no visits on that date. I double checked the transaction date and time and looked it up on the calendar. That was a Wednesday night. She should have been in church. Rita told me she never missed on Wednesdays or Sundays unless she couldn't hide bruises. Most likely, she wouldn't miss church to shop on the other side of town.

I continued down the list and stopped cold. There was a withdrawal in the amount of \$2,340.00 on the same date. On the previous day there was a very large deposit from PayPal for \$2,348.79. I needed to find out what she'd sold or what service she'd provided to get money like that. It was only 7:30 am, still too early to make phone calls but I wanted to talk to Rita asap. I searched one more time to make sure I hadn't overlooked anything else and closed up the box, placing the December bank statement on top.

My stomach was still somewhat queasy and although the headache was much better it hadn't gone away. I decided not to go into the office. Pearson couldn't meet with me and Shane and I could work through e-mail and phone. There were chores around the house I could tackle. Laundry being tops on the list. I put a load in the washer and stood staring into the fridge, trying to decide what to eat. I chose oatmeal, toast, and juice.

While I nibbled on the toast I kept going back to Sonia's PayPal deposit. It couldn't have come from her part-time work. It wasn't year-end or tax season and why would local people pay her online. Plus, that was too much money to come from bookkeeping or tax services. Suddenly, two thoughts popped into my head. Sonia's computer? Where was it? Quincy had his own laptops. And, Rita had given me the passwords to two of Sonia's e-mail accounts.

I plugged in my laptop and got the piece of paper Rita had given me out of my purse. There was a yahoo account and a gmail account. The passwords were almost the same, exalted4 and exalted5. I logged into the yahoo account first. It was full of

spam, subscription news, and coupons. It was obviously her play account. I scrolled back to the months before her death and found not one personal e-mail.

I switched to the gmail account and hit pay dirt. There was correspondence between Sonia and someone with the e-mail address brendasalon32@yahoo.com. It was the woman she did bookkeeping for. Almost all of the exchanges were about financial transactions and current balances. One of the e-mails discussed referrals for the upcoming tax season. Ms. Brenda, as Sonia addressed her, knew several people who needed help with their taxes.

Sonia was also part of a prayer chain with her church. According to the schedule, she had been on call for prayer emergencies during the week between Christmas and New Year's. I wondered if anyone had ever prayed for her.

I typed PayPal in the search window and sixteen results were returned. I paged down to the first one welcoming her. It was dated October 26th, just three months before she died. On November 13th she received a password reminder. I jotted it down on the same paper Rita had given me. In a new tab I opened PayPal and logged in as Sonia Fenton. On November 13th there was a test deposit from Sonia's own bank account. The next transaction was on November 16th when she transferred the amount of the deposit back into her checking account. Beginning on November 25th there were a series of deposits from EBay. By the end of the month she'd accumulated almost two-thousand dollars.

By performing another search I found e-mails welcoming her to EBay. I didn't see anything with her log in name but took a chance that it was the same as her PayPal name. I got lucky. I was about to click on the forgot password link when I decided to try

the same password. That worked too and I was able to look at the list of sold items. I nearly fell out of my chair. It was all electronic equipment. Sonia had sold Quincy's stolen DJ equipment.

For several minutes I sat there, trying to process this new information. Rita told me Quincy had beat Sonia severely when that equipment went missing. She must have known that's what would happen—which meant she was willing to put up with it in order to get the money. Running? Maybe Sonia needed the money because she was going to run from Quincy. I was confused, guessing, and needed some answers. It was 8:30 and Rita would probably be getting ready for work or on her way there. I hated to disturb her but I couldn't wait any longer.

My cell rang from the other room and I'd barely said hello when Shane started talking a mile a minute. "Adrienne, Adrienne. Holy shit. Adrienne," was all I could get out of him.

"Damn it, Shane. Slowdown."

"You won't believe this. You just won't. Maurice Billford is dead. He was killed."

"Maurice Billford from BlockKrew Records?"

"Yes. Yes. Oh man. He was killed."

"How do you know? Are you sure it's the same person?"

"Yes. Yes. Oh man. It's him. He's dead."

"Shane, stop repeating yourself and give me some details."

"It's on BET. It happened last night."

I knew he was in shock but I was getting pissed.

“I watch videos on BET in the mornings while I get dressed. They keep cutting in to talk about the death of Maurice Billford, co-founder of BlockKrew Records. His body was discovered in his car in the parking lot of Atlanta’s airport. That’s all they’re saying.”

“Hang on.” I dug around in the covers on my bed for the remote control and turned on the TV. An old Missy Elliott video was playing on BET. “Shane, I need you to do me a favor. Call Detective Dunbar or Detective Fredericks with the Major Crimes task force and tell them exactly what you told me. I have something else I need to follow up on.”

“Sure. I’ll do it right now. Are you coming into the office?”

“No. I want to but I’m not over whatever bug this is. We’ll keep in touch over the phone and e-mail. Tell Dunbar I’ll call him later.”

“You’d prefer me to talk to him over Kevin?”

“No. It doesn’t matter. Just talk to one of them. I gotta go. Get on the internet and follow this story. We’ll touch base in a little while.” I hung up and took stock of the latest developments. Sonia, Terence Perry, Bobby Lawson, Quincy, and now Billford. Technically Quincy wasn’t dead but he was so close to it I wasn’t holding out much hope. The only oddball in the group was Sonia.

Maybe there was a rational explanation for the money. It was the holiday season. Christmas gifts? Bills? But why tolerate a beating and go through the process of selling off the stuff. Apparently Quincy gave her money and she was making some of her own. The hidden video was in a file with account numbers. We needed to trace those in a hurry. That would be another task I’d hand over to Metro.

A news clip announcing the death of BlocKrew Records executive Maurice Billford the previous evening came on. I sat on the edge of the bed, hoping to get more information than Shane had provided. There was nothing new.

I couldn't wait any longer. I picked up the phone and called Rita. Beating around the bush would have been a luxury. "Is there anything you haven't told me about Sonia or what she was involved in before she died?"

"What do you mean?"

"She sold some items for over two-thousand dollars and I'm wondering what she needed the money for?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. What could she have sold?"

I hesitated, but knew I had to tell her. "She sold a bunch of DJ equipment at the end of November."

Silence.

"I'm guessing it was Quincy's stolen items. She sold them on EBay and transferred the money into her account in December."

More silence.

"Rita, are you there?"

"I don't understand what you're saying," she answered.

"I'm saying Sonia is the one who stole Quincy's equipment."

"No."

"Then can you explain how she happened to have turntables, a sound board, and CD players?"

“Sonia was too scared of Quincy to do something like that. When his shit got taken—you don’t know what he did to her. The neighbor called us and said Quincy was losin’ his damn mind. Walter and I got there and we found a bloody mess. It was so bad we were afraid to pick her up and take her to the hospital. Walter called an ambulance. And you know what? That fucker was still there, pacing around in the basement, screaming about how it was her fault. I wanted to kill him. I wanted to kill him.” She enunciated every syllable of that last sentence.

Maybe she’s the one who shot Quincy, I thought but dismissed the idea almost immediately. “But—,” I started to say but Rita interrupted me.

“Do you know the worst part? Sonia’s face and mouth were so swollen you could barely tell who she was and all she kept mumbling was ‘I’m sorry.’ Like it really was her fault that Quincy was too stupid to board up that window. And I was as angry at her as I was at him. Who lets somebody do that to them? We were there for her. She had options. She didn’t have to live like that. He didn’t love her. Not even close. She had to know that but she let him do it.”

Rita was openly bawling by this time. I didn’t know what to say so I kept my mouth shut. She was still talking but everything was incoherent. Now I was sure she didn’t know anything about Sonia’s actions but maybe she would remember why Sonia needed money. The other line on my phone beeped and I checked the caller ID. It was Dunbar but this was not the time to take another call. I pressed ignore. Rita needed to get out whatever she was feeling and I was willing to wait.

She began a pattern of inhaling sharply and repeating “Oh God” on each exhale. Then she let out one long breath while saying, “Oh God. I let him kill my baby sister.”

Flashback to me, sitting on the floor in Maya's house a month after Paige's funeral. Paulson had survived my bullet and his lawyer had somehow worked out a deal in which he only had to serve 10 years. I broke a lamp, glass bowl, and a long-stemmed candle that night. The wick held the candle together and the top part dangled like a child's ball and cup toy. I got a book of matches and tried to melt it back together but succeeded only in dripping wax all over my hands and the carpet. Maya finally took them away.

"Who is this?" Walter had taken the phone from Rita and sounded pissed.

"Walter, it's Adrienne. I asked Rita some questions about Sonia and they upset her. I'm sorry."

"I haven't seen her like this in a while." His voice became muffled but I could hear him repeatedly say that everything was okay. "What did you ask her?"

"I asked if she knew why Sonia would need a bunch of extra cash in December, aside from Christmas money."

"I don't know. Sonia didn't have a lot of people to buy Christmas gifts for. Maybe Quincy needed the money. Are you talking about her retirement account?"

"The retirement plan? What about it?"

"She cashed most of it out in November. After penalties she got eighteen thousand dollars. We figured Quincy made her do it."

"I didn't see that on her statements."

"Oh. It must be on my desk or something if it wasn't with her other stuff. Did you find out what the money was used for? Is that why you needed to know where it came from?"

“No. It looks like Sonia was the one who stole Quincy’s DJ equipment in November. She sold it on EBay and I was trying to figure out why she needed money.”

“What? That’s crazy. Sonia didn’t take that stuff.”

I could hear Rita in the background agreeing with him. “You know this? I saw for myself that she sold it and deposited the money in her checking account in December.”

“I don’t believe it. I mean, I believe you I just don’t believe it.”

“That’s what upset Rita. She told me what Quincy did to Sonia when it happened. Who was the beneficiary for Sonia’s retirement plan?”

“Rita was primary and their brother Ken was secondary. They used some of the money to pay for the funeral. Quincy couldn’t afford a decent one. The rest is being used to find who did this.”

“So Quincy didn’t get any money or property from her death?”

“He got what was left in her checking account. The house belongs to all the siblings so he can’t touch it and she didn’t have life insurance. It lapsed after she lost her job.”

“Walter, could Sonia have been planning to run away, to leave Quincy?”

“Oh, I guess that’s possible. But I think she wouldn’t have just left. She would’ve told Rita. The only place she had to go was to one of her brothers and Quincy knows where they live. I can—well I was gonna say I could call and find out but if they knew something like that they would’ve told us when we hired you.”

I wished I’d thought to ask all of this stuff sooner. Sonia had accumulated over twenty thousand dollars in a matter of weeks and I was just now learning about it. My

other line clicked again and I saw it was Kevin this time. “Thanks Walter. I’ll let you know what I figure out. Please tell Rita I’m sorry for upsetting her.”

“Sure. I want to know what’s goin’ on with the money too. Most likely Quincy made her take out the retirement funds but I don’t know about stealin’ equipment and sellin’ it on EBay.”

We hung up and by that time Kevin had left me a voice message. I didn’t bother to listen to it, calling him right back instead.

“What the hell is going on with this case?” was the first thing out of his mouth. “Shane called us. We’ve been in contact with Atlanta PD about Maurice Billford. We compared notes briefly and we think this whole case is coming out of Atlanta. Lieutenant Waterston wants Cliff and me to fly there as soon as possible.”

I thought about going too but what would that accomplish? There was no way the police would give me access to anything. Shane could follow the story online and when Dunbar and Kevin got back they would give me an update. There was so much going on and I was starting to have trouble processing it all. I needed to step back and spend some time with my notebook.

“Adrienne, there’s something else. Obviously it’s too soon for ballistics but Billford was shot with a .45 caliber hand gun, the same as Bobby.”

“I’m sure they knew each other. Maybe all three knew each other. Do you remember that file—,” the other line clicked again. Good God, what now. I checked and saw that it was Pearson. “Kev, I need to call you back. I gotta take this call.”

“We’ll probably be travelling so I’ll call you when I can.” We hung up and I switched over to Pearson.

“Sorry I haven’t had time to get with you on the Fenton case. I’m swamped here at the office. I’m really going to need your help on the fraud case.”

“You don’t have to apologize for being busy at your own job.

“I called for a specific reason. I didn’t forget about the file with the account numbers.”

“I was just about to ask Kevin if someone at Metro could look into them.”

“You don’t need to. I got someone here to do it. I didn’t go into too many details just that I needed to figure out if they really are account numbers and if so, what kind. You won’t believe what they are.”

“Oh, I’ll believe. The last couple of days have been like a room full of jack-in-the-boxes.”

“The last number, the one with the video link, is to a bank here in the United States. The rest appear to be banks spread throughout the world. We still have three more to research.”

“In Quincy’s name? How would he get bank accounts outside the US?”

“They’re not. The one in the US and all the others so far are in the name of Donald Hill.”

Stunned, I bent over and rested my forehead on my knees. Seriously? Out popped another Jack. “Pearson, I haven’t had a chance to talk to you but Shane and I figured out who the men are in the video. We also know some of what they’re talking about.” I went on to explain about BlocKrew Records, the connection to Kentucky, the murders of Terence Perry and Maurice Billford, and Dunbar and Kevin’s trip to Atlanta.

Then I told him everything I'd found out about Sonia's money and how the timeline didn't add up.

"What do you want to do next?" he asked. "I have some time after work tomorrow. We can get together and strategize."

I didn't want to wait until tomorrow but I'd just told myself to step back, look at the big picture. "Alright. We can meet at my office. Let me know what time you'll be free." It was time for some distance and clarity.

Chapter 11

My cello and I missed each other. I hadn't played in over a week and I was sure my stress level wouldn't have been so bad if I'd been playing. I sat down with one of my best friends and tried not to think of anything except the music. The bow stayed on the music stand while my fingers plucked their way through several pieces. Skipping the bow was a regular habit. I'd learned in elementary school that plucking slowed me down enough to let my left hand concentrate on the notes. Once I got the notes I added the bow back in and worked on my right wrist. A tutor once taught that technique and it worked for me.

For two hours I played, letting my mind and body relax. When I got tired, I made a cup of tea, put in a classical compilation CD, and spent another hour and a half staring out the window, counting beats, and listening for the cello part. I'd taken my notebook into the room with me, just in case, but I hadn't touched it. I tended to obsess about cases, which was why I had the "no work at home" rule. Now I'd broken that rule and didn't give a damn.

It was past lunch and I made a deal with myself. I'd allow myself one hour to write in my notebook but only after taking care of myself. All of the meat I had was frozen so I threw on some sweats, ran down to the grocery store, and bought a package of chicken breasts, fresh parsley, basil, and two lemons. I made a marinade of olive oil, lemon zest, lemon juice, garlic, and the fresh herbs. While the chicken baked I boiled pasta and steamed broccoli. I tossed them together with a touch of butter, salt, pepper, a tiny squeeze of lemon, and fresh grated parmesan.

The chicken still needed a few minutes and I took that opportunity to go to my office and choose a book to read. My library consisted of about fifty-five percent crime novels. I ran my fingers over the spines, telling myself to stay away from anything involving murder. I picked up Ian McEwan's *Atonement* and was almost out of the office with it when I noticed *Fledgling* lying on the desk. I loved Octavia Butler and it had been years since I'd read that book. I'd pulled it out weeks before and had been too busy to go back to it. Murder was her central theme but I didn't care. Vampires were too cool to pass up.

The oven timer was beeping when I got back to the kitchen. I made a plate and sat in front of the TV watching a reality show I was embarrassed to admit I liked. The food was delicious. My grandmother taught me to cook and I actually enjoyed it but it was time consuming and most nights, by the time I got home from work, I didn't feel like doing anything. I never remembered to thaw out the meat and I always craved dishes I didn't have all the ingredients for. I wouldn't want to go back out to the store so I usually ate sandwiches, cereal, oatmeal, canned soup, or delivery.

When I finished my chicken and pasta I went back to my office with my notebook. I often preferred to hand write my ideas instead of typing. I always went back and typed my notes into a case journal but looking at my brainstorming on the page, in my own handwriting, made me feel closer to the case for some reason. It was a quirk that worked—at least for me.

Starting at the beginning, I wrote down a list of names with plenty of space in between. Next to each name I wrote everything I knew about that person. I didn't try to force connections or form new ideas. I just wrote what I already knew. After that I

made a timeline of events, followed by a list of related locations and any miscellaneous pieces of information. I flipped back a few days and reviewed other notes I'd written to myself. I saw my own reminder to check the Wednesday night gas station charge on Sonia's debit card. Maybe I'd have time to do that before meeting with Pearson.

If only Quincy would wake up. I thought about him. A man who wasn't a man at all. A person who wasn't a person. A thing, masquerading as a human being who spent years beating and torturing a woman he claimed to love. I thought about the way he looked on the videos the day he was shot. Scared, unsure. Did it occur to him that the fear he felt was the same fear he'd forced upon Sonia every day of their married life together?

Quincy was a victim too. I understood that but I couldn't reconcile my disgust at his behavior with helping him get justice. I wondered if he missed Sonia. He was already living with another woman just months after her murder. Another reason to be disgusted with him. Did he feel guilt or regret for what he did? For what he did to her life? When their baby died what soothing words had he said to make her feel better? Or had he convinced her it was all her fault. For men like Quincy, everything was somebody else's fault.

My hour was up and I kept my promise. I put away the notebook. I got out a wine glass but put it away. I wanted to be at the top of my game in the morning and I didn't want to risk upsetting my stomach. Instead, I poured myself a glass of ginger ale, grabbed my book, and headed to the bedroom. For the next few hours I did nothing but read and refill my glass. Neither Kevin nor Dunbar called but Maya stopped by. She was checking in to make sure I was taking care of myself. Before she left she took my

temperature, shoved two aspirin down my throat as a precaution, and checked the refrigerator to make sure I had plenty of juice and ginger ale. Playing Nancy the Nurse made her feel better so I didn't complain. Thank God she only stayed twenty minutes. After Maya left I went back to my reading and enjoyed a dinner of the Tomato Basil soup she'd brought the day before. By 9:00 I was asleep.

The next morning I was raring to go. I felt refreshed and alert. The first thing I needed to do was get to the gas station on the East end of town where Sonia had been when she was supposed to be at church. The station was actually in the parking lot of a shopping center. It faced Hurstbourne Lane and there was a large grocery store on one side. What I was hoping to see was her going into a specific store or restaurant or meeting with someone. Unfortunately, the station attendant didn't have clearance to let me see the security video. He told me I'd have to contact the corporate office to ask for permission, especially for a video from the previous year.

I stood in the lot and looked around at the surrounding stores. People were cautious and worried about law suits these days. Getting access to camera footage wasn't as easy as one would think. As a matter of fact, it was downright hard for a private investigator, even when I flashed my license. Police had an easier time but even then, people often demanded a warrant.

There were several fast food restaurants, another gas station, and some small shops and boutiques across the street. I decided to start with those. I left my car in the grocery section of the lot and walked to the pizza parlor. There was one camera in the back corner of the restaurant. I asked to speak to the manager and a man covered in flour and pizza sauce stepped forward. I explained that I was investigating a crime and wondered if he had any other cameras that could see outside. He didn't and I went next door to the sub sandwich shop, then the jewelry store, and after that a toy store, coffee shop, and hardware store.

It wasn't until I entered a consignment shop on the corner that I got lucky. The owner's husband had installed extra cameras after they'd been robbed two years earlier. They captured all areas within the store but also the immediate parking lot and long range across the street. Her husband backed up the video files on their computer at home. She called him and gave him the date I was looking for. He e-mailed the file and I was able to view it right then.

The timestamp on the gas purchase was 7:22 pm. I asked to start the video at the 7:00 mark. It didn't show Sonia's car at the gas station but in the grocery parking lot. We backed up twenty minutes and waited for her to arrive. She pulled up, parked away from the other cars, and after five minutes a man walked up from the side, checking inside the car. It was dark outside and the only light shining on her came from the lamp posts in the parking lot.

From the distance of the camera I couldn't tell for sure how tall the man was but I'd have guessed a little under six feet. He was black, wearing a UofL baseball cap, a striped shirt, jeans, and a jacket. He knocked on the window and they talked for about

ten minutes. Then he got in the car and they talked for another fifteen. When he got out, he had a package. Sonia drove over to the gas station and the man walked out of the camera's line of sight.

Well, now I could make guesses as to what she needed the twenty thousand dollars for. Perhaps she thought the only way to be free of Quincy was to have him killed. If that were the case, and it was the same guy who actually did the killing, why hadn't he waited for Quincy to get home that night? It did appear that Sonia knew her killer. Maybe something went wrong with the transaction. There was no sign of a struggle but that didn't mean they didn't argue. Whoever this man was, I needed to get a better look at him. One thing was for certain, I did not want to be the one to have to tell her family that she was involved in her own murder.

I asked if I could get a copy of the file but the shop owner was uncomfortable with the idea. She said she'd run it by her husband and let me know. We were about to turn it off when I noticed the man Sonia had just met with in an old Ford Fairmont turn left onto Hurstbourne. I paused the playback and tried to decipher the license plate. I got 313 CM but couldn't get the last letter. Finally, finally.

After watching the video four more times I thanked the woman, gave her my business card, and walked back to the grocery store. It wouldn't hurt for me to talk to them. If I could just get a good look at his face I could describe him to Rita and Walter. The store manager was there but he said their policy was to request written documentation from law enforcement before releasing any security information. My disappointment act got me nowhere so I tried the sympathy card. A murder had taken place and the family was desperate to find out what happened. No, the murder hadn't

happened on store property but the killer may be identifiable in the security video. The manager suggested I have the police request the video. I wanted the footage from the gas station and the grocery store but that was going to have to wait, you can't always get what you want.

Shane was already at the office when I arrived and I gave him an update on everything that had happened. Repeating the details kept them fresh in my head so I didn't mind. I asked him if there was any more information on Maurice Billford. I hadn't heard from Dunbar or Kevin but I could only imagine how crazy things were in Atlanta.

The only new news was that Billford was scheduled on a flight to Antigua the morning he was killed and the police had found a briefcase full of cash. Given the two other murders and Quincy's shooting, I didn't blame him for going on the lam. But, that told me that he was scared too.

"Adrienne, do you think Donnie Hill found out about the recording? Do you think he's cleaning house?" Shane asked.

"I want to know how the video ended up in Quincy's hands. He could have gotten it on a trip to Atlanta or maybe he got it from Bobby. Rita said Bobby was the main one who got them into all their messes. Right now I'm more concerned with finding out who Sonia gave that package to. I know Metro Police can get a warrant for the security video from the grocery store and the gas station. I just wish I didn't have to

wait for it. I also wish Quincy would wake up but you know what they say. People in hell want ice water but they don't get it."

Shane laughed. "Well, what I want to know is who Quincy was going to meet downtown and why. He should have stayed on the run. Why didn't he?"

"That's a good question. And if he were awake we could ask him. In books and movies he'd miraculously come out of his coma, give us a full confession, then lapse back into a coma. I'm playing the waiting game and I can't stand it."

"What are you going to do in the meantime?"

"Figure out who the man was that Sonia was meeting with. The first step is to trace that license plate. My contact at the DMV is on maternity leave but Pearson has someone there too. He's coming by after work so we can take stock of the situation, figure out all of the loose strings, and tie everything together. I'll call him so he can get in touch with them during business hours."

Pearson didn't answer his phone so I left a message with the number and model of the car. Since I'd been out of the office for two days there were things I needed to take care of and I was pretty much in a holding pattern until I heard from Pearson or Kevin. Shane wanted to order more business cards and other office supplies and I was a week behind on balancing the business account. I also needed to tally my expenses for the Fenton case.

Close to noon I asked Shane if he wanted to grab a bite to eat but he kindly informed me that he had lunch plans at KFC. About once a month he went to KFC headquarters where they paid him to sample foods. It was something he and his roommate signed up for the previous year and he thought it was the greatest thing ever.

For eight dollars he got to eat chicken wings, baked beans, cole slaw, or whatever else they were working on. A short survey was given that ranked each food in various categories like spiciness, crispiness, saltiness, etc. Shane's work day usually ended around 1:00 and his appointment was at 1:30 so he hadn't planned on returning for the day.

I took advantage of the break in my schedule to visit Mrs. Laurel, my childhood next door neighbor. Not long after my grandmother died, her husband Herb had a massive heart attack. He passed away three days later. She moved in with her sister, Gloria, and sold the house. I visited her every couple of weeks or so and we spent the entire time talking about Granny, Herb, and gossiping about her sister's children and the people in her bowling league.

On this particular visit I learned that her nephew announced he was gay and in a committed relationship with another man. Mrs. Laurel didn't see what the big deal was but Gloria was beside herself, worrying about how to act in front of his boyfriend, whom they were going to be meeting the following weekend. The way Mrs. Laurel described Gloria's behavior was pretty comical and by the end of our visit I'd laughed more than I had in a while.

There was still enough time before my meeting with Pearson to squeeze in a workout. The egg salad sandwiches Mrs. Laurel had served sat in my stomach like a lead ball. I could feel the fat from the mayonnaise and the sugar from the relish accumulating around my abdomen. Unfortunately, I was not one of those women who could eat anything and not gain weight. God had blessed Maya with that trait and I was admittedly jealous.

As a tenet in Fisk Tower I had a membership to the fitness studio on the second floor. It was a really nice gym as long as I didn't try to go around 5:00 in the afternoon when it was too packed to find a machine. I spent forty-five minutes doing a complete weight circuit and abs and attempted another forty-five of cardio. I was overly tired and I realized that the bug I'd caught had affected me more than I thought. After thirty minutes on the treadmill I had to stop and drag myself to the dressing room. My head was spinning a little and I had to sit for a while before getting in the shower. It took me longer than usual to get dressed and I didn't get back to my office until fifteen minutes before Pearson was supposed to arrive.

One thing about Pearson, he was always on time. At 5:29 he called from the parking garage and said he was on his way up. He came in with two laptop cases which confused me. "I do have computers here, you know," I said sarcastically.

"I know but I have some special software on these. I thought they might speed things up for us a bit."

"Good. Let me get you caught up on what's been going on."

When I'd finished my update Pearson got out one of the computers and said, "I can help you with the license plate but I'm swearing you to secrecy."

I didn't like the sound of that. "Are we about to bend some rules?"

"More like break but for a good cause."

"Okay. What is it?"

"I hacked into the DMV system. That's why the second laptop. I don't do it from my regular one."

“Are you kidding me? Pearson! If you get caught you’ll be in serious trouble and you could get fired from Orman.”

“I know. That’s why I’m swearing you to secrecy. Although, I have to tell you they like my results and purposefully don’t ask how I get certain information.”

“You’re hacking into other stuff too? Don’t answer that. I always just thought you were a good researcher with good contacts.”

“Keep thinking that,” he said. “I already ran a search on the Fairmont and there’s only one with those beginning plate numbers. The last letter is an X by the way. It’s registered to a Florence Michaels on Rangeland Road.”

“It was a man driving.”

“That was probably her son, Vincent. He moved in with her after he got released from a six-year attempted murder sentence last summer. He shot the man who killed his little brother.”

“Does he have any connection to Sonia or did you get that far?”

“Other than the fact that they grew up around the corner from each other?”

“I can call Rita but I traumatized her the last time I asked her questions. Damn. I hate to do it but I gotta do what I gotta do.” I picked up the phone and called Rita’s cell. There was no answer so I called the home number. Walter answered and I told him I wanted to ask Rita about a Vincent Michaels.

“Vince? I know him. He’s from around the way.”

I realized Walter was as helpful as Rita on this case. “Do you know if Sonia knew him?”

“Yeah, he had a thing for her when they were in middle school. They had a little on and off romance. Puppy love stuff. Why you asking about Vince? And what did you find out about that money?”

“I’m following up on a few leads and I’m still working out the money thing. Do you know if Vincent—Vince knew Quincy?”

“Man, they hated each other. I mean really hated each other. They got into it bad in high school and never got over it.”

“I guess that means Sonia didn’t keep in touch with him?” I was fishing.

“Quincy would have lost it if he found out they were talking. I doubt she would’ve put herself in that situation. But then again, she sold his equipment.”

“Thanks Walter, I’ll give you a call if I have any more questions. You’ve been really helpful.” I hung up, turned to Pearson, and with my best British accent said, “And the plot thickens.”

He laughed. “That’s gotta be one of the worst accents I’ve ever heard.”

Chapter 12

My patience had run out and I wanted to hear from Dunbar and Kevin soon. Pearson and I were still in my office, trying to figure out how the hell Vincent Michaels came into the picture. If Sonia paid him to kill Quincy, why had he shot her? Maybe he wanted more money and she said no. Maybe he wanted sex and she said no. The one thing that confused me, well actually several things confused me, but the main issue was how had both Quincy and Sonia been shot with the same gun if he were on the run from someone in BlockKrew?

“I’m going back to talk to Quincy’s brother,” I told Pearson.

“Didn’t you tell me he wasn’t that helpful?”

“Yeah. Neither him nor his father would give me much information but it doesn’t look like Quincy’s going to pull through so maybe I can use that. I can offer them justice on his behalf.”

“If you’re going to do that I don’t think you should go alone.”

“No offense Pearson but if I want answers I don’t think I should show up with a white man who looks like an accountant.”

He looked at me, trying to formulate a good response. “I guess you’re right. Don’t go tonight, though. Go during the daytime.”

“They might work during the day. Tonight is better.”

“Damn. You’re stubborn. Fine. I’m going but I’ll stay in the car as backup.”

“Deal. Let’s go.”

Quincy's father and brother lived in Louisville's west end, off of 32nd and Broadway. I was hoping that both men would be home and willing to talk. The doorbell was a tangle of wires hanging out of the brick facing around the door and I knocked on the metal frame of the storm door. Keeshawn Fenton, Quincy's brother, came to the door almost immediately. When he saw who it was he pursed his lips together and glared at me through the screen.

"What you want? I told you I ain't got nothin' to say about Quincy. Not to you."

"The last time we spoke I was trying to find out what happened to Sonia. Now I'm trying to find out what happened to Quincy." I paused, preparing myself for the bullshit about to come out of my mouth. "I don't think Quincy hurt Sonia. Whoever did may have been the one who shot your brother and I want to find him. Quincy's a victim too."

Keeshawn looked at me skeptically then at the car. "Who's that?"

I glanced over my shoulder at Pearson, "My ride. He's not getting out of the car."

Keeshawn made a sucking sound with his teeth as he contemplated the situation. "You gonna do right by Quincy? The police don't give a shit."

"I need to know who Quincy was running from and who he went to meet that day at the waterfront."

"He didn't know who killed Sonia," Keeshawn said as he opened the door and stepped out onto the porch. "This asshole he knows rang him up and said he had info on who shot her. Quincy wasn't gonna meet him at first 'cause he had other shit goin' on 'cause of Bobby. But, he had this idea if he proved he didn't kill Sonia maybe people would get off his back about that, maybe help him with his other situation."

“Okay, back up. Who’s the asshole?”

“Dude named Vince. He’s a bitch and Quince wasn’t feelin’ him but Vince liked Sonia and probably did want to help her out. At least, tell somebody what he knew so she wouldn’t just be dead with nobody knowin’ who did it.”

“You think Vince shot Quincy?”

“I don’t know if he did but I suspect so. Quince was in a lot of trouble, though. Maybe he got done meetin’ with Vince before or maybe Vince shot him. Hell, I don’t know.”

My next question had to be asked. “Why haven’t you gone after Vince yourself?”

Keeshawn laughed and took a step back from me. “Man, Vince ain’t the kind of dude you can just roll up on. He’s always strappin’ and paranoid as fuck. Like he’s Charles Manson or some shit. Besides that, he’s dust. Left about a week ago. That’s why I thought he might’ve done it. But then again, he might’ve left ‘cause Quince got shot and he didn’t wanna be accused or deal with cops. See, what I’m saying. I don’t know for sure.”

“You keep talking about another situation. What was your brother involved in? Was Bobby Lawson also part of it?”

“Bobby’s a fucking idiot. He was cool and all but damn if he didn’t get in shit he had no business messin’ with.”

“Like what?”

“Like blackmail. That’s not somethin’—,” he broke off, shaking his head.

“Who was he blackmailing?”

“Reece. It was big too.”

I'd been looking around, watching the street as we talked, but when he said that my head snapped back to look him in the eyes. "Maurice Billford?" I nearly shouted.

"Yeah. I guess you saw the news."

"You mean to tell me that Bobby Lawson was blackmailing Maurice Billford, a major music exec, and now both are dead?"

"That's it."

"What was he blackmailing about? Did Reece kill Bobby?"

"I can almost guarantee you Reece took out Bobby. Over some video Reece made."

"How do you know this?"

"Quince told me. He said Reece made a video as proof about something that went down. I can't say exactly cause he said it was best if I didn't know. Reece gave a copy of the video to Bobby, sort of like a hiding place."

"Wait. Reece and Bobby knew each other that well?"

"Yeah. They was real tight, even after Reece moved to Atlanta. He tried to help Bobby get in the business but like I said, Bobby's a fuck-up and Reece got tired of tryin' to help him. Reece helped Quince get those Atlanta gigs and before all this happened Quince was planning to move to Atlanta."

"But you never saw the video?"

"No. But whatever was on it was big money. Bobby started askin' Reece for favors, then it was cash. That was dangerous business right there. Reece ain't nearly as hard core as Donnie but Reece don't play either. Then Bobby took it too far and

asked for a big sum, briefcase size, promisin' it'd be the last time. Reece said hell no. They got into it and Bobby threatened to send the video to Donnie."

"Quincy told you all of this?"

"Yeah, that's why he booked it. Quincy went to Chi-town last summer and stayed with some friends. He didn't want to be anywhere near Bobby, which was smart, 'cause Bobby got his throat blown out for talkin' too much."

"How would Reece know that Quincy knew about the video? I can't imagine Bobby admitted to something like that?"

"Reece ain't stupid. If Bobby was up to somethin', he would've told Quincy."

"Then why did Quincy come back from Chicago? It sounds like he was a whole lot safer there?"

"He showed up here at like 3:00 in the morning about two weeks 'fore he got shot. Had a plan to convince Reece he wasn't with Bobby's schemes. He was gonna send him the copies of the videos he had as proof he had no plans for 'em. Quincy had a bag full of CDs with the video."

Well, that explained the missing backpack from the basement. Quincy must have gone to the house before coming here. And, now I was sure it was Vince who shot both Sonia and Quincy. The same weapon had been used on both and it was too much of a coincidence that Vince and Quincy were to meet just minutes before he was shot. However, I wasn't about to say anything to Keeshawn.

"Do you have the bag with the CDs?"

"No. Quincy sent it a couple of days after he got here. He was in a hurry to convince Reece to back off." We stood there for a while, watching cars go by. "Hey, I

know how my brother was handlin' Sonia but he didn't kill her. You gonna prove that? I-I know what he was doing was wrong, hittin' her and all. It's just that my Moms isn't sure if he did it or not and I don't want him to die with her thinkin' he might've."

"I'm looking for the truth."

Keeshawn nodded. "That's fair enough."

We lapsed into silence again. After a while I asked, "And you never saw the video?"

"Nope."

"But Quincy told you what was on it. He explained why Bobby threatened to send it to Donnie."

He shifted onto his right leg, away from me. "Hmm. You have a nice night," he said as he turned and went back into the house.

When I didn't move, Pearson rolled down the window and called to me. I got back in the car and told him to drive. On the way to my office I gave him the rundown of my conversation with Keeshawn.

"You need to get in touch with Dunbar right away. The Atlanta PD needs to know all this."

"I plan to call Kevin as soon as we get back to my office. They need to start looking for Vincent Michaels."

"What are you going to tell your clients?"

"Nothing for now. I don't have concrete proof about most of this. I'm sure Sonia felt like she was trapped and had no other way out but this is going to really hurt them."

“Why wait ten months before going after Quincy? Maybe, after they find Vincent, he’ll be able to clear Sonia of murder for hire. Maybe he really does know who did it and he was going to tell Quincy.”

“Right, Inspector Positive.”

Pearson laughed. “We both see the glass as half empty. I was just trying to put a different spin on things.”

We were pulling up outside Fisk Tower. “We’re both realistic is what we are, Pearson. Thanks for the lift, I’ll see you later.” I got out of the car and reached for my cell phone. It was off but I didn’t remember turning it off. *Low Battery* flashed at me when I tried to turn it on and then the screen went dark again. Crap. I couldn’t remember charging it the night before. How long had it been off? I hurried my steps toward the elevator and stood there pressing the button repeatedly until the door opened. My weight shifted from foot to foot on the ride up and I was through the doors before they’d fully opened.

The light on the office phone was blinking when I finally got through the doors. There were three messages waiting and eight missed calls. As I scrolled through the caller ID I saw that two of the messages were from Kevin and one from Maya. Instinct told me to call Kevin first. He picked up on the second ring and began yelling at me immediately.

“Where the hell have you been? I’ve been trying to call you for hours. You’re not answering your cell and Maya can’t get in touch with your either. We thought your stalker finally made a move.”

“I’m sorry. My battery died and I didn’t notice. I came back to my office for about an hour and then Pearson and I left again. There was no need to use my phone so I never noticed. I wondered why you hadn’t called.”

“Dammit, Adrienne. You scared the hell out of me. You really did. Especially since I’m not there to take care of you or help you.”

“Don’t be so dramatic Kevin. I’m fine. You won’t believe what I found out about this case.”

He sighed and I knew he was annoyed with the way I’d brushed off his worry. “Ballistics came back and the bullets were a match. Bobby Lawson and Maurice Billford were killed with the same gun. People here are terrified of Donnie Hill and no one is talking. That convinces me he was somehow involved in the shootings. We showed the video you found here and the detectives on the Terence Perry case said they’d suspected Hill or Billford all along. People have a way of ending up seriously injured or dead when dealing with those two, especially Hill. Hill and his business dealings have been under FBI investigation for a while.”

“I can one up you. Lawson was blackmailing Billford, Billford had him killed, and there’s a good chance Hill had Billford killed for making the video. Sort of like a chain reaction. It’s all over that video file we found on Quincy’s computer.” I proceeded to share everything Keeshawn had told me. “Atlanta PD is on their own with Hill, though. There’s no way Keeshawn is going to say a word publicly. Quincy could come out of his coma but the video is their best bet for now.”

“Cliff and I are on a flight back to Louisville in the morning. Sounds like we’ve got some work to do when we get home. We’ll start tracking Vincent Michaels right away.”

We hung up and I called Maya to let her know I was okay. For some reason I felt sad. Sad that Sonia died, sad that so many others had died, sad that Sonia's life was so full of pain, sad that so many women lived in fear and took drastic measures as a way out. When I got to the parking garage I sat in my car, flipping stations, looking for an upbeat song. On the way home I stopped at the grocery and bought, not one candy bar, but an entire bag of assorted chocolates, a bag of chips, and a frozen lasagna—not the lean kind.

In the past, on days like this, I got sick of the junk food fairly quickly. That didn't happen this time. I ate half the bag of chocolates, two handfuls of chips, and most of the lasagna. Sleep eluded me and I tossed and turned most of the night. When I did finally doze off I dreamed of the yellow, blood covered recliner in Sonia Fenton's living room.

Chapter 13

The next morning was a Saturday and I awoke irritated by the incessant sounds of birds chirping and dogs barking. I decided it was best if I stayed in all day but after only two hours I was going stir crazy and drove to Seneca Park for a jog. Signs were everywhere advertising a fundraising walk for domestic violence. I'd been so busy I forgotten to follow the list of events. I hadn't registered or solicited sponsors but I would definitely go online and make a pledge.

Seneca Park was beautiful and during the jog my mind finally started to relax and I thought about why I had been in such a foul mood. The reality was, I didn't want to have to talk to the Gayles. I dreaded telling them that Sonia had most likely hired someone to kill Quincy, inadvertently getting herself killed. Although I had told Pearson I wouldn't say anything to them, I knew that I couldn't leave them waiting in the wings while the police searched for Vincent Michaels and Quincy Fenton slept in a coma.

When I got back to the house I showered, dressed, and called Rita. I asked if I could come over and talk to her and Walter, to give them an update on the case. She hesitated, sensing something in my voice that made her wary. I told her I'd be right over and hung up before she could ask too many questions. The smell of coffee greeted me

when she opened the door and I made a joke about the joys of caffeine. Rita didn't laugh and the knot in my stomach tightened.

"You have bad news don't you," Rita asked after pouring us both a cup of coffee.

"I have news," I answered.

Walter joined in the living room, taking Rita's hands in his. "What is it?" he asked.

I took a deep breath and started at the beginning. They listened intently while I described the video of Sonia and Vince Michaels and explained the situation with Quincy and Bobby, asking questions sparingly. When I'd finished Rita asked the million dollar question.

"Why?"

"I can't answer that. And we may never know or understand."

"Do you think Vince could tell us something?" asked Walter.

"If the police find him. He may explain why Sonia hired him but—"

"But we'll never know why Sonia didn't come to us or just leave him," finished Rita.

"There's always the possibility that Vince did all of this on his own. Walter did say he had a thing for Sonia." I didn't believe that. And, deep down, they believed what I believed.

They thanked me and I left feeling crappier than I had when I arrived. I could see the disappointment and sadness in their faces and it sucked. I went home and ate more chocolate and potato chips. Kevin called a while later to tell me he'd landed safely and

to ask if I'd received any more anonymous packages. "Not since last night," I replied sarcastically. He got the hint and hung up.

One week later Quincy Fenton died without ever regaining consciousness. Detective Dunbar called me and I called the Gayles. I expected Rita to have a strong reaction, either crying or jumping for joy, so I was surprised when she simply said, "It wasn't fair that my sister was dead and he was still alive. Now they're even." I was even more surprised when I received a call from Keeshawn Fenton asking if I'd proved his brother's innocence. I let him know that finding Vincent Michaels was crucial on that front.

Eight days later an anonymous tip led police to the doorstep of Vincent Michaels' ex-girlfriend, right across the bridge in Clarksville, Indiana. Although Crime Stoppers was offering a one thousand dollar reward for information leading to the arrest, the caller refused to identify himself. During Michaels' last arrest he'd broken the hand of one officer and dislocated the jaw of another. This time they issued a high risk warrant and the SWAT team went to pick him up. They arrived at 5:30 am, hoping to catch him asleep. Things went as planned and he was taken into custody at 5:40 am, all officers intact.

Thanks to information I'd provided to Metro Police during the investigation, Lieutenant Waterstone let me listen in on the interrogation session, which was extremely short. Michaels didn't say a word while Dunbar and Kevin explained they had a security video showing his meeting with Sonia and bluffed about the video of the shooting in the Fourth Street Live garage. When he did finally open his mouth it was to request counsel. That put an end to the interrogation.

Six hours later he met with his court appointed attorney for one hour and then agreed to speak to the cops. Kevin called me back in and I sat on the opposite side of a two way mirror with Lieutenant Waterstone as Kevin and Dunbar questioned Michaels. In my head, I thought I knew what he was going to say. I'd already worked everything out, but the surprises just kept on rolling.

"Sonia didn't pay me to kill Quincy," he was saying. "She should have cause that Mutha Fucka needed to die. He was beatin' the hell outta her."

"Then what was the payoff for," Kevin asked.

"You gotta understand. Sonia, she didn't have it in her to kill him. She paid me—she paid me to kill her."

Dunbar, who'd been sitting on the edge of the table, jumped up and repeated Michaels words back to him.

"Yeah, she was ready to die and put an end to it."

"So she paid you to help her commit suicide? Why bother?" Dunbar asked incredulously. "She could have just killed herself and been done with it."

"Uhh, uhh. The point was to make Quincy look like he did it. She wanted him to spend time in prison, gettin' his ass whooped by other inmates."

It clicked then and I understood everything. Quincy was supposed to be home that night. The last minute stop at the night club in Indianapolis had ruined the whole plan. If he'd been home, he would have been the prime suspect in her murder. She would be free of him and he would suffer because of her.

"But Quincy wasn't there so why didn't you change the plan?" asked Dunbar.

"Sonia said he was gonna be home any minute so just do it and get out. Man, I've done some things but that was hard. She sat down and put her arms in her lap and closed her eyes. Waitin'. Waitin'. I almost changed my mind but then she reminded me of the money and how she was already dyin' and didn't wanna suffer no more."

"Whoa, back up. What do you mean already dying?"

"She told me she had some kinda blood clot in her brain from gettin' punched in the head so many times. The docs said they couldn't fix it with an operation without causin' brain damage. At least that's what she told me."

Kevin hurried out of the room and into the room with the Lieutenant and me. "Is that true?" he asked me.

"This is the first I've heard of it. Certainly Rita and Walter didn't know or they would have told me. What did the autopsy show?" I asked, realizing I'd never asked to look at it.

"It didn't mention a brain tumor or clot, that's for sure. We'll have to go back and look."

I didn't know what to think. On the one hand, I was glad Sonia hadn't resorted to murder for hire but to plan her own murder/suicide in order to frame Quincy? Wow.

Kevin returned to the interrogation room. “Did she show you any proof of her illness?”

“She didn’t have to. Why wouldn’t I believe her? She said she was havin’ trouble seein’ right and was losing her balance and stuff. Listenin’ to her made me pissed off and I wanted to go after Quincy right then but she said we had to wait until after the holidays so her family wouldn’t be sad at Christmas.”

Dunbar began pacing the room. “This plan doesn’t make sense. Just waiting for Quincy to get home isn’t the best way to frame him.”

“He was supposed to find her, call the cops, and they was supposed to find the gun in his stuff. He stayed outta town and ya’ll dumb asses never found the gun.”

“Where did you leave the weapon?”

“In the basement, in his stuff. There was a bag with some CDs in it and I stuffed it in the bottom of the bag. Sonia gave me the gun that night cause it already had his prints on it. She was his wife, shot with his gun, in their home, and he was beatin’ her. It was a good plan but he didn’t come home and ya’ll didn’t find the gun.”

“Why did you go after Quincy and when did you get the weapon back?”

“Man, please. That punk bitch needed to die after what he did to Sonia. She was good people and he messed her up. I couldn’t take him walkin’ around like nothin’ happened and I finally went after him last summer. He got spooked and ran so I had to wait for him to come back. When I heard he was creepin’ around town I tracked him down and told him I knew who shot his woman.”

“And he trusted you? I thought you hated each other.”

“Yeah, we do, did, but he knew I had a thing for Sonia and he believed me when I said I wanted him to go after the guy. He kept askin’ if the guy was local. I didn’t know what he was talkin’ bout but I said yeah.”

“Then you scheduled a meet downtown and shot him. You didn’t answer my question. When did you get the gun back?”

“When I went after him the first time. I went back to the house and got it. It was still in that bag.”

“Okay. You have what you wanted,” interrupted Michaels’ attorney. “We’re done here. I need to talk with my client some more.”

Dunbar and Kevin left the room and I met them in the hallway. “I never in a million years would have guessed this outcome,” said Dunbar. “We need to access Sonia Fenton’s medical records to see if she was lying about the clot. It looks like your case is officially closed, Adrienne.”

“No, I still have to update the family.”

“Good luck with that. This is a hard one,” said Dunbar.

Kevin stepped forward. “I’ll go with you if you want.”

“I’m a big girl Kevin. I can handle it.”

It was a little after 3:00 in the afternoon and I hoped the Gayles hadn’t gone out after church service. For some reason I didn’t call ahead. I drove straight to their place and as I pulled into the driveway I saw Rita already on the front porch talking to a small group of Jehovah Witnesses. They handed me a pamphlet as they walked by and told me to have a blessed day. Rita called for Walter and escorted me into the living room.

“Vincent Michaels has been arrested,” I began.

Epilogue

Holiday decorations had devoured the main lobby of Fisk Tower, Christmas songs from every decade playing over the speakers. A gingerbread mocha latte called to me from the coffee shop and I made a beeline for the register in order to beat a group coming in the side entrance. Shane was sitting in the corner, reading a magazine and sipping on what I guessed to be a coffee, no cream, no sugar, with two pumps of vanilla. He waved when he saw me and joked that he'd have been surprised if I hadn't stopped for a drink.

I deserved a treat after the craziness of the last couple of months. Vince Michaels had accepted a plea deal for the murders of Sonia and Quincy Fenton. He was serving ten years for Sonia's murder for hire and twenty years for Quincy's first degree murder, twice as long as Paulson received for Paige's murder. Concurrently instead of consecutively. Rita Gayle and her brothers had to deal with Sonia's involvement in her own death. Especially after it was confirmed that she did not have a brain clot or any other fatal illness. The media was going crazy over the indictment of Donnie Hill, co-founder of Atlanta-based BlockKrew Records, for the murders of Terence Perry and Maurice Billford. That story was far more interesting than one covering the desperate act of a woman who'd suffered years of abuse.

I ordered my latte and sat with Shane while waiting for my name to be called. We chatted about Christmas shopping, his African-American Literature professor, whom he had a crush on, and our latest outing. Maya, her boyfriend Martin, Shane, his friend

Jarvis, Kevin, Dunbar, and I had gone bowling the night before. We ate lots of fried food, told bad jokes, teased each other incessantly, and left work at work. Despite my usual grumpiness at overwhelming holiday cheer, I felt happier and more relaxed than I had in a long time.

The elevator in Fisk Tower carried the smell of peppermint and pine cones to every floor in the building and Shane and I discussed our agenda for the day as we stepped onto the ninth floor and walked toward the office. What greeted us was a package, leaning against the door, the third in as many weeks. There was no postage, no return address. Each contained photos of my activities during the week. No notes, no fingerprints, no clues. Shane bent to pick it up but I grabbed his shoulder to stop him. I took out my cell phone and called Kevin. "I got another one," I said.

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Curriculum Vita

Tanya Marie Robertson was born in Louisville, Kentucky. She graduated from Seneca High School in Louisville, Kentucky in the spring of 1987 and entered the University of Kentucky the following Fall semester. She received a Bachelor of Science in Computer Science and Mathematics in December of 1992. After graduation she began a technical career utilizing her computer science degree. In the Fall of 2002, Ms. Robertson returned to the University of Kentucky to complete a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish. She graduated in the Spring of 2005 and enrolled in the University of Louisville to complete a Bachelor of Arts in English. Combining her Spanish and English degrees, she enrolled in The University of Texas at El Paso to work on her Bilingual Master of Fine Arts Degree in Creative Writing.

During her time at UTEP, Ms. Robertson worked as a Teaching Assistant for both the English and Creative Writing departments, teaching courses such as Rhetoric and Writing, English Composition, and Introduction to Creative Writing. She also worked as a professional résumé writer. She has published a short story entitled "Falling Pieces" in the Fall 2009 online edition of the *Rio Grande Review* and is currently working on the publication of her thesis novel *And Then It Clicked*.

Permanent Address: PMB178, 500 West University Avenue
El Paso, Texas 79968